

Robert Sanchez
2nd Chance Project- Episode 3
Full Transcript of Interview

The following is a complete transcript from the interview Sarah O'Connor conducted in the Winter of 2017.

Interviewer, Sarah O'Connor= SO

Interviewee, Robert Sanchez= RS

SO: So I was thinking we could start with just, if you could just talk a little bit about, your childhood and kind of your neighborhood, and your family situation growing up to give a little bit of background about yourself?

RS: Well, I was born in the Bronx, and in Lincoln (unclear and might need to be cut) in 1968. And um, you know my mother was, um, I think 21 at the time and my father 23. They had been Puerto Rican natives. Um, my dad was in prison at the time. He um, he was a heroin addict, but a very nice man.

SO: Mhm.

RS: And my mom, you know, had me by herself. Um, my sisters were born um, a year later, um, to another man, um, who wasn't as, um, wasn't that nice of a person. He used to rob all our clothes and he was a heroin addict as well, and eventually, um, my mother killed him.

SO: Oh my goodness.

RS: Um, in self-defense. And that's kind of like my first memory.

SO: Wow. Was she... Did she serve any time for that?

RS: She did three weeks at Riker's Island, and I remember thinking... my first memory ever of that I think I was about 4 years old. Maybe about, 4 years old... 1972. And I was in the bed with my mom and he comes over and comes into the house and I could see my mom getting fidgety and holding me closer to her... and he comes into the room and picks me up and, you know, he's kissing me and, and says "papi" 'cause we cool, "Go to bed, go to your bed" um "go to the room with your sisters" and my mother's like "No, leave him here, let him stay in the bed." And he's like "Let's go." So he takes me to the room, puts me in the bed, then I hear them arguing.

SO: Mhm.

RS: and my mother's like "No" you know, "you just can't come in here, no," like, "you need to leave."

SO: Mhm.

RS: And the argument keeps ensuing. Eventually, he hits my mother with a broomstick, something like that, breaks the broomstick over her head.

SO: Oh my gosh.

RS: I come out, my sisters are starting to cry, they woke up to the commotion. I'm keeping them in the room. I'm trying to keep them in the room, that way they're not in the way of anything. And, we're just like huddled up in a corner. But I'm looking, I come outside and I'm looking at the fighting, like, physically fighting. And then... my mother's on the ground, but she... they're both on the ground. My mother gets up and starts running towards the kitchen. And while she's running she says "Go back into the room." She goes into the kitchen, he gets up, he gets this bat, this baseball bat. My mother grabs a knife, and from the kitchen, about, I wanna say around, 10 to 20 feet, she throws the knife at him. It lands in his chest.

SO: Wow.

RS: And he falls back, and he looks at me, and he looks at her, and I guess he dies.

SO: What a terrible thing for a four-year-old to have to see.

RS: Yeah, and then we, I don't know how we ended up upstairs in a neighbor's house, I see sirens, a bunch of sirens. I see, um, I see a bunch of stuff, just, and then, I mean I don't remember much but, I do remember the day my mother came home.

SO: Mm.

RS: And I was so happy to see her and I remember her, you know, describing something and it sounded like Martians had, um, kidnapped her and taken her to Mars, and that's what I thought happened.

SO: Uh huh, gosh. So you had a pretty close relationship to her?

RS: With my mom? Yeah. I was my mother's first son. I was her only son. I mean, I was her first child, and from a very young age, I guess, I don't know if it was that incident... but that kind of, um, raised my awareness. I had this raised awareness, ever since I was young. I don't know what it came from, of, you know, my mother's suffering. And my mother, really had a really sad life. Like, she really suffered most, if not all, of her life. And growing up I kind of saw this, and of course I didn't know how to articulate it, um, and I couldn't really put it in those words. But now as an adult, I realize that I understood my mom. Like, and you know, we were close. Um, I was really the only positive male in her life as her son and, um, you know come to think of it I was probably the only positive male that she ever had in her life. Every other male failed her. And um, you know, she held onto me, I was her son.

SO: Right.

RS: And I was, um, that one person, that one male, that would make everything okay.

SO: Tell me about what was going on in your life around the time you got arrested.

RS: So, um, I lived in East Harlem and my mother had become an alcoholic, you know, as few years before and she wasn't working anymore. We were on public assistance. Um, I went to high school of art and design and at the time that I got arrested I got hit by a car so I was recovering from that.

SO: You were a baseball player, is that right?

RS: Yeah, and I remember when I met my girlfriend who eventually became my wife at 18, um, and I remember saying to myself, like I remember realizing like "Wow, I'm growing up, I'm 17/18 years old and I have nothing." Like, I need, you know, at the time, you know, the 1980s was really a time when you had to be fashionable, like, you know it was the beginning of that Hip Hop culture. Um, and I was very much into it, um, it was the beginning of... it was really like a time of excess, like you were bombarded by excess. You were bombarded by ads for clothes, you were bombarded by ads for cars, and the drug dealers were driving around in these gold-plated Mercedes Benz... and you know, jewelry, and they had all the beautiful women and you're like, wait a minute. This guy is MY AGE. You know? And that, like really, like, our community was flooded, FLOODED, flooded, flooded, flooded with drugs. And I mean, you could walk down the block and anything you wanted was there. So it was a battle between getting the job where you were going to earn \$150/\$100 a week, which wasn't going to go far.

SO: And you were supporting your sisters and your mother at that point, weren't you?

RS: My sisters, my mother, my wife, and her parents to an extent...

SO: With just an after-school job?

RS: Right. You know, and, you know that job I realized that, um, wasn't enough. And I remember when, when the girl I met when I was at school she said "You know, you're gonna have a baby, you might want to make a couple extra dollars." And then she introduced me to her husband, and I said "You know, I don't really like drugs like that. And you know, I'm not really the drug dealing type of guy, you know."

SO: Were you a good student?

RS: I was smart, I don't know, I think I had so many distractions in my life that I was very artistic, I was a good artist, but I had so many different distractions in my life that I just could not concentrate for long periods of time.

SO: Right.

RS: And it was difficult and even to this day sometimes, it, um, rears its head where my attention becomes a big distraction and back then it was like really running rampant. And it was hard for me to decide, like, what was I gonna do? You know, and remember I'm trying to decide all these things, I myself, as a kid at like 16/17 years old, like, I had no role models whatsoever. Male or female.

And I think um, it was easy for me to, to make a mistake, um, by hanging out with the wrong people at the wrong time. And that's what I did. And I ended up going to prison.

SO: So your girlfriend, um, your girlfriend got pregnant?

RS: Yeah, she got pregnant, um, and like, I think my life was so chaotic, my mother's side at home, that having a child for me, in my mind, was going to remove the chaos and kind of, um, give me some sort of stability and responsibility. It was going to instill some responsible behavior, like, learning how to take care of another human being. And I thought that was a good thing for me.

SO: And you knew you needed to make some money...

RS: Right, I needed to make a couple extra dollars because having a child is expensive especially, you know, people drill that into your head, and, you know you're hearing this and you start panicking like "Oh my God, I don't have enough." And what's going to happen if my child needs Pampers or my child needs, you know, food, and I don't know ANYTHING about that stuff. So you start panicking.

SO: So what happened?

RS: So I started hanging out with, um, with, um, this guy. And he um, you know I told him like "Look, I've never really done that" and he said "Look, you hang out with me for about a month. I'm gonna give you a couple of dollars, you don't have to do anything." He said "You'll see how it moves, you'll see it's nothing. You hang out in the apartment and, you know, you make sure people give you the right money for the right amount." So that's what I did, I hung around with him and a couple of other guys.

SO: Who were dealing drugs?

RS: Yeah, who were dealing crack. And I started noticing you know "Wow, this is not hard." But the people who were coming to buy, um, were a bit scary for me. And I didn't admit that, that they were scary people. And I started thinking like "Wow, like, what if something happens?" You know you see guns laying around and you know, wow, I don't even know how to pick one of those things up and shoot it. Like, I've never shot a gun in my life, you know, I've never even held one. And here are all these guns all over the place. So, I knew it wasn't for me, the lure of the money, like you see, stacks of thousands upon thousands of dollars every single day. Money, I thought I would never get legitimately, and here it is just flowing freely in front of me. And, eventually in that month, the police raided, and I ended up getting arrested... you know, I didn't belong there, this was the 15 years to life crime. You know, technically, I didn't commit a crime, I didn't sell anything, I didn't have anything on my person... I was just in an apartment that had drugs in it, and I was the only one there, the only idiot there.

SO: What do you mean you were the only one there?

RS: I was the only one there, because what happened that day was I went to the apartment, the night before there was a lot of commotion in the building, and I got spooked out. I didn't think this was for me. And that's what I said that day, I said "you know, I don't think that I'm gonna come back to this place. And I was a student and I was going to school, and I left my books and all that stuff in the apartment the night before. So I said "Let me go get my books, but I'm done with this type of stuff. I'm gonna let KC know that I don't want to be part of this. And I told him, I had the conversation with him, and he went with me and said "Let me buy you a crib, 'cause I know how hard that is so let me buy that for you." And I said, "Okay, cool." And we went around looking for a crib, I found it, he paid for it, and he was gonna have it delivered to my house. I told him, "I need to get my books, I left them upstairs." Because I had a test the next day. He said "Here's the key, you know where to get in." I felt comfortable, I had been at the house before, all I had to do was go in and come out. In the meantime, when I went in, while I was inside the apartment for those 2 or 3 minutes, there was a sale made on the ground floor by this guy who just happened, an officer who was undercover, happened to be strolling by downstairs. And that guy was like "Hey, listen, I got that good stuff" and the cop was like, "Oh, really? You do? Where do you...?" And he said "It's right here on the 4th floor, I got three left. I got three bottles left." Goes to the 4th floor, it was a positive sale, the officer goes downstairs to the ground floor, radios his backup team, and says "I've found another spot." And the police raid the building. As they're raiding the building, I unknowingly, unbeknownst to me of what was happening, while I was in the apartment, I'm coming out of the apartment with my schoolbooks. And I come out the apartment with my schoolbooks, and as soon as I come out the apartment, there's a gun in my face, the officer pulled out a gun in my face and says "Where are you going?" And I said "I'm going downstairs, why?" And he takes me by the neck and he pushes me into another empty apartment. Then they go into the apartment, and they had no warrant or anything like that, and they found all these drugs in that apartment and I ended up getting 15 years.

SO: Wow. How was it that you got so many years with no drugs on you and no record?

RS: A deal about the Rockefeller drug laws?

SO: Yes, with the crack cocaine laws.

RS: Well those are mandatory minimums meaning if you get caught with a certain amount over, I think it's an ounce or two, the mandatory minimum is fifteen years to life.

SO: Okay.

RS: And these laws are draconian and very racist in nature and even though the police officers did not have a right to search that apartment, because the apartment didn't belong to me, I didn't have a right to contest to the illegal seizure of whatever was found in the apartment. My argument to that was "if you notice, if you say that it isn't my apartment how can anything in the apartment found be attributed to me?" They never answered the question they just say here's fifteen years to life and that it was that was supposed to be answered, and it's never been answered to this day.

SO: Did you ever expect that you would end up in prison growing up?

RS: I never thought, no, I was a good kid so I um, I never thought that I would go to prison, I never thought that, I thought I would be playing second base for the Yankees like let alone like going to prison for fifteen years was the farthest thing from my mind. I was an artist a dancer I never committed a crime, I wasn't that kid. I just happen to, you know, do something stupid like uh a bad decision at a bad time –

SO: Right.

RS: and um –it cost me fifteen years of my life.

SO: What was it like for you making that transition to prison? What was - That must have been a terrible adjustment.

RS: It was. I was scary, you know. It was scary. And you know I told this to somebody and I don't know but I knew there was something wrong with me going to prison like for that long but I knew there was something wrong, I just couldn't articulate what it was. I couldn't, I knew that there was, that I was being victimized by a racist decision, but I could not articulate it. Like something was happening to me and I didn't know how to, you know, articulate it, and I had trouble adjusting in the beginning because I kept saying “my life is ruined” like I'm here for fifteen years like, like I don't even know what I'm gonna look like in fifteen years, I don't even know what I'm gonna feel like in fifteen years, I don't even know like like...and I had trouble like, I felt bad for my mom I felt like wow my mom is gonna feel like a failure you know like that was like my first thought like my mom is gonna feel like a failure and then my daughter is gonna grow up without a dad. That killed me, that killed me that I couldn't see my daughter grow up you know that I missed her graduation that I missed her birthdays that I missed all the little things that meant something to her at a young age and I wasn't there for any of it –

SO: What's her name?

RS: Crystal. And like I just, it really, it really tore me up. And I wasn't a bad kid, I wasn't, you know, I wasn't the fighting type and in there, when there is a um, when there is a um, when somebody senses (unclear) or you appear to be weak, the monsters come out and I was a really handsome kid and a lot of times, handsome equates to being a punk and I would always get tested because I was so handsome that people would try to take advantage of that and say “no, this kid can't fight” I would have marks on my face and have you know, I was a (unclear) kid, um, then crying, and I would have to always fight. But the good thing about it is that I didn't, you know, even though I wasn't a fighter, and I wasn't a good fighter, I had a lot of heart. And like you know, I knew people from my neighborhood, and my neighborhood is East Harlem, NY and a lot of people that were from my neighborhood ended up going to prison knew me from the streets and knew that I was a cool kid without getting in trouble for something he didn't do and a lot of people protect me and say, you know, he was a good kid, leave him alone. And you now, I had that going for me.

SO: What was the first thing that gave you a sense of hope and possibility when you were in prison?

RS: Education. When I went and got my GED. What education did for me, it articulated all the things that I knew what was happening to me and it made sense of my life, it made sense out of everything. The racism, the discrimination, the the-um you know, how economics played a role in my um, my incarceration, how all these things now make sense. And how, you know, I was the victim of a racist society and that racism is always, the worst type of racism is one that is subtle and can't – it's hard to articulate. the institutional racism that you don't realize that-that shouldn't be happening. Yet it happens.

SO: How did you feel that racism played a part in your situation?

RS: Um, through the prison industrial complex and how, you know, my body meant that me being in prison meant that I was cheap labor and that I was part of a work force that will be paid 10 (unclear) a day and I was gonna produce items that was gonna sell you know, that was going to be part of a market, like I understood that concept on how my body was worth something to somebody and um –

SO: Weren't there white men in prison, also?

RS: Not as much, not as much. I mean most of the prisoners in NYC at that time came from seven neighborhoods. All predominantly Latino and black and 95% of the New York inmate population came from seven neighborhoods in NYC. That's well-documented. So you know, you realize that you're part of this big monstrous, this big monster that you're fighting against all odds to um try and make sense of everything and once I was educated, one I was able to understand, I think life became easier for me to live. Excuse my language, the way I'm gonna tell you but I was being fucked and I didn't know who was fucking me. Education told me who was fucking me.

SO: Right, you said it explained the world to you.

RS: It explained the world to me, it explained everything to me it explained my place in the world, it explained why I was in the position that I was in and I was like okay, now that I understand, now I can do something about it now I know where to go, now I know who to write to, I know where I have to concentrate my efforts –

SO: So you got a GED and then what happened after that?

RS: Well, I got my GED, I went and got an Associates, and I went and got a Bachelor's degree and I took some time off because I didn't know if I wanted a Master's degree in Theology but I ended up getting a Master's degree in Theology.

SO: That seems so unusual that they would have been able to offer that in prison

RS: Well the Master's program was privately funded uh, it was um, it was created by this this really iconic American figure. His name was Dr. Bill Weber. And Bill, uh created the master's program, I think in 1978, he felt like if we had the ability to learn more that we would be much more successful if we had graduate degrees he was right.

SO: In prison –

RS: In prison, right. If I were you, I would look up the Reverend Dr. um, Bill Weber.

SO: Weather?

RS: Weber. He was this very iconic figure, that um, he's probably, you know, just as responsible for ending the Vietnam War as anybody. You're not gonna read about it, but he was a brilliant man and he was an angel to us and he created the um, the theology program.

SO: Who was the undergraduate degree program through?

RS: What was that?

SO: What university was the undergraduate degree through?

RS: Mercy College.

SO: Mercy College. And the graduate degree?

RS: New York Theological Seminary. When I came home and I got my second one from Hunter College.

SO: And that was in what?

RS: Um, Social Work.

SO: Right. So how long were you in prison all together?

RS: Fifteen years. And –

SO: Long time –

RS: Yeah, it is a long time and during that time, I helped create a theater workshop program where we're um, actually going to be doing our 20th year anniversary at Carnegie Hall. I can't believe it's just 20 years, it has to be more.

SO: You helped create the program?

RS: Yes.

SO: And what was the program exactly?

RS: It's called Rehabilitation Through the Arts and it was um, um, playwriting and acting and poetry and doing these big productions on the Sing-Sing stage and we went from these really archaic kind of sets to creating these moving sets that you see in Broadway and we did really, really well, um, with this program, and then it saved a lot of people's lives and it gave the

men something to do. Now I think the program is in seven different facilities across New York and there's prisons all across the United States that would like to replicate the program.

SO: And do you have people coming into the prison to work with that? Or is it just from within the prison?

RS: Yeah, yeah. We're actually working on a show now that is now, a lot of the men have come home and we're all doing really well, we've all come home and we gotten together and doing a show, it's like a traveling troupe, around different prisons in New York. Um, and we do shows for the population there, so I'm the oldest member of the group.

SO: Do inmates act in these shows? Or is it programs that are brought into the prison that are with former inmates?

RS: No, no, no so this program is new, the one we're working on, we're working at Carnegie Hall, and um, it's all former prisoners and we're going to um, go inside the facilities and put on shows. But the RTA program is still going on in the facilities. They got their own thing, we're just bringing a different show.

SO: So there's both things going on, there's productions going on inside the prison and outside the prison that are being brought in.

RS: Right.

SO: And what's your role in the Carnegie Hall production?

RS: Well, I'm just one of the actors in the show and we uh, we're going to celebrate our 20th year, I think later this year, um, and we're rehearsing. We use the space to rehearse –

SO: What's the show?

RS: It's about, it's about um, life on the outside for men and women in prison.

SO: Who have been in prison before?

RS: Yes. And what is that transition like, you know, what is life, what is living life out here like now for us.

SO: Um, you also helped start a Ready for Work program, is that right?

RS: With Fred Davie - who um –

SO: What is that program?

RS: Well, it's no longer up and running, but it was a four year program with public (??) Ventures, it's an organization called (???), a nonprofit, and what we did we established about, I think 18-20 sites across the United States and sit with this men and women who come home from prison what

do they need, how do they get ready for work, and what we started doing, we started, um, providing technical assistance to people who, um, people who wanted to work with men and wouldn't be coming home from prison and this is what you should do, and this is what they need. You know, everyone thinks we need a couple of dollars and car fare, train fare to get back and forth, and that's nothing, you know what we need is somebody there who's gonna listen, that's going to acknowledge our fear of going home, someone we can talk to, someone that can teach us not only about writing a resume, but why it's important to have a resume and a cover letter, like small little things that, you know, certain organizations, well if we give them a MetroCard and a couple of dollars, they're gonna be okay. Getting ready for work was more than that, like, how do you prepare someone for the act of working, you know? For the first time in their life, they have to get up at six in the morning, you know, prepare, get to work by nine, and do their job, that can be a pretty scary act for someone who doesn't know what that's like.

SO: And you, that program, also worked providing mentors, is that correct?

RS: Yeah, providing mentorship, yup.

SO: So the work that you do now, you're a social worker now?

RS: Yes, I run a um, I am the Program Manager to the um, a program called Connections to Care um, for an employment readiness program, and um, we address the mental health needs of our clients. So I do two things, it's two-prong. I train staff in mental health component modules which is, help first aid, motivational interviewing, psychoeducation, and I also provide a track for um, clients who need to support a mental health provider and I provide the track for them to get that, that help.

SO: And do you work with a lot of former inmates?

RS: Yeah, I work with everybody, a lot of formerly incarcerated individuals and um, you know, non- non um, non-formerly incarcerated.

RS: Something and if I have to keep telling my story over and over again. Umm... I will because I think uhh, my life it's some beauty in it and it's also a strength in it and umm... people can get that and I think my life meant something.

SO: Now, what do you feel would be the most important thing for people who have been incarcerated, who have just gotten out? What would help them the most?

RS: I think what helps them the most is to surround themselves by a group of people, by a team of people that will support them and I don't mean by physical support, I'm not talking about financial, I mean that could be part of it, but supporting them when they somebody to talk to or the moments that they are afraid, the moments that they feel like they are about to do something stupid that they have somebody that they can go to and say, I don't know where to go next. You know, like what do you think? That there is a team of people in that person's corner, like one of the things I recognized early on in my incarceration was that I needed to surround myself with people that I wanted to be like. So when that volunteer came into the facility and was doing some work, was volunteering. I wanted to be around that volunteer. I wanted to see how they spoke. I wanted to see how they interacted with people. I wanted to see I was interested in what

their life was like, wanting to know what they did for a living. I wanted to know like how they treated their wives and I needed to understand what a successful person looked like and I think that many men when they come home they should be able to surround themselves by people who are successful. Who look successful, come from another walk of life. And when I first came home I was so uncomfortable around white people and I am not focusing on (43:13 blurbs in here that I cannot make out) but I was intimidated by their articulation. I was intimidated by, by the class, by the way they showed class. I was intimidated by how successful they were in the very beginning because I didn't think I could be that way. I didn't think that I can be as umm as professionally sound as professional looking as they were and eventually I learned that that wasn't true that I could be all those things and I can be even more and that I was an equal as opposed to being a subordinate. And I think people come home have that fear of not fitting in. And they immediately have to surround themselves around successful people to learn how to be successful.

SO: Do you... have you experienced any stigma from having been in prison? Is that an issue that people have to deal with?

RS: Umm... You know it's weird I don't know if that is much of the problem today. I mean there is stigma there. I think when I came home when I first came home that was a big fear of mine. I was afraid to tell people, but then once I embraced it, I said look hey I know I did fifteen years for this crime, but this isn't who I am today. Once I was able to do that and be comfortable in that then that wasn't the problem. It was a problem only in one area of my life where I was afraid all the time. It's when I met a woman and I had to tell... you know... I had to tell her about my past and I have this unbelievable like... I have to tell the truth that was a promise I made when I came home from prison that I'm always going to be truthful, so when I meet a young woman and I tell her you know I said you know there's things in my past that I did fifteen years in prison. Every single time I never got any umm... . negative reaction. You know I've dated doctors, lawyers, and all type of women from different places and they all seem to be okay with it, so once I was able to say okay you know what people aren't as caught up as I think they are. Umm... It is easier for me.

SO: That's good to hear.

RS: Huh, yeah it was easier for me to say yeah, I'm okay with this. Like I can talk about it and not feel that I am going to be... judged or misjudged.

SO: So I'm guessing that the... your marriage did not survive prison.

RS: No, it didn't survive prison at all only because umm... we were very young and just like I was victimized by doing time, so was she. She was victimized by the act of me going away and you know before prison victimize myself I think you know being poor umm... being poor and not really introduced to many umm... opportunities that were going to umm... put us on a different track was there like before going to prison all those other things got me before prison did and got her as well and umm... she had I guess an interesting life she remarried and she had other children umm... and you know her life is her life and you know she had problems in her life... umm... but I'm okay I'm okay with them. I'm not angry at her... umm... I think again my education has... was able to explain everything to me in a way where I can say you

alright. At least I know why these things happened. And once you know the why I think it's easier to handle

SO: What's the biggest challenge for you that... since you got out of prison?

RS: I think the biggest challenge for me umm... has been professionally and has been trying to make, trying to have a job that is going to keep up with the demands of impatient to tell you the truth. Uhhh... Not for profits, don't keep up with the rate of inflation. It's hard and you know I'm always trying to find a way to make an extra dollar... I don't have any money. Living in New York City is crazy and it has gotten so expensive that umm... I can...I barely, barely, barely make it and I'm always struggling and I feel like I'm back at that umm... that place I was when I was a kid and I'm educated. I have two degrees like...

SO: Right.

RS: There's no reason why I'm in this position, yet I'm in it. And now I know why I'm in it and you know I can articulate why, but that's been the challenge is... you know trying to find a way just to be comfortable. It's like I'm tired of being that umm hamster in the wheel like I'm going fast, but I'm going nowhere fast.

SO: Right.

RS: You know it's like my life has always been that way where no matter how hard I worked it's not enough. No matter how much I put into anything it's not enough. I love my job, but I don't get paid what I'm worth.

SO: Right.

RS: And that in this environment in New York City that's horrible.

SO: Yeah, that's a hard place to live. It's just so expensive there.

RS: Right, half of my... like I have... my rent is half of my check.

SO: Wow.

RS: Half of what I earn a month.

SO: Yeah.

RS: And sometimes it's about to go to like about three-fifths of what I earn a month.

SO: Oh my God.

RS: Like it's ridiculous yo.

SO: Can you tell the story about what happened when you got kidney disease?

RS: I was thirty-seven at the time and I was working out and I couldn't do the same things I'd been doing all my life, like I just wasn't as strong and I always felt weak. I was tired walking up the steps and my friend took me to the emergency room one day after ignoring it for seven to eight months and the doctor said you have umm... (ins.... disease) and I flipped out because I was just so pissed off because it's like wow after fifteen years are gone I'm hit with something else.

SO: What class is that?

RS: Well, it was just a luck of the drawer. I'd never been high, I don't drink like nothing I was just getting headaches and umm the doctor said you know Robert we don't know what it is like we think it might have been umm a something you've been taking for your workout or something, but you know I told them I was just taking protein powder. I don't think that should have been something that caused kidney disease and now I have a lawsuit against umm (.....) because I'm learning that antacids might have been what killed my kidney.

SO: I see, so your kidneys have started failing?

RS: Right, when I was thirty-seven and I went on dialysis and a friend of mine gave me a kidney.

SO: Who was that?

RS: He was actually somebody who went to my program. He was this kid that went to my fatherhood program when I was at STRIVE and he said umm... you saved my life, now I'm going to save yours. And he was insistent on it and I was like no no no and he kept saying yes yes yes.

SO: He someone you met in prison?

RS: Huh?

SO: You met him in prison?

RS: No no no he was in prison and he came to my program and I mentored him.

SO: Oh, which program?

RS: My fatherhood program the story New York Magazine wrote about the story umm...you could look up Robert Sanchez and Felix Aponte, New York Magazine you could Google that and look him up.

SO: Okay, what was the fatherhood program?

RS: He had come to my fatherhood program and he was like nineteen years old.

SO: What was the program?

RS: Uhh it was a father... When I was trying right I became the umm... the umm... director of the fatherhood program and I... my job was to help young men and their children spend time together you know create events that would help them spend time with their children and to involve the other parent whether the other parent was with the father or not like just to try and instill. And it was very successful actually, we were able to put families and get them to spend time and really umm... learn that it's always about the kid and not about the parents. So I met him through that program and umm he always looked for me always looked for me every single day this guy was up my ass, but I liked him because I knew he needed me.

SO: This was... you were running... were doing this program after you got out?

RS: Yes,

SO: But it was in the prison?

RS: No no no the fatherhood program was at STRIVE where I worked at.

SO: Oh okay I'm sorry.

RS: Right and umm he eventually he heard that I was sick and he said look alright I heard you're sick and I'm in Florida and don't want to be down here, I don't know how to get back to New York, but I want to get to New York and I want to give you a kidney. I'm like no Felix no no no and he kept saying yes yes yes. And eventually I got the kidney he gave me the kidney umm... you know and I was forever grateful.

SO: Wow, that's amazing.

RS: Yeah, it is. I gotta get going here Sarah.

SO: Yeah, can I ask you just one last thing Robert?

RS: Sure, yeah.

SO: Umm... Is there anything you'd like for people to take away from hearing your story, what would it be?

RS: I think everyone deserves to be listened to umm, that everyone has good in them, but I think that everyone has the ability to do good and that if we can be much more supportive of each other then I think that goes a long way and changes people's lives. I think I've you know even though I complain about certain aspects of my life I am pretty successful for somebody who has gone through what I have gone through. I never loss hope. I think hope is probably the most important component in life because if you have hope you have everything and I think people who walk forward in faith and believe that the good in life is going to come their way. I think that's always the best thing for people.

[End

