

Telling History in Public: Loyola Project for the Innocent Oral History Project

Ruben Pinuelas

December 9, 2020 (interview conducted on Zoom)

Interviewed by Zoë Grandy

Summary and Transcript by Cougar Kime

SUMMARY:

The interview with Ruben Pinuelas by Zoë Grandy covers Pinuelas's experience of his initial prison experience, his wrongful conviction, his time in solitary confinement, his struggle to leave prison, and his life after prison. Pinuelas endures the police and legal system entrapping him, learns law in solitary, and proves his own innocence. He then takes this education of law to begin his own journey into the legal field. Pinuelas saw an issue in the legal system and hopes to address the change himself by becoming a first a trial attorney, then judge and/or a law professor. He has faith in the legal system and has faith in himself and the good people in the legal system who want to make change. All this, and more is covered in his interview.

In the conversation before the beginning of the formal interview, Ruben Pinuelas shared some of his experiences about online learning in the context of the COVID pandemic:

I think maybe for me a little bit, it's been a different experience because of all those years I spent in solitary confinement. This isolation, it's been, I don't know, making my, my mind and my body react in different ways that I wasn't expecting it to. Because it's, so much of my learning is sensory now. Because that's one thing they do in solitary confinement is they do sensory deprivation, they kill all your senses. They basically make you numb and take everything away from you that's, makes you human, which is your personality. But now that I'm out, this whole learning experience, you know, just sitting in classroom, touching the desk, hearing the chatter, smelling the, you know, the markers from the whiteboard, and just all these. That's my learning process. That's how I, you know, just even, just walking to class with the sun hitting on my face, running into people that I recognize on the way to class, waving and hugging, and it's just. So you take that away from me, and it's just, it's just sitting in front of a computer all day trying to learn, it feels very, very disconnected, very robotic, mechanistic. It's weird, but I'm adjusting. So yeah, yeah.

TRANSCRIPT

Zoë Grandy (ZG): Today, we're interviewing Ruben Pinuelas, who is an exonoree, who has worked with the Loyola Project for the Innocent and is currently applying for law school. This interview is for Telling History in Public Loyola Project for the Innocent Oral History. It is December 9, 2020, and we are conducting the interview using Zoom. I'm Zoë Grandy, one of

the project interviewers. Okay, so first, let's start with some background. Do you want to just describe your general background about anything that you feel comfortable sharing, just life, whatnot?

Ruben Pinuelas (RP): Okay. Um, that's why I was, how much time do we have?

ZG: Um, I mean, she said, it's supposed to be about an hour, but I don't have any commitments until later this afternoon, so I'm not worried about the time commitment.

RP: Um, okay, I'm just trying to get a projection because that sometimes people tell me, give me your 10-minute version, your half-hour version, and I can do an hour version because my story is a little bit, it's kind of different from other exonerees, because I was wrongfully convicted by the prison system. And a lot of exonerees, they were railroaded by the law enforcement agency on the outside by like [crosstalk] or whoever. And so then they're, they're wrongfully convicted, thrown in prison, and the prison guards are like, you know, we don't, we don't have no beef with you, they just told us to watch you, and then they get out. Well, with me, it was the prison guards that railroaded me, so while I was in there, they were doing, also I got everything that leads up to the wrongful conviction, everything that happened while I was in there, and then everything that's happened since I've gotten out. So as far as with my, I can go all the way back to my upbringing. I was a, I was a good kid. I grew up, my parents divorced when I was three years old, they dumped, they, they, I don't want to say they dumped me off. They, they were going back and forth, back and forth, and then finally, my grandparents were like, you know, that I was going back and forth from L.A. to El Centro where I grew up in a small town. And they were just like, you know, you can't keep doing this to this kid, just leave him here with us. So I ended up moving in with my grandparents when I was about eight or nine. And I was a good kid, I was in magnet schools, gate programs. They said I was gifted, didn't really listen to them. The teachers and the parents, you know, I just yeah, and I took these for granted. And I started using my, my head to make bad decisions, started running with the wrong crowd. And got, got caught up in gangs and violence and drugs. Because I grew up right there by the border, and this, so there's a lot of drugs and gang violence right there. So um, I don't know if it was just, I'm an only child too. So I don't know if it was, uh, a need to belong to people, friends, I don't know what it was. I don't wanna make excuses, but um, started getting in trouble and ended up getting two years with half time, ended up getting two years with half time for possession of marijuana. And they gave me, this is when it was still illegal, so I ended up getting two years with half time, going to prison when I was 19. Yeah, 19 years old, and then I think it was like a week before my 20th birthday. And they put me in a, right when I got to prison, they put me in a lifers building. And there was a riot and I got

caught up in that riot, just trying to defend myself, I didn't know what was going on, just kind of scared. You know, all the guys around me had 25 to life, some of whom looking at the death penalty. And I was just, I had eight months, eight months in prison, and I was gonna go home. So I was, and I was just a small town kid. So I ended up, this prison riot ended up happening, and ended up getting charged for that. They were looking, I was looking at seven years for that. And, you know, they, they tricked me into taking a deal, ended up taking seven years, ended up going from two years to nine years, only supposed to do eight months. Then they sent me to the SHU. Right when I got some SHU, I realized what they had done to me, as far as tricked me into taking that guilty plea when I didn't, I didn't do nothing. I was supposed to, I was just defending myself, small town kid, eight months on a lifer building. And I tried to withdraw my plea, and it was too late at that time. So I was sitting in the SHU, and that's when I started getting exposed to how, how crooked the system was and how they use their tactics to try to trick us into, to scaring us into taking deals even when we didn't do nothing. Even when we're innocent. So went from eight months to nine years. And then all of a sudden, two days before I was supposed to parole, they say, you're not going nowhere, you're looking at life. And I was like what? And they're like, yeah, and so I was just, I'm speechless. I didn't know how any of this was happening. And they say, yeah, you're looking at life for conspiracy to murder. And this was for something to happened on another yard and another prison with some guys that I've never met. And so this was two days before I was supposed to parole, two days, on the day, on my birthday actually. And mail takes about three days to get, to get home. And I tried to write my mother a letter, because she was, she was expecting me to, she was under the impression I was going home. So she was going to be waiting for me and try to send her a mail, try to send her a letter. It didn't get to her in time, because it takes three days to get home. And she was waiting for me at the, at the prison gates thinking I was going to get out. And she found out the same way that, that I found that, you know, by the prison guards just saying your son's not going anywhere, he's looking at life. So my mother had a, she had a nervous breakdown right there, right there at the prison gates. And so, so then they transferred me to county jail. I'm sitting in county jail, looking at life now. It took me and my family about a month to raise about 250,000, and my family's like, what do you want to do with this money? Do you want to bail out or do you want to get an attorney? And I told him, I said it doesn't matter if I get Johnnie Cochran, that I saw how they were, they were framing people and putting, pinning evidence on people. I said, if I don't get out of this place, I'm never going home. So we used that money to get me out on bail, and that was the only reason I was out on bail in probably 15 years that I was incarcerated. And so there I was on bail. And within six months, within six months, I was working, I was going to night school, I was going to community college for my diploma. I was doing volunteer work, working in Homes for Humanity with, right there next, next to police officers and fire...firemen, doing volunteer work

with the church. My parole officer, he, he recommended that I be taken off parole. He's like, it's wrong what they're doing to you, you know, you, you've done more in six months than guys have done in six years coming out of prison. And, you know, let me know if you need me to testify on your behalf. So but they kept blocking him. So there I was, there I was on parole and going to court every two to three weeks for this life, this life sentence for these charges that. Actually when I was on the street I was playing two life sentences at the time because that's what they do is they try to scare you by stacking up all these charges. And then as you get closer to trial, they'll start trying to, two life sentences and then one life sentence, and then 15 years, and then 10 years, and then all sudden now you're taking five years, just because it's not, you know, 25 to life. That's why the trick people into taking. So anyways, so I'm going back and forth to court every two to three weeks for court, and that just put me and my family through living hell. People just started slowly disappearing, distancing themselves from me. At the same time, I was kind of pushing people away because they started, because they saw that, that I wasn't giving up any information and that they, I wasn't taking any deals, they started going after the people close to me. So, one time when I went to court by myself on the train, I was in court and they ran in there with like SWAT gear and dragged me out of gunpoint and shook me down, put my hands up, and they're like what vehicle did you come in? I was like, I took the train. Don't lie to us, don't lie to us. And I said, check my my left pocket, so they checked my left pocket, and there was an Amtrak ticket. Had I, had I taken any, had anybody given me a ride that day, they would have, they would have torn that vehicle to shreds. So little things like that, they, they were trying to do, to harass me. Um, they offered me four years in court. And I said, no, I said, I don't care if you offer me one day, I didn't do nothing. And they didn't like that, so they threatened my mother with 25 to life for accessory, accessory to commit murder. So during trial, I had to tell my mother to disappear, you got to leave town. And she's like, I'm not leaving you right now, I'm not leaving, you know, this is trial, you need me. I said, mom, there's no, there's no telling what these people were willing to do, you know, they, they're trying to row me, they're trying to do everything they can to frame me. So she had to disappear for, for trial. And even my codefendants, my co, I had two codefendants, they had life, and they were they were ready to take the deal too. They were like, we're just telling the truth and just tell them, tell them, look, we never met this guy, he has, he has nothing to do with it, we did it. And I was like, no, it's not right what they're doing, you know, what they're doing to people, they can't keep scaring people into taking deals. I knew I was innocent. I didn't do nothing, I didn't do anything. And it just wasn't right, and someone had to stand up to them. So, so there we are getting closer to trial. And my parole officer all of a sudden was getting transferred, and he said, they're kicking me off your case. And I said why? And he said, I don't know, he's like, but the next parole officer that, that's getting assigned to you, she's not your friend. So I was like okay, and so sure enough, as soon as they reassigned me parole

office, parole officer, she takes me in and she has me arrested. And I was like, what am I getting, what am I getting arrested for? She's like, oh, it has something to do with your murder trial in Kings County. So then I'm sitting in county jail, like county jail for about a week, not knowing why I was arrested. I have my family members look it up on the internet. They said, it's like you got a ticket without a ticket being written, your, your, we can't find nothing on record. So then I get transferred to Kings County where my murder trial was going on, and I asked them, I said why did you guys arrest me? They said, oh, it was something for parole from L.A. County. And so L.A. County is telling me it's Kings County, Kings County is telling me it's L.A. County. So there I was in Kings County now, and they used the bogus parole violations to revoke my bail. So now I'm sitting in custody with a no bail hold, which is what they had been trying to do from day one, which is take my bail away. Because again, when I'm in custody, they can do what they want to me. Out of custody it's a different story, I actually have a fighting chance. So there I am in in in custody in Kings County, getting ready to go trial. Half the sheriffs, half the sheriffs were, were against me, half the sheriffs were actually in favor of me. And a lot of them used to whisper things in my ear, you know, a lot of them were like, we know it's not right what they're doing to you, it's wrong, we'll help you win. So I'm, one time these sheriffs had whispered something in my ear, they said, the DA is up to something because they had been planning to bring some witnesses to court, and I said okay. So they put me, before they were going to put me in a holding cell, I asked the sheriffs, I said search that cell before you put me in there. They're like, you sure? And I say, yeah, search the cell please. They searched the cell, and a big piece of metal fell out one of, fell out of one of the desks. So little things like that they were trying to put on me. The sheriff ended up taking the stand, and he testified on the record, he said, Pinuelas had nothing to do with that, what they found in there, he had nothing to do it that, he was never in that cell, he's the one that asked us to search that cell. So little things like that. Um, and then, so I was, I was going to, and then, so then, then trial started for about. And excuse me if I'm having, you know, again, it's, I'm trying to remember all this stuff. And it's, it's weird because every time I re-tell my story, something else comes out, or some things I forget, because, again, you know, the trauma, the suppression.

ZG: Absolutely.

RP: Yeah, um, it's not just like sitting at the top surface of my brain all the time, like let me, me tell you about what happened yesterday. And so anyways, I'm getting better, not crying anymore, I used to just be bawling in front, in front of crowds of people. And so and just that the experience of trauma alone, I was going to trauma, I was going to trial for about three weeks, waking up, only sleeping in a couple hours. That's another very traumatic experience

that a lot of people don't talk about. It's, your body starts going through a lot of physiological, physiological changes. I used to wake up in cold sweats, wake up feeling like I was, I was suffocating. My, I, it's like my body knew that, I felt like I was having anxiety attacks in my sleep. I just felt like I was suffocating. Like my body knew that they were, they were trying to kill me, you know, they were trying to take my life. And so then we're getting ready to go to trial. I mean, the jury was deliberating. And again, no, no evidence, no weapons. No, nobody was killed. I didn't have nothing to do with that crime. That's another reason why I fought it. And, and again, I said, I didn't do anything. I had nothing to do with this. I'm taking it all the way. I don't care if you give me time served. And, um, and so the jury was deliberating. And again one of the sheriffs had whispered something in my ear. They said, they said, what did they tell me, they said, the DA's pissed. And I said, well, they should be. And they said that, yeah, they think you're gonna win. And I was like, I am. So they took me back to my cell, jury was deliberating for about three days. And during, during while we were waiting for the jury verdict, come back, um, the toilet plugged up. In jail, in the county jail, when your toilet plugs up, you ask for the toilet plunger, they give you the plunger, unplug it, give back. So we did that. And I told the sheriff, I said, hey, you got this toilet plunger back if you want it, and he's like, uh, we'll come get it later during mail call. Mail call comes around, they'll pick up. And I said, we got this toilet plunger, oh, something came up, we'll come, we'll come get it at counseling. So they never came to get it. So the next morning, they take me to court, and I say, hey, I still got that plunger in my cell. Oh, we gotta get you to court, we'll come back and get it later. Okay. Next you know, they're taking you to another, another courtroom. And I was like, where are you guys taking me? And they said, uh, we don't know, they just told us to take you to courtroom. So the next you know, I'm going to this other courtroom, and I'm looking, now they're charging me with 25 to life for possession of a deadly weapon, for a toilet plunger, with gang enhancement, and now I'm looking at another \$250,000 bail. So all this stuff because they thought I was gonna, I was gonna be found not guilty on my, my original murder, murder case. So they were doing all of these little things, just to keep me in custody. So now I'm numb. Like, okay, even if I get found not guilty on my original murder case, now I got to deal with this whole thing all over again for this toilet plunger. So then the verdict comes back, and I was actually writing notes, trying to show that I was calm during the verdict, while reading it, and it just came back guilty, guilty, guilty. My hand started shaking uncontrollably, like, like bad, so I had to put my, my hand on the table just so nobody would see. And yeah, they found me guilty, ended up getting 105 to life with they, they for some enhancement thing. They couldn't give me that much, so they ended up gave me 66 years to life. When I went to my holding cell, they asked, oh do you feel like killing yourself? I said no, and this, I said, why you asking me that? Oh, it's just policy, we have to ask you that after anyone gets found guilty, anyone gets sentenced to life. And they said, are you sure? I said, yeah, I'm sure, I'm not, I don't feel

suicidal. So then they put me in a, in a holding cell it's called, it was like a bubble, it was like a cell within a cell. And if, they, we used to call it the Hannibal Lecter cell, because it was, it has all these blind spots, and you have to enter one quarter or just to get to another quarter. And so, anyway, they put me in that cell, blind spots, they were supposed to put me in that cell. And again, I didn't, in many ways, I think they did that on purpose, to try to get me to take my own life, you know, they were trying to get me to just lose, lose all hope and despair. And so I was in that cell by myself for like three weeks, getting ready to go back to prison. So that was when I got convicted. Now, that was everything that led up to the conviction. Alright, I'll now, this will be the part after when I go back to prison. I try to keep it in segments. It's first everything that led up, and then everything that's happened during, and then I'll share everything that happened afterwards. Then I go back to prison. And the prison guards had told me before I left prison, they said, you know, when we get you, and you know we're going to get you, we're going to validate you. And when they validate you, it's when they classify you as a gang member. Just, I mean, basically for the color of your skin, because in prison, you have to, you can't just say, I don't, I have no race, you have to say that you're Mexican, are you from south, South California, whatever. So and that's their way to keep you in the solitary confinement for as long as they want. And at the time, they were keeping people in solitary confinement for about 30, 40 years, indefinitely. So they sent me to, they sent me to Pelican Bay. And this was that after I had already done for the, for the other, for the nine years I had spent almost seven years in solitary confinement Corcoran SHU. And so they sent me to, and they knew my mother, they knew my mother used to visit me all the time. So again, they're always trying to take, they're always trying to hit me where it hurts. And they knew they couldn't break me, the only way to get to me was through my mother because she's like literally my only weakness in world. And I'm a mama's boy, and so when they can't get to me, they always go after to my mother, that's just, that's what they do. So they sent me to Pelican Bay to make it harder for my mother to go see me. Um, and so then I ended up at Pelican Bay in the SHU. And right when I, right when I get back, I started writing everybody, ACLU, all the Innocence Projects, anybody that would listen. And I said, I'm innocent, I need help. You know, we got to blow the lids off this place, expose these people, it's wrong what they're doing to us. And a lot of these organizations were like, well, since your appeal's still pending, there's nothing, there's only so much we could do for you. But as soon as your, your appeal is done, we got you. So it was nice, just knowing that I had them as a backup. But again, my appeal is still pending. So I, you know, there's nothing no one could do for me because a lot of Innocence Projects are very limited on resources. Let me stand up. Yeah, I'm more comfortable when I stand up. I don't know why. And so, so I get back to the, so I get back to the, yeah, the SHU, and I'm writing everybody. And everybody told me there was nothing they could do for me. So, and that's when I was like, okay, well, if, uh, I'm gonna have to if, I mean, literally,

nothing, nobody could do anything for me, so I'm gonna have to help myself if I want to get out of this situation. And the SHU, you know, you've probably heard stories of solitary confinement, a lot of the stories are true. You know, you, people are killing themselves left and right. People go crazy all the time. One minute they're like talking, just very coherent, like you and me now, and the next thing, like only a couple weeks later, they're just, their pupils are dilated and they're like no longer the same person, they're just out of it. People are screaming, going crazy. It's bad there because again, it's, it's, it's psychologically meant to break people's minds. That's what, that's what it's for. And it dehumanizes us to do sensory deprivation, as I mentioned before, it kills everything that makes us human, which is our personality. We, we, there's no, there's no windows, no sunlight. We only get to go out for one hour every other day, sometimes for weeks if the prison goes on lockdown, even though we're in solitary confinement. Yeah, and when I was back there I think, like, I did almost 11, I did almost about 11 years in solitary confinement altogether, almost 11, almost 12. And yeah, I didn't, I, just the simple things in life, didn't chew bubble gum for 12 years, didn't, you know, didn't have a glass of ice for nine years, didn't hug my mother for seven years. And so, so I get to the SHU, and I started, started studying the law. Again, because, you know, I was gonna have to help myself, so I started, started studying law in the law libraries there and in solitary confinement, they're pretty much a joke. They shackle you once every two weeks, you get to go, they shackle you, take you down to the law library, you have two hours to handwrite information. And that's all you're allowed to take back to your cell. And, yeah, and all the law books are outdated too. They do that on purpose, so the courts aren't flooded with innocence claims, so they make it very hard for us to get out to even, you know, legally fight for our way out. So um, yeah, so, so what I would do is I would go to the law library, handwrite this information. And I knew something was there, I just didn't know what it was. So I would write down these case laws, come back to my cell, and then I would tell my mother. I would go back, write a letter to my mother, yeah, I need these law books. And she's like, well, how much are they, and they're pretty expensive, law books are like typically like 200 bucks. And so she would go around collecting donations, or sometimes I wouldn't go to store for like three to four months, just to be able to save money for these law books. And I, but I would tell her, I was like, I need these law books, I really need these law books, because I, there's nothing, I can't, at the law library, there's not enough information there, I need the new stuff. And I said, but if you give these law books, I will get out of prison. So my mom's, okay, so she sent me these law books. And even when I, when we get the law books, it's a matter of holding onto them. Because in prison, they like to retaliate against jailhouse lawyers, especially if they know you have an innocent, an innocence claim, and you, you have, you know, you have issues and grounds like, okay, this guy's got action. And so and then the prison guards, they have a way of losing your stuff when you're transferring prisons, cell searches, whatever. So they sent me law books, and that's all I

did every day for four years. I would wake up early in the morning, and I would just read the Bible, study law books, study the law books, read the Bible. And when I first started studying law, the law books are very, very intimidating, and I didn't know where to start. And so I'm sitting there. Sorry for the lighting.

ZG: You're fine.

RP: I gotta get me one of those social media, those circle...

ZG: Oh, yeah, those like ring lights.

RP: I need to get one of those. I could be an influencer. And no, it's for, because I, uh, because I did speaking on Zoom all the time now, people have mentioned, yeah, you might want to get some lighting, like fundraisers and stuff. So, um, so you know, with the law books, I'm sitting in front of these law books, and I'm, like it's daunting and so I'm sitting there like practically crying, studying and trying to study through the tears and not knowing where to, where to begin. And I just started getting good at it. And I started reading, started reading a lot on the side, a lot of the self-help books I used to read in there, to try, I mean, just to be able to deal with the, just to deal with the, everything that goes on in solitary confinement. I mean, basically just, like keep my sanity. And like if something was up, I was like, okay, I don't feel right, or I'm not thinking right or something is, so I would get these self-help books just trying, constantly trying to deal with like depression or stress or whatever. And meditation. And I started reading, I was thinking, okay, well, I'm learning, I'm studying all this law, you know, I'm going to need to keep up with these lawyers in the litigation. So I started reading a lot of speed-reading books, so I get really fast at reading all these case laws and law books. And I'm like, okay, I'm learning all this new information, I need to be able retain it, so I started reading a lot of memory retention books. And so I get really good at it, started getting really good at studying law. And I was filing all these habeas corpuses, I filed five while I was in there, while my appeal was still pending. And, and then all of a sudden, that's when the hunger strike came up. And I knew the hunger strike was coming, it was in 2012 or 2011, and I knew that was coming because again at the same time, at the time, the start there, they were keeping us back there for decades, literally 30, 40, 50 years. Just, you weren't coming out, that was a death sentence, it was a life sentence within a life sentence. If you get a life sentence and you get validated, you're never gonna see the, I mean, you're never gonna see the sun again. Um, so the hunger strike was coming up. And that's a peaceful protest, just to kind of bring awareness to the cruel and unusual punishment we were suffering back there, in the SHU. They call it a Solitary Housing, Housing Unit, which is the SHU, short for solitary confinement. And so I started filing all my, my

legal work ahead of time to be able to get continuations and knew, I knew I was gonna have to get everything in the door, knowing that everything was gonna stop. And so it's filing everything in a hurry, and then the Innocence Proj, sorry, and then the, then the hunger strike started. And out of 10,000 inmates that began, I was one of the last 50 that went all 60 days without eating. I lost like 45 pounds, I was down to 120 pounds, they said I should have died. At that point, at that point, I had already had, you know, been sentenced to life, I was already dead. I was like, what do I have to lose? And if I can just by not eating stop other people from suffering, you know, and well, what do I have to lose? And so I wasn't eating, and we actually, and it was good, because while they were trying to make us look like these monsters, you know, we, all we were doing was just not eating. It was a peaceful protest, that was the whole point. And they were trying everything they could to provoke us into violence. And we weren't, we weren't, we weren't falling for any of it. And that's when the public started, started, like it started bringing a lot of bad media on them and making them look bad. And everybody's like, well, who's the real monsters here, they're, they're just not eating, trying to bring awareness to this peaceful protest, and you guys are over there trying to force-feed and beat them up, and do all this other stuff to try to get them to eat. This was when they had the Guantanamo, and they were doing the force-feeding too. So it was around the same time, so they were trying to use a lot of same tactics on this. Um, and we ended up winning the hunger strike, and they started releasing us. And so I think the maximum they can hold you back there is two or three years. And that was one of the best feelings in the world is when we came off that lock, that hunger strike, and knowing that we won, knowing that we did something good for other people. And that gave me a lot of hope, to see that, that type of selflessness and love and humanity. And in those types of conditions, you know, in the deepest, darkest dungeon that they had in prison, around the so-called worst of the worst, and to see, again, that type of humanity, it gave me a lot of hope. As far as if we could find good in those conditions, under those circumstances, imagine what we can do elsewhere. That has never left me, it's always resonated with me. So then we, I get back, hunger strike is lifted, get back to my legal work. And again, I got my, I got my appeal pending. And I'm filing all these other habeas corpuses on everything: on a bogus parole violation, on the gang validation, on anything that I could, I could file a habeas on. All I needed them to do was to look at the original evidence to show that I'm, I'm in prison for nothing. And as long as I could do that, then everything else is out the window. And sure enough, the appeal came back first, um, the appeal came back, and what was it, um, it was based on insufficient evidence. Um, there's only two grounds that you can be retried on that was one of them. Out of like 50, I think, grounds. But anyways, it's very rare. And out of, every year out of hundreds and 1000s of appeals, 93% get denied. 5% okay, yeah, you got something here, now you get to go re-live the whole traumatic experience all over again, which no one wants to do, so a lot of times will be trials just basically to get a

better deal. And 2% get out. I fell within the 2%, barred from re-trial, and yeah, my conviction was overturned based on insufficient evidence. Nothing there, because I was convicted on no evidence, and, and so I got out. I got that letter, I cried for about three hours, couldn't believe I was going home. It took them about two to three months for them to finally release me, and they were bouncing me around just, again, trying to set me up, trying to get me to do some stupid, trying to whatever, um hoping that I'll get in trouble. Just walking, keeping my head down. They threw me in L.A. County, I was sitting in L.A. County for about a week. They didn't want to release me, they're threatening to file charges for the bogus parole violations in L.A. county that they had originally put me in custody for and just playing more of their games. And then finally they, they released me in a paper jumpsuit. And I didn't get any gate money, because I wasn't on parole, I wasn't eligible for any services, counseling, programs, anything. They just kicked, again, they tried to, just like when they threw me in solitary confinement, they kicked me on the street with absolutely nothing, hoping that, hoping I would go away and die quiet. So there I am. So that's everything that happened up to the after my conviction is overturned. And then, so now after I've got released, um, and then that's the thing, it's like, when we get our conviction overturned, that's not the end of. If anything, that's just the beginning, it gets very difficult once we get out, and this is what a lot of what we're fighting for right now is policy to be overturned, to be able to get some kind of compensation because they're making it very difficult for us to be compensated. Because this is happening so often, they're like, okay, you know, if this keeps happening, I mean, we can, we can let them out the back door, sweep them under the rug here, hear no evil, see no evil, but if we got to keep paying them, we're gonna get in trouble, we're going to have to answer to the taxpayers. So they did, they changed the legislation and laws. So now, okay, yeah, you proved that you're, you're innocent, but you have to prove that you're not guilty. And the only way to do that is by actually catching the person that really did it red-handed. And when it's prosecutors and police officers that are the ones railroading us, and they're immune, it's, it's very difficult for us to, um, to prove that we're, we're not guilty after we've already proved that we're innocent. And again, they do that on purpose to make it very difficult for us to be compensated. So a lot of exonerees are not getting compensated right now. Um, so I got out, I get out, no gate money, no help, no anything. Um, I'd see people walking down the street, and I'm like, why are they talking to themselves? And they're like, that's a Bluetooth. I'm like, what's that? And I didn't know all this stuff. Even to this day, all this technology, you know, if I see, you know, I tell, I tell Alexa to turn on my A/C. And it's just, to me, I'm like a caveman, I'm like, wow, what's that? It's fascinating to, now because I was stuck in a time box for like 15 years, you know, the world kept moving, and I was, I was stuck. And so I get out, I'm looking for help: psychiatrists, therapists. Again, they kicked me on the streets, I didn't have nothing, I didn't, I didn't know anybody. I wasn't yet connected to the Innocence Project yet, so I didn't know that they

existed. And because I got myself out, I was just out here wandering, looking for help. Psychiatrists and therapists are like, we're not we're not qualified to help someone like you in your circumstances. So I, uh, one time I was, I was watching the Holocaust survivors speak, and when I hear them speak, every time I start bawling like a baby. I'm hearing them, you know, talk about all their family getting killed, them getting thrown into concentration camps for the color of the skin or something they didn't do, um, and, you know, everyone around them getting killed, thinking they're coming for them next and then all sudden, now they're out. And, and every time I hear a Holocaust survivor speak, I start bawling like a baby, like I get real emotional, I can't help it, because it hits, that is what I went through. And so I was like, well, you know what, I need to contact them, they'll understand. So I was able to find a couple at the Museum, Museum of Tolerance. And, and, and that's the thing too, it's like, you know, on paper, you know, Zoë, everybody, you know, they see the straight As, and they see the accomplishments and achievements and all this stuff, and they think oh, yeah, this guy Ruben, he's got it together now, you know, he's doing okay. You know, but they don't, it's hard to see the stuff that I suffer from on a daily basis that, you know, the PTSD and just all these things that I'm still trying to overcome. That's another big reason why I majored in psychology, to become my own therapist, because all these therapists were not able to help me. So I was like, okay, well, I'm gonna have to put myself back together again, I'm going to have to heal myself, so I majored in psychology. And, you know, the Stanford Prison Experiment, they shut that thing down after six days, and I lived that, I lived that for almost 12 years, solitary confinement, so I'm like a walking specimen. So I'm just constantly like, and that's a reason I'm able to perform in school the way I do, at such a high level, is because I'm constantly gauging myself, analyzing myself, again studying like what did I do right, what did I do wrong. I got post-it notes everywhere, all over my room. It's, yeah, um, so, so yeah, I'm, so then I find the Holocaust survivors. And then I ran into her, the first one I ran into, and we're talking and she says, you probably got offers to do books and movies. I said, yeah. She's like, how long you've been out? I said, about a year and a half, this was way back when, about four or five years ago. And, and I said, yeah, and she's like, and I told her a year and a half, and she's like, it's too soon, you'll know when it's time to get your story out. But in the meantime, be careful who you share your story with because, for one, people judge and, for two, it's too much for people to bear. And then she gave her speaking, performance, her talk. And I got to see her in action, how she was doing it. And she would kind of share these very painful moments of her experience, and just when the crowd was, like, on the brink of tears, she would lighten the mood or change the subject or tell a joke. And so that's it, that's, you want to help people to see it through our eyes, but not so much, because of course, we don't want anyone to ever have to go through what we went through. So and then she said, so then at the q&a, she was started to asked questions, and we had, again, we had already talked before she, she spoke.

So she answered my question first. And then I asked her, when does the pain stop? Because this is what I was looking for, I was looking for a healing potion. And she says, she said, it never stops. And right there and then, I started crying. I just started bawling, like I just started, just pouring out, the floodgates just opened, and everyone's looking, who's this tough guy in the front row, tattoos, crying like a baby? Because right there at that moment, I realized, I'm gonna be like this for rest of my life. These people messed me up. And, but then she says, but it's not what they've done to you, it's, it's, it's not what was done to you but what you choose to do with it. And right there and then, I felt this huge just weight lift off my shoulders. And, and that is really, and you know, she, we talked again later, and she said, you know, for you to come out the way you did, to be able to speak the way, you know, and think and just the way you carry yourself and still be, have such a big heart, she's like, God has a plan for you, you know, he has a purpose for you. And so then I get out, and I'm doing construction for a few years. And looking back at it now, it was a, it was a good healthy outlet for a lot of the emotions and taking care of resentment. So I was doing, worked in concrete, concrete construction, did that for a couple years. I came out of prison, I'm in great shape. And working on these huge celebrities' houses, Kim and Kanye and all the Kardashians, and I was seeing all these celebrities and these big lawyers' and judges' houses. That was actually when I started sharing my story with them. I was telling my story, and they were like, you have to go back into law. I'm like, I've never going, never going back, not touching that stuff again. I did that, I did that to survive. And they're like, how many people can say they want a case like yours? You know, you can help so many people, you can help fix the justice system, I mean, you can help teach the courts and law enforcement this is what you're doing, you need to stop doing this, fix that, and you can get innocent people out of prison. So I started going, okay, so I started thinking about it. And the more I thought about it, I said, you know what, it just, it just, it seemed perfect for me to go back into law after what I did. And again, these judges and lawyers kept convincing me, like you're a natural at this. You've seen both sides of the law, that's your edge, you know, and, you know, you have that advantage. And so before I started getting back into school, and someone told me, they said, uh, if you get straight As, people will pay you to go to school. And I was like, oh, okay. And, and I had never been a straight A student before that because, again, I was just a mess-up, I was, I wasn't really using my, my brains for, for what they were meant for. And, and so I started, I got into community college, started getting straight As. And that's, that's, that's all, that was it after that. After that I started getting straight As, started getting all these scholarships, started getting these awards. And I got an internship with the Innocence Project. Got that, yeah, I got, I got the internship, actually, because I won so many awards. I was at a presentation accepting these awards, someone heard my story, because, and someone heard my story, I was able to speak for a couple minutes, and they said, hey, we've got this internship at the Innocence Project, it'd be perfect for you. And so I was, okay,

and then that's when I first ran into my friends and family at the Loyola Law School Project for the Innocent. And so there I was, and it dawned on me, within a couple years, you know, I was, I was reading their mail, I went from being one of these people in prison with life, screaming, help get me out, to now I'm at the Innocence Project, their offices, at their desk, answering letters written by people that I was in the shoes. It just, and I was like, wow, you just can't make this stuff, you can't, can't write this stuff. And it was just the, I was having a little epiphanies like that, like how did they get here? It just, it was happening so fast. And after that, then I got a judicial internship, working with all these judges, in the superior courts. All these judges are like, Ruben, you just keeping your straight As, and we're going to do everything we can to get you into the top law schools. Actually, it's funny, because I was at, I was at one of these events, and I met a judge, William Ryan. I was like, wow, your name same sounds familiar. He's like, so does yours. And sure enough, he had heard a bunch of my habeas corpuses that I had filed while I was in there. And so, and he told me, he's like, when you're in law school, let me know, I have an externship waiting for you. So it's just a small world, and again, um, this has been part of what's healing me is getting back into the courtroom. Because one minute, you know, I'm sitting there, talking to these judges, and the judges are like, Ruben, I don't know what I could do to help, I just want to help. And I'm like, well, 10 minutes in the chambers, I got some questions, and they're like, come on through. Next thing you know, I'm going out to lunch with like four judges, and I'm just sitting there, like, how's this happening, you know. And it's one thing when, you know, the judges, or even anybody, they're just like, okay, yeah, that's a great story, good luck. It's another thing when they're like, you need to get this barbecue, you want to come from join us? And I'm like getting accepted and even just being in the courtroom again. One time, Zoë, I was, I was observing this trial. And it was me, it was, it was three people, and all these codefendants, and I'm sitting there observing the trial. And they come in, they came for the prisoner, the, the inmates, they're cuffing them up, and they're getting off their last-minute messages, whispering and stuff. And for a brief moment, I looked over my shoulder, I thought they were coming for me next. And I'm like, wait a minute, I'm on this side of the law now, I'm okay, I'm good. So it's little things like that, that has helped me to, again, heal, to realize, like, that's behind me, that's, that's, I'm not ever going through that again, I don't have to worry about this stuff anymore. And I think maybe that's why I'm getting into law to kind of like insulating myself, because I feel safe, I feel protected around judges, around lawyers, around the Innocence Project. And with my law degree as well. It helps me sleep at night, once a, one day when I do have that. Um, but uh, and then so, uh, so then I, yeah, I was, did the internships, school's going great, I started doing a lot of public speaking, and started learning the benefits of, that's another, that's another way that I can give back. Because I want to get back to the law degree, I want to become an attorney, to be able to change laws again, to be able to, you know, give people a voice, to be able to, where people can know that you're

not alone, like I was in that in that SHU, and just to be able to use my experiences to help get innocent people out of prison. And then, but with my, my degree, I want to get my bachelor's degree in psychology, I'm only one semester away from that now, that is, again, to be able to reach people that a lot of people have, are hard to reach, that, you know, people that have done time in solitary confinement, formerly incarcerated. And that's the thing too, like I'm, I'm, I'm a, I'm like a hybrid, because a lot of justice-impacted people, people that have and, people are starting to see the value in people that have done time before, in the law, in the law field. And you're seeing, it's a big movement right now to get people that have had experience, that have been formerly incarcerated to be, to get their law degree. So because I was, I did time, before I got wrongly convicted, I'm formerly incarcerated. But then while I was in prison, I got wrongly convicted. And so I went in guilty and I came out innocent. So I'm both formerly incarcerated and an exoneree, which is weird. So, there's not a lot, either you're formerly incarcerated or you're exon, or you're an exoneree. And so I deal with that all the time too, just trying to help both communities and, and then with the public speaking, to be able to use my story to give people hope, to, you know, inspire people, motivate people, educate people, where people can learn from my experiences. You know, I see, I see people having a bad day, and, you know, I share my story with them, and all of a sudden, they're like, wow, life's not so bad. And just to be able to use my story to spark people and give people that, you know, people see me on campus all the time, Zoë. You know, well not, not this semester, but before, you know, people see me skipping and dancing, and I'm like having a blast on campus. They're like, this guy loves to do homework, he likes taking tests, this guy's crazy. You know, I've walked down the street and smelled the, smelled the flowers and looked at the birds, and I'm like, in heaven, and they're like, until they hear my story. And they're like, oh, that's why he's, you know, enjoys, that's why he has so much fun, fun. And that's another thing too is, you know, with the school, it's not the grades, the degrees, that, you know, the money that's going to come with it later on one day. To me, it's just paper, you know, God gave me a second chance in life. He said, okay, I'm going to give you one more run at this, let's see what you do with it. So now I'm just trying to change as many people's lives as I can, to change the world, to make a positive impact on people's lives, to make people smile. That's the, you know, and, and even education, you know, by, by educating myself, it's what allowed me to survive all those years in solitary confinement, it allowed me to get out of prison, and even now, it's allowing me to take back control on my future. Again, because I, you know, did so well in community college, got straight As, like I told you, I applied to 30, 30 schools, I got into over 23 schools. It was just a matter of money, and Pomona was offered me, they offered me a full ride, so now I'm at Pomona College getting ready to go to law school. It's amazing, you know, like I've only been out five, six years. And it's just been a whirlwind, and I'm just like, how did I get here? It still hasn't, you know, because I've already won, no matter what happens, I've already won, you

know, and no matter what happens on a test, what grade I get. I mean, don't get me wrong, the wrongful conviction, it never leaves me, it's kind of like, it's, it's, I feel like I always have something to prove. Um, it's like this chip, not a chip on my shoulder, it's just, I mean, society threw me away at one, at one point, they said, I would never be good enough, I didn't deserve to have my mother, I would never vote. You know, I couldn't get straight As on tests, so it's this constant something to prove that I'm not what they said I was, that I'm not a bad person, that I don't deserve a life sentence. And so that's made me an overachiever, which is good. But, but at the same time, it's hard for me to turn it off. And then, yeah, and then, so my goals, again, with the law degree, the degree in psychology, and public speaking, hopefully, now, I've honestly, after working with so many judges, I want to be a justice one day or a judge or a law professor. I want to do lawyer stuff, of course, I want to be a trial attorney, because that's where I feel like I can protect the most people. I love to talk, I love to be in front of people. I'm not, I'm not intimidated by the court system, like I'm not afraid of it, and because I've lived it, but in a different way. But if anything, like I said, you know, people ask me all the time if I have faith in the system, I have a lot of faith in the system, because, you know, I meet these future attorneys, I meet these wonderful judges, the wonderful people have at the Innocence Projects, just beautiful human beings, and, and all these future attorneys and, you know, we are the system. And so I have a lot of faith in the system, because I have faith in myself, because I'm part of that legal system. And so again, it's just a matter of what we choose to do with it, and if we want to make a change, or you know, we could sit there and gripe and complain and moan about it, or we can go out and do something about it. But um, yeah, yeah. So I think that's it. Sorry about that, I told you I talked a lot.

ZG: Oh, no, my God. I don't mind at all. I mean, you like covered most of the questions that I had outlined, that was wonderful. I guess just like one overarching question is, like, what's like the main takeaway or takeaways that you have for people based on your experience and stuff?

RP: Um, well, I know this year has been making us all take inventory of our lives. And so you know that, that's one thing that, you know, even just on a, on an educational platform, the importance of education. And that's one thing I always tried to, you know, when I go to the schools, the inner-city schools and the high schools and even colleges and talk, you know, to make the most of education, because with education, it's the most powerful thing in the world. It gives you so many answers, it leads in the right direction. And it introduces you to so many wonderful people, and to really kind of take advantage of, not, and this goes for students that scramble to make the most of it, don't see it as something you have to do or, or just, you know, you know, I heard, I hate the saying, you know, Cs get degrees, you know, because, again, we have so much more potential. To really be all that, you know, to be the best we can, and not

just in school but, um, you know, it's, again, it's, it's an opportunity to be able to, I can, I, it's a privilege to be here and take a test. It's a privilege to, I'm not nervous talking to Zoë or even when I'm nervous speaking of hundreds of people, I'm nervous, this is like, it's an opportunity, it's a privilege, I get to speak to all these, all these wonderful people, and I get to touch their lives in some way. I get to maybe, even if you walk away with just one lesson, I actually made a positive impact, so it's the way you look at everything. You gotta look at everything like an opportunity, like I don't have to do this, I get to do this! So that's my outlook on everything. It's trying to find that, I know it's hard sometimes. Um, but, and again, I take that from in the classroom, but even just to in school and life in general, because right now, this, this quarantine lockdown stuff, which they just did it again, but um, it's really, again, it's making everyone sit down and kind of appreciate what we have. And, and it's making us slow down because we're so go, go, go, go. Even myself, Zoë. I've been using education as kind of like a coping mechanism to, and to not really deal with my stuff, my pain and trauma. And I've just always been, okay, what's next, what's next, all these accomplishments and, and, and, and always the next step. And now this, this year has really kind of slowed me down and say, wait a minute, who am I now? What have I become? I'm no longer that exoneree, you know, turned attorney. You know, I, that was a chapter of my life, but I don't want that to define me. You know, now, I'm not just an exoneree or former incarcerated, now it's like I'm a, I'm a scholar, I'm a college student, I'm a future law student, I'm going to be a future attorney. Now, it's like, wait a minute, and it's dawning on me like, like, I'm this new person now. I'm this, this, I have this new identity, so I'm still trying to grapple with that, making the most. And, and this, this year actually, it's hit me hard, because again, it's made me slow down and kind of really taking, taking the time to heal. And I'm actually going to apply next cycle for law school. And this was consulting with everybody, and I said, something just doesn't feel right, something doesn't feel right. And it was something, because usually I don't have to force myself for anything, I'm just like, go go, go, go, go. I'm just, and something was just kind of unh, and, and that's what it was, it was that I just needed time for myself, to heal and also to really kind of savor and enjoy this last year at Pomona. Because that's what everybody was telling me too, like, Ruben, go too fast, you try to do too much. Just enjoy your last year undergrad, because you're never going to relive that again. And so that's what I'm doing. I'm really just, you know what, I'm going to put off law school admissions for next year, for next cycle. And this year, I'm going to take the time to, I'm going to finish on time, I'm gonna really just enjoy this last year at Pomona, graduate, and then I'm going to, I'm going to take a year to really get back in touch with the Innocence Project, do some volunteer work there, get back with the judges, get back in the courthouse with some internship, whatever. And public speaking, do things that really invigorate me, really like matter to me, things that like remind me, oh, this is why I'm doing what I'm doing. Like, okay, because I haven't had that in a while because school has just been

so demanding. And I think that's what it was too, I was missing, it was leaving a void in my heart. So that's what I'm gonna do, just self care. You know, I know we hear it all the time, and I'm, you know, practice, you know, I, I need to do more of it. But um, because people are always working on me like, Ruben, you got to take care of yourself, you got to take care of yourself. So self care. I'm not throwing the heart away. And yeah, education, just and just really appreciate, you know, don't, don't, you know, we've been hearing it all, all year is not to wait till it's too late. appreciate what we have, what and with me, with me, I, I've been through this, as far as the isolation, it's just the re-living it. But when I got out, Zoë, people were passing away, and it really wasn't affecting me. And my mom was like, how come you're not crying? Like, how come you don't feel nothing? And I'm just like, Mom, I already had grieved everybody in that. So I personally mourned everybody, I didn't think I was going to ever get out again. I, so now I get, I get to see everyone again and it's like, what, I get to see that person again? After I had already personally grieved and mourned them? Like, okay, it's like bonus time to me. So, so again, I get to, you know, I already appreciate people, I don't have to wait until afterwards, I don't need to, I'm a very, you know, I like to hug, I just, I'm a very people person, but that's just me. And I can get annoying sometimes, but people, when they hear my story, say, oh, that's why he's like that, because I didn't have that, that, that, you know, that social interaction for so long that now I just, I just want to, I just want to be friends, I just want to be around people, I want to make people happy. I want to, and that's just the way I am. You know, so that's what it is, just, just, you know, appreciate things. You know, and don't wait till, you know, appreciate it, try to slow down, and really make the most of, like I was saying too, just education, especially for us, for us students to make the most of it. Because, again, the power, and even you, Zoë, all of us, the power that we have, with our education. Again, education has the power to help us overcome years of solitary confinement, to get ourselves out of a life sentence, and to, after everything that's happened, I'm gonna, I'm still putting myself in a position to make 10 times as much money as they still owe me, as they're never probably going to pay me. But again, because I wasn't sitting there, waiting on an apology or money that, that I may or may not get, I say, you know what, you can have them, you can have that, I'm done with that, whatever. And that's one thing too is, I don't, again, I don't have hard feelings against the system, even after everything they did. A lot of people say that, you know, there's no chip on your shoulder. I've already forgiven him, because how am I going to claw and scratch and bite my way out of prison just to be put in another prison of resentment, of anger, of whatever. Again, you can have that. And so by me letting go of that stuff and not letting them continue to, you know, maybe trapped in that trauma, I've just, I've been able to move on with my life and to move forward. And now again, I got a full ride at Pomona College, I'm in a position to get to a great law school, straight A student. I mean, it's just, you know, because I wasn't living in the past, because I was living in the now. And looking,

looking ahead. Um, so that's, that's another thing too, the power of forgiveness. Because, yeah, there's so much in that instead of just holding things in and holding grudges, or not communicating with someone or whatever. Life is too short, you know, life's too short. Sorry.

ZG: Nothing to apologize. This has been wonderful.

RP: Yeah, this is good, after uh, it's good too after finals just to be able to unwind and relax and just to be able to talk. This is a good therapy session. Yeah, now every time I talk, it's just, it's healing. That's right, like I said, if you were to ask me yesterday, what day it is, I wouldn't, I wouldn't have been able to tell you. I'm just barely coming out of my own cocoon. I just went for a run this morning and started to look around and I'm just like, okay, where do I start? The next two months off, and you guys got finals next week.

ZG: But I don't have many next week, like most of them are this week or were last week and stuff. So it's nice that it's spread out.

RP: Cool. Any more questions? Anything you want to know?

ZG: Um, I mean, you're answered most of the ones we had. That was, that was great. Yeah. So again, thank you for sharing like your time and your experiences and your thoughts with all of us. That was really wonderful.