

Forbes

What High-Profile Inmates Learned In Prison

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/robertwynne/2011/09/21/what-high-profile-inmates-learned-in-prison>

BY ROBERT WYNNE: I write about public relations and marketing with targeted advice on how to contact reporters, how to make your story attractive to the media, how to produce events and how to work with PR firms to increase your profile.

Search for “self-help” titles on Amazon.com and you’ll come across 234,000 entries. The more help we seek, the more we seem to get—though much of it isn’t helpful.

Maybe the problem isn’t the message, but the messenger. With all respect to Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil, there are other seasoned experts with wisdom aplenty: those who served time in a cell.

We spoke with seven of them, including actors, sports stars and business owners who endured pain and humiliation in the spotlight. (Many others declined to participate.)

Not all are role models by any stretch, but all learned more from their time behind bars than many shrinks and gurus could pass along in three lifetimes. As Greek playwright Aeschylus said: “Wisdom comes alone through suffering.”

Here’s some hard-won and at times hilarious perspective (if not redemption) from some high-profile inmates.

Make Your Bed

Beloved stoner comedian and film star [Tommy Chong](#) (of “Up in Smoke” and “Half Baked” fame) drew some surprisingly practical conclusions from his time in the joint.

In 2003 his Chong Glass/Nice Dreams firm—which sold drug paraphernalia, was financed by Chong and run by his son Paris—was snared in a sting operation. Instead of going to trial, Chong took a plea deal where he admitted distributing bongs and water pipes on the Internet. Despite his cooperation, Chong was sentenced to nine months in federal prison.

“The first thing prison does is dehumanize you,” Chong said. “It strips away any kind of identity or station in life. You become a number, you are dressed like everyone else. You lose your identity.”

Chong never finished high school, so he took the time in Taft Correctional Facility to study for his GED exam. (“George W. Bush did more for socialism than anyone in history,” says Chong. “Once you get in a federal prison, it’s mandated you have to go to school, and you get healthcare.”) Chong would fail the exam; algebra stumped him.

Chong, now 73, wrote a book about his experiences, *The I Chong: Meditations from the Joint*, and a documentary “a/k/a Tommy Chong” got good reviews in 2006. Chong reunited with his former comedy partner Richard “Cheech” Marin in 2008 and the pair still tour, using Chong’s prison experiences as fodder.

“The number one lesson I learned is that the system is totally stacked against the citizen,” says Chong. “If you’re indicted for anything by the government my advice is to save your money, don’t spend it on an expensive lawyer.” Oh, yeah, added Chong: “I learned how to make a bed and how to pick up garbage. And now I make the bed at home, my wife loves it.”

Get Your Head Straight

Heidi Fleiss soared, crashed and burned all in her 20s. The Hollywood Madam was arrested for pandering in 1993. Three years later Fleiss was convicted of federal charges of tax evasion, sentenced to seven years in prison, but released in 1999. “I was arrested when I had Mick Jagger and Prince dancing in my living room,” Fleiss said. “To go to jail seemed like a death sentence.”

Before being sent to prison, Fleiss lived in the federal detention center in downtown Los Angeles. She was protected by a “tough white girl” named “Skipper” who gave her some jailhouse wisdom: “Hit ‘em hard, hit ‘em fast and hit the biggest one first.”

Getting sober and working out (Fleiss ran at least seven miles a day seven days a week) helped, too. She also worked on her state of mind. “It’s all relative,” she says. “You can be just as happy in solitary confinement as you could be on a private island or a first-class jet. It all matters how you are in your head, your state of mind, how you feel.”

Fleiss has negotiated a series of twists and turns, including a move to Pahrump, Nevada in 2007 to start a brothel stocked with hunks to serve lonely women. It never got off the ground. She has since adopted 17 macaws, and just finished a program for “Animal Planet” all about her colorful birds. She is also in negotiations to host a matchmaking television show, dedicated, she says, to “making sure two people are very happy for one night, or maybe for a lifetime.”

Deal With You—Now

In 1988 Bruce McNall, former owner of the Los Angeles Kings, turned the sleepy hockey franchise into an entertainment phenomenon by landing Wayne Gretzky. While McNall had all the flash, he lacked the cash, defaulting on more than \$200 million in loans. In 1994 he pleaded guilty to five counts of conspiracy and fraud,

and he was released in 2001. Two years later he published a biography, [*Fun While It Lasted: My Rise and Fall in the Land of Fame and Fortune*](#).

“In a funny way you learn a lot about yourself [in prison],” says McNall. “You have a lot of time to think about that, to think about nothing but that, what went right, what went wrong, in your business and your life.” McNall concluded that he suffered from measurable insecurity. “I wanted to make everybody happy,” he says. “In my case I didn’t put companies in bankruptcy that I knew should have been, I didn’t want to say No to bankers who I knew I should have said No to.”

Today McNall is one of the founders of [Procon.org](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to encouraging students and teachers to explore both sides of controversial issues. Procon has “no government affiliations of any kind,” he says.

It’s Not About The Highs And Lows

Before [Michael Vick](#), before [Plaxico Burress](#), before Nate Newton, there was Eugene “Mercury” Morris. The speedy running back and kick returner for the undefeated 1972 Miami Dolphins was convicted of cocaine trafficking in 1982 and sentenced to 20 years in prison, but his conviction was overturned four years later by the Florida Supreme Court because key evidence was suppressed. (Morris pleaded guilty to a reduced charge and was sentenced to the time he served.)

Before trial, Morris claimed that prosecutors dangled freedom in exchange for naming other players who used drugs. Morris said he refused and he received the maximum sentence. He says he wouldn’t go back in time and name names: “It’s more important to be a man than it is to be free.”

Today Morris remains a hero to many for volunteering to obtain benefits for retired gridiron stars, who Morris believes have been cheated by the NFL. His advice to the struggling masses: “I’ve been to three Super Bowls and I’ve been to prison,” he says. “It’s not about the highs and the lows. It’s about who you are and where you are.”

What Doesn’t Kill You...

In 2006 then Alabama Governor Don Siegelman was convicted of bribery and conspiracy, and served nine months of a seven-year sentence. During the trial news outlets questioned the charges, given that Siegelman was a Democrat in a Republican state. Three years later, 91 former attorneys general signed a petition asking Attorney General Eric Holder to [throw out the conviction](#), but that request has been ignored.

“The most frightening thing [about prison] is your rights are taken away,” says Siegelman. “Whatever rights you have are what the prison guards decide what they want to give you. It goes

on with food or medicine or anything else.” The upside for Siegelman, a second-degree black belt in karate: “I hit much harder now thinking about those that lied to convict me.”

But Then, Anger Can Be Poison

Michael Lohan, like his incorrigible starlet daughter Lindsay, was no stranger to trouble. As a stockbroker, he was convicted of criminal contempt of court in 1990 and served three years in prison. He did an additional year after violating his probation for leaving the state to visit Lindsay, who was ill, in 1997. In 2005, he was back in the clink after fighting with a guest at his son’s confirmation held at his Long Island home; he was released in 2007. He [appeared on](#) “Celebrity Rehab with Dr. Drew” in 2011 to receive treatment for alcoholism.

Of his (first) time in the can, Lohan says: “It teaches you what it’s like to be alone and not have access to the people you love.” He concedes that anger issues (and some cocaine abuse) were to blame. “I stuffed a lot of things inside that I thought were resolved,” he says. Today Lohan works as a pitchman for private rehabilitation centers, including [Behavioral Health of the Palm Beaches](#), and is trying to mend fences with all three of his children.

Challenge Your Assumptions

Thomas “Hollywood” Henderson, former Pro Bowl linebacker for the Dallas Cowboys, had a rare combination of size, speed and ferocity. He also had an addiction to drugs and alcohol, which got him booted from the NFL in the prime of his career. In late 1983 he was arrested with two teenage girls while smoking cocaine, accused of sexual assault and eventually served 28 months in prison.

In his second book, “In Control: The Rebirth of an NFL Legend,” (2004), Henderson wrote, “The shame itself almost killed me.” Henderson claims he has been sober for 20 years. He supports many charities in Austin, Texas via his foundation, the [East Side Youth Services & Street Outreach](#). In 2000 he made headlines by winning \$28 million in the Texas Lotto. Today he sells motivational films of his experiences and speaks about his recovery.

“Too many of us grow up believing that in order to have fun in life, you must have a drink or a drug,” he says. “I deal in facts, and sobriety is also an option.”

Life Moves In One Direction

When contacted for this story, [Michael Milken](#), former junk bond king and philanthropist, demurred. His spokesman replied: “Mike is focused on the future—curing disease, fixing the economy, reforming education— not on the past.”

For some, that may be the best advice of all.

Robert Wynne is a publicist in Redondo Beach, Calif. He is working on a book on celebrities and prison. www.wynnepr.com