

RRP 104 — Justin Rye

From the Streets to Service: Finding Faith, Sobriety, and Purpose in Recovery

Episode Details

Presenters: Peter and Julie

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Summary

In this episode, Julie and Peter welcome Justin Rye, a substance abuse counselor at Adult and Teen Challenge in Estacada, Oregon. Justin shares a raw and unflinching account of growing up in Fresno, California — a childhood shaped by gang culture, early drug use beginning at age nine, juvenile detention, and years cycling in and out of group homes, jails, and prisons across California. His path eventually led him to Portland, where five years of living unhoused and using intravenous meth on the streets culminated in a federal bank robbery charge. It was a federal prison sentence, the structured accountability of sober living under Rob Black, and the death of a fellow resident from synthetic marijuana that catalyzed his recovery. With nearly three years sober, Justin now carries 12 clients on his caseload at Adult and Teen Challenge and speaks with conviction about faith, foundation-building, and why real recovery is supposed to be uncomfortable.

Key Points

[00:09:34] Growing Up in Fresno

- Justin grew up in an all-Black neighborhood in Fresno, California, where gang involvement began as early as fifth grade.
- He started smoking weed at age nine and was sent to juvenile hall at age 12 after stabbing a teacher.
- He spent four years cycling through 16 group homes, running from each one in an effort to reach his mother.

[00:10:49] First Exposure to Meth and the California Youth Authority

- After his sister took him in at age 16 or 17, Justin first used meth — with his mother, who was the first person he ever got high with.
- He was arrested again, violated probation, and was sent to the California Youth Authority until age 19.
- He was released with no probation, no job skills, and nowhere to go — and went straight back to the streets to sell drugs.

[00:11:57] Life on the Installment Plan

- Justin describes spending most of his adult life in and out of jail and prison — approximately 12 incarcerations total, including two state prison terms in California and one federal.
- His only drug charge came when he sold dope to an undercover officer at a casino in Redding, California, resulting in a prison term.

[00:14:14] Seven Years in a Van and Arriving in Portland

- After his California prison term, Justin traveled the country for seven years living in a van.
- He arrived in Oregon in 2017 for the National Rainbow Gathering — described as the largest hippie family reunion in the world, held in a different state each year, with no electronic instruments permitted.
- Though he had been off harder drugs for two years at that point, a return trip through Portland ended with him finding drugs at Skidmore Fountain, relapsing, and spending the next five years living unhoused in downtown Portland while using intravenous meth.

[00:18:43] Going Hard in Portland Without a Safety Net

- Unlike previous cities where family proximity provided some restraint, Justin had no family in Portland and went, in his words, "hard" — using for weeks at a time with 80-unit shots.
- He and a companion eventually drove to Eugene, ran out of gas, and robbed a bank using a note — no weapon. They were arrested by federal agents six months later.
- Justin served two years in federal prison for the bank robbery and was released to a halfway house on Killingsworth in Northeast Portland.

[00:21:45] Spice, the Halfway House, and the Turning Point

- Justin began smoking spice (synthetic marijuana) in federal prison and continued at the halfway house, where he was found unresponsive on the floor with the pipe still in his hand.
- Kicked out of the halfway house, he was given an ultimatum by his PO: find housing or report to custody. A fellow resident named Cilo handed him a number to call.
- That number belonged to Rob Black, who placed Justin into sober living on July 3, 2023 — his sobriety date.

[00:24:02] The Death That Ended Any Doubt

- Shortly after moving into Rob Black's sober house, Justin learned that a woman he had smoked spice with the night he moved in had died from it.
- That loss removed any remaining temptation to use spice and reinforced his commitment to sobriety.

[00:24:42] Building Recovery Through Structure and Faith

- Rob Black's sober living required three AA meetings per week, weekly house meetings, and regular UAs. Justin credits that structure as the foundation of his recovery.
- During this period he found his higher power through a church where he volunteered feeding homeless people every Sunday.
- After two years sober — the minimum required to work in the recovery field — his pastor Tara, who is vice president of Adult and Teen Challenge, connected him with the position he now holds.

[00:26:00] Working in Recovery as a Peer Counselor

- Justin currently carries 12 clients on his caseload at Adult and Teen Challenge in Estacada and runs three groups per day.
- He has completed 90 continuing education units and is working toward his CADC certification, approximately 500 hours into a 1,000-hour on-the-job training requirement.
- He describes the reward of the work as watching clients arrive broken and disheveled, then opening up, finding peace, and graduating.

[00:30:28] Real Recovery Takes Time to Build

- Justin offers a direct message to anyone early in recovery: the foundation takes time and cannot be rushed.
- He encourages people to wait out cravings one day at a time, noting that today he has a driver's license, a car, and a home — things he had never had in his adult life before sobriety.

[00:35:23] The Value of the Timeout

- Justin reflects that federal prison — despite being the consequence of his worst decisions — saved his life by removing him from a lifestyle that included carrying a pistol and selling heroin daily.
- After two years on probation, he petitioned the court for early release and thanked the judge, telling him the incarceration had saved his life.

[00:45:37] Discomfort Is Where the Growth Lives

- Justin speaks candidly about what working a solid recovery program actually requires: calling a sponsor when triggered, talking about things he did not want to discuss, and doing things that were deeply uncomfortable.
- He names finding a power greater than oneself as the single most important piece of lasting sobriety — and tells his clients: "There is a God, and I'm not him."

[00:58:39] Relapse Is a Part of Relapse

- Justin states clearly that he will never tell a client "relapse is a part of recovery" — in his view, relapse is a part of relapse.
- He acknowledges people can get back up, but adds that their next stumble could be their last. Relapse is not a foregone conclusion, and it was not part of his story.

Guest Quote

| *"Real recovery takes time to build."* — Justin Rye

Websites Discussed

- [Adult and Teen Challenge](#) — Faith-based addiction recovery and counseling program
 - [Skyler Ray](#) — Recovery artist and advocate
 - [Real Recovery Podcast](https://www.realrecoverypodcast.com/) — <https://www.realrecoverypodcast.com/>
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