Jim Chambers – 97% of Us Are Coming Home. We Will be Reengaged with our Families.

Carrie Basas: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Rooted in Washington Podcast from Roots of Inclusion. I'm your host, Carrie Basas , and today my guest is Jim Chambers. Thanks for joining me, Jim.

Jim Chambers: Yeah, I appreciate you asking me to.

Carrie Basas: How could I not? We're doing a podcast about family engagement, that's how I got to know you through your work in that area.

But first, could you tell me a little bit about your family today?

Jim Chambers: Today I'm raising my 11-year-old granddaughter. Her mother's not doing too well, and I'm just, my family's pretty separated, to be honest. It's not what I expected when I came home from prison after serving 23 years. I expected it all to be Kumbaya and everybody's gonna be seeing each other and spending time with each other, but kids grow up and they have lives and I'm connected with all my family, but I'm just like still trying to navigate the systems myself. So it's been busy.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. I'm glad that your granddaughter has you there for her. [00:01:00] At the same time, that's not a simple navigation of systems and you above all other people, among other people, really put so much effort into having the pathway towards a more intact family. So like I mentioned, I met you through family advocacy work and then your allyship in the Black Prisoners Caucus. Can you share a little bit more about your journey into that work and how you got involved in this kind of advocacy?

Jim Chambers: So I was sentenced to prison in 1999 to a 40 year sentence.

I was shipped about three to 400 miles away from my family initially. So I wasn't able to have very good visits or any of that kind of stuff. So the only telephone calls at that time were $25 to call home for 20 minutes. So I did a lot of writing letters and like trying to build back my relationships from my kids.

And some of my children were very small, so letter writing wasn't really a thing, but luckily. [00:02:00] About a year or so into my sentence, I was shipped to McNeil Island, which at that time was like the place where there was a lot of programs and things like that. And I happened to walk in the door at the time when they were starting a pilot program called Long Distance Dads, and I was asked to be part of that program to take the class.

It was like 10 men that were asked to take their initial class, and I think six of us graduated, or five of us graduated from the class because it's really hard for parents in prison to understand the harm they cause their kids by their choices and some people don't want to face that.

But it just drew me into the work, to be honest with you, because I heard my children have a seven out 10 chance of ending up in prison and all these statistics that were given to me about the harm that I caused my kids. But there was other statistics that showed if parents that were incarcerated stayed actively engaged with their kids and had, those supportive relationships, they could actually put the kids in a different trajectory. So I decided I was gonna be the parent that did everything he could for his kids, and I [00:03:00] moved into the space. After I graduated the class, I was asked to become a peer leader and help teach the class. So I did that for I think, 13 years. I taught that program inside intermittently. There was times where it wasn't teaching, but when it came back, I would always be asked to teach again. And, but it, because every class I learned something personally. I learned every man in that room gave me a tool that I could use in my own children's life. And we created a community within the prison that was like 300 men that were trying to be parents.

We probably at that time we were doing groundbreaking things. The Secretary of Corrections Eldon Vail opened up the yard for us to have events on our yard. Our kids could come in and have barbecues and we had fire trucks and would fly kites and road bikes and all these things that were unheard of in prison.

But he was giving us an opportunity, right? And that's a big risk for him to take. But he gave us this opportunity because he saw it would benefit our families. A lot of those programs today are hit and miss at some facilities. They still have some of them. And then at that [00:04:00] same time my kids were journeying through school and I was like, what can I do to benefit my kids the most?

I think it was for me, being involved in our education, right? The caregivers of my kids' moms, they were busy working and trying to take care of the kids in everyday life and I could take on the role of helping my kids with homework and doing the things on the side. So I sat down with the superintendent at

McNeil and wrote a program that allowed parents to do parent teacher conferences.

And I was the first parent to participate in a parent-teacher conference. And the superintendent brought me to her office to do it 'cause it was such a big deal. When I was done doing my parent-teacher conference, she was like, she goes, I've been doing parent-teacher conferences for decades and never asked the questions that you asked.

She goes, where did you learn all that? And it was like, I learned it in our parenting class that we actually teach the stages of development and all those things that we learned. And so the program just took off and now it's a statewide program. They're now revamping that, trying to make it more interactive with people.

So it's just something that the work drew me to it [00:05:00] because I wanted to stop my kids from end ing up in prison. Four of my kids went to college and one of my daughters went to prison. But it could have been the reverse, right? It could have been four of 'em went to prison and one of 'em went to college.

She got the same tools that everyone else got. And she still struggles today with addiction and that's why I'm raising her daughter. For me, the work just drew me to it because of the way I was impacted. I impacted my own family. And four years before I got out, I began to work with the Strength in Families unit, which is when I met you. Once I started teaching the parenting class inside, and I started working with the BPC, the Black Prisoners Caucus, to help with their family programs, their family integration programs and their legislative committees to help teach folks about what was going on with legislation around children and all that stuff too.

Carrie Basas: There are so many barriers, and we've talked about them over the years. For parents who do wanna be engaged, who are incarcerated, to do those things, like the parent-teacher conference, to get the [00:06:00] supports. Years ago I was a law professor and I was in North Carolina for one of my jobs, and I was going and meeting with people who were incarcerated at the maximum security facility for men and then the one for women. And I saw a big difference in the programming for men and women. I felt like the women's prison, and this is not to make anything sound like it was a good life experience, but the women's prison was more oriented at that time in offering parenting programs and thinking about reintegration with community. And I did not see that at all for the men's prison. And so I'm wondering, and we know that those programs

here in Washington have struggled over time and there have been various limits on them:

what do you think made the difference back then for saying, okay was it Eldon, was it others? Was there a secret sauce?

Jim Chambers: I think Eldon had the courage the first, [00:07:00] and there was also Alice Payne. She was a superintendent that came from Purdy, which is a women's facility out here in Washington. She came to McNeil at the same time as Elden was the Secretary of Corrections and she saw that the programs were a little different for men too, and she wanted men to have as much value in a child's life as the women were getting. And not to say anybody's programming is what it should be in prison, because I don't believe that's true.

And I think the women's prison now is probably one of the worst places for programming currently in our state. And they get the least amount of visits. Literally like they have the least amount of support. Like men have their wives and their kids and all these people, and usually the women in Purdy are getting visits from their moms 'cause men aren't hanging out with women when they go to prison. They're leaving. And it's a whole different dynamic over there, but they all have their issues and I think that, parenting is universal, whether you're a mom or you're a dad, and if you're incarcerated. For me, like if the person that's raising an incarcerated parent, incarcerated child, who has a parent that's [00:08:00] incarcerated, if a parent person is raising them, they should know the risk that this child is in just due to the fact that their parent is in prison. And I think that there needs to be an education piece around that too, like the parent that's raising these children, whether it's foster care parents or kinship care parents or whoever.

They should understand the risk that these kids are in, and I believe that most of 'em, if they care about the child would, if it's no harm to the child, allow that parent in prison if they knew it was gonna reduce the risk for that child to allow them to be involved and. So for me, like there's a whole bunch of education pieces that need to go on and the barriers as far as the barriers go, like phone calls are very expensive.

Prisons aren't built on I-5 . They're like way off the beaten path. They're not by the urban areas where most people come from prison. I think we have one prison left in Monroe up here that's probably the closest to any of the major cities. Travel is a problem 'cause most people in prison come from poverty.

People that are raising these kids are really struggling. So to make 'em pay $3 for a phone call for [00:09:00] 20 minutes, video visits cost money. There's nothing free. I don't want anyone to believe that anything that you get in prison is free. We pay to use every service. We pay for our medical. We pay a $4 fee to go to the doctor.

We pay for our gym, we pay for recreation, we pay for everything. And the visit room food, it's $7 for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to feed your child while you're visiting. So you drive three hours. You want to visit for the eight hours. So it's costing you a hundred dollars bill to feed people while you're in the visit room.

There's a lot of barriers and a lot of it's around cost. And Washington does have some program for travel and they'll give you a gas card or something, I think, to pay some of the gas fees and stuff like that, but it's still very limited. A lot of people don't even know that it's available, so they don't ask.

And then, it's the personal relationships that get in the way is a barrier too. We have babies, moms, or mom, who you might have a personal, you might have a personal issue over the decisions you made while you were committing crimes or using drugs. And it's hard to get those relationships healed.

It takes two people [00:10:00] to heal a relationship and I think that's a big-- one of the things we really talk to the men about in classes is like we have to take our accountability for the state of all of our relationships. We don't necessarily have the right to make amends with everyone until they're ready. We can't just force them into taking our amends or, being able to apologize to them. It takes two people to do that. I think we just give people tools and encourage people to continue to engage with whoever has their kids. Show them that they're making changes in their life and move through this process with some grace too.

Give people grace because being angry and doing all the things is not helping the kids.

Carrie Basas: There are so many barriers, like you mentioned, and even I discovered working in state government that it costs state agencies to email people who are incarcerated through the JPay system that they were using at the time.

And so the services that would normally be free for people to access, there would be a barrier for us and we all set up [00:11:00] personal accounts and trying to. We had to associate a personal credit card. Our state purchasing card

wouldn't work doing that. And we had a hard time even maintaining communication-- you and I.

You had mentioned the homework program early on, but there was really a lot of interest fast forwarding to right before Covid, for the homework program, and we wanted to figure out how we could help as an agency. And then one of the educational service districts' foundations donated school supplies, but even getting the school supplies into the prison was an issue.

You and several other people had asked for the informational materials that are available on our website to everyone else who can just access state government websites-- at the time when I was running the education Ombuds. And we had to go figure out who runs the prison libraries to do that. And then people couldn't find the materials after.

There was so much time trying to develop that relationship. And I know [00:12:00] that one of your passions too, was around making sure that people had better access to the parent-teacher conferences and we found that some of the school districts were really excited about that possibility, wanted to know how they could identify more children who were affected by their parents' incarceration, because there's so much stigma in sharing that.

And then we had some mixed reactions, even from people at Department of Corrections involved in family engagement who said, off the record: " who wants an armchair quarterback? Those parents aren't involved in their kids' lives." And I think one of the fundamental assumptions, even for people working within the education system or in the correction system or the public, is that parents who are incarcerated are no longer parents anymore.

Maybe people are assuming that their rights were terminated or that they just don't give a crap anymore, and that was one of the big impediments [00:13:00] that maybe they shouldn't be parents anymore. But we know that there are all those protective factors in remaining involved, especially when you-- it sucks that it is prison in which you're having a personal transformation-- but you're changing and growing and your kid only benefits from seeing that.

Jim Chambers: Yes. We used to make a show of it, like when we'd have events when fathers graduated from college or graduated from classes, like we would present their certificates at the events so the kids could see their parents making these achievements because it sets the standard for the kids.

If I'm doing this in here, then you're gonna have to do this. So you can, and like for anyone to assume that a parent. It was never apparent my crimes didn't involve my children. Let's be clear, I didn't have my kids with me at the crime scenes doing crimes with my kids. Like I was struggling with addiction and multiple addictions, but I was always engaged with my kids.

I'd be at their soccer games or all their stuff. And so for me, like parenting is [00:14:00] universal, man. And you never lose your right to be a parent unless you've done something to your kids.

97% of us are coming home. We're not gonna stay in prison forever. Like we will be reengaged with our families. And I had a friend of mine that literally wrote his kids for 10 years, wrote his daughter a letter for 10 years every week that went through our program. And when she turned 18, she put in a visiting form and came to see him.

She never received one letter. Her mom would tear 'em up before she got him, but his consistency showed his kids that he never forgotten about them. And so he kept a journal for the whole time writing to 'em every day, in a little letter thing. So for that kind of stuff is it's about the kid, it's not about anyone else.

So that's what has driven me to continue to do this work in our community.

Carrie Basas: And if 97% of folks are coming out, they need a network of support when they come out and something to be hopeful for because yeah.

Jim Chambers: Without community [00:15:00] support, we're sending people back into places they don't need to be. And like my family connections and things like that are what help my, drives me to still to this day to do the right thing and make right choices. Because if I didn't have them, there wouldn't be nothing to lose. You know what I mean?

Carrie Basas: Yeah. All of that. And you knew it wasn't going to be easy, but you felt a call even when you were still in there to make sure that your granddaughter had a better life too.

Jim Chambers: 100%. At the end of the day, like I'm the parent that shows up for my kid, like telling judges to keep her in jail. And it might sound crazy, but like I know she's safe in there. You know what I mean? And I know hopefully she can get a moment. I was writing letters from prison to judges and prosecutors when my daughter would get in trouble asking them to keep her because at the end of the day, I'm still a parent. I'm her parent, and she wasn't

happy. She'd come visit me later when she got her stuff together for a while and be like, I can't believe he did that. But at the end of the day she's my daughter. And like that never goes away no matter where I'm at. [00:16:00] No one ever wants her kid to be in prison with him.

But the sad part is everyone talks like the system's broke. Our systems aren't broke. They're set up the way they are and they're working perfectly. So they can capture generations of people into our systems and continue to incarcerate families year after year. And regardless of what people say or they're committing crimes they also live in very overpoliced areas.

And like the little white kids get to get a ride home, the little black kids go to jail. That's the way it is, man. I think that anyone that believes that our systems are broken is got things messed up. It's working perfectly. I was on the yard with four generations of men from the same family-- grandpa, dad, and grandson, all in the same place. And the only way to change that system is to allow parents that are in prison and allow parents that have children to be engaged with their kids. You reduce that risk greatly for these kids.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, it's working as it was [00:17:00] designed. And that piece, I remember going to Stafford and maybe it was a youth policy forum, and one of the themes was that people said when they were young, no one asked them how they could help.

These were people who were at Stafford and they said it would've made a difference to just be asked: how can I help? Even if that person couldn't have waved a magic wand, provided housing immediately, changed the fact that a parent was incarcerated, whatever the situation was, but tried, cared, in a genuine way.

Let's not just add this to a list where people just say, okay, then fine, I asked-- but try to do something. Just saw that they were really struggling because. They didn't have that. And like you were saying, white kids are getting the ride home from whatever, maybe they're getting the lawyer to assist with something or they're not perceived as [00:18:00] dangerous. That's just acting out kids being kids. But then if you're in a situation that's a total cluster and no one asked how they can help, in fact they think that's your fate, then it will be.

Jim Chambers: I mean there's, I know, I've worked with a lot of men in prison and the majority of 'em come from our foster care system, to be honest.

Like they remove kids from their parents and put 'em into a situation that sometimes is worse than the situation they were living in. But I think that children of incarcerated parents get lost in the wash because one, they don't talk about it with their friends. Most kids are embarrassed that their parents are in prison or they're ashamed, but they don't know.

The kid sitting next to 'em has a parent in prison or in jail, and like the numbers are pretty high. I believe there's at least two kids. I think the numbers are like one in 16, so there's probably two kids in every classroom that have an incarcerated parent and like teachers don't know, the parents aren't sharing it with the school system.

Most parents don't share that they have kids when they get arrested because they don't want other systems to [00:19:00] get involved in their kids' lives. They don't want CPS or DSHS or any of those people to know, even though the kids are living with it. When one of their grandparents or someone in their family, the other parents that's in prison, doesn't talk about having kids.

So we don't even really know the real numbers of parents in prison that have kids. To be honest, there's no real hard data on this stuff. But being in prison with people, I know there's a lot of people in prison that are parents and a lot of people that are, some don't ever admit their parents to the, to anyone in case management or anything like that.

I think that like we have to, in order to really impact our system, we have to make these children of incarcerated parents-- their entire ecosystem has to be aware of their situation, right? So teachers, coaches, community because the only way we can really engage with these kids is if everyone's aware of their situation.

And I think that the people that are raising these kids, if they knew that they could help the kid by doing that, I mean it would, it'd be amazing. My kids' [00:20:00] schoolteachers throughout my kids' career were absolutely amazing. They' d like take my calls, answer my letters, send my homework to straight to me in the prison like it was having another parent almost for my kids, to be honest with you 'cause they cared about my kids and they came to visit me. We had an event at the McNeil Island called the caregiver event, where we invited our kids' school teachers from the parents that graduated from our class and we did a sharing education thing.

My kid came with his teacher to visit-- my son. And so we did, they taught us about some standardized tests that kids had to pass and I forget which one it was

back then, but they had to pass some tests to move on to the next grade or something. And there was just amazing movement back then. And it went away when the budget crisis hit.

A lot of things went away in 2008, 2009, and like those programs have never been restored. We've been spending all this money on stuff. I think there needs to be some more investment in this stuff too.

Carrie Basas: Yeah it should be proactive investment because we know the costs that come [00:21:00] later, but we don't see it that way.

Even if it wasn't a one for one, that it shouldn't be what's guiding our values and making sure that kids are supported early on. So I'm just thinking about that shame and stigma that comes for parents and for kids. How do you encourage that culture of openness that you're talking about and build comfort to with educators and schools signaling or asking about the status of parents?

Jim Chambers: I think for school teachers specifically for educators, I think that there's almost a code of silence amongst them anyway, so I feel like you should be comfortable talking to your kid's teacher about stuff. They talk about things all the time and these kids are at risk and like it's worth taking a risk to me to have other kids know that child has an incarcerated parent to stop your child from end ing up in prison.

Man, to be honest with you, like I'm willing to take a chance on the school teachers knowing, and because I [00:22:00] feel like most of 'em are very, they wouldn't be doing this job if they-- nobody gets into teaching because they're gonna get rich. They get into teaching because they care about kids and all the things that come with that.

And for most of the teachers, I feel like when they saw me wanting to be engaged as a father, even though I was incarcerated. They clung to that. Because dads in the community don't do that kind of stuff.

Carrie Basas: And now the irony when you're out that you can't even really go into school buildings.

Jim Chambers: Exactly. I can't volunteer at my granddaughter's school. Oh, I can't, I've, to be honest, like there's lots of barriers still with my criminal history, even though it didn't involve any harm to anyone. I've been asked to volunteer and I just kindly turn it down because I don't want to deal with the rejection.

Carrie Basas: That's fair.

Jim Chambers: Every school district, the problem is there's no state control or there's no, every school board, every school district makes their own decisions on how they deal with formerly incarcerated parents. Some allow it. Some don't. There's no standard, and it's a case by case basis in most places.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, and that's the [00:23:00] problem. It's not specific to crimes against children. It's not specific to sexual crimes. It's not specific to a certain number of years having elapsed. Having clemency, for example, and you went through the clemency process and you've shared how slow that process can be.

I know that shifting gears a little to the policy piece, but what is the impact of that clemency process on families and that issue of family separation?

Jim Chambers: I think that not just the clemency-- all processes that involve any kind of criminal justice, whether it's a direct appeal or anything to do with the courts, everything is slow.

There's not a single case that moves through the courts within 18 months. You know what I mean?

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

Jim Chambers: Even if you're right, it takes 18 months to get to the Supreme Court, and then you might wait a year for a decision. But like the clemency process is a probably two year wait once you get on the list.

It's finding an attorney to help you [00:24:00] navigate that, which is pretty hard to do. They have the Seattle Clemency Project who helped with one of my lawyers. But it still takes a long time to write a petition. You're writing a story about someone's life, you're literally having to write from the time this person was a child until the current day.

And that takes a long time to work through. And the records, you gotta file public disclosure from the Department of Corrections, which takes God knows how long they're gonna take to give a year of public records when you ask for 'em. There's a lot of issues with clemency and like sometimes, as we know with Justice, man, it's what you can pay for sometimes.

You get what you pay for in, in all of our criminal justice systems. And but the clemency process for me is a very long process. I felt like I was treated fairly. They did a great job of examining my life from the past and examined my life today. And thank God we had a governor at the time that was willing to sign off on a clemency. I don't know that's gonna be happening anytime soon due to the things that have happened recently in the community with people on clemency. So it's a scary time for the clemency process.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, and [00:25:00] it's such an important process because you didn't need to be there that long.

You didn't need more time being there either. You had no infractions. You were testifying for the legislature making all kinds of things happen. I know that you start getting, going through the clemency process, or you got clemency, then you got covid, and I just thought, okay, great-- the ironies of the universe.

Jim Chambers: Yeah, for sure.

Carrie Basas: You were sick while waiting.

Jim Chambers: Yeah, December 10th, I was approved for clemency. December 25th. I got covid for the very first round in 2020 and was stuck in the gym with 300 men that had covid, like we were living in some giant, just basically cots in the middle of the gym. Yeah. I thought I was gonna die too, to be honest with you.

It was pretty scary time. I think that like for me, like every process to do with justice is slow except for when they're trying to get you to prison. Then it goes pretty quick.

And on the side, in 2010, I filed a direct appeal, pro se, and won my case in [00:26:00] Pierce County. They dismissed a whole bunch of time off my sentence. I was sent to work camp for three years. I worked in the community at like community work crews and things like that, and had basically been earning my freedom. And then I was released on the FSO CPA program, which is the Family Sentencing Alternative Act. But I was released on the DOC side of it, which is a community parenting alternative.

So basically because I had a child that was underage and that I could prove I would be a good support system for my child, they gave me basically the last year of my sentence on an ankle monitor. I was released on the ankle monitor

on June 11th, 2013. On June 14th, 2013, I received a phone call from my CCO, which is my community corrections officer.

I was asked to turn myself back in because my appeal had gotten overturn by the Supreme Court, and basically they reinstated my entire sentence. So literally, she called me, asked me to come turn myself in. And that was a moment for me where [00:27:00] I made a decision that, I thought about all the people that showed up for me, all the people that believed in me, all the people that my children, what I've, what example I've been showing my kids.

And like those kinds of things is what inspired me to go turn myself in. To be honest with you, I was getting ready to go back and do 20 more years in prison. Like I was free. I was in at the Lakewood Mall when she called me. And I called a friend and said, Hey, I need you to drive me over there to the CCO's office; I gotta go back to prison. .

And I'm calling my family on the way to let 'em know what's going on. It was Father's Day weekend. Mind you, my very first Father's Day, I was gonna get to spend with my kids and the CCO when I got to her office was shocked that I even showed up, to be honest with you. She's: I can't believe you showed up.

And I'm like, I'm not that person from that committed my crimes years ago. Otherwise, I would be on the run right now. She just started crying. She's said I begged DOC to allow you to stay out, at least do Father's Day with your kids, and we could have picked you up on Monday. It was no big deal. You didn't have to know this even happened.

And so [00:28:00] that was like a moment in my time where I realized that I was never my worst moment, and I was able, capable of making really good decisions and I'm gonna continue to make those good decisions. But it, a lot of it, Carrie, I have to say is there was people during my prison time that saw things in me. I never saw myself, like even staff, like staff and volunteers. There was two amazing volunteers, John and Sylvia Peterson, who showed up for us to teach the class. They taught the dads class. And then the staff, like Joan McGerr , Eldon Vail, like people who continually pressed into me to do more work and grow and gave me every opportunity to do the right thing.

And I think that's really important about our system. We have some good people that work in our systems and then we have some horrible people that work in our systems. But I think, that's what really changed my life is because someone saw something in me I never saw in myself

Carrie Basas: It is so heartbreaking to think about the taste of freedom, that phrase, and being out for such a short amount of time. Father's Day. [00:29:00] You said be on the run. I can also imagine, and I don't mean to be too dark on a Monday morning, but someone just saying, I'm gonna commit suicide. What the hell? Like, why would I live at this point? Because I have been out. I thought I was out.

You can't easily shift that mentality for you to positively say I'm gonna not accept this, I'm gonna do this, and I continue to be motivated to get the hell out of that place.

Jim Chambers: I went back, that was, like I said, that was 2013. I was taken back to the receiving units that day. I sat there for a few weeks, they sent me back to Stafford and I got to Stafford like probably right before 4th of July.

I think I got there the weekend before that. And I just made the decision that I'm not gonna allow this to turn me into a person that I don't wanna be, I'm not gonna go backwards. So what I did is I dug in, I started learning more about the legislature, about the law, about all these things.

And everyone told me you should [00:30:00] file clemency, you should file. And, but I'll be honest, I didn't feel like I deserved clemency. I never felt like I really deserved clemency. And I was involved in an accident where someone lost their life, a vehicle accident. So I always thought about the person that I harmed, right?

I harmed this person, I harmed their family, I harmed my community and I didn't wanna re- aggravate that harm, right? Because a lot of times when people go before the board or before any clemency board, the victims show up and they're like, man, I can't believe we're doing this again-- this is really causing me harm, or this is hurting me. And I wasn't gonna do that to people. I was just gonna do my time. To be honest with you, I was dead set on doing my time. My release date was 2027. Then I talked to a friend of mine and they were like, look, what if we can find out how the victims feel, what if they're okay with it?

I'm like, look, if you find that out, that's fine. So we went to the prosecutor, we worked through the prosecutor to find this stuff out. The victim's family was like, you know what, if the board lets him out, we'll support it. And that's the only reason I even filed clemency. Because there's a lot of men that feel like that in prison too, [00:31:00] that, that don't go through the process because they know it's re aggravating harm and it puts families through so much.

I think that like we need to move into a place where victims and people who commit crimes have the opportunity for restorative justice, have the opportunity to go through and like really work on themselves. Because I think, at the end of the day, like victims, criminals, victims, like a lot of times they're growing up in the same neighborhoods like.

There's kids that kill people that were their neighbor. You know what I mean? That, for whatever gang reasons and things like that. And there needs to be more of restorative practices. When we go through the courts, the prosecutors have all the power our system is rigged and they get to decide what you're charged with, what your plea bargains gonna be, basically who your attorney is, 'cause you're getting a public defender. All the stuff, right? What judge you go in front of. And so like they give you options, right? You take this plea bargain for 30 years and we're gonna give you a hundred years if you go to trial. And they [00:32:00] over punish people for using the trial process.

So if I feel like I didn't commit the crime they said I did, and I go to trial, I put myself at risk of all these other charges that the prosecutor's gonna add on, just because they can. And it happens all the time.

Carrie Basas: I think it goes back in a bit to when you were saying that, justice is not swift unless people would like to get you locked up.

I actually went to a judges' training this past weekend. I didn't tell you it is pro tem judges training. It was two days. And I don't know, my family asked me how I felt about it, would I wanna do it? It's intriguing to me. I think that, it's high stakes and there's a lot you can do wrong, and that sits on me.

But one of the things that came up, because it was for civil and criminal dockets, one of the things that came up was: always remind people that they have the right to counsel because some people will get there and say, I don't want the public defender. The public defender doesn't have a lot of time to talk to them, probably doesn't even know [00:33:00] how to say their full name. There's just, it's that pacing, the overwork. People end up in the wrong courthouse or courtroom, that was another thing that came up. Always verify you've got the right person, the date, 'cause people are being pulled from the jail into your courtroom.

But one of the things that people said was that really emphasized that they have the right to counsel because people will think when they're charged with crimes if I don't take this attorney and I go pro se, or I try to figure out something on

my own, it will go faster and I'll either be out of here sooner, or that it'll be held against me.

But it's the absolute wrong space to be in where you don't have anybody and there's no backup plan because it's not gonna move fast. Or if it does, it's gonna move fast in the wrong direction. And this is, this is not the time to exercise a lot of self-help.

Jim Chambers: No, it's not. I think that [00:34:00] a lot of people, I mean I public defenders, there's good ones, bad ones, just like every trade, I think, but I also believe like I'm on the office of public Defense advisory board. I was appointed by the governor to be on there and so I get to hear like people coming forward with their caseloads. Their caseloads are unreal for a felony caseload in King County. I think they have 60 people at one time, and they might have five murder, convict five murder cases going, how do you possibly weed through all the stuff and give someone a proper defense?

I believe it was Laura Zurowski from the Innocence Project who said the biggest thing we can do to stop innocent people from going to prison is give the right defense on the front end. Give attorneys time, give investigators, and if we're gonna be charging people with horrific crimes, we have to be able to make sure that they did it.

Carrie Basas: I did appreciate that from this weekend's training, and it was a cross section of people who are willing to do the training, but they were saying slow down. [00:35:00] Slow things down to the extent that you can-- not slow things down to keep people incarcerated, but slow down in the courtroom space so that people understand what's happening, that you can explain what's happening.

If people's children are there: don't pretend that they aren't because they're watching you. And watching their family and then just thinking about that in that mix is heartbreaking. But the people who have gone into some of this work have said that what keeps them in is trying to create a better experience.

At the same time, there's precedent and there's, certain sense of if you do this, this is what happens, or this is our usual pathway.

Jim Chambers: I think the biggest thing is they've taken away judges' discretion through the criminal process-- the judges don't have much of a discretion.

There's sentencing guidelines. If you got this crime with this criminal history score, your sentence is either 50 months or a hundred months. You don't have it. You can go anywhere in [00:36:00] between that, but you don't have much discretion to really look at the individual and make a different kind of decision.

There's some people that deserve more. There's some people that deserve less. You know the greatest thing I heard one time was a judge from Pierce County. He's on the Sentencing Guideline s Commission, and he was talking to a prosecutor and he says, I see people come before me all the time that when I read the facts of their case, it doesn't even appear like they committed this crime and they're taking plea bargains to avoid being over punished at trial.

Literally, a judge told me that, and he goes, I'm in fear of turning down their plea and putting them at risk of having to go to trial if I refuse to accept their plea. And so a lot of those pleas are offered pleas where they don't really take accountability for their actions. They just, they plead the plea bargain out to avoid stiffer consequences.

I just did a matter of fact, I just did a judge's training also with Ann Stone from DSHS; we did a training around the bias that incarcerated parents face when they come home in the family court. [00:37:00] Or in foster care, when kids are in foster care, they walk in the courtroom, they're usually not represented by counsel 'cause usually the mom's getting a counsel and all the services, the dads are trying to get rights to their kids. And that's if it's foster care. But if it's civil legal and they're just trying to give visitation or anything, the judges look at their criminal history and basically just shut 'em down.

Or they mis- file some paperwork 'cause they're doing it pro se, or, and they throw their cases out. It happens a lot in a lot of places. And if a dad or a mom is trying to navigate these systems by themselves, pro se without an attorney, you gotta give 'em some credit. That's a lot of work, and to show up in our courtroom after you were just there and got sentenced to prison, like that is traumatizing for walking into a courtroom after that, whether you're there for good things or bad things. Man, it's just reality. And so for parents that try to navigate these systems, they should be given a little grace.

I told the judges, you should give 'em a little bit of grace when they come before you. Don't look at their worst moment 'cause people change. I'm here before you today [00:38:00] and I changed my entire life. And had I not told you I was incarcerated, you would've never known. I think it's just education. We gotta educate people about these people. And we all have implicit bias. I have things that. I know my implicit bias. That's why I force myself to grow every single

day and put myself in positions that I can be fair with everyone. Because I know I grew up in racially charged prisons for 25, 23 years. You know what I mean? And like race is real in prison. There's a lot of racist people, or they pretend to be racist at the end of the day. What I learned by working with the BPC and the A-P-I-C-A-G and all the other cultural groups and all that stuff was, we all have bias. We all have things that we go through, but it's being able to see those things and work through them is what's important.

And that's why I told the judges.

Carrie Basas: That's powerful too-- when we think about all the ways that people can end up divided and that reduces their power in that mix. And then the importance of people believing in you, like believing in you for the parenting program, [00:39:00] believing in you for asking, for encouraging, and asking you to be open to pursuing the clemency, that people that we've harmed can also believe in us or believe in something better that is not always just vengeance, that maybe that for their healing they would like you to be around for your granddaughter and would like something to have some closure. And it does make all the difference. And I just keep sitting on that piece of you mentioning that other people who are incarcerated, they often will pause about doing clemency because they're thinking about the harm they've caused to the victim and their family and their community and that holds them back because all the narratives that I see really, although, we watched the other weekend, the movie Sing Sing , which was great, it's just like uplifting prison musical, but based on a true story, but still. All the narratives that I see are about how people are [00:40:00] really selfish, who are incarcerated, that you're selfish, you committed a crime, you're selfish for keeping using the court system, appealing this thing. And so it's just another sign of selfishness to go for clemency.

And that is how we dehumanize people because people aren't sitting there going, let me find a way to torture someone.

Jim Chambers: Exactly. And to be honest, like someone using their right to file an appeal if they have a legal right. I think anyone in the community, if you had something going on and you felt there was an injustice, you have a right to seek court relief.

If you, if the laws change or things happen along your prison sentence or you change into a different person, and at some point in your life you feel like you deserve an opportunity to present yourself to someone, you should have that opportunity regardless of what you did or where you came from because not every victim wants someone to go to prison. Or serve life in prison. I've seen

women show up whose their children were killed by another young man. And she said, look, I don't want this guy to serve life in prison. I [00:41:00] want him to have an opportunity for a life. You know what I mean?

And I think if people understood the story of the person that commits a crime, it changes the way they look at him. It's easy to dehumanize someone that the prosecutor's telling you, this is a bad person. He's a monster. He's this. They don't tell you the kid grew up in foster care, was sexually abused while he was in JRA. Like all these other things that happened to this young man along the way. No one talks about that. Most people that commit crimes are victims first. And I don't live in a victim mindset, but like we gotta look at the whole picture. These people were victims of our systems first and foremost.

Carrie Basas: That part is huge too when we think about the resources or lack thereof for people to do that healing or for, when you were saying for victims or for folks who, for young people to have supports around trauma, to have functional schools, to have food on the table, to not live in fear that they're going to be the target of a crime and then that ends up shaping their behavior too.

And you have a [00:42:00] lot of people who have been hurt, and I always say, this rubs me wrong with the phrase "hurt people hurt people", but the reality, because it's just seems like a bad Hallmark card. But the reality is you do. A lot of people have experienced trauma and other things that weren't attended to by a system, but then the system is very good at punishing people.

I know that people have bigger hopes for a system that is more functional and that things happen outside of formal, strict systems where community comes together and supports people. And if you're coming out of prison, we'll take you, get some clothes, make sure you're fed, make sure you have friends.

That's not stuff we can all legislate away, but we don't necessarily put a lot of resources into healing.

Jim Chambers: I work in the reentry field. I support people coming home. I go inside our prisons today and work with folks. And the thing for me is like people have to have a community to come back to.

If you make everyone an [00:43:00] outcast and make everything a barrier for people, you're gonna create more victims. So like at the end of the day, there's no one coming outta prison that doesn't deserve a roof over their head, an

opportunity for a job and to be able to live out the American dream like anybody else.

We made bad decisions, but we're not bad people and we wanna be back part of our community. We can't guess. We don't have a crystal ball when people come home. I don't know that this person's not gonna commit another crime. I don't know any of that. But what I'm willing to do is put in the work to give them the tools they need to be successful and show 'em that there's a different way of life.

And so it's a risk every time, right? There's a risk reward we see good, we see bad. We got people that come outta prison, overdose and die while they're in work release at Department of Corrections. It's all the whole thing. But like we can't throw out the good with the bad. There's a lot of people that come out of prison, live their life and go on with their life, and we never hear from 'em again.

Then we have people that are like on the repetitive door, they go back and forth, but it's because they're never able to get the things they need to get healed from the stuff ever. [00:44:00] And like I just wanna clarify, I just really wanna make clear I don't believe that anyone's a victim once they become an adult. You start making decisions and but you also have to deal with the trauma that people have suffered.

And there's prison trauma too, right? I got healed from everything. I got healed from everything I did before prison. Then I came home from prison and had to deal with the prison trauma. Seriously like someone handed me an iPhone. All this sensory stuff, like I hadn't made a choice in 20 years. To go in a restaurant, pick up a menu and try to literally pick something to eat was hard. I would order what everybody else ordered just because I didn't wanna have to make a choice.

And having the phone on, I was on sensory overload for probably six months, literally three hours a night. I'd get up, go to work out, go to work, and just be on this cycle of very little sleep because these phones and everything had my brain messed up because I'd never been around that.

The whole world was different. I was coming out during Covid, everyone was wearing masks. Like it was pretty shocking. Getting on a bus, like I got on a bus one time, it took me [00:45:00] to the wrong place. I wind up walking two and a half, three miles to get to my CCO's office and I walked home because I wasn't getting back on the bus.

But yeah. And then I moved into an apartment by myself outta my clean and sober house and started having panic attacks 'cause I hadn't been alone in 23 years literally. And I didn't know what the hell was going on, but I was able to advocate for myself and get some therapy and things like that and work on that stuff.

But it, but not being aware of it. And people don't talk about that stuff, right? People come home from prison, they don't talk. Then I went to my buddy, I'm like, Hey, why didn't you tell me? Or this is what happened. He is oh yeah, that happened to me too, bro. I've been in therapy since I got out.

I'm like why didn't you tell me to expect that to, so that I could at least be aware of it so I could address it? And so now I address that stuff with people while I'm in the prison with 'em and tell ' em, like, man, this stuff's real. Like making choices is hard and you have to be aware 'cause when people are aware of things, they can navigate through it because they know what they're going through.

Carrie Basas: It's interesting. Years ago when I was doing this study of people who were incarcerated and asking them [00:46:00] about their disability experience, the prison system in another state didn't really think they had many people with disabilities. And then the women I ended up talking to shared all kinds of disabling experiences, many of which happened in prison. And they were mostly worried about what their lives would be like when they left. Everything's teed up. Like of course you wanna get out. And they said, I just don't know what kind of supports I'm going to have and how I'm going to manage this.

And years ago, the criminal law class I was teaching-- the prison in that state invited us to come and tour the maximum security facility, which was its own thing. We could spend a long time unpacking, but we went, some people went, it was not required. Some people went for my class and we spent hours with the guards. One of my students asked the guards, how does working here affect you?

And he said, oh, I've been here for 20 something years. I don't think I'm that affected by it. But then he told [00:47:00] us-- it's a companion piece to what you're describing, that he would come home every day and he had multiple locks on his door. So he had a wife, if I'm remembering correctly, and his wife thought he was strange.

He would go and lock all the locks, then check them again. So hypervigilance, he would pull down all the blinds, even if it was a beautiful summer day. He just needed to, for it to be quiet. And he also just needed to reduce the stimuli. And so while that was his job that he had done quite proudly in ways we couldn't fully relate to, he was having a trauma response at home. He said he didn't really have that many friends. He was describing things that sounded like panic attacks, but in this very, matter of fact way. He brought all of that home with him. It wasn't like he got in his truck and turned up the music and went for a beautiful drive. He went home, he locked himself in, [00:48:00] he pulled the blinds down. He tried to keep things pretty mellow until he did it again. And I thought he's free. And that is not much of a life.

Jim Chambers: No, for sure. I think that I think it affects both sides of the folks that work in this industry. I don't think one gets less than the other.

I think that there's abuse and neglect and harm caused by lots of folks in prison. The fact of the matter is there's bad people there and some of 'em wear the uniform and some of 'em live inside with us. So I think it comes from both sides. But I think the trauma is real for all of them. I don't take away from what they see.

It's an unnatural place. Unnatural things, and like having someone tell you to go to your room and all that when you're a grown ass man is pretty wild, or you're gonna eat this food or sit in this seat, or any of that stuff. I think that it's gonna take a lot of work to change the cultures in prison.

They're just, they just what they are. We hear about Walla. Walla Prison used to be the worst prison in the country and all that. And like kids hit the prison yard, [00:49:00] a place where they say they're in the worst prison in, in the country and they're gonna live it out.

They're gonna live that out. Like what? They read the books about Concrete Mama and all that stuff about our prison in Washington, Walla Walla . And like kids get to the receiving unit, like you're going to Walla and like you're forced to do things that you wouldn't naturally do, man. And everybody doesn't deserve to be in places where it's closed custody.

We have kids that come to prison that are drug addicts or whatever. They're not savages. They're not monsters. And we put 'em in a position where people are gonna force them to either become a monster or get run over. And that's the way our prison system is all the time .

Carrie Basas: And then it happens for the next generation.

Jim Chambers: Yeah. And people that are stuck in that miserable place, just push it on other people.

Carrie Basas: That they do.

We're in our final couple minutes together, and I'm just wondering what has been, this is a final question, a two-parter. What has [00:50:00] been the most rewarding part of your advocacy so far, and what are you looking forward to?

Jim Chambers: I just advocated for a friend of mine who just got outta prison after 45 years. I helped him navigate the clemency process. He went to prison at 30 years old. He's now 78, I think. Very old man and I read his story as he was growing up as a child. The kid seven years old was in his first institution, his mother went to prison and he went to an institution in Texas where he was sexually abused for years and years and became a heroin addict at 11 years old and committed petty crimes most of his life.

And then wind ed up, he was on escape from one of the county jails and wind ed up being a robbery and shooting somebody that tried to stop. He took a plea bargain to a life sentence and to see him out now living a life that like, the guy calls and he's every day is like amazing to him.

Everyone's his [00:51:00] friend. Like he has all these amazing things going on where he is just grateful to be free. And like I think that's one of my greatest things about, I appreciate the most about advocating for people, to be honest when I see people get to live their, whatever that looks like for them.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. And not until he was 78,

Jim Chambers: 78 years old and like he's, doing his best. He lives on Orcas Island and goes down and looks at the water every day, like that's what he does. He just had a bypass, triple bypass. But I called him last night, he's in the hospital, happy as hell. You know what I mean?

It's amazing to see him do that. What was the second part of the question?

Carrie Basas: What are you looking forward to?

Jim Chambers: For me, like I'm always looking for a way to do more. I want to be able to actually build a future for myself too, at the end of the day, like I don't have a retirement, I don't have nothing.

I want to be able to build out something where I can sustain my future also when I get old. So just stay busy working and, watching my granddaughter grow up and maybe leave her some generational wealth that she can use to make her life better. That

Carrie Basas: sounds like an [00:52:00] awesome plan and something that you've been dreaming of for a long time.

Jim Chambers: Long time. Like most people who come from, the systems is I grew up in poverty. I grew up, with not much, but I wanna be able to leave something better for my next generation to my family.

Carrie Basas: I think that's what families have in common, we forget that.

That's what we all have in common- why we get up in the morning and do things. It's because of people we love. Thank you for that. Thank you so much for doing this with me today. Awesome.

Jim Chambers: No problem. I appreciate you.

Carrie Basas: Thank you. I appreciate you too.

Jim Chambers: See you later.