

Dion Tillman talks about his work as a substance abuse counselor:

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I owe them that, and the way I give it back is to give it to my clients. I started out in the drug and alcohol field and now I'm here [at Palmdale], which was a challenge for me. And I'm able to give to them what I was giving my clients in the drug and alcohol treatment system. Compassion, genuineness, understanding, forgiveness. Because in this system, they think it's their fault. It's not their fault. Mental illness is not their fault. Mental illness is a chemical imbalance. It hurts. It's misunderstood by people who don't have mental illness. As a health professional, I can help them understand that, "OK, you do belong to the general population that walks in society. You belong there. You're not placed outside of that population; you belong with this population, and it's OK. It's OK."

It's almost like being a drug counselor, because that's also a stigmatized group. If you're an alcoholic, you're an addict, you're a crackhead. No one wants to be thought of as having a mental illness. We teach them here – "teach," that's even not the right word. We show them here that that's OK. You can live with that and have a prosperous life. You can go back to school; you can work; you can raise your family. And it's OK. We all have bad days; we have up and down days. As counselors, we have up and down days. But it doesn't make you, for having a mental illness, any less [of a person] than me, or less than someone that doesn't have a mental illness. So it's fun. It's hope-building.

READ THE FULL TRANSCRIPT BELOW.

INTERVIEWEE: DION TILLMAN
INTERVIEWER: Diane DeMartino
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My name is Dion Tillman. I am a substance abuse counselor, a community worker here at the Department of Mental Health Palmdale Mental Health Clinic. I have been for four years.

Tell me about how you grew up.

[I grew up in] Central South Los Angeles, the Westside; I grew up in actually two areas: Echo Park, [which] back then they called East Hollywood, and I grew up in the '60s over in the Crenshaw district. I was very impressionable. I've always liked that up front, confrontational, gangster, black power persona. I grew up in a neighborhood where the Black Power movement was very prevalent. I grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood. When the Black Panther party was dying out –

My lifestyle began with the Black Power movement, with the Black Panthers [a militant African-American organization that grew out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and promoted a black nationalist and socialist ideology]. My mother and her friends, and my cousins, and a lot of my friends, my older friends, were a part of that. And we were actually the bastard children, because we became the Crips, the clandestine revolutionary individuals in the party structure [the Crips are a national street gang].

Now there was never any pressure for me to join that group; but I liked it and I was allured to it and it was talked about – the ideals they had talked about my life. They talked about what I grew up in and what I was exposed to. So it was easy for me to become a Crip. They called it Kitchen Crip back in the day; that was the particular gang in that neighborhood. Yeah, I just grew up gang banging, slinging dope, using drugs, a pretty hard life. As I said earlier, I guess I was a product of my environment; I enjoyed it.

It was different facets in my family. My mother was 16 when she had me. So I was raised by her mother and her aunt, which was my great aunt – my grandmother's sister. Because she was a kid who had a kid, it was left to them to raise me. They took on the job; God bless their hearts and rest their souls. They did the best they could, but because I was a very extreme individual, and when I say "extreme," I mean I was the one they came and got, when they wanted to see some fine tuned entertainment. I say that loosely, because the behavior I exhibited was anything but fine tuned entertainment. I was carrying weapons at a young age and I've always wanted to be a gangster. And being a Crip helped me do that.

Not having a father figure, a strong father figure, in my life; again, my mother didn't know what to do with a child. My mother was too hard and my grandmother and my auntie were too soft. So I was in between the two different worlds, and because my uncle, my mother's brother, was a dope fiend, it was easy for me to get pulled into that lifestyle. So it was the lack of a father figure and not having a strong mother presence in my life.

They put beer in my baby bottle to put me to sleep; they predisposed me. I grew up in the '70s – it was "make love, not war;" get high and forget about it. So what they thought was funny was actually a danger. They turned me onto a lifestyle that they didn't even see coming. I smoked my first joint – I had my first exposure to weed, marijuana, at 7,

by someone who was my father figure – my cousin Anthony, may he rest in peace. We called him “Ano.” He was from Harlem, he was my godfather Crip.

Where did that lead you?

At that time, it didn't really lead me anywhere. I was just a little kid, so I was still under my mother's thumb, didn't have [any] autonomy. So it was around the neighborhood. It wasn't something I was doing every day. It was just [that] whenever Ano was blowing weed, if I was around him, he let me hit it. And it was like cool. I felt accepted. That was cool for me; I felt accepted.

Because I was predisposed to [drugs by] the baby bottle issue, deal, it was easier for me to get used to it. I had already built up a tolerance whether I knew it or not. I grew up smoking weed. As I got to be 12, 13 – I was staying out all night gang banging and smoking weed. Hanging out with the homies – I was a little kid, the youngest of the bunch. All the kids in my age demographic were doing kid things. I was robbing, carrying guns. My first gun was a 20-gauge. My cousin and I broke into his friend's house and we stole from his parents. So that was fun to me. I guess you could say the weed led me to the lifestyle that would later become my life.

Tell me about the life.

At 12, 13, I was a Crip and that was it. And I didn't care about you or anybody else. My home boys were my father figures, and I made a name for myself as a young kid, not to mess with me. But it was fear. I would have to say, if I had to label it, it was fear. It was all fear-based. It was all delusional, because it was this image that I wanted to live that really wasn't for real. It was tangible, but to a certain degree, I created it so that I didn't have to feel the pain of not being accepted by my mother, not being accepted by my father. I didn't really feel loved, even though I was loved by my grandmother and my great aunt. I didn't really know what it really meant, because the person I wanted to love me didn't know how. So it was easy for me to go ahead and come up in that lifestyle. It was easy for me to be a gangster, to be a gang banger, and it was easy for me to rob people. It was like breathing.

So what changed all that?

I got tired of going to jail. If you want me to fast forward – the low points would've been when Judge *Abby Sullivan – that was 1984, and I was getting ready to be 14. She labeled me a menace to society. This was long before the movie *Menace to Society* [a 1993 movie about a street hustler set in South Central LA]. And she said it when I was on the witness stand. And she was disturbed about it. She said, “Stop talking!” I was on the witness stand, just lying. I was just lying. We got busted for the robbery and it was my first stint in jail. She said, “The minor is a liar! If you say one more word, I'll lock you up forever.” And she scared me. It was shock therapy at its finest. And my attorney tried to interrupt. She said, “You shut up.” (laughs) I remember it like it was yesterday. She said, “You shut up. The minor is a liar. *You* are a menace to society.”

And that was it. I was locked away from my family for three years. I grew up State-raised. It's supposed to be about rehabilitation for children, in juvenile [justice] systems. But the lifestyle inside, the politics for juvenile delinquents, are just as hard as in an adult prison. B/c you can get swallowed up if you're not strong enough. That cliché, “only the

strong survive,” is really a serious deal when you’re locked up. And if you’re weak, you will get swallowed up, you’ll get taken. And I wasn’t going to be one of those. So it was easy for me to lock up if I had to – get down with them at the drop of a hat. You disrespect me, you’ve got a problem. I’m not gonna disrespect you, ‘cause I don’t want a problem. But if you disrespect me, you got a problem and a big one, because I’m not gonna stop. And when I stop, it’s probably because you’re left on the floor bleeding and so on. That was my life at 14. That was my life.

Were there more? More prison? More using?

Oh, yeah. Oh, wow.

When I was in Juvenile Hall, there was no more using. When I got out of Juvenile Hall, in ‘87-88, I was so far into the gang life, it was who I was. I was no longer Dion, I was *D-Loc. And that was who I was. No more Dion. It was all D-Loc. I called myself that in gangster Crip, that was it. If you got a problem with it, do it. Handle it. That was the lifestyle. It was easy for me because again, I was an extremist. So I was gonna put the “Crip” in Crip, not the “C”; I was gonna put the “Crip” in Crip.

And just to backtrack a little bit, what Crip turned into was not what it started out as. Again, we were the bastard children of the Black Panther party, of the Black Power movement. So what Took [Stanley Williams, known as “Tookie”] and Raymond [Lee Washington; Williams and Washington were cofounders of the Crips gang in LA in the late 1960s] started evolved into this thing you see today. And it’s so far removed from the way it began, it’s amazing. I look at it now, and “Wow.” I was talking to one of my homies and “Wow, we did this. We did this.” You can glorify Tookie and you can take his life and you can send him to where he needs to be in the afterworld [Williams was executed by the State of California in 2005], but we all did it. If you want to blame someone, you blame us all, because we’re all responsible for the degradation you see today in the black community. We did it and I’m sorry, because what you see today is a rerun. I did it to the full. I was the one they made the movie about.

And as far as jail is concerned, there were many jail stints. I had many jail stints. At 19, I did my first County Jail bid, and it was uncomfortable, because it wasn’t Juvenile Hall. It was big boys, it was men, and you had to act as such. If you’re gonna be at a men’s jail, you have to act as a man; but if you’re a kid, you don’t know how to be a man – you’ve never been taught how to be a man. You may have the man’s physiology, but the persona and the mindset is still kid – it’s still childish. So you’re gonna get checked. Some old guy’s gonna say “You’d better shut up! You’d better ease back, youngster.” That’s what they call you, youngster. That was 15 days in a 30-day bid.

But that wasn’t the last. That was the first of many and it was pushing forward – fast forwarding to my prison life. Because I went to the penitentiary at 21, for selling drugs. Direct sale to an undercover cop. Cocaine, crack cocaine. I used weed, but I became a crack addict and an alcoholic. I can say I went to jail for selling drugs, but I went to jail for using drugs, because I was selling drugs to use drugs. I was selling drugs to feed my habit, to take care of my habit. I was a young dopehead, a young dope fiend, at 19.

At 20, they busted me, the day after the Gulf War started. Directly after the Gulf War started, the very next day, they locked me up. And I did my first bid at the penitentiary at 21, but I did it in the hole [solitary confinement]. I spent 15 months in the hole, on 24-

hour lockdown, for assault on [prison] staff. Again, I was a bad actor; I was very bad. I'm not glorifying it, I am reliving it, because this is where we're at, if you want to know. I was a bad actor. I was a bad dude. And my thought process was in the gutter. If it didn't suit my belief system, which was already shaped from days of old, it didn't compute. It didn't equal out. So I had to make it equal out. And the way I made it equal out was how it felt good to me.

So that was my first time in the penitentiary, in 1991. I got out in 1992. I had a problem with drugs and I knew it, so I went ahead and told my parole officer, who put me in a drug program. Which was for show, because all I wanted to do was have her not send me back to jail.

Did you get clean in prison?

I got clean in prison, under those circumstances, under those parameters. Because I was a Crip. Crips don't pay taxes. Neither do Bloods [the main rival street gang, also founded in LA]. Bloods don't pay taxes, either. If you see somebody that's paying taxes, they're probably rehabilitated. But I'm a Crip, so I can't be a dopehead, a dope fiend, in prison. They had drugs in prison – they had cocaine, heroin, weed. You could smoke weed, and you could drink the manufactured, prison pruno which is the alcohol [fermented fruit beverage brewed by inmates]. That's gangster. That's acceptable. But you can't be smoking crack and shooting dope in jail. I would've been trying to dig a hole in the ground with a plastic spoon, trying to get up out of there (laugh), and I would've been ostracized. I wouldn't have been accepted by my homeboys. Nah, that's weak, and I was anything but weak. I was anything but that. You won't classify me as a weakling. So I didn't do it. I waited till I got outside. But when I'm inside, I've got to be a soldier.

I went to rehab, because I didn't want to go back to prison. And I knew that if she [his parole officer] had tested me and I tested dirty, there was a large chance that I would go to jail. So I said, "You know what, I got a problem with cocaine. I need help." And she said, "OK, I'm glad you stepped forward. That's good. That's commendable." I said, "All right! [in a whisper] She fell for it." That was the first program I was in. That was the *Capitol West program, on the Westside of Los Angeles, and I stayed there 94 days – clean and sober.

And on the 94th day, I said "I'm clean, I've got the answer, I've got the method. I can leave now." Against all odds, against the will of my counselors, I went ahead and left. And in no time flat, the urge hit me and I was back on drugs again (snaps fingers) just like that, the same day, which led me back to prison, a few months later. And that started my debacle with that – back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I spent all my 20s behind the walls. I started out at 21 and I finished at 27.

What changed?

I got tired of going to prison. That's what changed. I got tired of going to prison and I stopped. I was sitting in my neighborhood where I grew up, alone, lost in a familiar land if you will – lost. If that makes sense – it doesn't make sense, but it does, because here I am in my neighborhood. This is my birth village, if you will. This is where I was raised. And I was lost. I didn't know where I was going.

So I was supposed to be in a drug program, and I ended up in Royal Palms [Recovery Center, on Westlake Avenue, near MacArthur Park], as God would have it. That was 13 years ago. I just celebrated 13 years of sobriety – clean and sobriety time on the 11th of this month. So I haven't looked back since 1998, March 11, 1998. And I became a drug counselor, in '99.

How did that happen? What was the shift?

It was a shift. It was a culture shift; it was a mind shift. It was a spiritual awakening. Again, I just got tired of going to prison. And once that mindset was firmly embedded in me, I couldn't get loose from it.

I burned my blue rag [blue bandanna commonly worn by Crips]. I burned my blue rag, because, even though I stopped representing, I was a Cuz. I wasn't a Crip anymore – we say "Cuz." I was a Cuz, I wasn't a Crip, meaning I wasn't active. And I was sober and I was going to meetings. One day I was at this meeting at the *MB House and there was this little girl, one of my homegirls, one of my sober friends' daughters. She saw me and said, "You're a liar." I said, "What you talking about?" And she said, "You said you don't do that no more." I said, "Do what?" I had my blue rag on the table. I had it because I would sweat, so I would dab my forehead [when] I sweat. The idea of that being a blue rag never even came into play. I was just dabbing my forehead. But it was a blue rag.

She said, "You said you don't do that no more." I said, "Do what?" She said, "That!" I said, "Oh, this? Oh, I don't do this." And she said, "So why do you carry that?" This is a little girl. She's 13 and I'm having a conversation with her. I said, "I just dab my sweat with this." She said, "Nah, nah, nah, you're a liar. You're a liar." I said, "I'm *not* a liar. I don't gang bang any more." And she said, "Well, then, burn it." I'm thinking, "Silly little girl – go away." (laughs)

Now I can fold it up and put it away. I can use it to dab my forehead with and I could say I'm not representing it. But the whole idea of burning it? That's like saying I'm a Blood and I'm not a Crip. That's just taboo – you don't do that, you don't switch up. At least I don't switch up. But she would *not* leave me alone the whole meeting. So my other homie from Compton [and I were] thinking about that. I couldn't even listen to the speaker at the meeting, [because] I was focused on what she had said to me. So after the meeting, we went outside, me and my homie, and I took my blue rag out and I got a lighter from my partner and – boom. I set it on fire. I set it on fire. And I think that was the day that I really stopped saying [I was a] Cuz.

I'll say it now because we're talking, but you won't catch me saying that in general conversation. Even with other Crips, you won't hear me say it, because that's not who I am today.

It doesn't pay. I have more to lose today. I have a wife; I have two little girls. And this life – my worst day sober is better than my best day high. My worst day working for the Department of Mental Health is better than my best day as a Crip, and I wouldn't trade it for all the blue rags. I wouldn't trade it for nothing. I wouldn't trade it at all. There's nothing out there – there's nothing in that life, that that life could offer me, that would make me go back. Like I said, I do pay taxes today. And I want to be a part of that help model. I want to be an ambassador for peace.

I don't see color no more. I really don't. I know you probably hear that, but I really don't. My first daughter's half white. Now, for a person who came from the uprising that I had, the background I had in that predominantly black neighborhood, it was unheard of. It was really unheard of for us to mix races like that, but because I am an ambassador for peace, I don't even think along those lines no more.

When did things really change for you?

March 11, 1998. That's when it happened for me, when I made the conscious decision to get sober. And everything else fell into place. It was a clear picture for me. I got kicked out of the program for fighting. It didn't come easy – this lifestyle I'm in, that I'm living today – it didn't come easy. I got kicked out for fighting. And my boy was taking me to the hospital because I had this guy's teeth in my knuckle. So we're going to [LA County] General Hospital. Normally a situation like that would push me to go get high; I'm ready to go do some more dirt. It hit me that I wasn't, and I was like "Oh!" You ever get one of those "Oh!" moments? He said, "What's wrong with you, D?" I said, "Man, right now I should be high." He said, "I don't wanna hear this!" And I said, "No, no, no, I'm fine. I'm good. *I'm not high.* This is what they were talking about – I'm not high. And the situation's calling for me to get high." It was a spiritual awakening. It was a psychic change. The computer chip that had been wedged in for so long had popped out; and it was replaced with one that allowed me to see that my life could be used for the better.

How did you get your current job?

I am a CAS, a certified addiction specialist. My first job was as a counselor downtown on Skid Row, at the Volunteers of America program STEP program [Special Treatment Entry Program, run by Volunteers of America of LA, a Salvation Army-based service organization]. They were one of the first and only programs [at the] time that required their counselors to be certified. So it was a series of written exams and a series of oral exams. And I passed them all with flying colors.

But that wasn't enough for me, because I wanted to be more. So I enrolled in LACC [Los Angeles Community College] and they had a human services program. And I think the answer's right there, the answer to the question you've been asking me, which is, "When did it really hit me?" While I was learning about how to be a counselor, while I was learning about what it would take [in learning] psychology, it hit me that this is where I should be. And it felt right.

I think my first milestone came when I made amends to the LAPD [Los Angeles Police Department]. They were dropping off alcoholics, drunks, all day long. And I was in the amends process of my recovery [Step 8 in the Twelve-Step recovery process, to make amends is to make restoration or redress of the harm one's addiction has caused others]. And I had to make amends to them. And they were sitting there, [saying,] "What?" I have a mark right here when they tried to take my eye out with a billy club. I lost it. I was that drunk – I had lost it and I had attacked them. I had gotten beat up by them a couple of weeks before, so I got tired of taking the beatings. So I had lashed out and attacked two of them. It didn't end well for me (chuckles). But that was my milestone. That was when I knew, "OK, I can do this." That was it.

As a mental health counselor, it's enjoyable. It really is. I've never been a product of the mental health system. But I relate, because I've eaten out of garbage cans at 25. [I've been] out of compliance with parole and living homeless on the streets and being on drugs. That's the lifestyle. So it would look to the naked eye like [I was] crazy out of my mind. My cousin saw me one day at Winchell's [Donut House]. My leg was twisted this way. I was dramatically underweight and I smelled like I needed to be alone. And he said, "D, what's up, man? You're all right?" And I was like, "Yeah." *No!* I didn't have a mirror. [He said,] "Uh-uh. Come on to the house and give you some rest and take a shower, man; get you some food. And I [said], "No, man, I'm good." That whole concept of I was raised in a home. I was raised eating at a dinner table, sleeping in a bed. Now I'm more comfortable lying next to the garbage can at the neighborhood Winchell's. It was a major culture shift. It was a major mind change, a thought change. So it was amazing to people who knew me.

What's it like working with mental health clients, as a counselor?

Being a health professional gives me a chance to give back. The two people I wish I could go back and apologize to and make it right are gone. My grandmother and my great aunt. They took over my mother's job to raise me. I'm their only grandchild. My mother never had any other children. And I paid them back with misery and pain. I mean, I would have pawned my grandmother for crack. They had to get me out of their life so that they could grow old peacefully. They were already elder people when I was screwing up. [It was] their twilight, their aging process. It was supposed to be peaceful. These women had never done a bad thing in their life. And the only thing they had ever done for me was take care of me and the best thing I could do for them was to cause them misery.

I owe them that, and the way I give it back is to give it to my clients. I started out in the drug and alcohol field and now I'm here [at Palmdale], which was a challenge for me. And I'm able to give to them what I was giving my clients in the drug and alcohol treatment system. Compassion, genuineness, understanding, forgiveness. Because in this system, they think it's their fault. It's not their fault. Mental illness is not their fault. Mental illness is a chemical imbalance. It hurts. It's misunderstood by people who don't have mental illness. As a health professional, I can help them understand that, "OK, you do belong to the general population that walks in society. You belong there. You're not placed outside of that population; you belong with this population, and it's OK. It's OK."

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Do you get as much from your clients as they get from you?

I hope I do. That's a good question, because I've always said that, if I care more about the client than they care about themselves, it's a waste. I always say that. I hope the groups that I'm doing and the individual therapies that I give are beneficial. I get a kick out of it, I get a real uplift when I come to work and I do this work. But I want to make sure that I'm doing the best for them. We have a tendency to say "my client, our client." That's a part of that stigma. It's still setting them aside, [saying,] "OK, you're over there and we're over here." No. They're not our clients or my clients; they're people who need help. And we're the help providers. It's a voluntary basis from both sides. They've asked for help; we've agreed to give them help. They're not our clients. They're just people who need help.

How does your new profession affect your life and your relationships?

I don't hang with my homeboys anymore. I have my neighborhood [tattooed] on my arm. I have it across my chest and I have it on my stomach, but that's not who I am anymore. And I was talking to one of my homeboys two Christmases ago. He was [saying,] "The hood don't need you like this no more, D-Loc." He wasn't trying to diss me, but he was trying to say, "Where you're at, this is where you're supposed to be at. The hood don't need you like that, and there's nothing you can do or that you can bring, because that's not you no more." I'd be a foreigner there today. I would be a foreigner in my neighborhood, because that's not who I am. I don't know how to Crip no more. I don't know how to carry a blue rag no more. I don't know how to join in and drink on the corner, tellin' "What's up, Cuz?" I don't wanna do that no more. It actually looks very stupid to me. I'll be 41 in April. Could you imagine me, at 41, with a blue rag in my left pocket, a 40-ounce in my right hand, saying, "What's up, Cuz?" on the corner?

I mean, you see me here today and the more you see me, [you can see that I] don't even look right. The lingo's different. The conversation is different. The mindset is different. I mean, I got homies that are still my friends. One of my boys was best man at my wedding, he was a regular '60's Crip. But he's not a Crip no more either, because he pays taxes. He became the supervisor of the IT dept at Arco Tower downtown. Imagine that! He is a success story. We were in treatment together; we were roommates at the Royal Palms. I came back there to do book studies up there for the clients and I [see that] they're so angry, man; they're unruly.

I said [to a counselor,] "Who's that? Were we like that?" He said, 'You were. You were just angry at everybody.'" And I'm like, "Wow!" "Am I like that now?" He said, "No." He called me a hug-a-thug, because we just wanna hug now. (laughs) He says, "Whatever your wife says, you do now. If your little girl cries, you're gonna run and try to hold her." Crips don't do that. Gangsters don't do that. Bad people don't do that. I'm not a bad person today. I thank God for my life. I thank God for this moment right now.

Thank you.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW