

Cellblocks To Mountaintops Podcast  
Episode 8:  
A PATH FORWARD  
Transcript

**Host:** It was a rainy, misty Oregon morning in November, just before dawn when Sterling Cunio walked out of Oregon State Penitentiary, a free man, for the first time in almost 28 years.

**Sterling Cunio:** The very first thing that I noticed right away was the smell of the grass. It was slightly raining, you know, that felt cleansing and, it was like a deep breath.

**Sterling Cunio:** My friend.

**Anthony Pickens:** Wow. Wow.

**Host:** Anthony was there. He'd been out at that point for four days.

**Host:** His legal team was there, too. And about 30 other loved ones, supporters and former prisoners who all came to witness this moment.

**Sterling Cunio:** [Sound of Cheryl crying. Sterling embraces her.] My glasses are completely fogged.

**Sterling Cunio:** I was just engulfed by people and love. I just remember love, man. Freedom.

**Supporter:** Congrats Sterling. Congrats man.

**Sterling Cunio:** What's up my man, what's happening?

**Supporter:** Hi Sterling. Oh, what a great day.

**Sterling Cunio:** Eskra baby! Hey!

**Sterling Cunio:** He brought his only possessions. His books, his writings, and a plant he had discovered growing out of a crack of concrete years before. He nurtured it until it was big and beautiful, with long, thick, green vines. It had grown along with him.

**Sterling Cunio:** I love y'all. Thank you. I don't... I don't have the words. I don't have the words. I love you.

**Sterling Cunio:** Speechless right now.

**Host:** He led a group down the street to the yellow fire hydrant.

**Cheryl:** Ooh. Can you see them waving in the window?

**Supporter:** They're all cheering for you, man.

**Host:** He moved in with his aunt in Albany, Oregon at first so as not to put too much pressure on his relationship right off the bat. Visitors came and left. He had a meeting with his parole officer. He took a private driving lesson and got his driver's license. But mostly he just spent time with Cheryl, friends and family. He savored foods he hadn't had for years. Fried fish, smoothies packed with vegetables and fresh fruits. And then, on his fifth day of freedom, he needed some time to himself.

**Sterling Cunio:** Cause since from the time I stepped out up until that point, I was just surrounded by people nonstop.

**Host:** He just bought a used car. So, he went for a drive.

**Sterling Cunio:** I was actually just driving around out in the middle of nowhere. I see this sign. Independence, Oregon. And I was like, I like the sound of independence. I'm gonna go and I'm driving and I'm driving and I'm out in the mountains. So I come to this big ass river and, you know, walking along the river. And I'm just all in trees and stuff. Man, I'm just free. They ain't came and got me. That's when I really accepted, like, yo, I'm here. I made it. It was November. The sun was going down. The leaves were falling off and changing. And the way that they were illuminated with the reflection of the water in the background. I seen a hue that I've never seen before. Right? I seen the colors blend in a way that I'd never seen before. I felt like that was a gift from the universe. They were so beautiful. I felt embraced by the world. And I just started bawling. It had to be an ugly cry, right? And it was like a release. I was home, you know, on the path to recovery.

**Host:** In this episode, recovery, reentry and what the future holds for Sterling and for the criminal justice reform movement he's now able to be fully engaged in. I'm Phil Stockton and this is the final episode of Cellblocks To Mountaintops.

Even though Sterling had been behind bars for nearly three decades, he'd made a name for himself in the outside world. On top of winning several writing awards and fellowships, he made some real connections with the students who came into prison with Professor Melissa Buis's class. And as soon as he got his commutation, Melissa invited him to speak on a panel on clemency at Willamette University. So, less than two weeks after his release, he found himself in an auditorium in front of college students, activists, and attorneys. He read the last poem he had written from behind bars. It's called Society Imagined.

**Sterling Cunio:** Try to imagine the type of society we could be if we believed it possible to redeem those once deemed incorrigible. And what could we do if we view crime as a multiple intertwine of complex factors, and not just the rotten soul of bad actors? And just...

**Host:** The audience was completely captivated.

**Host:** Imagine the type of society we could be. If it was impossible for a teenage kid to get an AK 47 in the city. Mental health care was free for those living in the alley, if eye for an eye...

**Host:** And he was reaching people and finding his footing in the outside world. He didn't waste much time before he went to work. Aliza hired him part-time at the Criminal Justice Reform Clinic at Lewis and Clark Law School.

**Sterling Cunio:** I was working on juvenile clemency cases, writing reviews, bail projects.

**Host:** And the opportunities to share his story. To keep reaching people kept coming.

**Host:** Remember the song Grammy Award winner Antonio Sánchez and Becca Stevens created with this poem from the bucket?

**Thana Alexa:** In these concrete tombs, that most call cells, resistance becomes survival.

**Host:** Well. Sánchez happened to be on tour in Portland a year after Sterling was released.

**Sterling Cunio:** And instead of being spiritually crushed...

**Host:** He invited Sterling on stage to read his part from "The Bucket" in his own voice.

**Sterling Cunio:** I am he that blow kisses at the moon because indomitable wills create artistry out of sufferance, and thus even with handcuffs on wrist, I can build peace from inside the prison industrial complex where resistance is survival and love our salvation. Because resistance is survival and love our salvation.

**Sterling Cunio:** Man, I have so many moments where I'm like, I can't fucking believe this, right? Like, I'm literally up here on stage with Antonio Sánchez in a room full of people in Portland, Oregon, my loved ones in the crowd sharing my poetry. Like, who would have thought. It was it was amazing. A real honor.

**Host:** Sterling says he's experienced several of these moments since he got out.

**Sterling Cunio:** Being out and being free is a blessing. I understand the preciousness of liberty. It's miraculous. And all of these words fail. Like barbecues and camping trips and family get togethers or just the lazy day around the house. It was that type of stuff that I dreamed about when I was inside. I started laughing in the middle of a traffic jam, just because the traffic jam was as bad as my day was going to get, like that was it, that was the worst inconvenience I had all week. I'm so happy to be in traffic. I just started laughing that this is the new norm.

**Host:** But like anyone who is incarcerated for a long period of time, Sterling also struggled to reacclimate to the outside world.

**Sterling Cunio:** In reentry, you have a thousand crises of confidence, right? Like, I know that I am developed, that I have spent a lot of time on becoming aware of my strengths and my weaknesses. I understand that I'm a good learner, but God dang, I'm struggling with the washing machine. I'm struggling with the fucking microwave. And now these phones is going off. And these people want a zoom line, zip filed. And just like, man, you you're literally having to learn so much every day.

**Host:** He's not alone. The vast majority of people who are rearrested after the release get picked up for technical parole violations. These often reflect not criminal behavior, but just an inability to find their footing. Keep appointments, let their parole officer know when they leave town, or find a new place to stay.

**Sterling Cunio:** The challenges of finding housing, of finding employment, of people returning to the same context that was criminalgenic in the first place, whether that's household, neighborhood, you know, all kinds of stuff, collateral consequences to a conviction. You don't get beyond the shadow of the wall just because your body is released.

**Host:** Aliza Kaplan has represented and worked with people getting out of prison in several states, and she says that reentry support is never adequate.

**Aliza:** We need to focus on what happens to people when they get out of prison, or if not, they're just going to end up back in prison. It's just part of this machine. Yeah, you can get out. It's your time to get out now. You've done your time. And then not only are you going to be punished by having it on your record, but it's going to be almost impossible to find housing. It's going to be really hard to get a job.

**Host:** When Sterling was released, he received state-sponsored health care for one year, some food stamps and a parole officer. That's it. And the parole officer isn't someone who helps find housing or work. They are just there to make sure they're following the rules. Sterling was lucky. He had managed to build so many connections from inside prison. He had people ready to offer him work, food, a place to stay. But he still struggled with the lingering effects of trauma from the violence of his youth, the more than 27 years living in a high-stress environment, the wildfires, and watching people around him in prison die of Covid.

**Sterling Cunio:** There's just a lot of expecting the worst-case scenarios. That's a trauma linger. I've been in grocery stores and had the thought of like, if a riot breaks out in Safeway what's my plan, right? (laughing) But for 30 years I had to think like that. Automatically without knowing it. And our brains don't change just because our feet do. You could put your feet anywhere, but your brain is the same.

**Host:** Sadly, his relationship with Cheryl did not survive the transition. He had a hard time balancing his newfound freedom with a full-time relationship. The two of them split up less than six months after Sterling left OSP.

**Sterling Cunio:** My feelings for Cheryl is still an appreciation for our journey. You know, after surviving and overcoming so much, we had found ourselves facing personal challenges in which we went different paths. And I wish her the best. Always.

**Host:** He spends a lot of his free time with other people who've been in prison in an organization called Regroup. It's run for and by returning citizens. One of the founders was actually a former member of the Restorative Justice group at OSP.

**Sterling Cunio:** It started off with just three people with the idea of how do we have a support group for people coming home? And then it grew. You know, it went from like three people to 64.

**Host:** Together, they network and pool resources and connections.

**Sterling Cunio:** We're strictly peer-to-peer kind of mutual aid.

**Host:** Sterling has been working with them in various roles since he got out.

**Sterling Cunio:** This is the beginning, right? Developing those connections. Developing that community.

**Host:** This was recorded at an orientation he led about ten months after his release. Part of what Regroup does is help people reacclimate, stay connected to a community.

**Sterling Cunio:** And because it's somebody that's came through the reentry process, that's who we can talk to about the shock over five-cent bags. You know what I mean? I don't think nobody else can relate to how long it took me to figure out these fuckers don't put ketchup and mustard in the bag no more. Right. It took me three dry ass burgers. Now I'm shouting at the drive-through. Right? I'm angry. And make sure you put some ketchup in the bag too. And no whipped cream in the milkshake. right? You know.

**Host:** They also help people find a new purpose. Many of them put their unique experiences and expertise to work to help stop the revolving prison door and end the cycles of violence.

**Sterling Cunio:** Many of our members have been directors of gun violence production programs. Some of our members are facilitating restorative justice circles.

**Host:** Sterling is also enjoying something he didn't have the luxury of doing. It always be spending time in nature, and he takes other returning citizens with him as often as he can. He calls it cellblocks to mountaintops.

**Sterling Cunio:** When I say cellblocks to mountaintops, I want it to convey the idea that you can reach the peaks you seek. It sounds kind of cheesy, like I was just nickel-and-diming, rhyming you know? But it is at the heart of the vision and the energy that's animating my work right now. It's holding on to the ability to dream a vision of a better world and keep pushing forward.

**Host:** With time, Sterling has found several ways to hold on to that vision of a better world. You may remember that Sterling spent his final years of freedom living on the streets, and when he got out, it seemed like there were even more people in that situation.

**Sterling Cunio:** When I came home, one of the very first things that pierced my bliss was the amount of people sleeping on the streets that I saw.

**Host:** He was released in November, and it was an unusually cold winter in Oregon. He started volunteering at an organization that provides services and transitional housing and micro shelter communities. It's called Church at the Park and they offered him a job. He left the law clinic to take it.

**Sterling Cunio:** I started working there as a storyteller and teaching staff nonviolent communication skills, conducting belonging circles inside the communities and just serving.

**Sterling Cunio:** Two years after the death of my mama. I was living in the streets.

**Host:** This is a recording of him telling his story at an event co-hosted by Church at the Park and Willamette University.

**Sterling Cunio:** Failed group home placements. I eventually found myself sleeping on the couches of friends or aimlessly roaming around the streets of this city. I slept in cardboard, recycle dumpsters to get out the cold and rain. And while I was in the streets, I fell into the culture of the street crime and spun out of control, down a violent path that inevitably led to prison, at age 16.

**Host:** Sterling and Anthony have managed to stay close, and they continue to motivate, support and challenge each other.

**Sterling Cunio:** It's served us good and in helping each other, we've strengthened each other and sustained each other, so why wouldn't it work out here?

**Host:** Anthony and Natasha renewed their vows recently, and Sterling was his best man. The two shared a moment they'd always dreamed about on the dance floor.

**Anthony Pickens:** Sterling dances horribly. I seen him dance in prison before, and then, I seen him dance at my wedding renewal not long ago, and it hasn't changed. It's horrible. (laughs)\_

**Host:** They've also continued working for change together. While they were still at OSP, one of Melissa's students started organizing to amend Oregon's State Constitution. They wanted to remove language allowing slavery and involuntary servitude as a punishment for a crime. This clause exists in several states and in many places' prisoner rights advocates have lobbied to have them struck.

**Anthony Pickens:** It just got me very interested in tackling this system in legislative processes and then ultimately, once I got commutation, those were my first jobs in that field.

**Host:** Anthony, in particular was instrumental in getting the issue in front of voters.

**Media Clip, OPB:** Ballot measure 112 would remove part of Oregon's constitution that permits slavery and involuntary servitude.

**Host:** And their efforts were successful.

**Media Clip, Youtube -KTVB** Oregon votes yes to remove slavery language from the Constitution.

**Anthony Pickens:** It means everything to me. I was once an individual who didn't have a voice, I was incarcerated. I might have had a lot of critiques about this system. When you're in those spaces, the majority of people don't have the opportunity to do anything about it. So to be able to be on this side of freedom and be able to fight for those who can't fight for themselves and doesn't have a voice as well as the fact of having that lived experience of knowing what they're going through. It motivates me every minute of the day.

**Host:** During the exception clause campaign, Sterling met someone who would give him an opportunity to forge an entirely new path, completely unrelated to his troubled past. That's after the break.

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**Sterling Cunio:** Dr. Denise Fairchild is the 2021 Climate Breakthrough awardee, only the second American to win the prize in the world.

**Host:** Her project is called the Ubuntu Climate Breakthrough Initiative. Ubuntu is a common word spoken across several languages in sub-Saharan Africa. It refers to the connectedness of humankind, and the mission of the Climate Breakthrough is to combat climate change and the systems that have created it by changing the culture.

**Sterling Cunio:** And the whole goal is to reunite people with planet, reclaiming, renorming and practicing Afro and pan-Indigenous wisdoms. Because it was pretty much universal all around the world up until capitalism spread through colonialism, that all peoples had a respect for Mother Nature, the environment, the spirits, whatever you want to call them, and to get back to that appreciation is the goal.

**Host:** Dr. Fairchild hired Sterling in 2023 to be a cultural organizer of sorts, and he left Church at the Park to work with her.

**Sterling Cunio:** She was interested in personal transformation, because if we're going to restore some balance with our world, literally with the environment, then people are going to have to change their behaviors.

**Host:** He's currently planning a nationwide storytelling contest centered around the themes of "re-uniting people and planet" and the "oneness of humanity."

**Sterling Cunio:** Working on that particularly has me excited because it's really focusing on how do we use cultural arts and storytelling and song to mobilize, to get people to think about our relationship with the world and each other.

**Host:** If it feels like a sharp turn for Sterling, it's not. He's been a nature lover since his early days exploring the Arkansas woods behind his grandpa's house, and he's always been inspired by Indigenous and Pan-African belief systems. In fact, peace circles and restorative justice are rooted in these traditions.

**Danielle Sered:** Restorative justice has almost endless lineages, right to Indigenous communities here, to Indigenous communities on the African continent, in New Zealand and South America and all these places.

**Host:** That's Danielle Sered again.

**Danielle Sered:** I mean, even Stonehenge is in a circle, like even white people used to do this. And that's because these processes are natural to us. Like if you have a group of people who belong to each other and you don't want to exile someone forever and you don't want to kill them, you have to figure out something to do and what most people in relationship with each other figure out to do is to leverage the existing relationships to try and induce a positive change.

**Host:** One day recently, Sterling was up for a walk when he got a call from a strange number.

**Sterling Cunio:** She was like, hey, Sterling, this is Kate. And I didn't even have to be like Kate, who?

**Host:** It was former Oregon Governor Kate Brown, the person who granted Sterling a commutation. She left office in January of 2023.

**Sterling Cunio:** And that was amazing. Like, I'm gonna have to invent a new word, right? Because amazing is just too diluted now and overly used. I mean, it was awe-inspiring. My request for a commutation was basically a prayer, and she answered it.

**Host:** Since leaving office, she's continued to advocate for change in the criminal justice system. Here she is at an event at Harvard University in March 2023.

**Kate Brown:** I see our criminal justice system as very much being built on racism, and I think it is going to take very strategic, very methodical deconstruction of that system in order to have a criminal justice system that we can all believe is fair and just and equitable towards all.

**Host:** She called Sterling to invite him to speak with her at a seminar at the University of Chicago. The event was one she organized as a fellow there about transforming the criminal justice system through restorative justice. Sterling traveled to Chicago, and it was there that they finally met face-to-face.

**Sterling Cunio:** To not only be able to meet her, have that dinner, exchange ideas, but to be able to tell her about how my work didn't stop. It just expanded. And to be able to share all of that with her and tell her thank you. That was a beautiful moment. She probably sick of hearing me tell her how thankful I am. I mean. It's had to become uncomfortable because I don't feel like I could express it enough.

**Host:** A lot has changed in our criminal justice system in the past ten years, thanks in large part to the efforts of dedicated activists, many of them formerly incarcerated people. The prison population has decreased significantly in some states, and there has also been a growing movement to improve conditions inside prisons. Many states have started to reduce the reliance on solitary confinement, and some have begun to train staff in trauma-informed care. Former prison Chaplain Karuna Thompson says these efforts are helpful but piecemeal, so they can only go so far.

**Karuna Thompson:** We have not had substantial revisioning of what corrections and our penal process is for 400 years. That's a problem. We all know that environment deeply impacts our state of mind. You walk into a beautiful space that feels well-appointed, you have your needs met, you relax. You walk into an unlit alley you're panicked. Right? Like environment matters. And the reality is that there is no way that we can use the prisons as we have them designed now, and get the mental, emotional, spiritual, physical results that we want as a community.

**Host:** She said she spent years working for the Oregon Department of Corrections, thinking she could change OSP from the inside.

**Karuna Thompson** And we did, we created really beautiful pockets where human beings could be human beings, but they were pockets. And the minute that you walked out of our area, you were right back in the violence of the structure. I mean, it's not even just the people. It's the structure of it is violent. The colors are cold, the sounds are hard, the lights



are always on. The fact that people do develop the way they do is a testament to who they are as human beings, but the space itself does not promote it.

**Host:** Once she realized she couldn't make a real dent, that the system was too big and the problems too embedded, she decided she couldn't be a part of it anymore. While we were working on this project, Karuna handed in her resignation to the Oregon Department of Corrections after almost two decades. She now works for the State Department of Human Services. Remember Rosemary Brewer, the executive director of Oregon Crime Victims Law Center, after 20 years advocating on the side of victims and their families, She, too, has reached the conclusion that we ought to be doing things differently.

**Rosemary Brewer:** Our system has been significantly unfair to certain races, and that's real. We need to fix poverty, racial inequity. Those are the things that need to be addressed in order to stop the cycle of violence. And until we get to the point where that is solved, then you know violence is going to be a part of our world.

**Host:** So, these two people on opposite ends of the political spectrum have reached a very similar conclusion, that the way the cycle of violence perpetuates itself is predictable and avoidable, that we could end it if only we redirected our energy and resources. Professor Melissa Buis says this approach is part of a movement towards transformative justice.

**Melissa Buis:** I think of transformative justice is really growing out of the insights of restorative justice. It starts with the same critique that the criminal legal system is not adequately addressing the needs of survivors, offenders, or communities. The difference with transformative justice is thinking a little more holistically about both the pathways into prison and how to heal after violence has occurred or after a harm has been committed.

**Host:** As soon as he got out, Sterling started working with her at the Transformative Justice Initiative. It includes several projects that aim to interrupt the pathways to prison and build a world where violence is less likely to occur.

**Melissa Buis** For example, one of the programs that we worked on was a program for youth with incarcerated parents. Recognizing that they're six times more likely to end up incarcerated themselves.

**Host:** They work to give the kids the kind of support that might help them break the cycle. The Transformative Justice Initiative is also home to Regroup, the mutual aid organization for formerly incarcerated people that Sterling is still very active in. Karuna Thompson says that if we could invest in truly changing the socio-economic conditions that feed violence, addiction and crime, and when harm occurs, focus on healing and rehabilitation from day one, we might not even need prisons as they currently exist.

**Karuna Thompson** It's not working because victims don't get what they need. Offenders don't get what they need, and staff are damaged.

**Host:** Karuna says it would make a lot more sense to do everything we can to give kids and parents what they need to thrive and be safe, instead of simply waiting until people do harm and then locking them up.

**Karuna Thompson:** To think that somehow this is a legitimate solution to our criminal issues in our society is really missing the mark. But we can do treatment, family development, education in the community. There's no reason we have to have prisons.

**Host:** Karuna is a self-described prison abolitionist. It's an idea that goes at least as far back as the anarchist movement in the mid-1800s. It's basically the belief that prisons can be eliminated through investing in systems of rehabilitation and education. As a movement, it has gained a lot more mainstream acceptance in recent years, alongside a growing understanding of the racial inequities, costs, and consequences of mass incarceration.

**Sterling Cunio:** I consider myself an abolitionist. People tell us, what would we do, just shut down all the prisons? How is that going to solve the problem? Because that's a critique, right? That's the first thing people want to go to, but it demonstrates a misunderstanding of the problem and the carceral system. Because the problem didn't start in the prison. So before people can critique the abolitionist, we have to first be able to answer systems of social inequity, school push-out problems, over policing. Excessive sentencing. Poverty. Hunger. Prison is where you land when you fail through all these other systems.

**Host:** Rosemary Brewer doesn't think we'll ever get to a point where prisons become obsolete.

**Rosemary Brewer:** There are very real reasons why incarceration exists, and there are some people who need to be incarcerated. It does take somebody out of society who could potentially harm someone.

**Host:** But even she agrees that it's possible to significantly reduce prison populations. It's not rocket science.

**Rosemary Brewer:** There are so many kids at risk of going into the criminal justice system school to jail pipeline is real, and those kids who are recognized as being at risk need a team to shepherd them through school and get them on a different path. And we don't do that. And it's it's very frustrating to watch all of these, and I'm one of them a nonprofit that gets funding and then we can't seem to use that funding appropriately for what the root causes of our society's problems are. And the United States has the money to do that. But they don't seem to have the appetite to do that. And that's really what needs to be done.

**Host:** There are groups across the country building the infrastructure from the ground up to create real avenues for healing and safety outside of prisons. Like Daniel Sered's, Common Justice in New York City, which funnels people who commit violent crimes into restorative processes with their survivors instead of giving them prison time. She says it is important for reformers to be careful not to fall into the trap of only making the prison system look better on the surface.

**Danielle Sered:** You can be really disciplined about the kinds of interventions and reforms that only fortify the systems we ultimately want to displace, and the kind of things that we can do that start to build scaffolding for the world we want to create.

**Host:** Danielle says it will require people to get more ambitious and more proactive about supporting the work that's already happening.

**Danielle Sered:** We aren't interested in building an empire. We're interested in building a movement. And so people should look at places like the Freedom Community Center in Saint Louis as a source of extraordinary inspiration. And people should look at the People's Advocacy Institute in Jackson, Mississippi, and the work they have done and are doing that range from building something like Common Justice to ensuring people have water in a city that can't provide it.

**Host:** There are plenty of others, like the West Side Justice Center in Chicago, which offers legal assistance while working to mitigate the impact of incarceration on affected communities and build restorative justice options. Or the East Bay Arts Alliance, a hub where kids can go when they're hungry or need a place to relax or sleep.

**Danielle Sered:** People should look in their communities to where people are already working and building and give their energy to that work and to that creation.

**Sterling Cunio:** I would like to see a future where personal transformation is viewed as a form of justice, and we reduce inequity through care.

**Host:** Today, Sterling is spending his time in service. He's working to fight climate change. He's volunteering with Regroup and the Transformative Justice Initiative. He's spending time outdoors and enjoying freedom. But he doesn't want to waste a moment because there is still so much work to do.

**Sterling Cunio:** So, if you're with me? Then raise your peace signs quickly so that the world can see the type of society we can be. Redemption is ending all my poetry with love everybody.

**Host:** To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at [cellblockstomountaintops.com](http://cellblockstomountaintops.com).

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