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From Prison to Paradise

Written by Lewis Carlyle

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FIVE years ago, Wally Long stepped out of prison without a dime to his name. Today, he's one of the most successful business owners in the state of Colorado. He travels the nation giving motivational speeches, coaching business owners on methods for success, and is in the final stages of his autobiography, *From Prison to Paradise*.

"I was broke and drunk for twenty years," Long recalls as he sips coffee with his family in the living room of their log cabin in the hills of Woodland Park. "And out of those twenty years I spent about 13 in and out of federal and state prison." Long came to Colorado in 1987 as a 23 year old high school drop out. "One night I picked up a hitch hiker, and two hours later he and I were robbing two guys coming out of a restaurant. There was a low speed chase for about an hour and then a big scene in Castle Rock where they had us spread out on I25." Serving four years of an eight year sentence, Long emerged from his first stint in prison in 1991.

"At that point, I hadn't learned anything, in fact I was worse. I had a huge chip on my shoulder. When I was younger I thought I was going to do some cool things with my life; but after getting out of prison I had kind of adopted that I was a criminal. I was out for a year when I went back to prison. From 1987 to 1996, I spent about six of those nine years locked up."

In June of 1996, Wally Long was in federal custody on an indictment for mail fraud when his father passed away. "That was my epiphany," recalls Long, "my moment of clarity. I was a three time loser, facing seven more years in prison, my son was three years old, his mother and I were not getting along, I had no education, no money, no future. . . And then something interesting happened. In the days following my dad's death, I began to stop and think: my father's last memory of me was that I was in prison again. Looking back, I realized how pathetic I must have looked in his eyes."

At that point, Long decided it was time to start searching for an answer. He took solace in three books that would soon change his life: *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen R. Covey, *You Can Work Your Own Miracles*, by Napoleon Hill, and *Real Magic*, by Wayne Dyer. "The lesson I took from these books was that we're all completely responsible for our own actions. I had spent my entire young life blaming the judges and the prosecutors and all these other people, and never taking responsibility for my own actions." Long then began to learn about the law of attraction, which is theorized in the writings of Napoleon Hill and Wayne Dyer. "We create our lives by the nature of our thoughts," says Long, "so I began to write out what an awesome life for me would look like, down to the last detail."

Long's list consisted of a home, a loving wife, an education, financial stability, and perhaps most important, that he was a man of character. "All of these things seemed a one in a million shot for me," Long recalls.

"But I would read this list, meditate on it, and visualize it every day for seven years."

Since there was little he could do about building a financial empire while in prison, Long concentrated on pursuing one very important precursor: education. "I tell people I went to jail, not Yale," Long says with a smile. "I went to the state pen, not Penn State." During the final years of his incarceration, Long used a small inheritance from his grandmother to take correspondence courses and earn enough credits for a law degree and an MBA. "It was actually quite funny," Long remembers fondly, "I would get a final exam and the cops would take me into an empty cell, pat me down and lock the door, and that's how they would proctor my exams. I used to crack up wondering how many law students got a full shake down before they went to take their finals."

When he finally emerged from prison five years ago, Wally Long had a new lease on life. "Everything that I had visualized for those seven years, I would take consistent action towards achieving. I wouldn't do anything that was counter intuitive or hypocritical."

Things were not easy at first. Long struggled for six months to find a job. Having a serious criminal record did not work in his favor, especially in a post 9 Eleven environment. "Recently, there have been so many

violent situations in institutional, work place, and educational environments that employers are very sensitive to the liability of hiring a former convict.”

When he did manage to find work at a local heating and air conditioning store, Long was quick to recognize that many of the business’s methods could use improvement. Drawing upon his education, he presented a newly designed marketing and customer service module to the owners. His ideas, however, fell upon deaf ears. Over the next few months, Long approached every HVAC business in town with his new plan, again to no avail. It was then he decided to take matters into his own hands.

With the help of his wife, Janet, Long started his own company from his living room. “Our first office,” recalls Janet, “was a card table with a few folding chairs and a phone.” Regardless of its meager beginnings, the company amassed over two million dollars in sales within the first year. Year two: three and half million. By this time, Long was a major player in the HVAC market, and began buying the very companies which had closed their doors to him not two years prior.

“It wasn’t always easy,” Long remembers, “there were times when we were making payroll on personal credit cards. Looking back, I just believed there was a cooperation from the universal energy that kept pushing me along. We would put one foot in front of the other; we stayed sober, stayed focused, and refused to compromise on our principals of service. And things just unfolded. It’s been amazing. People always ask me: ‘how did you do it?’ And the truth is, I just believed it for so many years.”

Today, Long and his wife, Janet, own a home on Maui, a string of Papa Murphy’s Pizza restaurants in Denver, Wright Total Indoor Comfort (one of the largest heating and cooling businesses in the state), and ITSUP2U Media. “I have a business partner in Denver who, ironically, is an ex-cop,” Long says fondly of his partner.

About a year ago, Long’s constituents convinced him to begin putting his story down on paper. He soon conceived Prison to Paradise, an autobiographic reflection of one criminal’s transformation into one of the most successful business owners in Colorado. “People need to know that you can change your life by changing your thoughts,” Long recalls. Setting out upon his long term goal of writing a book on the shores of Hawaii, Long wrote 2000 words a day at his home in Maui. Today, the book is in the early stages of publication, and still adheres to Long’s most important message: “Take responsibility for your actions. Elevate your thinking and create your own destiny, whatever it may be.”