

ENTREPRENEURSHIP, TECHNOLOGY AND HOPE: THE MISSION OF PERSEVERE

By Chris Rawle

Sit down with Sean Hosman and he won't blink when tracing his path through life—he was arrested 12 different times from 2010–2012 for a variety of drug- and alcohol-related crimes. In his words, “I napalmed everything in my life.”

What happens before and after those arrests is key to this story. In 1999, Hosman started building software designed to help manage people coming out of the correctional world and re-entering everyday life. Realizing that many of these people lack skills or support systems to help integrate them back into society, Hosman started a company that he believed would help reduce recidivism rates—the likelihood that a convicted criminal will reoffend—through a combination of algorithms and data science.

That software has been tweaked for nearly two decades into its current form: Vant4ge, Hosman's current company, which works with over 70 different jurisdictions (department of corrections, jails, parolees, etc.) around the country to help human beings in the system. As an online community of coordinated care, Vant4ge's software is structured to be a support system for people trying to get their feet underneath them. Users have access to relevant treatment plans, provider networks, online education, employment tools and a host of other useful things. At the same time, Vant4ge analyzes each user to help build a larger picture of what works and what doesn't, in turn using this data to help drive change on a systemic level.

When Hosman entered the roughest stretch of his life in 2010, his company offered a way back. After being released from jail in 2012, he rebuilt the company,

paid off his debt and began concentrating on ways to make an even bigger difference for those caught in the system.

“For myself, entrepreneurialism represented hope,” said Hosman. “It gave me hope that I could make it back. What is going to help me and how am I going to make it? A lot of it had to do with the fact that I owned my own company. Once I had control of it again, nobody could tell me I couldn't have a job—I owned my own company. Technology is a great equalizer; it allows everyone a seat at the table. If you know how to code, if you know technology, it opens up doors.”

Indeed, opening doors is the new mission of Hosman and his new non-profit organization, Persevere.

A PATH FORWARD

Coming out of the criminal correction system is hard. Many have spent years, or even decades, serving time. Re-entering the civilian world can be intimidating, fueled by lack of skills or people who refuse to give second chances. Persevere is the opposite, an organization dedicated to providing opportunity to those in need. Hosman's personal journey helped him realize that he was lucky to have roots in entrepreneurship and technology, two things that allowed him to jump back into the workforce, no problem. Now he wants others to feel that empowerment.

“Everybody coming out of the system gets told no,” said Hosman. “In our country, the recidivism rate is 70 percent. I was a criminal, yet while others struggled, I kept getting to do my job because I owned my own company. Technology provides hope, it's a way out. Persevere has

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to be a message to all people caught in the system: In 13 weeks, or 18 weeks, or 52 weeks, there's a way to learn a skill, code or system that allows you back. And then the sky's the limit."

The world needs more coders, and those convicted and released of crimes need jobs—why not pair the two? Persevere has partnered with BoomStartup—one of Utah's most well-known accelerators—to do just that, building a program that teaches inmates coding and entrepreneurship. The coding curriculum is pulled from freecodecamp.com, combined with the entrepreneurship curriculum from BoomStartup and other components available that concentrate on soft skills and cognitive restructuring.

Prison doesn't feature many learning options, especially from a technology perspective. Through Persevere, that can change.

"They're going to do actual work, create actual portfolios, work on real-world stuff while they're inside (a correctional facility)," said Hosman. "Instead of making 70 cents per hour, they can make \$12 per hour and

come out with a stipend of \$3,000 to pay for rent, fines, restitution and child support—this can crush somebody on the way out. The real hope is to build an ecosystem with management and understanding where they can get jobs because people know the program they're going through."

Hosman cites The Last Mile—an organization that taught business and technology to inmates at San Quentin State Prison to great success—as reason for optimism. He believes Persevere can bring the same ideology to the table on a larger scale, teaching vital, new-age skills to inmates and those on probation.

While Persevere is still in its very early stages, Hosman is starting to get the ball rolling, meeting with Utah government officials to work out an arrangement where Persevere's curriculum can start making an impact, teach useful skills and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. He's experienced first-hand the power of entrepreneurship and technology—now it's time for others to feel the same.

"In a short amount of time, people can learn a coding language or skill that gives them any opportunity they want," said Hosman. ■



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