

As teens, these Bostonians were sentenced to life behind bars for murder. Now they're out and trying to help others heal.

'Who can help decriminalize a criminal but former criminals?'

By **Danny McDonald** Globe Staff, Updated August 6, 2022, 3:08 p.m.



Tim Deal hugged his grandmother Everlena Roberson upon arriving home from work in Boston in June. Deal said he makes sure to hug his grandmother every day. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

On the day he killed his best friend's older brother, Tim Deal made a series of bad

decisions, but none more disastrous than reaching for a knife in another man's waistband.

There had been tension between Deal and William Woods for months, ever since Deal learned the older man had become a police informant — and told police there were guns and drugs in Deal's Dorchester house, according to Deal. It was a solid tip; at the time, Deal, then 16, was moving about half a pound of marijuana a week. Authorities soon raided Deal's home, arresting him and his brother on gun and drug charges. Deal's relationship with Woods turned icy after that, but he said he mostly ignored the older man.

Until Jan. 14, 2002, when he did not.

Deal says he doesn't remember exactly what words he exchanged with Woods. He was over visiting his best friend, Nick — Woods's younger brother. While Woods's status as an informant had soured their relationship, Deal maintains that, on this day, it did not spark the violence. In any event, the two started jawing at each other in the foyer, Woods took a step back into his room, and Deal took the move as a signal Woods wanted to brawl.

Deal recalls hitting Woods first. Then, he reached into a friend's waistband — there were several people in the house at the time — and grabbed a knife. Woods was bigger than Deal and several years older. Deal remembers thinking he needed “an equalizer.” He flailed wildly with the knife. Woods was a lefty; every punch Woods threw with his left opened up his left side. Deal stabbed him multiple times. One of the thrusts pierced Woods's heart.

“I look back at it like he probably was never trying to fight,” said Deal recently.

Deal was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to life behind bars with the possibility of parole. The state parole board eventually found that Deal being set free was compatible “with the welfare of society.” He got out in July 2021. He's now 37.

Abruptly, he had to face the questions familiar to hundreds of returning inmates in Massachusetts: how to adapt and survive in the world outside, and how to avoid going back to prison — challenges that are, perhaps, more pronounced for someone who went away as a teenager.



Tim Deal got a haircut from his longtime barber, David "Hev" Baptista, at Final Touch barbershop in Boston. Baptista started cutting Deal's hair when he was a youth and hired him to work at the barbershop when he was 11. He said he has been impressed with Deal since he was released. "Most people would have gave up. Tim came out with a good attitude, he was hungry right away," Baptista said. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The world is a harsh place, made undeniably harsher if you have a serious record. There are obstacles large and small, from procuring up-to-date government identification to finding a landlord and an employer willing to take on a convicted felon. Even navigating the labyrinth of local bus routes can be an existential task for someone whose universe has been confined for years to a cell roughly the size of a walk-in closet.

For people like Deal, though, personal healing is the most crucial issue, the central challenge around which all other matters revolve. And the answer, he has found, lies with

others, some of whom have also spent years behind bars — their hard lessons learned, their wisdom, their willing fellowship — and Deal has dedicated himself to sharing that gift.

Deal has plenty of company in these challenges. According to the state statistics, there were more than 6,200 inmates in the Department of Correction system as of Jan. 1 of this year. Last year, 1,845 inmates were released, a number that excludes people committed by a court to a mental health institution or treatment center and people who were incarcerated while awaiting trial, according to state figures.

Deal shared his story recently over lunch — a steak and cheese sub — in a local diner in his native Dorchester. He recalls the crime matter-of-factly, but not coldly. He's had many years behind bars to ponder the unyielding realities of his life. Nineteen and a half years to be exact. Lots of time to think about what led him to the street life, drawn into the drug game at age 14 because he got his girlfriend pregnant, and her mom wanted him to pay for an abortion. What led him to kill someone.

Now that he's out, Deal's trying to help others work through their own misdeeds, their own stories of trauma and violence, and get on with life. He recently completed a fellowship at the Transformational Prison Project, a restorative justice organization that was founded in MCI-Norfolk in 2013. The program focuses on dialogue and brings together volunteers, people who are incarcerated or recently released from prison, victims of crime, and relatives of crime victims. People sit in a circle and share their stories of trauma.

The mission of the program is to provide spaces where victims and those who have perpetrated violence “can come together and ... build understanding and empathy toward those who have been victims of violent crime.”



Tim Deal (right) recorded a “birthday shoutout” with Jamal Spencer during Spencer’s birthday celebration at Franklin Park in Boston on July 9. Spencer said it was his first birthday celebration “on this side of the wall,” in decades. Deal also had reason to celebrate, his first anniversary since being released from prison. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

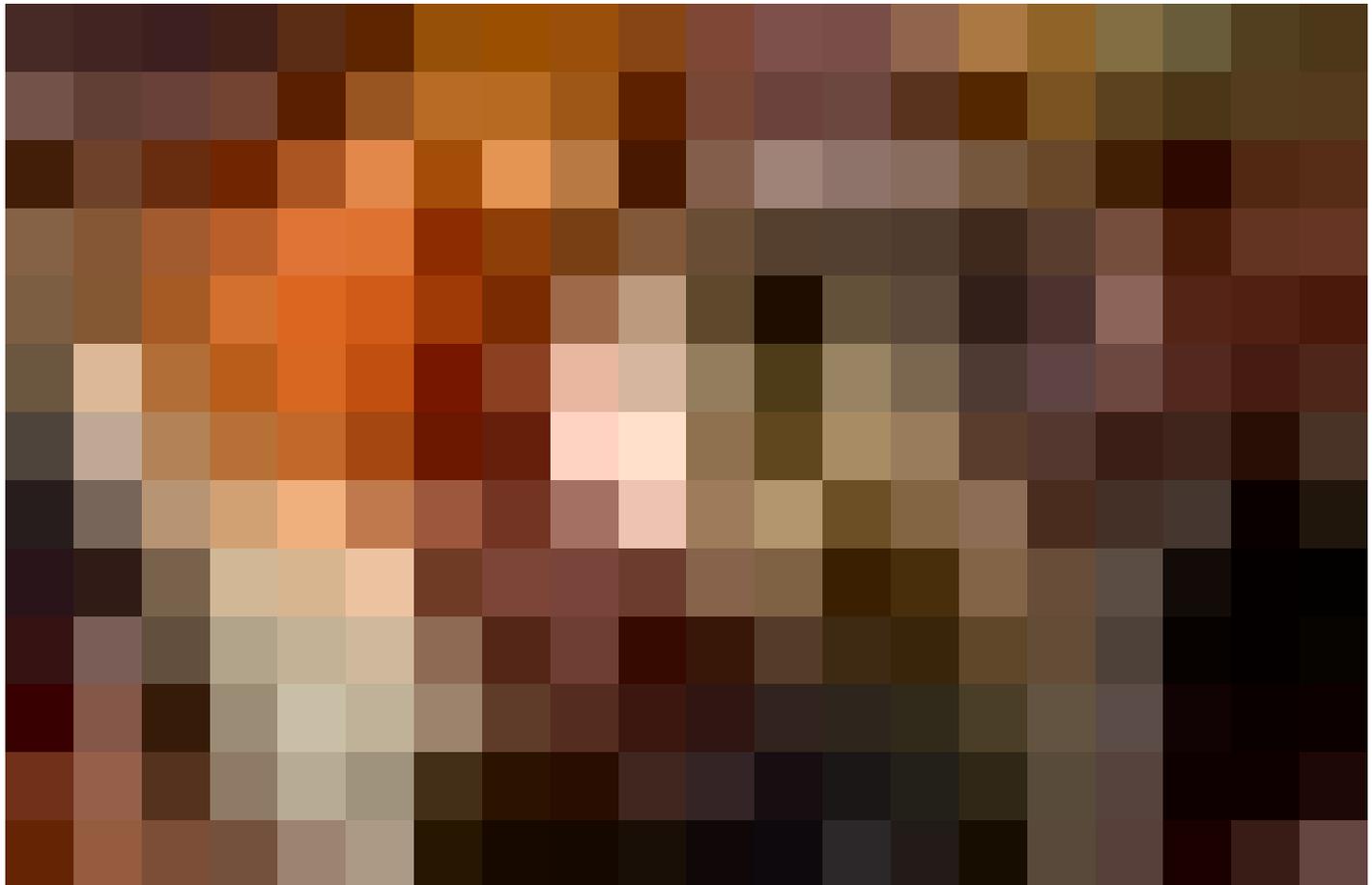
For months, Deal led or co-led these circles of youthful offenders. The project, which is funded through donations, grants, and state and corporate contracts, also provides mental health clinicians for one-on-one work with those who are incarcerated or recently released. The project’s ethos is simple: Healed people heal people.

The themes of the discussions are big, biblical even: introspection, self-forgiveness, redemption, catharsis, and, hopefully, healing that prepares the incarcerated for re-integration into a society that doesn’t live by prison rules. Healing that also, hopefully, offers some modicum of closure for the victims or their relatives.

For Deal, those discussions, many of them conducted behind bars, “restored me to the person I was ”

PERSON I WAS.

“I wasn’t born someone that was going to commit a homicide, but how did I get there?” he asked. “For me, I had to process a lot that I went through. Where was the first domino, and how did I go wrong, because if I could understand that, I could prevent that person from ever manifesting again.”



Armand Coleman (left), executive director of the Transformational Prison Project, spoke with Jamal Spencer during the Greater Boston Reentry Summit at Roxbury Community College in Boston on June 25. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

The program that Deal credits with helping him with that understanding is spearheaded by executive director Armand Coleman, who, like Deal, killed someone as a teenager and received a life sentence, spent years behind bars, and has since re-emerged into a changed world. Coleman, then known as Robert Littles, was 17 when he fatally shot 19-year-old Calvin Reese in the back of the head at a Roxbury club. The year was 1990, and Coleman and Reese were in rival street gangs.

Coleman was sent away on a second degree murder conviction. He was the youngest inmate at the state prison in Walpole. Over the years, he said, he came to realize, “every crime that I ever committed, every harm I ever committed, I was living out my own trauma that happened to me as a child.”

As a kid, his father was not part of his life, and he had two uncles who sold drugs. Once, he recalls, he told his grandfather that another uncle was not helping with a chore. In response, the uncle hit Coleman on the head with a brick, sending the then 5-year-old to the hospital. When his mother came to see him, she chastised him: “That’s why you shouldn’t tattle.”

As a youth, a substantial part of his identity was wrapped in his criminal and institutional record, in being a member of the gang known as the New York Boys, which court documents state were active in Roxbury’s Orchard Park housing development.

“I was in a position, my reputation was beyond reproach in institutions and on the streets. That’s gold in that world,” said Coleman, who now lives a short walk away from Roxbury’s Nubian Square. “I thought I did it because I was an ill dude, or they said a bad dude. Me recognizing myself as a victim first allowed me to acknowledge the people that I victimized.”

His revelations cannot erase certain unmovable facts. At Coleman’s last parole hearing, the mother and brother of Reese, the man Coleman fatally shot, opposed his release. Reese’s brother said “forever I’ll be hurting” from his brother’s murder; the mother called it a brutal and cowardly act, and said she thinks about her son every day, what he could have been, what he should have been. She goes to the cemetery where he is buried to talk with him.

“That’s not a very good feeling,” she said.

For Coleman, all the people behind bars represent a lot of trauma, trauma he would like to help address. He has ambitious goals for his program. He hopes eventually he could

reach the entire populations of the Massachusetts Department of Correction and Department of Youth Services. This year, his goal is to help 300 newly released people.

Jamal Spencer is another participant in the project who has helped lead restorative justice circles for the incarcerated and the freshly released. He was sentenced to life imprisonment for the fatal shooting of Sabrina Smith in 1990. He shot her with a .45 following an argument with her boyfriend. (He shot the boyfriend as well, but he survived.) He was 18 at the time of the slaying, a member of a local gang that operated in the Greenwood Street area of Dorchester and went by various names, including Greenwood Posse. He got paroled in 2005 but violated his parole when he was caught with a gun and ammunition in his possession in 2007. He went back to prison. He was paroled again and was released last September.

At his last parole hearing, Smith's sister denounced Spencer for failing to apologize to her family, calling her sister's murder "senseless," and saying her niece grew up without a mother because of him.



Jamal Spencer at his home in Boston. "Who can help decriminalize a criminal but former criminals?" he asked. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Like Deal, Spencer has had plenty of time to think about how it all went wrong. He spent years in a unit where he was limited to his cell for 23 hours a day. The worst part of prison was the "day after day" relentless sameness of life. He recalled having to take care which cafeteria tables he would walk between during his stint in Walpole prison to avoid problems with the gangs that had laid claim to particular spots. It is a sort of turf consciousness he knows well.

"It's tribal," said Spencer, 51.

He's still getting adjusted to life on the outside. Many ordinary actions that would have serious consequences in prison are an accepted part of everyday life now. Bumping into someone on the T, for instance; a stranger looking too long at what you're reading while you're seated in a public space.

Sitting in his living room, located in a quiet Hyde Park neighborhood, an electronic monitor attached to his ankle, he speaks of the paradox of prison life: the need to dehumanize oneself to survive a harsh environment, but also the necessity of purging self-lacerating feelings to become a better person. He remembers a fellow inmate telling him that if he was going to get into a fight he was going to have to punch with reckless abandon — no half measures — "as if you're trying to break something." He credits the intervention by restorative justice groups with saving his life.

He used to stick up drug dealers, but nowadays, he is trying to help break cycles of violence through his work with the project, by helping those who have done wrong work through their anger and guilt.

"Who can help decriminalize a criminal but former criminals?" he asked.

As for Deal, he is back living in the house he grew up in, next door to the place where he fatally stabbed Woods. But really, he mostly grew up in prison. It's a place where he

himself was stabbed. At one point, Deal, who is Black, had to bunk with a white supremacist with swastika tattoos.



Tim Deal spoke with his wife, Kim, outside their home in Boston. The couple live in an apartment at Deal's grandmother's home. CRAIG F. WALKER/GLOBE STAFF

Now, he faces a changed world. The downtown skyline is transformed, sure, but there are smaller tweaks to everyday life that carry more weight. The streets where he used to play football as a child are too full of cars to do that anymore. He sees far fewer guys hanging out on the corner.

He tries to keep busy. He has three jobs. He does the restorative justice work, but also works at a bowling alley and as a loan processor. He plans to take the state's real estate exam soon. He hopes that he will become the first real estate agent to receive their license while on parole in Massachusetts.

He recognizes he is lucky in a life-changing way: Before he was released, Woods's mother, Gladys Bogust, forgave him for killing her son, according to testimony at Deal's

two parole hearings.

Her cancer had returned, and she wanted to help him before she died. She reached out through an intermediary and they spoke on the phone while he was locked up. She called him “honey” and “dear” on the phone, just as she had when he was the kid next door who hadn’t yet killed her son. The significance of her extraordinary gesture is not lost on him. No matter how much restorative justice work is done, forgiveness at that humane depth can be rare. Just ask Coleman and Spencer. Deal would understand if Bogust were to go to her grave cursing his existence.

“What the hell do you say to that, but thank you?” said Deal. ”I have to honor her request for me to live my life better.”

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