

Episode #44  
**THEN: Homeless, Addicted & Convicted...**  
**NOW: Time's "100 Most Influential People"**  
 (6/3/2019)

<b>Who</b>	<b>Audio Segment</b>
Desmond Meade	I tell people that on November 6th, on election night, the country got to see love winning the day, right. We had over 5.1 million votes, a million more than any candidate received. And those votes weren't based on hate and fear, they were based on love, forgiveness, and redemption. Love actually won the day. Love destroyed that Jim Crow law.
	INTRO MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST OVERVIEW
Andy Levine	<p>Welcome to Second Act Stories, a podcast that looks at people who have made major life and career changes and are pursuing more rewarding lives in a second act. I'm your host, Andy Levine.</p> <p>About a month ago, I was sitting in the dentist office and I happened to pick up the latest issue of Time Magazine. It was the 2019 edition of the "100 Most Influential People in the World." And it profiles people like Lady Gaga, Donald Trump, Michelle Obama, Nancy Pelosi and Dwayne Johnson. This is the A list of the A list.</p> <p>On this incredible list, I came across the profile of Desmond Meade, a name I'd never heard before. And as I read his profile I thought, "Holy Cow...this might be the most amazing second act story I've ever heard." So I emailed Desmond and within a day or two I heard back from his assistant. And we arranged to sit down for an interview in the lobby restaurant at the Grand Hyatt in Washington a week later.</p> <p>My digital tape recorder rolled and I was in awe of this amazing man who went from a homeless addict with a prison record to a powerhouse community organizer responsible for passing Florida's Amendment 4 this past year.</p> <p>Amendment 4, officially known as the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative, is an amendment to the Constitution of Florida passed by ballot initiative on November 6th as part of the 2018 Florida elections. The proposition restored the voting rights of an estimated 1.5 million Floridians with felony convictions.</p> <p>Here's Desmond's incredible – and I really mean incredible – second act story.</p>
	FADE MUSIC

Desmond	So I was actually born in St. Croix, Virgin Islands. And at a very young age, approximately about like five years old, I moved to the United States, Miami, Florida, to be exact, with my parents.
Andy	How many brothers and sisters?
Desmond	Oh, Jesus. That is an amazing question because we had a blended family. So I had about six sisters.
Andy	Six sisters, wow.
Desmond	Six sisters and about eight brothers.
Andy	Are you somewhere in the middle or early?
Desmond	Yeah, I'm the youngest, and you'll probably say the most spoiled. But no, I had quite a large family and, like I said, was a blended family.
Andy	It sounds like a fairly happy upbringing?
Desmond	<p>Yeah, it was fairly happy. I mean, I don't think everything was perfect about the upbringing. There was some hard times, you know, we weren't well off financially as well. And then, of course, you always have the family dynamics, but for the most part, it was a loving household, and it was a religious household. After graduating high school, I enrolled, enlisted, I should say, in the U.S. Army.</p> <p>It was there that I started to be a little wild. And I believe it was there that I started really living life unchecked. And I, you know, drank a lot of alcohol, and used a lot of drugs.</p>
Andy	His drug and alcohol abuse eventually caused him to be court martialled from the Army. He returned back to Florida and got a job working as a bodyguard.
Desmond	I had a very, very adventurous life. But what happened eventually though, being a bodyguard or providing executive protection actually led me into like using drugs even more, particularly cocaine. And sometimes not too long after I started doing that, my mother passed away, and that's when I really dove into drugs extremely heavy.
Andy	Sort of an escape from losing your mother?
Desmond	Sort of an escape, I would say. And eventually, I became homeless and addicted to crack cocaine.
Andy	How long were you homeless for about?
Desmond	I was homeless for a good nine years, total of nine years I've been homeless.

Andy	Okay. A big part of your story is obviously also that you did go to prison. Tell me about that because it sort of fits in with Amendment 4 that we'll talk about later.
Desmond	When you're addicted to drugs eventually you're gonna find yourself in close contact with law enforcement and our criminal justice system. And so my addiction led me to experience several arrests, and eventually the last arrest it was a very interesting story. The police came to the home where I was...I wanna say living but it wasn't my house, and they found a gun in the house. And I was the only one in the house with a prior felony conviction and so the gun belonged to me according to the police.
Andy	Desmond was sentenced to 15 years in prison. He was 33 years old at the time. And that might have been the end of this story. But he found a way to challenge his sentence.
Desmond	While in prison, I decided to work on my own case. And I did and I was able to successfully petition the court to vacate the sentence and overturn the conviction, and I was ordered a new trial. And so I elected to take a plea deal, which was basically for the time I had already served, which was three years.
Andy	He was released from prison but still had a serious drug problem.
Desmond	I tell people that I was released from incarceration, but I was still imprisoned by drug addiction. And so not long after being released from prison, I found myself homeless again, and addicted to drugs. And eventually, that led me to railroad tracks in South Florida.  It was what I can say the lowest point of my life.
Andy	Desmond is a powerful public speaker. And I found this audio clip of a speech he was giving before a conference in New Orleans. He describes that day at the railroad tracks.
Desmond Speech	<i>In 2005, I found myself standing in front of the railroad tracks. It was one of those hot and humid days in South Florida. And as I stood there, I was a broken man. And for moments, I was able to block out that oppressive heat and humidity. Because as I was standing there, the only thing I could think of was how much pain I was going to feel when I jumped in front of an oncoming train. You see that day I stood there I was a drug addict. I was homeless. I was recently released from prison. I didn't own anything but the clothes on my back. Now I knew that my parents didn't raise me to be in the position. But there I was. And I waited. And I waited...</i>  <i>But the train didn't come that day for some reason. I say but by the grace of god. And I crossed those tracks and I walked two blocks and I checked myself into drug treatment.</i>

Andy	He was in treatment for four months and then moved to a homeless shelter. He was interested in the law so he decided to enroll in Miami-Dade Community College in the paralegal program.
Desmond	I spent the first probably two years there with a lot of anxiety. You know, because I just couldn't make myself believe that I deserved to be there. And I was like, man, if the school ever find out that I am a homeless, recovering drug addict that was imprisoned they're gonna come and say, "Hey, we made a mistake by letting you in."
Andy	He got an associate degree in paralegal studies and then his bachelors in public safety management. And with the encouragement of his professors, he enrolled in law school at Florida International University. And in 2014, he did indeed receive his law degree. But in a bizarre twist, he was unable to practice law in Florida because of his prior felony conviction. And that takes us back to Amendment 4.
Andy	So I wanna switch gears to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition and Amendment 4. How did this idea start? I mean, it seems like a huge mountain to try to climb up.
Desmond	It was a divinely inspired movement. I got the inspiration for Amendment 4, after the 2010 elections in Florida, the midterms, when we got a new governor. And in 2011, the first thing the governor did with his cabinet was roll back the clemency policies from the previous governor. Prior to that governor, we had Charlie Crist, and during his tenure there or whatever about 155,000 people were able to get their rights restored. Because he instituted a policy that allowed nonviolent offenders to be able to have their rights automatically restored.  But when the new governor came in, which was Rick Scott, he rolled back those policies and made it even more difficult for people to have their rights restored. So then this policy was a person would have to wait five or seven years before they're even allowed to apply.
Andy	So just to put this in perspective, Florida has 21 million people in it?
Desmond	Yeah.
Andy	How many people are impacted in terms of, you know, returning... I think the term you use is returning citizens.
Desmond	Yes
Andy	I'll use that.
Desmond	They did a comprehensive study throughout the United States about the impact of felony disenfranchisement. And they estimated that Florida had about 1.54 million people who had felony convictions who couldn't vote because of that.

Andy	<p>Desmond created the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition to focus on the problem. They needed to obtain 67,000 signatures in the state of Florida just to get the state's Supreme Court to consider a ballot initiative. They got the signatures.</p> <p>Once they go passed that hurdle, they needed to obtain an additional 700,000 signatures to get the measure on the public ballot. They got over one million signatures.</p> <p>And as the final measure, they needed to get 60% of the vote in the actual election. I asked Neil Volz, Political Director of the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, to put that challenge in perspective.</p>
Neil Volz	<p>Some people would look at amendment four and say that was an impossible mountain, and that it shouldn't have been possible, that you can't put an initiative on the ballot in the state of Florida, with Florida being what it is.</p> <p>Talking about crime, and felonies, touching on race, and the economic divide. And so when we talked to people, for the longest time, there were a lot of skeptics, there were people who said, "This just can't be done, you can't do this."</p> <p>But this is a faith journey, and we know that, I know that just, man, God uses the broken and the hurting to do the impossible and we got to see that first hand.</p>
Andy	<p>And I asked Neil how he would describe Desmond to someone who had never met him before.</p>
Neil	<p>I would describe Desmond as somebody who has kind of a firecracker personality, a big heart. I mean, the minute you meet him, you're instantly aware that you're with somebody who leads with his heart. He cares, he's listening, he's engaged. The other thing that really jumps out to me is that he's a free thinker. He's somebody who actually doesn't just accept conversations with people who don't necessarily agree, he leans into it. One of the biggest things that I've learned being a part of this movement and being led by Desmond as the leader of this movement, has been the importance of being in proximity to people who don't think and see and experience things the same way.</p>
Andy	<p>You get this on the ballot, and this is coming up for a vote in November 2018?</p>
Desmond	<p>Yep.</p>
Andy	<p>What was the secret sauce, the recipe for success in terms of how you approached this ballot issue?</p>

Desmond	Keep politics out of it. At the end of the day, I think that... I mean, there's just so many gems that are there, but I think one definitely is that we led with people. Our campaign was not a bipartisan campaign, it was not a nonpartisan campaign. It was an organic grassroots movement that welcomed and enjoyed bipartisan support. And the key and the difference in that secret sauce is that we didn't lead with the politics of the issue, we led with the people.
Andy	So you don't care if someone votes democratic Republican, socialist, communist?
Desmond	What I care about is they have ability to vote, that's what I care most about. And I used to tell folks and some folks thought it was controversial, but it was the truth. That we fought just as hard for that person that wished they could have voted for Donald Trump, as we did for that person that wanted to vote for Hillary Clinton or Barrack Obama.
Andy	You needed 60% to win.
Desmond	Yep.
Andy	You got 64.5%?
Desmond	Yep, we'll say 65. Let's round it up.
Andy	We'll round it up 65%
Desmond	Sixty-five percent.
Andy	Describe to me how you felt when you found out this passed and I had won.
Desmond	<p>I'm gonna tell you, there were so many times while working on this issue that I ran across people who were scared. And what they were scared about was that they were gonna die before they get to be a citizen again, before they're able to vote. Those stories stuck with me, like, I never could shake them.</p> <p>When we won in November they were the first people I've thought about. And amazingly there was a gentleman in the audience at our watch party, he was one of the ones that I thought was gonna die before we got it back. And I remember hugging him and all he kept saying was, "Thank you, I can vote now." He was crying and he was saying, "Thank you, I could vote now. I could vote now." That's what I remember most about that night was how other people felt.</p>
Andy	I wanna ask you about another memory. A few months later, you got to go and register to vote. Tell me about that day.

Desmond	<p>Yes, that was amazing. I tell people that on November 6th, on election night, the country got to see love winning the day, right. We had over 5.1 million votes, a million more than any candidate received. And those votes weren't based on hate and fear, they were based on love, forgiveness, and redemption. Love actually won the day. Love destroyed that Jim Crow law.</p> <p>And I tell people that for a second time, they got to see love winning the day again. Because in January, when we were able to register, it was a huge celebration throughout the state.</p> <p>And folks was crying and everybody was crying with tears of joy. And we were celebrating the expansion of democracy, we were celebrating love.</p>
Andy	<p>I've heard you say a phrase when a debt is paid, it's paid. Just talk me through that statement.</p>
Desmond	<p>We said it so many times during our campaign. When you pay that last mortgage payment, that final mortgage payment, you're not expecting another bill to come in the mail. And what we're saying is that as people who have made mistakes, who have broken laws, who have been convicted, and we've been sentenced and we completed our sentence, it's time for us to move on.</p> <p>And what we're saying is that, "Listen, when the debt is paid, it's paid. Let's move on."</p> <p>And so in a case like what we have in Florida, that person paid their debt, give them back their citizenship. Give them their voice back, give them an opportunity to reengage, in their community, to be a part, to carry their fair share of the burden of the taxes, be able to get a good job, a safe and affordable housing, just to be part of the society again.</p>
Andy	<p>What advice would you give to someone considering a second act, someone thinking about doing something like what you did moving from a very difficult phase to changing and doing something very positive?</p>
Desmond	<p>One of the things I tell people all the time is that when I look back at all of the suffering that I've gone through, when I look back at all of the mistakes I've made, when I look back at all of the obstacles that was placed before me, I understand now that those times were preparing me to be of greatest service. And that they will condition me. It's a basic physics lesson, right, that you cannot get stronger without experiencing some type of resistance. In order for you to gain muscle, you must tear it first.</p> <p>All these things that we've experienced prepares us to be better people, prepares us to do a greater service to mankind. And so I would encourage anyone that's talking about a second act, to embrace it, and to welcome the challenges that you'll face in this next level.</p>

Andy	His work leading the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition and his work securing the passage of Amendment 4 earned Desmond Meade a place on Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People of 2019. And it also earned him and 1.5 million others returning citizens just like him, the right to vote in the state of Florida for the first time in 150 years.
	OUTGOING MUSIC; FADE TO BACK DROP FOR PODCAST CONCLUSION
Andy	<p>I've interviewed some amazing people over the past year. But Desmond Meade is in his own category.</p> <p>Addicted to drugs...homeless for nine years...a criminal record...ready to commit suicide...His first act was not a pretty story. But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And he found a way to completely – and I mean completely – turn his life around.</p> <p>And with the help of the Florida Restoration Right Coalition that he built from the ground up, Desmond challenged a 150 year-old-law that said returning citizens don't have the right to vote for the rest of their lives. It took him nearly a decade but he got the law changed.</p> <p>If you're thinking about your own second act and you find yourself paralyzed by fear or doubt, I hope you'll think about Desmond's story. Yes, I know it sounds corny. But with the right motivation, the right attitude and the right energy, you can achieve anything. Desmond is living proof.</p> <p>We hope you'll keep listening. There are more second act stories just around the corner.</p>