

RRP 116 — Aaron Burrell / From "Money" to Hope Dealer: Gangs, Prison, and the Walk That Does the Talking

Presenters: Julie P. Lewis and Peter B. Dowell **Episode Length:** Approximately 1 hour 48 minutes

Release Date: May 29, 2026

Summary

Aaron Burrell grew up in Salem, Oregon with his father in federal prison for twenty years — and a gang heritage he spent his early life trying to live up to under the street name "Money." When his father paroled as a recovery success story, then relapsed and pulled him into a crystal meth operation, Aaron ended up in the same county jail as his dad — where a note slipped under his cell door brought him to his first prayer. What followed was another prison bid, a renunciation of gang life, a near-suicide in Two Rivers maximum custody, a dream sequence that pointed to a single Bible verse, a courtroom turn no one saw coming, and a City Team graduation that put him on the path to peer recovery work. Today Aaron is 30 months clean — the first sustained sobriety of his adult life — and wears a Hope Dealer hat to work.

Key Points

- **[00:03:00]** Salem, Oregon roots. Aaron's father went to federal prison for attempted murder and a bank robbery spree when Aaron was one year old. The gang culture that surrounded his father was idolized in Aaron's circle, and a young Aaron tried to fill those shoes.
- **[00:05:00]** Mixed-race household, Hispanic stepfather, and an identity Aaron describes as soft at heart underneath a violent mask. "Internal conflict my whole life."
- **[00:06:00]** First prison stretch at 21 — Oregon State Penitentiary. Aaron is called for a visit thinking it's a girlfriend; turns around and meets his father face-to-face for the first time. Full circle.
- **[00:11:00]** Father paroles, becomes a recovery poster child, then relapses. Aaron walks into his own house one day to find a duffle bag on the table — bundles of cash and crystal meth. "This is what we're doing now."
- **[00:16:00]** "In that darkness is when I seen the light." Aaron crosses paths with God for the first time.
- **[00:22:00]** Aaron is in Marion County Jail; his father lands there too. Dad forces Aaron to memorize Swahili so they can speak in code. A note appears under Aaron's cell door — two names, two addresses, and an order to make sure the witnesses don't make it to court.
- **[00:24:00]** First prayer of Aaron's life: "*If you're real, I need you to do something.*" The next morning his father is sent to the hole for fighting guards. Aaron opens a Bible at random — Matthew, *do not worry.*

- [00:27:00] Days later: the unit lieutenant orders Aaron to stab the guard who maced his father. Aaron prays again. At 6:30 the next morning a raid breaks the plan apart — the constitution his father wrote and distributed is found in 90 percent of the cells.
- [00:31:00] Aaron refuses to carry out his father's orders. His father's response: *"You're dead to me. Change your last name."*
- [00:32:00] First taste of recovery: the SOAR program at Chemeketa Community College in Salem. AA, NA, and a "No Matter What Club" with two buddies.
- [00:33:00] PO Anna Whitlock asks Aaron if he wants her to take him to his father's trial. He goes. His entire view of law enforcement shifts that day.
- [00:40:00] Father is sentenced to 45 years. Turns, gives Aaron the death stare, and says *"I'm coming for you."*
- [00:42:00] Aaron completes the program with every award and 100% attendance — but it doesn't sink in. He relapses; the suspended sentence is revoked; he goes back to prison for over 50 months. Inside, he renounces his gang life, finds Celebrate Recovery, and facilitates step studies for the first time.
- [00:45:00] Released 2019. CADIC, work at a detox — but Aaron describes leaving the Bible behind on the way out the prison gate.
- [00:46:00] Survivor's guilt. The voice that says he didn't deserve to make it.
- [00:58:00] A daughter's birthday with a trunk full of presents and a family waiting at the pizza parlor. The mother of his children won't let the girls out of the house. Aaron reacts the only way he knew how. A plea is taken. The counselor career is lost.
- [01:00:00] In court for the revoke, the judge gives him 48 months without looking up. Aaron charges him, hits the table, tries to get to him. Wakes up in the hole with another 18 months added for the outburst. October 16, 2023.
- [01:03:00] Two Rivers maximum custody. Suicidal ideation. Aaron is planning his own end.
- [01:05:00] Aaron's wife — at the time not a believer, science to the bone — keeps asking him to pray. He says yes to get her to stop asking. His heart softens.
- [01:14:00] Letter from his attorney: the judgment has been vacated.
- [01:17:00] "We're gonna shoot for treatment," the new lawyer says. Aaron's wife paid the \$30,000 fee — money he's been paying her back ever since.
- [01:18:00] Three nights of dreams: every clock, every page, every number reads 1921. On the fifth night Aaron wakes at midnight, opens the Bible, lands on **Proverbs 19:21** — *"Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose which prevails."*
- [01:21:00] Aaron starts running a 7 p.m. men's 12-step and scripture group in his unit. Ninety percent of the men join. The corrections officers watch on the video feed.
- [01:22:00] In court, the new judge plays the video of Aaron charging the old one — then pulls out a stack of letters from released inmates and corrections officers vouching for who Aaron is now. *"In 25 years, nobody has disrespected this courtroom like you have. Nobody deserves prison more than you. But — you're going to City Team."*
- [01:27:00] Aaron walks into City Team still wearing the maroon DOC transport jumpsuit — the guards wouldn't give him dress-outs. Mark Gamboa, Lance Orton, and Monica Morton meet him at the door.

- **[01:28:00]** Aaron volunteers for the job no one wants: washing the feet of the houseless guests who come through City Team. Full circle to a moment in 2019 when he washed his daughters' feet to teach them who Jesus was.
 - **[01:34:00]** Post-City Team: mentor at 4D Recovery, then on to The Peer Company, where Aaron works alongside Ebony Brawley, Bo, and supervisor Terry.
 - **[01:40:00]** The Hope Dealer hat — from Be Bold Street Ministries in Salem — and what Aaron believes about sharing hope with anyone he meets, from the executive director to the person on the corner.
 - **[01:42:00]** The buffalo metaphor: don't run from the storm, charge through it. Aaron claimed that one for himself.
 - **[01:43:00]** Words of wisdom: the opposite of addiction is community. Aaron's sobriety date is October 17, 2023 — 30 months at the time of this recording, the first sustained sobriety of his adult life.
-

Guest Quote

"In that darkness is when I seen the light." — Aaron Burrell

Websites Discussed

- City Team — the residential recovery program in Portland where Aaron was sentenced to treatment instead of prison
 - 4D Recovery — where Aaron mentored after graduating City Team
 - The Peer Company — Aaron's current employer in peer recovery support services
 - Be Bold Street Ministries — the Salem outreach organization behind Aaron's Hope Dealer hat
 - Celebrate Recovery — the program that became the game-changer for Aaron during his second prison stretch
 - Real Recovery Podcast
-

Listen & Connect

- **Listen:** <https://mdcr1.com/116>
 - **Blog:** <https://mdcr1.com/116b>
 - **Newsletter:** <https://mdcr1.com/newsletter>
-

Hashtags & Mentions

#RealRecoveryPodcast #Recovery #AddictionRecovery #HopeDealer #OregonRecovery
#PrisonToPurpose #GangRecovery #PeerSupport #SoberLife #SecondChances #CityTeam #4DRecovery
#AA #CelebrateRecovery

@realrecoverypodcast @cityteampdx @4drecovery