

Don't Be Ashamed

Ernest Ray Valenzuela, or Ernie, is a 32 year old male. One month before his 19th birthday, a San Diego County jury, found him guilty of first degree residential burglary with only eyewitness testimonies. For the following 48 months, Ernie would spend his sentence at the Donovan correctional facility in a program called Amity. To this day, Ernie maintains his innocence.

Lights focused on Ernie

I grew up in the ghetto and down there is the river bottom so...I grew up in the heart of otay uh I remember getting a brand new bike and I was like 8 no yea I was like 10 and I'm hanging out in front of our house and petting the dog and there's these two guys our next door neighbors and they're hanging out and I don't know what they were doing and then all the sudden I see this car drive by real slow and then "pow, pow, pow, pow" and I fall on the floor and my dad comes out yelling "get over here" and I remember running *laughs* and I started crying because I left my bike behind...

Fade lights

Lights up

Alyssa: ok...uhh... How was your relationship w/ your parents as a child compared to now?

Ernie: Umm... *thinks*

Alyssa: Is that a hard question?

Ernie: It is, cause is it was different when I was young my uh, my uh, my mom was always there. My mom she hardly worked, so she was always there, but we were poor so we didn't have any money to do anything so and uh.. my dad was always working and he was never there and uh I would hardly ever see him. And its kinda still like that today, my mom still tries to give us whatever but she's going from job to job and still trying to work and I guess its still different from when we were smaller to now that were older, you know, but it's still kinda same, they were supportive.

Alyssa: When you were growing up what were your friends like?

Ernie: They were normal boys, normal boys, we would play football on the streets, and just hung out, and got into trouble... We would walk around the river bottom trying to throw each other in the lake and beat each other with the bamboos and all that stuff.

Fade lights

Bring back lights slowly

Ernie: Well this is when I went from good to bad probably? Ummm... my dad left me *pauses* my mom and my dad they fought as long as I can remember, they would always fight my dad was abusive *pauses* umm... always drunk, criminal, getting to it with my mom and once we moved out of the river by otay we moved to San Diego and he was around for like another year and then uh... my mom was finally done with it and kicked him out and after he left, um it was just my mom taking care of me and my brother, I was 13, 14 and he's 3 years older than me so he's 15, 16 and she got two crazy boys and my brother was a gang member, so my mom had to work and she could only get a night job so she would work 10 hours a day and she would go to work around 10 come home at 10 so we would just go to school, wait for her to leave, ditch school, come home and be party central at my house, cause my mom wouldn't get home until freakin 10, 11 o'clock at night so our house was the total party house.

Myrna: Did she know about this?

Ernie: She had to know.... but I mean what could she do, you know. She had to go to work she couldn't do anything while gone... I mean me and my brother we were just crazy, you know.

Myrna: Does your brother have a family of his own?

Ernie: Yea, yea, he has two kids, three kids *pauses* three different baby mommas.

Fade lights

Lights back

Ernie: Umm well so after the lady pointed me out they put me in the cop car and drove me to the substation. From the substation they fingerprint you and then they throw you in a room about this size *gesture small

size* and jussst sit.

Alyssa: With nothing to do?

Ernie: Nothing to do. Yeah nothing just probably just in the substation theres a bench and then you have your little sink and toilet and thats it. And you just sit. **How long do you sit in there for?** Hours. you're there for hours while they process you and once you get processed they take you to downtown and then from downtown its another loooong process. They take you down there. And your hand cuffed like this **does the motion of being handcuffed** and you go through these doors and they get your name and they fingerprint you and they put you in a room with these other people. At least you have friends now. You have someone to talk to. So they put you in a room with other people and then the strip you out of your street clothes and they put you in their jumpsuits or whatever and they put you in another room and then from there you go and you do your screening and your medical history and they put you in another room there and yea its horrible. Then they give you a bag of lunch with old soft cookies and an old bruised up apple. Some bologna thats brown and its nasty.

Alyssa: Is that one of your worst experiences?

Ernie: Yeeeaah, I think so, its funny though because I really liked the cookies. Cuz I'm a big cookie person. So I enjoyed the cookie but the other stuff it wasn't happening.

Myrna: Do you have any good memories?

Ernie: Um, this was before I went to Donovan. I was in uh George Bailey. and it was my birthday. **beat** and uh **laughs** I was like, Man it's my birthday and I was all down in the dumps. Man I'm gonna be nineteen. **laughs** everybodys like "aww man" they all felt bad for me. So everybody gave me their *apple.. for breakfast*. They gave me an apple, and they were like "Here man." **everyone laughs** Yeah.. It was funny. That was like a fun memory.

Myrna: Too bad they weren't cookies.

Ernie: Yeaah. It was.. it was.. There was fun stuff in there like in Donovan. You get to play *football* and every year we had like uh LA vs. San Diego guys football. And then me and a group of guys, we would have our annual football in the rain. You know it would rain and we would get *hurt* so bad. But it was.. **smiles** it was fun and we would get all *muddy*

Fade Lights

Bring back lights

Alyssa: What helped you cope during your time there?

Ernie: I just.. I just try to make the best from wherever I'm at. You know? Um.. just knowing when I was gonna get out one day and start over.

Dim Lights

Lights back on

Ernie: Yeah so.. **smiles and puts his head up high** I'm a better person now.

Myrna: That's great.

Ernie: Yeah.. I was going off the deep end.

Alyssa: So it was almost like a good thing.

Ernie: Yeah... it was. I was in there for four years and I seen my cell mates come in and out. They would get out and couple months later they'd come right back and want to be my cell mate again. **laughs** and I'm like "dude."

Alyssa: Does anything crazy happen in there?

Ernie: I tried to stay out of everything. It's.. it's.. it's all politics.. and they kinda make it up. Some things are like.. A lot of it is over drugs, (faintly) a lot of it is over drugs.

Myrna: Was it hard to stay out of it?

Ernie: **sighs** No. I just.. I got a job.. Well when you are in Donovan you have a job. **smirks** I was making *good* money.

Alyssa: They pay you?

Ernie: I was making 75 cents an hour. Yeah I was *ballin*. You just get a job and uh they make shoes just like that **points to converse** for the inmates.

Myrna: What would you spend your money on?

Ernie: **sighs** Food

Myrna: Good food?

Alyssa: Better food?

Ernie: Well I mean they give you the food.. like the regular food but then when we you go to the store every month. I'd buy *chips, tortillas, beans, rice, sausage, soup, sodas*.. Yeah you can buy a lot of stuff.

Alyssa: Sounds pretty amazing compared to... soggy cookies

Ernie: *laughs*

Alyssa: So were you alone in there or did you have like.. a group of friends.. or a person that was there?

Ernie: I had my friends.. I had buddies.. like I had work all day then I would come out and play handball. Do you know what handball is? You know like the little blue ball. You hit it against the wall and it bounces and you hit it back *interviewers laugh* I'm pretty good at it too. Yeah, so I played handball, and then uh we played cards, pinochle and dominos. So I would just go to work, workout, play cards, talk on the phone and just stay off the yard, stay off the *gangsta* tables.

Alyssa: That's where all the trouble happened.

Ernie: Yeah, cause you can tell.. I mean you got those people that are working out.. then you got.. theres tables in the yard right.. and uh so you can tell cause they got the *radio bumpin'* and they're all like *nods head to music* *Interviewers laugh* Crazy.. you know and yeah so I just tried to stay away and they always say "Ernie.. Ernie.. c'mon come hang out" I would say hi but I would keep going my way.

Alyssa: It's weird how they are able to get drugs and weapons on the inside.

Ernie: *quiet and high pitched* yeah. Cell phones.. they got cell phones in there.. I mean

Alyssa: Could you go on the internet?

Ernie: No. we didn't have comp- well.. if you had a phone yeah.. theres like some people that you would see.. they would take a picture of.. a selfie in their cell.. *interviewers laugh* and they posted it on their facebook page. I've seen it. its crazy.. its crazy. *interviewers act surprised* Well.. you figure .. there are millions of people that work there.. not a million but *a lot* of people that work there, and theres like nurses and cops that are like friends ..you know. And theres this drug program called Amity and they are ex drug addicts that are doing a sober type.. thats what I was in the Amity program, a drug program. Thats why I was able to stay in Donovan. I didn't want to get sent up north or anything like that. So I mean they are regular people that come in. Sssome of the girls get persuaded by the guys in there.

Myrna: Persuaded?

Ernie: *smiles* Yes.. persuaded *girly voice* because they talked to them so sweet *interviewers laugh* Yeah so they did stuff like that.. stuff like that happens.. its.. its..crazy..

Fade lights

Lights back on

Myrna: Who did you stay in touch with when you were in there?

Ernie: My mom

Myrna: What about your brother and your dad?

Ernie: Ummmmm.. my brother was on his own tweaking mission and uh my dad is a hard ass. He's like *imitates dad in deep grunting voice* "Well he put himself in there. I bought him a TV" cause my dad did buy me TV cause you can actually buy your own little TV. *imitates again in grunting voice* "I bought him a tv, thats all he gets" *interviewers laugh* So .. yeah ..but he's not the type to write a letter.. he lives in Rosarito so I can't call him. Mostly my mom..

Dim lights

Bring back lights

Alyssa: So what was your turning point?

Ernie: *chuckling* I didn't want to be in there anymore. It got old. No I was always good I just hung around wrong people I was always a good person. As a kid I was good until my dad left. And then I hung around all these guys runnin the streets. You know I was always good just never on the right track. Like thats what I felt. You know.

Alyssa: How do you feel like the experience of being in prison shaped your life?

Ernie: These are some tough ones umm. Shaped my life? *Yea* I guess it helped me to sober up. I started smoking weed when I was like 14. I was pretty strung out on crystal meth I started doing it when I was 15 and thats all I would do for like 3 or 4 years.

Myrna: So thats when your dad left?

Ernie: *sigh* yea thats when my dad left. Cause my brother was all into that and he was selling and doing all that stuff too and he would tell me "never do it!" but everybody else was doing it, all my friends were doing it. Yea I just- it sobered me up and I mean in there you could get pretty much anything you want but I wasn't trying to get into that. So it helped me get off that stuff. Before I met my wife I did it once and I felt baaaaaaaad and I haven't done it since. Because I met my wife and we were just on a roller coaster ride.

Alyssa: How did you meet your wife?

Ernie: I met my wife, Adriana, three months after I got out. I was hanging out with my brother, he's a DJ and he was DJing a wedding and uh I was doing that with him. I was hanging out in the DJ booth and I see this guy dragging a girl from the bar over to me and I'm just like what is he doing? I'm just standing there, and he pulls her up and he goes "Here I think you guys should dance." And I'm like whaat and I'm like hi I'm Ernie. We just started talking and we never danced that night because she went to the back and I couldn't see her anymore. At the end of the party we bumped into each other and I got her number *giggles from interviewers* and that's how things went down.

Alyssa: How long after meeting her did you get engaged or married?

Ernie: A year later *aww* yeah like a year later. Its funny because... not funny but *giggles* Cause we were just going partying, hanging out and actually she got this new job and uh it was with a bunch of guys so I was like ooh hell nooo. So she's like "you know what, let's go out for happy hour." So that we could meet all the guys. We went out, we went from happy hour to another place and another place and then another and I ended up getting a DUI. And instead of getting a slap on the wrist, I was on parole. We had our own place we were living together already and uh and I got my DUI and I ended up doing three months and (dramatically) she stayed by my side *laughs*aww* and didn't leave me. *laughs* So yeah and then uh this was like in August and then a couple... and then I asked her to marry me two days before christmas. Yeah two days before christmas cause they were doing a light festival in griffith observatory LA. And uh yeah I took her up there.

Fade lights

Bring back lights

Myrna: Do you have kids?

Ernie: Yeah I have two kids they are four and two. My daughter is 4 and my son is 2.

Alyssa: What are their names?

Ernie: Ariel and Gabriel

Alyssa: How do you support your family?

Ernie: I'm in construction I do the drywall, I do the actual finish part.

Alyssa: Where do you go for work?

Ernie: Everywhere. Last... two weekends ago I was in long beach. So we were working at Cal State Long beach.

Dim lights

Lights on everyone

Alyssa: What's your biggest regret?

Ernie: I don't think you could... I can say that I regret anything cause I wouldn't be where I am today. You know? If I didn't go through where I've been through. I'm still alive.

Alyssa: Yeah thats all that matters.

Ernie: They didn't kill me, right? (laughs)

Dim Lights

This interview took place at the High Tech High Chula Vista where the Donovan prison can be seen in the distance. good night

Lights on Ernie

Ernie: Yup so that was me being a...Me being a hardcore drug addict to going to jail and getting better. Its all on what you make of it, you know.

Alyssa: Right

Ernie: So yup. Did you guys take pictures of my condo?

Alyssa: What?

Ernie: Did you guys take a picture of my condo? *project picture of Donovan* *pointing to Donovan on screen* You can see it

Alyssa: Oh right there

Ernie: My old condo

Alyssa: You could see it, it looks all nice at night time.

Lights off

Spotlight on Ernie

Ernie: I've learned *pause* that don't be ashamed of where you came from. Just know that you can move forward from whatever you've been through. Cause when I met my wife you know I just got out and my wife four years of college UCSD graduate and uh yeah its crazy huh? That's what a lot of people were like when I mention it like "whaaaat you're with this construction guy?" And uh yeah she's a UCSD graduate and she would take me to all these events. Like NCLR, you guys know what NCLR is? National Conference Latinos Business... I think. She was working for the hispanic chamber of chalmers and she would take me to this event. And uh I'd feel a little out of place because it'd be a bunch of people in like suits and ties, you know they were proper *laughing* and I'm like ookay. Kinda like just stayed by the bar drank some beer just hung out. And uh and she goes "don't be" what did she say?... she goes "don't feel intimidated by them, they're just like you they're just dressed differently." And I go why? and she goes you probably make more money or have a better job than half the people in here. Just because of the way they look don't mean they're successful. You know so thats what I've learned.

Dim lights

The End