

[Transcript] Letters from Sing Sing / The Apology

Today, actually, Mark's a very special anniversary.
It sure does.
Today I celebrate one year after my release.
I fought for my release almost 24 years.
These last 12 months have been a lot different than the last 24 years.
I'm sitting with JJ in an office at NBC News.
We've spent a lot of time together since his release.
A year ago today was one of the greatest feelings in the world.
I always had this vision of the day that would come and I would be able to reunite with my family.
And a year ago, that became a reality.
And I remember just walking outside of Sing Sing.
And right there at the front where they released me, hugging my mother and my two sons.
And it was like, I never wanted to let go.
Yeah, I never wanted to let go.
I'm Dan Slepian and this is the final episode of Letters from Sing Sing.
Episode 8, The Apology
On September 9th, 2021, JJ walked out of Sing Sing and began his new life.
He and his family headed to a party thrown by friends and supporters.
People who'd helped JJ get out and helped his mom, Maria, keep going.
You have been there. You have been there for me.
Whenever I was down and I felt like I couldn't go anymore, there was always a call either from Dan or somebody that said,
Maria, this is going to happen. We're going here. We're going to do this. We're going to do that.
He's going to come home. We're going to get him home. And they never gave up.
That's right.
They never gave up.
That's right.
And that's why I never gave up because they held me up.
I love you all. Thank you.
Thank you. Thank you.
Thank you for bringing my baby home.
Thank you.
Thank you.
After the party wrapped up, JJ spent his first night of freedom in his mom's home where he'd be living.
I went home that night and my mother had a whole bunch of gifts there.
And I started opening them up. It almost felt like Christmas, right?
So we had Christmas on September 9th.
I'm opening up all these gifts. I'm caught up in just the ambience that was created by the love, you know?
And so that first night I slept on that couch downstairs and the couch is about 15 to 20 times more comfortable
than that slab that I called to bed for two and a half decades.
I didn't know how much he slept that night, but I sure didn't.

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I couldn't wait to experience JJ's first few days of freedom with him.
So I volunteered to be his chauffeur.
One of our first stops, upgrading that sofa to a real bed.
That's soft.
He needed other things, simple things.
So I took JJ to a Walgreens to get a toothbrush.
So, moisturizer.
You got pretty good skin as it is.
Scrub prison.
I kept waiting for JJ to have some sort of big emotional moment to break down or cry or something.
I don't know what I was expecting.
I even said to JJ a few times, you seem so normal.
When is it going to hit you that you're actually free?
But he just kept telling me, this is what's normal.
This is where I belong.
That afternoon, I went with JJ and his boys to an arcade.
We played air hockey.
And bowl.
Watching JJ have fun with his boys felt so good, but it also hurt.
So much time had been lost.
Time they could never get back.
And so much in the world had changed.
When I left, the main thing, the main mode of communication was a beeper.
Now you got people who have the whole world at the tip of their fingers.
I remember one time I was trying to get my printer to work.
It's a wireless printer.
And my son made it work in front of me so I know it works.
I'm trying to print something.
He's at work.
I need to get this done.
Everybody told me if you can't figure out what to do as Siri or go to YouTube.
I spent five hours watching all these videos, trying all these things.
My oldest son happens to come over.
And I'm like, yo, listen, I need to get something printed.
I'm getting frustrated.
I need some help.
Jacob's not around.
He went upstairs and pressed this little button in the back.
My printer starts working.
Unbelievable.
They didn't say they're in YouTube.
JJ also needed to find a job.
Many people who get out of prison have a hard time doing that.
A felony record scares off a lot of employers.

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But that didn't happen to JJ.

His years of work and programs on the inside paid off.

I was offered a job right away within, I would say, the first three weeks to a month.

I was offered a job and it was a dream job.

It was being a program director for the Frederick Douglass Project for Justice,

which gives me an opportunity to continue increasing awareness about the humanity that exists in prison

and how important it is for individuals that are incarcerated to be treated with dignity.

JJ had spent nearly a quarter century trying to get himself out of prison.

And now he was voluntarily going back in to prisons all over the country, including Sing Sing.

What we do is we bring individuals from outside in the community inside to the incarcerated community.

And we create this safe space where people can listen, learn, and share.

But more importantly, show each other compassion and treat each other with human dignity.

And that works wonders for individuals inside, of course, because that's not a norm for them.

But it also works wonders for individuals that come from outside because they're able to ask these questions

to real people in real time and get real answers to real questions.

Let me tell you about a time when the world didn't believe in me.

I was falsely accused of taking a retired police officer's life.

It didn't matter that when this crime took place in Harlem, I was in a Bronx.

This work has become JJ's new life.

He's given talks, run workshops.

He's gotten a lot of invitations, including a big one last fall.

When he told me about it, I literally thought he was kidding.

JJ was going to Washington to meet the President of the United States.

On October 18th, 2022, JJ met with President Biden in the East Wing of the White House.

JJ, your questions for the President.

Thank you.

He'd been invited to be part of a panel of rising leaders to discuss key election issues.

It was sponsored by now this week.

Good afternoon, President Biden.

Obviously, being wrongfully convicted is one of America's worst nightmares.

It certainly was for me for almost 24 years.

Fortunately for me, I was able to be released through executive clemency.

My question is, how can we create clear, uniform standards for clemency

so that incarcerated people are motivated to change

and know what they need to accomplish

to show that they're ready to return to their families and communities?

And then the President said something that JJ could have never imagined.

First of all, on behalf of all society,

I apologize for it. I mean, 23 years.

My God, I admire the hell out of you.

I couldn't believe it.

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JJ had gotten an apology from the President of the United States, the most powerful person in the country. That night, JJ recorded his thoughts. It is now 828 on October 18th. And I just came back from the White House. And for the very first time, in almost 25 years, I finally achieved one of my objectives, which was to get a public apology for the 23 years, 7 months, and 8 days I spent incarcerated, suffering for a crime I did not commit. The President of the United States extended a sincere apology to me while he looked me in my eyes and told me that he was sorry that I went through what I did. But the President's apology didn't change one important thing. JJ was still convicted of murder. He was under state supervision in New York. He had to get permission from his parole officer just to make that trip to D.C. to get that apology. JJ will be on parole until 2024. That means he has a curfew. He needs to be at home by 9 every night. He needs permission to travel out of state. And he can't have a single incident with a police officer. Technically, even getting a speeding ticket could be enough to send him back to prison. And JJ is dealing with more than just the restrictions of parole. Yeah, I'm not free. Because there's still like mental and emotional bondage that you have to be released from. And no judge has that key or that authority. No prosecutor can help you with that. And a lot of times, that's where people get lost. Like, they think, oh, he did all this time. They released him. He can get his life back together. But the truth of the matter is, like, how do you compensate for that gap? You know, it was over 20 years of my life. How do you deal with it? I haven't fully dealt with it yet. You just do it one day at a time. Every day, you continue to struggle. And you remember what you've been through. And the fact that what you're going through is a lot different and a lot better.

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And no, I'm not free.
But I'm freer.
On a snowy day a few weeks ago,
JJ and his oldest son, John, stopped by my house.
So much had changed in their lives
since JJ had been released.
It's March 14th, 2023.
And here we are in the same room together.
JJ and John, father and son.
How long have you been out of prison now?
18 months.
And how does it feel to be sitting here together
in the same room right now for you, John?
It feels great.
This is something that I thought was impossible before.
And now it happens on the regular.
It's wonderful.
And you gave your father shortly, you know,
a year or so after he came home,
you gave him two very, very special gifts.
Yeah, now I got two twin beautiful girls.
And that's definitely a gift I gave him.
Like, I was just running around my whole life.
Now it's time, you know, settle down,
I'll find me a good girlfriend.
And it's exactly what happened.
Baby girls.
Yeah, we playing for one,
but nothing goes playing when it comes to me.
Got two.
I love you.
I love you.
She's daddy.
You heard her?
What's the name of the girls?
What's the name of the girls?
Got Harley Anna and Chase Mariah.
That's my girl.
That's my daughter.
They make me just want to change the world,
make it better for them.
What does it like to be a grandfather?
Well, it's great to be a grandfather
because I get to hang out with the kids

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and enjoy them.
And then when they get a little bit overwhelming,
I get to give them back, right?
So that's the greatness of being a grandfather.
But the reality is I've been blessed.
I have these two beautiful babies who like,
I can be upset.
I can be miserable.
When I look at the glimmer in their eyes
and they smile at me,
everything changes.
I feel great.
And JJ will soon be a grandfather again.
His younger son, Jacob, is also about to become a father.
As for John, he says fatherhood has centered his life.
Before, like, I felt like I didn't know what to do with myself.
And now, like, I feel like I'm at peace.
I feel like I could just stay in my home and I'm, you know,
I'm at peace.
Like, I really feel like, I don't know.
Like, I use, I use patience.
Like, I never had patience.
I wanted everything to happen right now, right then and there.
If I'd seen something and I wanted it right now,
it was like, now it's like, I could wait for that.
Wait till I do what my grandmother does.
I'll wait till that go on discount.
Like, I could do that now when before it was like,
whatever it was, I wanted it.
I needed it that second.
So, um, yeah.
I'm curious if you have any questions for your son
or if you have any questions for your dad.
Um, I'd rather say some things to him
because questions, I don't really have any questions.
But, um, I just want to tell my father that I'm proud of him.
Like, I don't think I tell him that much.
I tell him, like, I call him a superstar
because that's what he is to me.
Like, I don't think I would have been able to do the same thing
he did in his position.
I'm proud of him.
Like, he's trying to make something happen in this world.
Jay, you're the reason.

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You're the reason why I do everything that I do.
Me seeing how the system impacted you,
how it's impacted me, how it's impacted Jacob,
how it's impacted Mommy.
You guys were, like, my strength.
You were the rock that kept me solid, right?
And had it not been for you and Jacob and Mommy,
I wouldn't have had the desire to overcome my circumstances
and to thrive as hard as I did.
So just understand that when people appreciate me,
they appreciate me because of you.
So they appreciate you.
And I appreciate you.
And I love you.
Love you too.
J.J. continues his fight to be exonerated,
and he might actually get a new chance to clear his name.
In 2021, Manhattan voters elected a new district attorney,
Alvin Bragg.
One of his campaign issues was wrongful convictions.
That issue of how many people are falsely incarcerated
is one that's never far from me.
We're going to be looking at,
these matters anew with a fresh eye, with a fresh team,
and mindful of the shortcomings of our system.
Bragg succeeded Cyrus Vance Jr.,
and in his first months in office,
Bragg disbanded the CIU,
the one that reviewed J.J.'s case 10 years ago.
He replaced it with his own post-conviction justice unit.
I think that we will, you know,
based upon looking at things like false confessions
and faulty science and eyewitness issues,
that they will take us where we need to go.
That unit is now taking a new look at J.J.'s case.
The DA's decision could come at any time now,
so J.J. waits.
Ultimately, after living with this for more than two decades,
I'm not really sure whether this is actually true
or whether this is a happy story or a sad story.
Maybe it's a little bit of both.
At J.J.'s sentencing all those years ago,
he stood before the court and made a statement.
He called the process that led to his conviction,

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some type of gain.

He said, we're all losers here.

Maybe J.J. will get exonerated.

Maybe one day he'll truly be free.

But after all these years,

it's hard to feel like that's a win,

especially in the face of a system

that so often refuses to acknowledge the truth.

And J.J. is just one story.

For every J.J., can you imagine how many others don't get out?

One thing I know for sure,

it shouldn't be this hard to make things right.

The truth should be enough.

Letters from Sing Sing was written and produced

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Thanks for listening.