

CHAPTER 02

FORGIVENESS

The story of *Jason Wang*, the founder of *FreeWorld*, a tech-enabled nonprofit aimed at ending generational poverty and recidivism through asset ownership and high-wage careers for people with criminal records across the US.

CONTENT WARNING

Child abuse, sexual violence, suicidal ideation

INTRO

When people first set their eyes on Jason Wang, they don't usually think, *That guy probably went to a maximum-security prison*. But he did. A gang member at age fifteen, Jason received a twelve-year sentence to a prison in Texas and spent the next three years in a repetitive, violent, and gray microcosm of the world he had known. Yet, as shrunken as his life had become, his inner world was expanding.

Under the facilitation of group therapists in their rehabilitation program, Jason and the other juveniles imprisoned with him took turns reenacting their crimes with props, and they wrote version after version of their life stories on paper. Over three years of this introspection, aided by hundreds of books and the unfailing love of his mother, Jason began to understand how a cycle of poverty and abuse had shaped his choices, which then shaped his story—a story that drives his life's purpose today.

I'll never forget the day I was arrested in front of my mom. Two squad cars pulled up from behind me, guns drawn, as I was making my way into our garage. My mom usually slept during the day, but we were making so much commotion that she came down to see what was going on.

“What are you doing? That’s my son!” she screamed as the officer cuffed me.

They started to explain the charges they were filing against me.

“You must have the wrong kid. My son would *never* do that,” she said. I had hated her so much up to that point, yet she had leapt to my defense at the drop of a hat. *She loves me*, I realized, for the first time I could remember. The officers pushed me into the back seat.

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My parents came to the US as adults—my dad from China and my mom from Malaysia—searching for better opportunities. They met while working and getting paid under the table at Chinese restaurants in New York.

A lifelong entrepreneur, my dad dreamed of opening businesses. Unfortunately, he borrowed money from a Chinese gang to start a trucking business. A few months in, the business went under. It wasn’t long before a few of the gang members found my dad, with photos of his family in their hands, and threatened to slaughter all of us unless he paid.

He decided to flee. From New Jersey to New York to Georgia, we lived in apartments that crawled with rats and rang with the sounds of sirens and gunshots at night. Wherever we moved, my parents would pick up restaurant jobs, until we ended up in Carroll, Iowa. By then, my dad had finally saved enough money to start his own Chinese restaurant. Starting from when I was five, my dad made me work in the restaurant from the end of the school day until my bedtime. During lulls, my mom would unfurl huge Chinese menus, write math problems on the back, and make me solve them.

We were some of the few people of color in Carroll, along with a Black family and a Mexican family. Not only did I get picked for being different at school, but I also suffered my dad's terrible temper at home. When he was angry, he would throw tables, chairs, and anything he could get his hands on. He chased me around the kitchen with a butcher knife and wanted to stab me. He tried to run me over with his car. He would often tell me, "You're good for nothing," "You'll never amount to anything," "You're not my son," and "I don't love you." When we had huge blizzards at fifteen degrees below zero in the Iowa winter, he would strip me down, kick me while I was on the floor, and then throw me naked into the snow. I was six, seven, eight years old at the time.

Because my mom never stuck up for me when my dad was abusing me, I grew up hating her. I loathed both of them so much that when I was six years old, I suspended myself out of our apartment window, two floors above our restaurant, knowing that if I killed myself in the restaurant's parking lot, my dad would lose business and make less money. He cared about money most, so that's how I could hurt him, right?



Me as a child, featured
in a local newspaper.

One day, when I was eleven, my dad sprung a piece of news on my mom: “I’ve got a wife and three kids in China, and they’re gonna come live with us starting tomorrow.” Unbeknownst to us, he had been in an arranged marriage when he was eighteen. For the past twelve years, he had actually been working on sponsoring them to come to the US.

That day, my mom drove to the middle of the woods to kill herself. The only thing that stopped her was the thought of me growing up without a mother. She gritted her teeth, came back home, and lived with my dad’s ex-wife, as well as his ex-wife’s daughter and her husband, in our two-bedroom apartment.

The other family stayed in one bedroom, while my parents were in another. I lived in the living room, my grandma in the kitchen. A few months later, my mom filed for divorce and took my grandma and me to Texas to begin our new life. There, she got a minimum wage job moving boxes for fourteen hours a night.

By this point in my life, I hated the world. Angry, abused, and convinced that I was good for nothing, I thought, *Fuck it. I’m just gonna do whatever the hell I want.* At age thirteen, I joined a gang, and that led to me making a terrible decision.

At age fifteen, I committed aggravated robbery, a first-degree felony, and was arrested.



My mugshot when I was incarcerated at the age of 15.

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My mom immediately took out her entire life savings of \$10,000 to hire the best lawyer she could afford. He took her money and never returned her calls.

For two and a half months, I sat in a holding cell and awaited my court date.

Finally, the day came. In the courtroom, the judge looked down at me and said, “Jason, because of the seriousness of your offense, I’m going to sentence you to twelve years in prison.”

All the feeling in my body floated away. My mom and my grandma wailed in the background, but nothing registered. I was in total shock. Later that night, though, as I lay down alone, I burst into tears. At age fifteen, twelve years felt like the rest of my life.

I arrived at a juvenile corrections facility called the Texas Youth Commission, the first Asian person there in ten years. The second I stepped in, I received a garbage bag with my toothbrush, sandals, bedsheets, pillow, and blanket. Then I went into the Pod.

The prison had housing built like warehouses, and in each warehouse there were four Pods, arranged two by two. Bunk beds lined all four walls for twenty-four people, although we were overcrowded to thirty sometimes. In the middle of the four Pods, facility staff would sit in a control room with one-sided glass.

This open-bay dormitory configuration is the most dangerous way to incarcerate people because you can’t seal off the Pod’s inhabitants from each other. Here were ten- to twenty-year-old kids with pent-up energy, who had gone through some traumatic shit and were furious at the world. As a result, we fought and rioted nearly every day—not because people in prison are predisposed to hurt each other, but because of the hopelessness induced by the harsh conditions, lack of programming, and corrupt correctional officers.

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Me visiting with my mom at the prison's education building.



Visitation with my mom and grandma while at Evins Regional Juvenile Facility.

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Every time she and my grandma came to visitation, they cried their eyes out. My mom used to say, “Even though *you’re* physically in prison . . . mentally and emotionally, I’m in prison with you.”

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I knew that the key to my success in prison would be getting out of the Pod. Being in a room with thirty people who have nothing to do all day is gonna mean trouble. So, even though we were only allowed to have one job on campus, I sweet-talked my way into four. I cleaned the education building, worked in the kitchen, worked in the administration building, and mowed the grass on a riding lawnmower, all for twenty-five cents an hour.

When I wasn’t working, I was reading. My mom sent me thick packets of mail every week. At first I thought they were from my homeboys or the girls I used to date. But instead, she was sending me math homework and books, with topics ranging from geology to the stock market to real estate to religion. Keeping me occupied with reading was her way of protecting me from trouble.

For three and a half years, I was that dude who read in the corner of the prison every day. I had fought and gained respect, and nobody screwed with me. Over three years, she curated and sent me hundreds of books like a personal librarian. I began asking her to print song lyrics and full-color photos of food, too.

Singing songs in my head and becoming my own radio, closing my eyes and tasting the food on the page—in the grey world of prison, how else do you recreate a sense of sanity?



Earning my GED.

Over time, I lobbied for the correctional officers to give me access to materials and a classroom in the prison. I started a GED program to teach others to read and do math, and I started a Bible study class on Sundays. Through the GED classes, I realized that the kids around me were hungry to learn. And on the yard, everybody would act super tough, but in the Bible study class, we were eventually singing hymns together at the top of our lungs.

Don't get me wrong though—this was a really shitty time. Everyone was pissed off, the whole place was corrupt, and the few who were released came right back. You know how in the movies they'll show characters crossing off days from a calendar? Yeah, don't do that. It makes time feel longer.

In 2006, a scandal broke out in the news. The world found out that not only were correctional officers abusing and sexually assaulting kids, but the whole system was extraordinarily corrupt. The state started holding public hearings to listen to guards and those imprisoned in the facility. Amazingly enough, they allowed me and six others to attend the hearings. Though we were shackled and in our jumpsuits, we went out in public for the first time to testify in front of the state Senate on national news.

A month later, I got transferred to a better facility only four hours away from my mom. I didn't serve the full twelve-year sentence in the end. In Texas, a unique law allows kids under eighteen who committed first-degree felonies to be released to supervision after a minimum of three years in prison, if they behave well.

I served the rest of my three and a half years. Then I entered into the free world.

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I enrolled in UT Dallas and sat in the front row of every class. It blew my mind to see kids slacking off on Facebook in the back. My appreciation for life had magnified more than anyone else I saw around me, and I took advantage of everything I could. I got a full scholarship to school, worked two jobs, and used my savings to start my first businesses and buy homes to turn into investment properties and Airbnbs.

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My second business, Byte Size Moments, was one of my biggest failures. Say you wanted to buy me a gift but couldn't deliver it in person. You could go to the Byte Size Moments website, pick

a box of chocolates for me, and record a video to go along with it. Someone in a Byte Size Moments T-shirt would then hand-deliver the chocolates to my doorstep and play your video, all while wearing a concealed camera to record my reaction. We would then compile all the videos for both the giver and receiver.

The emotion was what drove me to believe we had a great product. We partnered with the military, and when overseas soldiers would send a teddy bear and a video to their families for Valentine's Day, the families on the other end would receive the gift dry-heave weeping. How often does a customer break down in tears of gratitude?

Yet, we could never make our revenue model work. We had high churn, because the second time anybody wearing a Byte Size Moments T-shirt arrives at your door, you know what to expect. And, of course, the secret recording aspect was weird in itself.

For two years, I put all the money I'd earned in management consulting and the stock market into the business. When our funds began approaching zero, I started pitching to angel investors in Texas—each of whom ushered me out the door when they found out about my criminal history. I went to Silicon Valley next, hoping that investors there might be more open minded.

I was so persistent in cold-calling and randomly showing up at venture capital firms that I would eventually land a meeting with a partner. But once I'd heard no two hundred times, my spirit just broke. *We don't actually have a business*, I realized, long overdue. *And worst of all, I don't know how to make payroll.*

Realizing that five people had essentially thrown away two years of their lives to help me chase my dream, with nothing to show for it, killed me inside. I turned to alcohol, I became suicidal, and I ended up homeless at one point. Ultimately, I found myself lying down in the street in front of my house in the middle of the night, crying my eyes out, and thinking about getting hit by a car or jumping off a bridge. The reason I'd held on to the failing business for so long was because its identity had become

intertwined with mine—declaring the business a failure would be a public declaration that I was a failure, too.

But eventually, I moved through the stages of grief, from denial to acceptance, and shut it down.

I had lost everything. I had even sold all my possessions to pour the money into the business. But rather than go back into management consulting or another six-figure job that I hated, I decided to take another risk. I had nothing to lose.

With \$36,000 in credit card debt, I moved to New York and took a fundraising job at a nonprofit that helped people with criminal histories. I fell in love with the work and never looked back. I don't give a shit about money anymore. All I care about is this: Am I doing what I've been put on earth to do? And that's helping people with criminal histories.

Three years later, with the help of Matt Mochary, Jason Green, and Andy Bromberg (our first Board of Directors), we founded FreeWorld. The board's generosity ensured that we had 3 years of funding lined up to make this dream come alive.

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Given a choice between a job applicant with a record and one without, most companies will choose the person without a record. FreeWorld gives people with criminal histories access to high-wage careers in industries that are so short-staffed that they have no choice but to hire for skill alone.

There are over three and a half million trucking jobs available in the United States. We can train somebody to get their license,

and therefore a job, within thirty days. Driving in a truck all day is unappealing for most people, but for our graduates, who have spent eleven years on average in prison, it's a chance to see the world. Within the first year, they make about \$50,000. By year two, they're making \$70,000. By year three, they can make \$80,000. If they choose to buy their own truck and become owner-operators, they can make anywhere between \$150,000 to \$200,000. At every stage, these numbers represent a living wage and a path to breaking the cycle of poverty.

To avoid being dependent on philanthropic donations, FreeWorld operates an income share agreement, or ISA. If a person makes a certain minimum salary, they pay 10 percent over a set period of years. If they don't make the minimum, they don't pay a thing. It incentivizes us as well as them to continue doing well.

Since December 2019, we've been getting consistent payments every month, so we feel like we've hit product-market fit. Every FreeWorld graduate can pay for two or three future graduates. That means, for each new participant in the program, we can put a roof over their heads if they're homeless, provide them transportation through a partnership with Lyft, collect any missing identification documents for them, and provide job training and job placements for three years.

But the real power behind FreeWorld is teaching our graduates how to build wealth. Within six months, we get them from an average credit score of 467 up to 697. If they have student loans, restitution, child support, or any debts that have gone to collections, we wipe them out. We work to make them whole and, more radically, help them become wealthy.

In the US, the average Black family has a total net worth of \$17,000, while the average white family has a net worth of \$171,000. Most of our graduates are Black and Brown. We're helping them learn to budget and invest, purchase a first home, and pass wealth on to their kids. That's what's most exciting for us.

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For a long time, I held immense guilt and sadness when I thought about all the people I hurt. No matter what I do in life, I know that I can never pay it back. I have thought about reaching out to my past victims and apologizing, either through writing a letter or meeting with them in person. . . but I ended up choosing not to.

Because I'm scared.

I'm scared that I might be reopening a wound that has scabbed over in the past twelve years. Maybe they've moved on. Maybe they'll be angry. Maybe they'll want to do something to me and my family in retribution.

It's been a long journey, but over time, I've learned about forgiveness, closure, and moving on in life. I can't change the past, but that knowledge fuels me to do the work that I do today. And part of that work is simply being honest about my story.

My story is imprinted in everything I do. If people can empathize with it, maybe they'll look at others with criminal histories with a bit more empathy than they do today, too.



Me visiting a prison through a program called Defy Ventures.

In the two years since FreeWorld's founding, Jason has helped 120 people with felony records get jobs in the trucking industry, with a median salary between \$50,000 and \$80,000. They have a 100 percent employment rate, and zero returning to prison so far. Further information and resources:

- To support Jason's work at FreeWorld, check out *JoinFreeWorld.com*.
- To hear Jason tell his story in his own voice, we love his interview on episode 22 of the Rock the Boat podcast titled "Jason Wang, from Convict to CEO." You can listen to it at *GoRockTheBoat.com*.
- The median wealth statistic comes from a Brookings study, "Examining the Black-white wealth gap," by Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Jay Shambaugh, published on February 27, 2020. You can read about the study at *brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap*.