

Texas After Violence Project
Interview with Jim Buffington

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Interviewer: Chris Castillo

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Abstract

Jim Buffington is the Chief Operating Officer of Bridges To Life, a restorative justice program that centers its curriculum on the stories and experiences of people who have been affected by crime to heal and rehabilitate currently incarcerated individuals. In this interview, led by Chris Castillo, Jim shares his perspective on the path to healing and forgiveness.

Jim describes how his life intersected with the criminal justice system, and discusses how his father's incarceration and his mother's death impacted many facets of his life, and describes the complicated nature of being the child of both a victim and an incarcerated individual. Jim chronicles his journey to forgiving his father and how it helped heal his family and influenced his involvement in working with Bridges To Life. Jim also describes the collaborative writing and documentation effort between him and his family which led to the publication of his book, *Betrayed by Choices*. Jim reflects on the importance of sharing stories with family, people affected by crime, and currently incarcerated individuals to create connections, build empathy, and heal individuals, to ultimately end cycles of violence and incarceration.

RAQUEL GARCIA [00:00:02] This is Raquel Garcia with Texas After Violence Project. Today is March 2nd. We are in Austin, Texas. I'm here with narrator Jim Buffington and interviewer Chris Castillo. We will be conducting an oral history interview about Jim's life and experience with violence in the carceral state.

CHRIS CASTILLO [00:00:37] Jim – I wonder if you could tell us about your story and what brings you here – the general essence of your story.

JIM BUFFINGTON [00:00:43] I'm Jim Buffington. I'm the chief operating officer – the COO of Bridges To Life – and what got me involved with Bridges To Life – which is a restorative justice program. We have a 14 week program in prisons and rehab centers. I started off sharing my story as one of the victims' stories– my story. There's a saying that home is where your story begins and that's how it happened with me.

I grew up in San Antonio, Texas so it's great to be in Austin. I went to high school here in Austin. I have parents – James and Chere Buffington – they were leaders of our church. My dad was the worship pastor for our church – my mom was a church pianist – and I grew up with a mom and dad in the same house. I've got two younger brothers – and both sets of my grandparents lived in San Antone as well. I grew up with family and church. That was our life and thought I was really lucky.

When I got to junior high school my parents got divorced. I didn't know what a divorce was because no one in my family ever got divorced. Through that process we went through a nasty custody fight. We bounced between my dad's house and my mom's house – and that went on for another year. I was 12 – almost 13 – and my dad went out of town for the weekend. We were supposed to be with my mom – but last minute change of plans – we were with some friends.

It was in March and two men had held my mom up at gunpoint to rob her. They stole her purse – stole her jewelry off of her and both of these men – in the backseat of her own car – raped my mother. One of them took a gun and shot my mom in the face three times. When your mom is found without any clothes on and murdered there's a fear that attaches to the children. My brothers and I couldn't figure out why in the world would anybody want to kill my mom – are they going to try to come kill me etc – and it's just such a violent death.

My dad came back to town the next day and we just held on to him because we were scared to death. There's a fear that attaches to victims of crime. We got through the funeral – the next year

goes by where we're trying to get back to normal – and I always share that if you're a family member of a homicide – normal doesn't come back – there is no normal again – it's a new normal – if you will.

A year later my dad – who also had a business on the side – a construction business and he was the worship pastor at our church – got arrested. He was charged with capital murder and criminal solicitation of hiring two of his employees to kill my mom. He said he was innocent – he didn't do it. The only evidence were the two men that shot my mom – blamed each other – and one of them said that he overheard my dad hired him. So my dad got arrested – he went before the judge – they denied his bail.

That's when everything changed for me as a victim of violence. When you're a victim's child everybody wants to help you. But when you become an offender's child – all of a sudden – there's a shame about that. People think you're damaged goods and you're not going to amount to anything. That started for us a new chapter of not only being a victim – but now being an offender's child.

That's what started my story – the tragedy that happened with our family. What happened over the next several years is my dad finally went to trial. It was a capital murder trial and he was found guilty of capital murder and criminal solicitation. My dad was sentenced to the death penalty to be executed. For me it was extremely devastating – there was so much trauma – being a crime victim – but now being an offender's child – especially a son of a man on death row – it's difficult. That started a new chapter to be in the criminal justice system.

CASTILLO [00:05:55] What happened after that? What was revealed to you that changed your view about your father?

BUFFINGTON [00:06:06] We ended up moving to Austin – here – after my dad got arrested. We grew up here with my aunt and uncle. When my dad was convicted, we then moved to Arkansas with my dad's parents – my grandparents. It was my senior year in college – the District Attorney's assistant came forward and confessed that there's some men on death row that shouldn't be there. It was disclosed that the DA in my dad's case was so convinced he was guilty – he made up evidence – altered evidence – changed evidence.

The great news is there was proof of that. My dad had always said, I didn't do this – keep the faith – is one of his things he used to tell us. We did – we completely supported him – believed him –

visited him – put money on his account in prison, and fully supported him. When he got a new trial he got off death row. That was such a relief to us. He goes back to San Antonio – to the Bexar County Jail to await a second trial.

I got married right out of college. My wife Marilyn and I've been married 39 years this year. As soon as we got married, we moved here to Austin. Every weekend we go to the San Antonio Bexar County Jail and visit my dad because we supported him. About four years later he finally had his second trial. I testified for my dad – I knew he was innocent. At the end of the trial the jury found my dad not guilty of capital murder – but they found him guilty of a lesser charge of murder – which was a life sentence.

They were basically sending him home because they knew that the parole board had already decided to grant him parole if he got the lesser sentence. We were excited that night. I know it sounds weird to say, I'm excited my dad was found guilty of murder – but the issue is as an offender child growing up – our life is on hold. It's all about getting our dad out of prison. For us, he was coming home.

I had testified that he could come live with my wife and I. We were excited. He was going to be released within the next week. We went to go see my dad – and in capital murder trials everything comes out. There was a lot of questions I had – not just about my dad – but about my mom – because there's just so much that's disclosed – as homicide victims we always think we're going to get the truth in a trial – and the truth is rarely there many times.

I had questions – so we met with my dad. He had just been found guilty but he was going to be released. I said, Dad, I've got some questions. He said, Jim, ask me anything. I'm going through all my questions and he's answering – I get to this one question and everything changed. He said Jim. I did it and she deserved it. He confessed and I will tell you it was the ultimate betrayal. I couldn't believe he had betrayed my brothers and I. We had supported him – testified for him – crime victims – there's so much trauma and isolation – we just want the truth – we just need answers. For all these years he had denied the truth and now he confessed.

I was extremely angry – a lot of crime victims are angry – they deserve to be angry. I turned on my dad – I protested his parole and the parole board denied his parole. He went back to the Ellis Unit – which is where death row was at the time. This time he was going to general population in a

maximum security prison and I didn't care. I told him he would never see me again. That ended that chapter of the trial for my dad.

CASTILLO [00:10:38] Tell me about the next time you saw your dad.

BUFFINGTON [00:10:41] I was so angry with my dad – about a year after I had told him I never wanted to see him – our son was born – my son Bryce – he's 34 now – so it's been a few years. There's something about the joy of when your son is born. It was a mixed emotion for me because I was so excited. I'm looking at this little boy – but something that got disclosed during the second trial was that my dad had hired not only these two men to kill my mom – but he had hired them to kill me – and my brother Oscar – and my brother Louis – we were nine – ten and 12 years old. Who kills their kids – well – my dad.

I'm holding my son thinking, How in the world could I ever kill this little kid? A lot of struggles that a lot of men have is – we turn out just like our dads. Sometimes that's a great thing – but I had a dad who – I had the same name – he's James Buffington Sr – I'm James Buffington Jr – and we look alike – we sound alike. We both talk with our hands – we have a lot of the same mannerisms. Here's what bothered me – how did my dad – who at one time was happily married – leader of a church – married to an attractive – awesome lady – had three good sons – how do you go from that to a killer of your whole family? It bothered me because I'm just like him.

Four years went by – no contact with my dad. I hadn't visited him – not spoken to him on the phone – did not put money on his account – I had checked him off. I said, I've got to go back and see him one more time and find out how did he go from this minister to a murderer. So I show up at the prison – and I grew up on death row. Every time I visited my dad there was a big thick piece of glass – and he had a phone – I had a phone. I had not physically touched my dad since I was 13 years old – here I was 29 years old – and there was no glass. It was general population – it was called a contact visit. He's at a table – on one side just like you are – I'm right here. He stands up and he wants to hug me and I thought, No, I'm not touching you. I'll be honest – I treated him like trash. I said, Dad, I'm not here to make up with you. I'm here to find out how you became a killer because – unfortunately – I'm just like you and I hate it.

He started telling me all the bad choices that he went through. The first thing he did is he apologized and – really surprised me – he said, Jim, I'm sorry for you. I'm sorry for what I did to your mom and your brothers – Oscar and Louis. It surprised me because my dad was one of these

very controlling – always his way – he was always right. I had never heard him apologize. What I've learned is if you apologize – many times – the other person starts healing. I didn't want any part of that – I said, Dad, I don't care. How did you go from happily married guy to killer?

Here was the story – he said it was really his choices. He started going to happy hours – getting drunk a lot – not coming home. Then he started cheating on my mom. He came home one morning – she was mad because she should be – husbands and dads were supposed to come home. She had worked all day – helped us with our homework – fed us dinner – and my dad's at the bar getting drunk – spending all the money – cheating on her. He gets home one morning and they get in an argument – and he punches my mom in the face – domestic violence. My mom said, You know what – I have put up with your drinking – I've put up with you not coming home – I put up with you cheating on me. She gave him a second chance – she said, Let's get some counseling to save our family. He kept cheating on her and finally – when he hit her – she said, I'm done – I'm divorcing you.

I always say that's the right thing – when you hit a lady – the consequence is you get a divorce. She had done all the right things and she needed to protect us and to protect herself. She filed for divorce and it's very interesting for a child of domestic violence because the victim is your mom and you love her – but the offender is your dad and you love him. The children are put right in the middle of domestic violence and they're on both sides of it. The next bad choice for my dad is he started hanging out at a bar with some people he shouldn't be with. There's a scripture that says bad company corrupts good character – who you hang out with is who you become. It's so true.

He said something – you've got to be careful what you say because a lot of times your words will take on a new chapter. He said, I sure wish she was dead. He was angry – he was embarrassed that she had the nerve to leave him and then he got this bright idea – he wanted to be rich – free and single. He took out a bunch of life insurance on my mom and me – and my ten year old little brother – and my nine year old little brother – and he hired these men. This was his next bad choice – for two grand – to kill all four of us – and boom – that's how he went from a minister to a murderer is all of these bad choices.

Over the next year, I went to go see him once a month because he appeared to be remorseful. He also said that he had finally hit rock bottom in prison and given his life to God and he changed. I'll be honest Chris – I wasn't believing him, but I was witnessing that he seemed different. Over the next year I went through a forgiveness process with my dad. People say, How in the world could

you forgive your dad who killed your mom and tried to kill you? Here's what I've learned – and we work with a lot of crime victims in Bridges To Life – is a lot of victims – if they don't forgive their offender, they become bitter – angry – depressed. I didn't want my dad to control me like that, so I forgave my dad not to let him off the hook – but to let me off the hook.

About a year later we had gone through this process of forgiveness and – by the way – I was still protesting his parole whenever he came up – because that's a consequence. You had my mom robbed and raped – and murdered. When it's time for parole I'm going to speak up for my mom – that's wrong. Fortunately that's a parole board's decision. I can restore relationship with my dad – but his consequences were completely separate. A lot of people get that confused about forgiveness.

I get a phone call about a year later and it was the chaplain at the prison at Ellis in the Huntsville Unit and he said, Something's happened to your dad. What had happened – he had a brain aneurysm – it's a blood vessel in your brain and it had popped. By the time they got him to the prison hospital, he was brain dead. We had to make a difficult decision to pull him off life support. You would think that would be easy – he tried to kill me and my brothers and killed my mom. But he was my dad and I love my dad. There's a scripture that says honor your father and mother. Even though I'm in the middle of domestic violence, I wanted to honor both my parents and I did – but it's hard.

He passed away that night. Here's what happens if you die in prison – you're either buried on the prison grounds and there's no service – or at the family's expense you can claim the body and have a private normal funeral. We didn't want the legacy of having my dad buried in a prison cemetery so we claimed his body and had a private service in San Antone. About a week later we find out that the warden and the chaplain had approved the first ever memorial service for my dad inside prison and he wanted our family to attend the service. By the way – there has never been a memorial service for an inmate inside the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and there's not been one since that happened. This happened in '94 – so we knew something was up.

We get to the prison – and my wife says I always take her to all the hot spots – it's myself – my wife – my two brothers and their wives and we get a tour. The warden took us on a tour of death row where my dad had lived – and then he took us on a tour of general population where he lived in a cell there. Then he went to the chapel – and Chris – it was really ironic. On one end of the

hallway is death row – the other end of the hall is the chapel called Chapel of Life. I thought how ironic – death and life.

We get to the chapel – walk in – and they put us on the front row. The chapel is filled with a bunch of inmates in white prison uniforms. The very first thing is there was a men's choir – we found out my dad had a job and I didn't know it. He was the minister of music. It's incredible when you give your life back to God – or give your life to God – many times he will restore you. He was restored to what he did before – minister of music. He started a men's choir. We heard these men singing these awesome Christian songs. I thought – that's neat – but here's what happened next. There's a microphone in the front of the room and for three hours – one by one – we heard 300 inmates walk up to the microphone – grab it and say – looked me straight in the face, Because of your dad – he shared his story with me – and I asked God into my life and I changed.

When you hear one person say it – but when you hear 300 people say the same thing – I met your dad – he shared all the bad choices he had made and how your dad had asked for forgiveness – taking accountability and responsibility for his actions – and he was moving in a new direction – we wanted the same thing. When three hundred men share how they became believers in faith – in God and that they were going in a new direction – it was very healing for us. I learned that people can change.

At the end of it the chaplain asked me to say something. I have to admit – I was scared to death. I'm in the middle of a prison – I didn't want to – I just wanted to grab my cute wife and get out of there. But I turned around – and I always try to be transparent. I look at this room of 300 inmates in these white prison uniforms and the only thing I could say was – but please don't judge me – I'm not judging you. The only reason you're here is because you've made a bad choice that I haven't made. I'm no better – you're no better. What I've learned is a lot of men in prison – they're given a label – my dad had several labels. He was an alcoholic – a cheater – a wife beater – a murderer. Men in prison wear this label of whatever their crime is – thief – murderer – whatever.

I shared with these men. I said a lot of times – they struggle with forgiving themselves – I offered to them, Let yourself off the hook. Whatever bad choice that got you into prison does not have to define you. It does not have to be the rest of your life. You can move in a new direction.

We left that day and my brothers and I described it as we let go of our luggage. A lot of victims – when they become victims they pick up suitcases of hurt – anger – betrayal and shame. You carry it around and it's attached to you. My brothers literally said when we left the prison gates, We let go

of the luggage. Now does it mean that it's still not attached to us – it means we don't have to carry around. It was very freeing for us to forgive my dad.

Soon after – this is what brought me to Bridges To Life – sorry for the long explanation. I was asked to share my story with Victim Services – which is a group here in Texas where you go into prisons and you share your stories. Hopefully the inmates get victim empathy.

I met a lady there on staff with Bridges To Live at the time and she invited me to a Bridges To Life graduation. What I observed is at graduation – after the men or women have completed their 14 week program – there's an open mic and all the graduates walk up to the mic with two minutes and they share how they've changed – what they've learned. It looked just like my dad's memorial service.

I started volunteering with both Victim Services and Bridges To Life. What I've learned through Bridges to Life is – every time I tell my story as a victim – it heals me more. On the offender side – when an offender hears a victim's story – they get empathy for the victim because they've never thought about it from the victim's perspective. We go through a program of topics like accountability – responsibility – confession – repentance – forgiveness – reconciliation. By the time the inmate graduates, they've changed – they've got a different perspective.

The great news is 86% of our graduates don't come back to prison. So what I've learned through this process is it's really about our choices. We can ask for forgiveness – be accountable and responsible and go in a new direction. I think there's hope and healing that happens through our program. That's what I've experienced through my mom and dad's story – what I've experienced through Bridges To Life.

Now I have honored my parents. I honor my mom every time I share her story and the impact she had on my life. I get to honor my dad and share all the bad choices he made – but how he turned his life around. It's a story of redemption and that's what led me to Bridges To Life.

CASTILLO [00:27:56] I wonder if you could tell me what it was like to be in front of your first inmate during the first Bridges To Life program and what it was like with Victim Services. Was it traumatic for you?

BUFFINGTON [00:28:14] Sure – yes Chris – thank you for the questions. Still today, it is very traumatic to enter a prison for me. I tell this to inmates all the time – it's one of the worst things you can do is have your kids visit you in prison. The reason why is every time that child or family member goes to visit the inmate in prison – even though they may have gone through a bunch of healing – but when they reconnect with the inmate – they relive the loss of losing that inmate again – of whatever trauma happened to get that inmate in prison – and then you've got to leave the prison. For us as family members, it's like you pick the scab every time and the hurt continues. I share with inmates – I said, I'm not telling you not to have your kids visit you – but just understand it causes them trauma – they relive the loss over and over when they come back in.

It reminds me of that trauma of visiting my dad in a very awful place. I have to admit my motivation when I first started is I was an angry crime victim. I just wanted to share my story inside a prison – beat the inmates up verbally and then leave. I thought, Wow, what a great Christian I am. I'm coming in to share my story but my motive was to make them feel bad.

The more I shared my story – I started healing more. The interesting thing is one – the longer I am in Bridges To Life and I'm sitting in these small groups – we meet with ten inmates – two volunteers and a small group. Many times one of the volunteers is a victim. When I hear the inmates story of how they grew up and what brought them to prison, I actually get empathy for the offender. What happens is both sides – victims and offenders – as well as community members that volunteer – get empathy for each other and they see a different perspective. Through the process we all change – especially the inmates – they really do learn how not to commit crime again and not to harm others.

It's the beauty of restorative justice. People say, What's restorative justice? It heals the harm caused by crime. Victims come in – share their story and heal. Offenders rehabilitate and transform and they heal. It's really a journey and a process to go from anger – whether you're a victim of crime or offender of crime – to a place of healing and restoring hope – restoring peace and changing lives. That's been my experience of going in and out of prison – but it's still hard to go inside every time.

CASTILLO [00:31:49] I wonder if there was a moment where you said, I am at peace – and do you remember that moment?

BUFFINGTON [00:31:58] For me – for peace – was when I forgave my dad. That was really a turning point when I let go of that – of the anger – the bitterness and the shame of being a victim's kid and offender's kid. I can tell you exactly.

When we put our groups together of inmates we diversify the groups. We put two black men – two white men – two Hispanic men. We'll put two 18 year olds – two 60 year olds – two murderers – two armed robbers – two drug dealers. We try to diversify those groups as much as possible.

Being transparent – I would diversify my group and make sure I didn't have a murderer. Even though God doesn't rank sin – I did – also rape – sex offenders. I had a problem – I didn't want to be with a murderer – with somebody that committed a sexual offense.

Two things happened that healed me – I'll never forget it and it really brought peace to my life – I finally put myself in a group with an offender who had committed murder. I really understood what led him to all those choices that landed him in prison – quite honestly – I could put myself in his shoes to see what happened – not excusing it – I could actually shake this man's hand.

The other turning point – there was two – is we now – at Bridges To Life – conduct our program in the sex offender treatment facilities here in Texas. There's five of them and we don't have a sex offender with general population because if they share their story they're at risk for harm from the other inmates. In a sex offender treatment facility it's all sex offenders.

One of my staff members invited me to Amarillo to speak at the prison with a bunch of sex offenders. I'll be honest Chris – I shared all the gory details about how awful it was of what my mom experienced in the backseat of her car being raped by two men – and I came across very angry. I wanted these men – how that almost hurt me more than my mom actually being murdered – it's the ultimate violation – such a betrayal. After I shared my story our staff member said, Hey would you like to sit in a small group? I'd like to tell you I was excited about it – but I wasn't.

I sat in the group with a bunch of sex offenders and really listened and tried to understand. They take it more seriously than some of the general population inmates – they want to change at the end of the night. Those that know me know I'm a bit of a hugger – I tend to hug too much – and you're not supposed to hug an inmate. I got up to leave and there was this really big black man – kind of scary looking but I had gotten to know him – and at the end of the night I just naturally stood up to hug him goodbye. He looks at me and he starts crying. [35:58 inaudible] I said, I'm sorry did I do

something offensive? He goes, I can't believe you would hug somebody like me. They're just people and this man is suffering for what he did and is remorseful – he's changed.

That's what really brought me peace – accepting and loving both a murderer and also a person that committed a sexual offense. I tend not to rank sin anymore. We all make mistakes – the next step of – what are you going to do about it? Are you going to take ownership – apologize – ask for forgiveness – take responsibility – accountability and live in a new way? That's what's healing and that's helped heal me.

CASTILLO [00:37:04] I wonder if you have any special memories of your mom that you'd like to share?

BUFFINGTON [00:37:07] My mom Chere was a very tall attractive lady – and she was a singer. She had a great voice. I have great memories of her playing the piano and singing in church. One of our favorite things on Friday nights growing up is my mom and dad would go over to my mom's parents house – my grandmother was a little on the fancy side. Every Friday night we would have China plates and crystal – she loved preparing these huge meals. We would have this nice sit down formal meal and then we'd go to the living room – and again – my dad was the worship pastor – my mom was the church pianist. They would practice what they were going to sing on Sunday mornings.

On Friday nights I grew up listening to my mom sing – or listening to my dad sing and one of the memories still with me is listening to my mom play the piano and sing – she was so joyful. Today that piano is in my home – it's a great reminder of her. She's also the one that led me to faith to become a Christian.

I was only 12 when she was murdered so I didn't get that many years with her – but she's still making an impact on me today. There's a Bible verse in Proverbs and it says, Let the mothers who you were born to rejoice. I'm hopeful that my mom is rejoicing with the good things that I've done – and especially in her memory and her honor. It's a privilege for me to remember her and honor her – and think about all the lives she's impacted from a horrible tragedy. What I always say is God can take a horrible tragedy – three men made a horrible choice to murder my mom – but God still used it for his good – that's what I've gotten to experience – how people can change through listening to what happened to her.

It's a great memory for me of thinking about music and such an early faith story for me which – quite honestly – is what got me through all these difficult times.

CASTILLO [00:40:02] I wonder if you could tell me about your book and if it brought up any – did you have to relive the trauma?

BUFFINGTON [00:40:11] Yeah – my book is called *Betrayed By Choices* and it was a two year process. This picture was taken right before my parents were divorced – I'm the cute kid, of course. I've got two younger brothers, but I'm the good looking one. My brothers – if they're listening will always enjoy that comment. It's a story about our family story. I describe a murder – forgiveness and redemption.

Through this two year process, I wanted to document our story for my grandkids and my brother's grandkids – our children know the story. But if we're not around a few years from now – is the next generation really going to know the story? It was important to document the story and I wanted to honor my parents. I really had to go back intentionally and relive everything that happened. The horrible murder of my mother – I relived that – you read about that. I had to relive going through eight capital murder trials – my dad had two trials – one of the shooters had four trials – each time overturned because of the DA that altered evidence. The actual shooter has had two trials. You find out what it's like to go through a murder trial and then I go into a lot more details about my dad – of who he used to be and who we became.

You'll read about what it's like to live on death row – to live in general population in prison. The good news is you're also going to read about forgiveness and redemption. There's a term you hear – the ripple effect of crime. In our book, you're going to hear from my wife – my brother's wives – our children. You understand the ripple effect of forgiveness and healing.

It was a two year process – kind of a life story of documenting everything that happened and trying to continue to honor my mom and dad. It leaves and discloses a legacy of what my mom left us and unfortunately what my dad left us – that's the book.

CASTILLO [00:43:03] Did you find it healing to do that?

BUFFINGTON [00:43:05] Yes. I turned 60 this year. I know I look much younger – but I turned 60 and there was something about getting all of this documented and turning 60, and in my mind being

done – I'm just done. It was the last piece of letting go of it. Now the story's documented and I feel even freer to help people.

I don't know if you know – but the older you get you tend to forget things. The good news is it's in the book – it won't be forgotten. It was very healing for me and our family to go through the process of writing the book. Again you hear from my brothers – from our wives and from our kids – our adult children now – of how it impacted them. The great news is you hear about generational curses and how some of these bad choices get passed on to the kids and their kids. But for us, you see how those curses can be reversed and you can pass on healing from generation to generation – it really is the ripple effect of forgiveness.

CASTILLO [00:44:35] I wonder if you could tell me how your siblings felt about you forgiving your father – or were they not there yet?

BUFFINGTON [00:44:45] I share this all the time, Chris – great question. Every victim is different and their healing looks different – the timeline is different. Some victims choose to never forgive – that's their choice – I'm not going to judge a victim on any of that. There's some horrible things that happened to folks and it's too traumatic. Fortunately for me, it was a long time process. I forgave my dad before my brothers did. My brothers never went to see my dad after he confessed. I was the only one that visited my dad after his confession. My brothers didn't see him again until after he died. The feelings of my brothers were when they listened to that memorial service – they were furious – they were angry. They said some of the feelings they had was, I didn't know that man. The 300 men that were sharing all these great stories – they felt robbed – like we didn't know him.

I got to know him because I went to visit him but it had happened within the last year. For my brothers it was two different journeys for them. You hear about in the book – it was afterwards – one brother really had to let go at some point in the future – of all of the rage and the anger – he finally got to that point. My other brother – this is true for a lot of people – once my dad died he's like – it's done – I don't have to think about this anymore. It's been surprising how losing someone that did something awful can be healing.

What tends to happen – at least for me – is looking back at my dad – I try to remember the good things. Today, people say, You're just like your dad. Well – that's a good thing. My dad's a person that changed his life and impacted others – helped heal others. I'm thrilled to be just like him. All victims of crime – my brothers included – feel differently and heal in a different timeline. Our

wives and even our kids – my parents' grandkids – they had to go through healing and forgiveness of a couple that they never met. Our children – their grandchildren – they never met them.

It's interesting to hear my son's story of having to forgive my grandfather who he never met. He recognized how much pain my dad caused me and it is generationally how if somebody hurts how it can get passed on. We have been able to see how when you get healed it can get passed on.

Something we say in prison – you spend a lot of time in prison – you hear this saying. Hurt people hurt people. What I've learned through Bridges To Life – of victims sharing their story and healing – offenders taking accountability and healing – is healed people can heal people.

We've now had 80,000 graduates – over 80,000 graduates and those graduates of ours are now healing their families through their life change. It's been a real honor to document our story with the only motivation is to help other people – that's the feedback I'm getting is like, Jim if you could forgive that person I need to let go of my spouse cheating on me – or I need to let go of this little argument I've had with a sibling. We've all been hurt – the issue is how do we forgive and move forward? Hopefully that's a timeless message in the book and that's our motivation is we want to help. Thank you for that question.

CASTILLO [00:49:37] I wonder if you could tell me – and you can say if it's too painful – but what the funeral was like for your mother and also for your father?

BUFFINGTON [00:49:47] The funeral – it's interesting when somebody passes away your first response is you don't believe it. For many of us you don't really believe it until you see the body in the casket. I just couldn't believe my mom was gone and we wanted to see her body. I remember my dad taking us to the funeral home to see my mom's body. My dad warned us – he said, Jim you need to stay far away from her because it doesn't look like her. When you get shot at close range three times in the face it destroyed her – how she looked – we didn't want anybody to see her or remember her like that. We agreed to have a closed casket funeral. You can imagine – my mom was only 29 years old when she was murdered – the place was packed – her funeral was packed – there was a lot of people. They were leaders of their church and she grew up in San Antonio – that's the only place she'd ever lived. She also lived in Houston – but mainly San Antonio. We had an eight by ten photo of her which was taken right before she had been murdered. We put that eight by ten photo on top of the casket because that's how we wanted people to remember her – the attractive, awesome inside and outside lady – and not the after effects of being brutally murdered.

I remember the funeral. I remember it being very crowded. I remember going to the cemetery when we buried her – the outpouring of people wanting to hug us and it seemed something was wrong – and I didn't know what it was. It's that my dad was the suspect and I didn't get that at the time. For my mom, the funeral was over quickly. This is true for a lot of people – when the person gets arrested it becomes all about them. All of a sudden all our focus – our attention is on the offender – and what happens is the family member – the victim gets forgotten.

That was true for me. It was all about dad and I share this with offenders, Guys your whole family is stuck. They can't move on until you get released. It's all about – how do we get you home. When my dad confessed – I had spent years all about him – when he confessed, I remember my wife and I left right after that and went to my mom's grave at the cemetery in San Antonio. I'll be honest – I finally grieved for my mom. I had to apologize to my mom – it had become all about him – it needs to be about her.

Even my dad thought he was the victim because he was in prison. I had to quickly remind him, You're not the victim. My mom who's buried underground is the victim. This domestic violence struggle for the children – you're torn – you love both parents – but one's the victim – the other was the offender. Unfortunately the way the criminal justice system is set up – after a violent episode it becomes about the offender and the victim gets forgotten.

For us, we made the shift back to it's about the victim. That's where we are with Bridges to Life – we're a dual ministry. We minister to victims – that's our primary concern – by bringing those victims into heal – is what leads to life change when the offenders hear the story. So we get to minister to both victims and offenders. The way of the criminal justice system is set up that doesn't happen. I'm thrilled that we've got a different perspective.

CASTILLO [00:54:49] Do you remember what it was like the first time you told your story and how people reacted?

BUFFINGTON [00:54:53] Sure. There's a couple of things – one – the reaction is, I can't believe what an awful murder it was. It was awful. The other reaction is, How come you seem so normal? The third reaction is there's a lot of hope for inmates when they hear how my dad had changed. Inmates in prison know they need a different direction – they know it. Those are usually the three reactions. It's very empathetic to the awful trauma that my mom and us went through. How can

somebody that's been an offender's kid and the victim's kid seem so normal – and then the hope message of people can change.

My brothers and I give a lot of credit – number one – that my mom brought us to faith early in life – I think that made such a difference – and we feel protected. My mom saved our life. I've had victim offender mediation meetings with both the shooters and they disclosed that the reason they were torturing her in the backseat of her car was because she wouldn't tell them where we were. When she pulled up in the car me and my brothers were supposed to be with her. One of the first questions – one man made her crawl into the back seat and he put a gun to my mom's head and said, Where are your boys? That's what took so long – and we're very thankful that my mom saved our life. We're very thankful that she led us to faith and that we had our faith in God and our Christian walk gets us through the trauma.

My brothers and I credit our wives – we married well. It's interesting – we all married helpers. My wife is retired now – she was an elementary special ed teacher. My middle brother Oscar – his wife is a nurse – and my youngest brother Louis – his wife is also a teacher. It's incredible when you marry helpers – the influence that can have on all three of us.

Some will say – we've heard it, You three boys are very successful. My brothers have awesome jobs – awesome careers and we attribute it to our mom – we attribute it to our wives. Yet we do have a great example of a dad – we all make bad choices – an example of how you can overcome those bad choices and take accountability and ask for forgiveness – be a good husband – a good dad even though he wasn't. We've learned how to do it. The good news is we saw him change – through all that is what we give a lot of credit to.

Home is where your story begins – I said at the beginning – that's where my story started – It's stayed part of my story and it's the same for my son. His story began at home with me and his mother. The good news is our son and his wife live eight minutes from us and we have one grandson – and they're expecting a girl in August. We're going to have two grandkids and we live just down the street from them. It's just great to see the legacy that healing can happen on our family and that's my story.

CASTILLO [00:59:07] I wonder if you could share what it was like for your father's funeral, because I'm sure that was a little bit different.

BUFFINGTON [00:59:15] Great question Chris. Nobody's ever asked me that just so you know – nobody's ever asked me about my dad's funeral. My dad died in prison and we claimed his body, and the prison chaplain at the time – Chaplain Richard Lopez – he was chaplain at the Ellis unit, and my dad worked for him as a chaplain's assistant. Chaplain Lopez went on to become head of chaplaincy and minister to death row for years. He's become a great friend of ours.

Chaplain Lopez did our dad's service for us and we had to have a private service because we buried my dad next to my mom. People go, How in the world could you do that? Well – first of all we didn't have a lot of money at the time – we had to borrow money from my wife's parents to even pay for the funeral. There was already a tombstone where my mom was buried and there was already my dad's headstone. We chose to bury my dad next to my mom – those are my parents. The media couldn't believe it – they showed up – they can't believe that we were going to bury my dad next to my mom and I always say, Would you like to pay for it?

Very trauma impact of the media on your life. We experienced that through the trials – I could go off on that. But we had a private visitation and a lot of friends – even one of my old school teachers showed up – and family – both my mom's family and my dad's family was there. The chaplain did the service and it was very short.

We did a short visitation – a burial service and I actually gave a eulogy for my dad. Which I think was healing for my family because I had been the only one to see the new James – I had been visiting him for the last year.

For all of us, it was a closing to bury him that we were out of the system if you will – the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, I'm still in the system because one of the shooters is still in prison serving a life sentence. He keeps getting eligible for parole and he is not a man that's remorseful – so I'm still in the system. I've been protesting his parole since the 80s.

My dad's funeral was very healing but it was even more healing a week later when we had the memorial service inside the prison. I had a great opportunity a couple of years ago to bring Bridges to Life to the Ellis Unit. Our staff member asked if I would speak on the first night of the meeting and I did. It was week one – which was orientation and there were several men there serving a life sentence.

One of them came up to me and said, I knew your dad. I worked with your dad in the chapel – and everything you said was true. I was at your dad's memorial service – you don't remember me but I was here in this room with you. He got very emotional – as well as I did – about bringing Bridges To Life inside the prison unit where my dad served time.

The other irony of this is God has a sense of humor. My dad worked for Chaplain Lopez in the Ellis Unit prison system and when I came on board with Bridges To Life chaplain Lopez was one of our regional coordinators – now he was working for me. It is very healing when you've got a father and a son that both worked with the same chaplain. I'm still in touch with that chaplain today – we're great friends. That's just one of the blessings that we've had through this experience. I think God puts people in our lives to help us heal. That's what we experienced.

CASTILLO [01:04:07] I wonder if you mind sharing about the victim offender mediations that you have with the offenders.

BUFFINGTON [01:04:15] The first offender – they're both named Charles – one's Charles and one's Charlie. But Charles County was the driver in the car. So what had happened is when my mom was hired by my dad to go pick these two men up to take them to a construction site. She was going to use the money to buy us some school clothes – she was really doing it for us. That's how my dad got her with the two killers. She drove up – one man pulled a gun on her and made her climb in the back seat. The other man got in the driver's seat and the two of them went off.

The drivers in the car and the other killer's in the backseat with my mom. The driver served 20 years on death row – each time overturned. Finally – his fourth trial he got life in prison and then was eligible for parole, and had really served his time – 20 years was a life sentence at the time – and crazy enough – a little quick story about the criminal justice system – is we have been to all of his murder trials.

When you go to a trial, there's the state side and the offender side. We had gotten to know Charles's family – we just sat with them. What the state couldn't believe is why in the world are you nice white people sitting with this black man's family? I'm like, They're just people. We became friends with his family and because of that after his last conviction they said, We've approached Charles – he's willing to speak with you if you'd like to.

I met with him and the experience was very healing. He was very remorseful – owned up to everything he had done. He got released and he's been out now for quite a long time – since '96 – and he's never gotten in trouble again. What I tell people – other inmates – is if you get out of prison and don't commit crime again it can heal you. It can heal the victims. I've shared with people because he's not re-offended – it has healed me.

Now the other man – the one that was in the back seat that shot my mom. His name is Charles Moore and he goes by Charlie. He got out of prison – committed an armed robbery – went back to prison – got a life sentence – got released a couple of years ago by the parole board.

He had killed a lady before my mom – he had killed my mom – he got released – committed an armed robbery – came back to prison – he's been in prison since. He's almost 80 now. He was 30 when he went in prison. He's been in prison a long time.

The parole board – I protested because I had a victim offender mediation meeting with him – this guy told me that if he ever got released he thought he would kill again. Sure enough they released him anyway and he didn't make it six months – tried to strangle another lady – fortunately she survived.

He's back in prison and what I share with people is, Do you want to be like the guy in the front seat who served his time – got out and he's living a good life and healed his victims – or do you want to be and the guy in the backseat who keeps committing crime and keeps hurting people? It's your choice.

I spent eight hours with the guy from the back seat and he blamed a lot of things. One of the things I noticed is he said, Jim you don't understand – I had a problem with alcohol. I said, So did my dad. Well you don't understand – I then became a drug addict. I said, Okay. He goes, My dad was in prison. I looked at him and I said, So is mine – and what?

He and I realized he had gone through a lot of the same things that I had gone through. How come he ended up in prison and I didn't? It's really about choices and – unfortunately – he continues to make bad choices – and he's still in prison.

But I did get a lot of details from him about what happened to my mom and that's when I learned that he was trying to find out from her where the kids were – me – that she saved my life. I

wouldn't have gotten that truth had he not met with me. So I'm thankful that he spent time with me. I got some answers because as victims of crime we obsess about the details. He was able to give me a lot of answers to my questions. I'm thankful for him for meeting with me on that.

CASTILLO [01:10:00] So how did you meet John Sage – the leader [inaudible 1:10:06]?

BUFFINGTON [01:10:06] I started volunteering when I met Connie – who was on staff with Bridge to Life. I've been a volunteer for 20 years now with Bridges to Life at the same prison unit in South Dallas – the Hutchins unit. About eight years ago John Sage – our founder and CEO – the board said, John you're 70 – you probably need to come up with a succession plan. As you know this is our 25th year with Bridge To Life and I was hired to come on board to take over Bridges To Life to be his succession plan if he ever decides to retire. He's only 75 – he's very healthy. I hope he's here till he's 95 – but John's story is similar. His sister was murdered 30 years ago – horrible crime. It was a young couple – the man died on death row. The lady that killed his sister is still on death row waiting to be executed. John and I have similar stories – he lost his sister – I lost my mom. We similarly went through a lot of pain. Fortunately for John he started an organization – our Restorative Justice Organization that helps heal victims and helps rehabilitate offenders – which makes our community safer. It's about connecting community with prisons. He's an incredible guy who was obedient to God's call to help. It is an honor to get to work with him – serve with him – and get to make an impact with him.

I met him through my volunteer work with Bridges To Life and eight years ago he brought me on to be the COO. I left my business career and retired early from that and am now in full time ministry with Bridges to Life. It is such an incredible effort to be able to see the impact – 80,000 inmates – about 3600 volunteers. We're in 17 states and 7 countries and our recidivism results are very low – which means that the majority of our inmates graduate and don't ever come back to prison. It's just been incredible.

CASTILLO [01:12:44] What have you seen happen to the victims who speak at Bridges To Life?

BUFFINGTON [01:12:51] One of the most rewarding things is working with the victims. I remember one victim in particular – a lady named Susan who lost her son to an awful murder – she was so angry. She said, Jim when you speak you're so nice and you're so forgiving – that's not my story. I said, Susan, you deserve to be angry. Your son was murdered – you should be furious. The inmates need to see that you're furious. You've lost an awesome young man – I knew her son. But

what I've seen happen – it's been about seven years since her son was killed – I've seen her heal. Sure – she's a mom – she should be angry. But I've seen that turn to where she's helping.

She's a volunteer with us and she not only speaks – she sits in a small group with ten inmates and goes to a 14 week program. I've seen her heal and I've seen her forgive. A lot of victims are in counseling or they're on antidepressant drugs – and I'm not saying anything about being on antidepressants – what I've seen is a lot of our victims now don't need the counseling. They're not on antidepressants. Because they shared their story, they've gone through a process of healing – for some it's a short process – for some it's a lot longer process. It's been very rewarding to see how the victims change and how the victims heal.

The other point about this – and you've seen this Chris – a lot of inmates have also been victims of crime. It goes back to hurt people hurt people – even though they were hurt and they were victims of crime – it's still not an excuse to commit a crime. I've also seen a lot of offenders heal from the victim perspective – they've connected that they too were a victim. Why did this victim make good choices but me – the inmate what was also a victim – went a different route?

It's just been rewarding to heal victims on both sides – the ones that aren't in prison as well as the ones that are in prison. That's been the best part of Bridges To Life is the fact that we do minister to victims and – especially after a violent crime – whether it's domestic violence – murder or armed robbery. That people can heal – that people can change and make our community safer. That's what's so rewarding about being part of Bridges To Life.

CASTILLO [01:16:08] I wonder if you have a story about the first Bridges To Life graduation that you attended after you were involved in a small group?

BUFFINGTON [01:16:17] I remember it. What's so fun is I travel around Texas and in the months of May and November, I go to as many graduation ceremonies as I can. It's just so awesome to hear graduates share how they've learned what they learned through the process – how they've changed and what their plan is now. It's so incredible to hear inmates have a plan – what they're going to do next.

I remember the first graduation at Hutchins. I was overwhelmed how similarly it was to my dad's funeral in the prison and the memorial service. Every graduation I think about my dad. I think about that memorial service – of where I realized people can change – what I shared then and what

I share now. When I first stood up to share at my dad's service – you can do and say things when everybody's looking at you – but who you really are is what you do and say when nobody's looking. What I learned from my dad is when nobody was looking he'd meet a man in prison and he'd share a story – we all have a story – he'd share a story of bad choices – but how he had asked God for forgiveness and – taking accountability and responsibility – was going in a new direction. It reminded me that everybody has a story – we need to share it. That's how it can lead to life change.

I will end it with this – my mom knew somebody was trying to kill her – she had no idea it was my dad and who was involved. She had a funeral service written in her safety deposit box – she had it all detailed. She wanted one song sung – I'm not going to sing it to you – it's an old 70s song, I'll tell the world that I'm a Christian. The lyrics talk about telling your story – it talks about forgiveness.

I'm thinking, if my mom – who was facing death – and took the time to leave a message for us that I should tell the world that I'm a Christian – I need to share my story – to forgive others. That's the legacy that was passed on through her life. That's what really heals violence – heals the harm caused by crime – that's restorative justice in my opinion. Thank you.

CASTILLO [01:19:30] Is there anything else you'd like to share or add – or forgot to answer?

BUFFINGTON [01:19:36] No. You've got some great questions Chris. I appreciate it and I appreciate your service to Bridges To Life as well as with the Texas After Violence Project. It's all about helping others and we're in unique positions to see both sides of crime.

And I would add – if anybody's interested in being a part of Bridges To Life you can go to our website, www.bridgestolife.org. If you want to be a victim volunteer, either to share your story or sit in all 14 weeks. We also have ex-offenders who have served time. They've gotten out of prison and they can come back and volunteer with us after they're out for a year. There's the third type of volunteer – people that just want to help. I always say people who like to hang out in prison – but we've met a lot of church folks that just want to help – a lot of college students that are going into Human Services – lawyers – or in ministry. They just want to help.

There's something about sitting in a small group and leading the discussion with a bunch of diverse people whether race – age – type of crime – or no crime – diversity of faith – or no faith. Doesn't the world need more of that? It's incredible how you got such a – and you've experienced this –

such a mixed group of people of how healing can happen and you can learn. Wardens tell us all the time, Jim you've changed the prison culture. I can't believe you put that white Aryan gang leader with this young 18 year old black man. They're now friends. Our world needs more of that. I've heard Heaven's going to be like that – it is a diverse place. We can get along and we can learn that even though we're different we're very similar – that's what happens in Bridges To Life and I'm just honored that I get to be a part of it.

CASTILLO [01:21:52] I think I have one more question.

BUFFINGTON [01:21:54] Okay – is this a bonus question? [laughs]

CASTILLO [01:21:57] Yes. Well you reminded me that you introduced some of the parole board members to Bridges To Life documents because they were so curious about Bridges To Life. Tell me how that came about.

BUFFINGTON [01:22:13] I've had 40 years of experience with the parole board and I'm still involved because I'm protesting my offender's parole because I feel it's my duty to speak up for my mom and try to help others not be a victim like we went through. Unfortunately this man has made a decision not to change his life and that's his choice. But fortunately the parole board now is keeping him in prison. I've had a lot of great experiences and one of the first meetings I had with the parole board – after I've been with Brides To Life – I said, Here's how I'm torn. I can give you a list of men and women that should be released today – but not this guy. He hasn't changed. There's a lot of people in prison that haven't changed. The ones that have – let them out – is my opinion.

Here's what the parole board tell me. They've been exposed to our program because we've had 80,000 graduates. We've been around for 25 years. But the parole board tells me, Jim, when we're interviewing somebody to vote on whether they should be released from prison or not – before they even tell us that they've taken Bridges To Life – we can already tell. I said, How so? They said, They speak differently. They talk about how they've taken accountability for their actions and how they will be responsible – and how they want victims to forgive – how they've forgiven people in their own life – and what their plan is for life. She said, Jim, they speak differently. We can tell they're a Bridges To Life graduate. She said, Jim, they're at less risk of re-offending because they've taken your program. When you hear that from the parole board – it's incredible. I always tell an inmate – just because you take Bridges To Life doesn't mean you're going to get parole – but it's probably favorable. That's usually a good motivation.

It's incredible to hear how the parole board sees the impact of our program which has been so rewarding. Great bonus question, Chris – thank you for that.

CASTILLO [01:24:45] Thank you for your time.

BUFFINGTON [01:24:46] Appreciate it. Thank you.