



Prisoner Reintegration through Entrepreneurship and Psychology

PREP Project | ERASMUS+ Program | Training Concept
Case History

Case History – JB Wellness¹

Introduction

James Butler had a troubled upbringing and spent many years in difficult circumstances. Drug addiction led to prison terms, but even at his lowest points, he still held on to a dream that eventually he could achieve good things with his life. There were many reasons for his difficulties, but there were also many people who helped him to become the person that he is today. His story could be considered as inspiring as he overcame adversity in childhood and early adulthood to become self-employed and personally fulfilled. However, it was a long, tough process, but James overcame his many challenges through recovery, education, fitness and a deep commitment to changing the way he lived his life. His dream of running his own business is now happening and he is in a good place mentally. He wants to share his story about personal development, self-mastery and never giving up on your goals because he hopes that it will help others to find their way to better lives for themselves and their loved ones.

Personal Background

James describes his childhood as "*difficult*". Growing up, he was exposed to traumatic situations stemming from neglect, violence and his parents' addiction problems. James described his experience of childhood trauma as leaving him "*with a lot of scars, a lot of vulnerabilities, a lot of fears*". James would find a way of coping with adversity through escapism. He would fantasise about living in a wealthy family, having lovely food, a car and going on holidays. He struggled to focus on academic studies and at 14 years of age he was expelled from school. At this point, James had already experimented with drugs and had started into minor criminal activity. At 15 years of age, James moved out of his family home to live on the streets. He became known by social workers and a charity that supports people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. His drug taking had quickly progressed to heroin from which he became addicted. James started to look up to people with a history of criminality for inspiration. "*They weren't going anywhere good in life, but they were my role models*". James followed in

¹ This case history is based on a real person and real events but the identifying information (names of people and places) has been changed to protect the person's identity.

their path, and soon came in contact with the criminal justice system through various charges and stints of imprisonment.

Throughout this period, James struggled with addiction, homelessness and mental health issues. Despite the adversity James faced, he always held onto a sense of self-belief, which helped to carry him through the bleakest and darkest moments. *"I always had a voice in my soul that was telling me I was really good human being and that I had a serious skill set, that I could actually be successful"*. James spent over twenty years struggling to find a positive way of living, but he attributes his sense of resilience and optimism to his grandparents, who were once a positive, stable presence in his life. As he grew older, James began to recognise that he had a special way of connecting with people. Furthermore, although it was not apparent to him at the time, James was a natural entrepreneur, possessing attributes like leadership, creativity, salesmanship and independence. When he did recognise these characteristics in himself, James was unaware of how to harness these talents in terms of employment or education and training. But then, a rekindled passion in James's life opened the door to personal and career development.

Success through Fitness and Education

James had always been athletic, participating in boxing, soccer and gaelic football as a child. Then through his addiction recovery, James returned to sports and fitness as a natural coping mechanism. Because of his love of fitness, James decided that he needed to pursue a career within the sports industry. When James left recovery, he continued to stay involved in sport through voluntary and community-based activities in rehabilitation centres and other locations. He was committed to training in the gym and he gave up cigarettes. He was soon competing in races and triathlons and became *"obsessed"* with achieving better results. Then James took a course and qualified for his personal training licence, which provided him with the necessary skillset and expertise to begin his career.

The personal development bug continued and soon he had signed up for a college course in Sports & Leisure Management. *"I decided it was always my dream to go back to full-time education"*. James excelled academically, achieving six distinctions and two merits. However, James's greatest sense of achievement came from the Special Merit Award in recognition of his contribution to his fellow classmates. James was a mentor and role model to his class cohort of mostly younger students, some of whom were from similar disadvantaged backgrounds. This helped to confirm for James that

he had a special ability to connect with and inspire people. James, speaking of the award: *"It sits on the table in front of me and it's a constant reminder of who I am and what I stand for"*.

With his latest qualification achieved, James then began studying a full-time Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Sports Coaching and Management. While studying, James was able to get a job to help pay his bills. The job happened due to a chance encounter at a gym with a man who shared a similar background and was working for a local authority. James applied for a part-time job at the local authority as a leisure attendant and fitness instructor. He was successful and this allowed him to be supported financially throughout the duration of his degree.

In 2019, James graduated with an Honours Degree. He remembers the graduation day, at which his two year old daughter was present, *"as one of the most amazing experiences in my life"*. However, aside from this momentous achievement, James's life was in turmoil again. *"I was full of anxiety or I was deeply unhappy with myself in life, recovery, my relationship, my job, everything"*. He had been made permanent in his local authority job but felt dissatisfied. *"That dream that I had, that entrepreneurial spark, that creativity. I wasn't able to use that"*. Ultimately James's fierce need for independence drove him to leave his job and pursue an entrepreneurial idea that he had been cultivating in his mind for some time.

JB Wellness

James is the founder of JB Wellness, a business that offers a suite of wellbeing programmes, motivational talks and consultancy work to individuals and businesses. James provides a range of services to his clients including bespoke fitness and nutrition programmes, wellbeing and meditation workshops, Pilates courses, and motivational talks for corporate settings, charities, prisons and other organisations. James has a long-term vision of his business providing positive societal impact, as well as delivering on the longer-term goal of employing people who come from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The idea for JB Wellness had formed during James' time working at the local authority. He delivered fitness sessions to many different people, including neurodivergent individuals and persons with disabilities. It was during these interactions he had come to realise his ability to empathise and motivate people and enable them to navigate their personal struggles.

"I knew that what I had was raw passion and drive and motivation to make a difference for people". James credits these attributes, together with his ability to stay grounded and never forget where he came from, as the unique selling point of his business.

The Degree in Sports Coaching and Management provided James with a solid basis to pursue his own business, by not only covering sports science and physiology, but also business-related topics like marketing and accountancy. Unlike stories he had heard about people with criminal convictions having great difficulty starting a business, James encountered relatively few challenges with getting his business started. For instance, he did not face any difficulties with securing insurance, either as a personal trainer or later as a business owner. However, this positive start-up experience for James was not possible without a knowledgeable network. *"I started reaching out and networking and getting information from people that had gone before me and they showed me what to do".* By attending events and talking to people, James found a way of getting experienced businesspeople to mentor him and provide advice regarding his business activities.

James began as a sole trader, meaning he operated on his own and carried all the financial risk of running the business. He qualified for a government grant worth €2,500, plus he received mentoring and other supports from his Local Enterprise Office (there is one in every city and county in Ireland). In November 2023, James changed the legal status of his business from sole trader to limited company as this protects him against liability for any insurance or legal claims against him. At present, it is only James who runs JB Wellness, but he has plans for expansion and to recruit people in the near future. James outsources his bookkeeping and accountancy which means he can fully focus on the day-to-day business. He also consults once a month with a business mentor who advises him on business development, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and operational aspects of the business. James is also in the process of applying for a grant that supports high-potential social entrepreneurs to take their business to the next level.

Pursuing a Business – the Challenges and the Supports

It was a very difficult start for James to pursue his goal of self-employment. His relationship with his partner had ended, he left his job, sold his car, moved into a one-bed apartment, and was in serious debt. However, James did not focus on what he had lost, but on what he could

gain from this fresh start. *"Whatever it's going to be. I'm going to make it happen, but it's going to be on my own terms"*. And James was not afraid to work hard to make it happen. His initial concern was to support himself and his daughter financially. He began work as a delivery driver for fast food outlets, working six nights a week between 5pm and 2am.

Setting up his business was possible through the network that James had carefully cultivated over the years. An important person who stands out in James' journey is the founder of the charity for homelessness that supported him through his adolescence. James views the charity founder as a close friend and mentor. *"I'm lucky that we've a really good relationship, me and him are quite close. So I would often ring him for advice"*. James has shown his appreciation for the charity down the years by giving back through fundraising events and volunteer work.

While his business is going from strength-to-strength, there are still challenges to its development. James faces a constant struggle with securing funding and supports. One of the biggest issues he faces is the red tape around funding applications that require him to disclose his past interactions with the criminal justice system. James has big ambitions to set up a community development committee (as part of the social objectives of his enterprise) and to begin recruiting employees (including those from marginalised backgrounds). However, such plans will require additional income and funding, and having a criminal conviction makes it more difficult to get bank loans. Another major challenge for James is burn-out. As the sole person responsible for delivering his business, he risks trying to do too much work on his own, spreading himself too thin, and suffering mental and physical exhaustion.

Final Thoughts from James

James would like to see more people, with similar life experiences, explore the possibility of starting their own businesses and become leaders in enterprise. He knows that getting a job after leaving prison can be very difficult and therefore, he thinks self-employment is great alternative option. He would like to have had the opportunity to take a course on entrepreneurship while in prison, as that would have helped him to become aware of all the things he needed to do to start a business. It would have been very helpful if he had a business plan, even a rough draft, as that would have given him a starting point regarding what actions he needed to take to get his business started. James thrives on being *"the underdog"* but acknowledges that role models need to be visible to offer a blueprint for

success to people coming out of the criminal justice system. *"You can't do it without somebody that's living proof that can stand in front of the man and go, this is how it is, how it looks, and they are inspired by that"*. James knows that it is tough to start a business, but he also knows that it is possible and hugely rewarding.