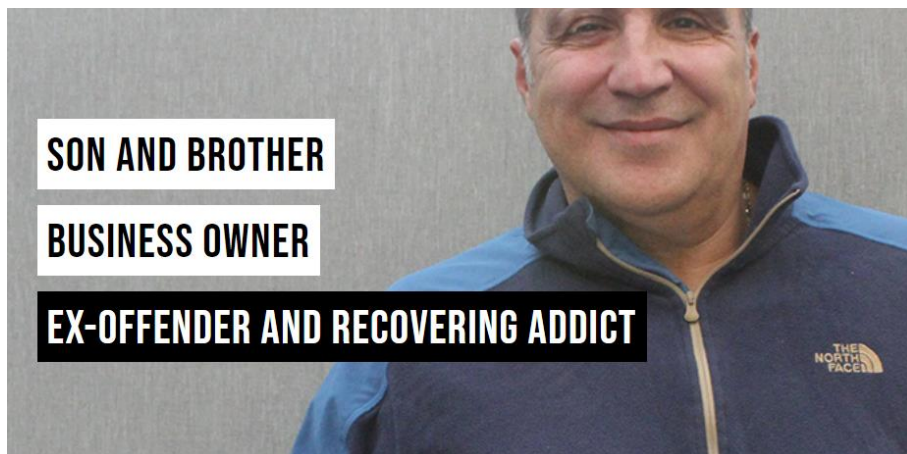


Ilario

Catering company owner

Autobiographical life story.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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This life story is reproduced, with permission, from the More Than My Past website at www.morethanmypast.org.uk. The website is produced by the charity the Forward Trust, which is at www.forwardtrust.org.uk. The Forward Trust empowers people to break the often interlinked cycles of addiction or crime to move forward with their lives. The life stories at the More Than My Past website are written by people the Forward Trust has helped.

1. Childhood

I grew up in a small town near Tuscany in Italy, living with my parents and grandparents. When I tell people about how my life was like growing up, most of them don't see my childhood as the typical beginnings of an addict or an offender in the way that they are sometimes portrayed on paper. Far from dysfunctional, I had everything as a child. I was well-looked-after by my parents, had a place to call home, I was well fed and I was sent to a religious private school.

My mother was very career-oriented from a young age and she had reached a high position as a matron. Her role consisted of overseeing the running of a hospital in Tuscany. She worked long hours and I didn't get to see her often. From a young age, I felt that my mum was critical of me. I always tried to win her approval and that became the dynamic between us. Growing up, I also began to notice that my father had a serious drinking problem. In the morning, he'd be a wonderful man and – by nightfall – he was a drunken lunatic. He also seemed to be the wimp in his friendship circle – and I told myself that I never wanted to be like him.

I was a shy little boy with no personality. But that all changed the day I discovered alcohol.

I never felt as though I was in control of my surroundings as a kid. I was a shy little boy with no personality. But that all changed the day I discovered alcohol. When I was 9 years old, I was on a trip to a family vineyard. It was a tradition to go there in October to cut grapes and to produce wine. Some of the children decided to go and play outside, so I followed them, which – in part – was because I was always so desperate for friendship, so I would do whatever the other kids did. The kids found the area where the wine was being made and each of them gargled a few drops of it, and then spat it out. I swallowed mine. As soon as I did, I felt something change inside me – that was the day I found my courage and the day that I switched from being a follower to a leader. When I began drinking regularly, however, I remembered never wanting to be like my father and that's when I exchanged the drink for drugs.

2. First Run-in with the Law

I first had a run-in with the law at 14 when I stole somebody's handbag whilst riding a moped. My mum was instantly in denial and never tried to address any of the reasons for or causes of my behaviour. I got into the army at 16, but was chucked out a couple of years later for using inside knowledge about firearms for my own criminality – I was also heavily into drugs by that point.

I lived in some sort of fantasy world – I felt like I was Al Pacino from Scarface with lots of cars and women around me – but in reality, I was a criminal who didn't want to work and I committed crimes to fund my addiction.

I came to London at the age of 20 in 1981. Subconsciously, I tried to use the opportunity to stop using drugs because I thought it would be easier once I was away from everything that was going on back home. But my using only got worse. It wasn't long before I then started using and selling heavy drugs, eventually leading me to ruin all my friends' lives because I also encouraged them to use heavy drugs too. When I look back, I really hate who I was becoming, but – at the time – I just couldn't see anything wrong with my behaviour. I lived in some sort of fantasy world – I felt like I was Al Pacino from Scarface with lots of cars and women around me – but in reality, I was a criminal who didn't want to work and I committed crimes to fund my addiction.

Unsurprisingly, I got arrested several times over the following years. One of my last prison sentences in 1989 was for possession with intent to supply class A drugs and possession of firearms, and I spent nearly 9 years behind bars until I came out in 1997. I was extremely arrogant and aggressive in prison, and my behaviour led me to get moved around to different prisons several times over the years. I also wanted to maintain my habit of using, so I'd borrow from everybody in prison and then get into fights about the money.

3. Forward Trust

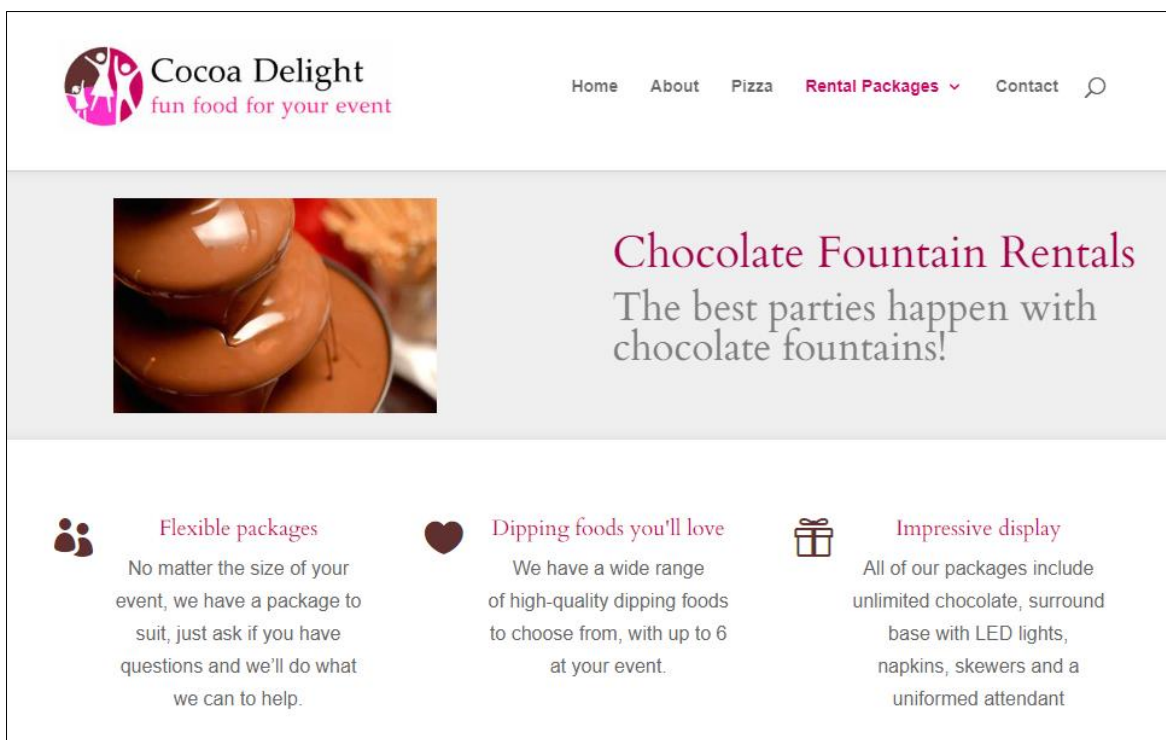
During my time at HMP Blundeston prison, I was given a job to carry around the plumber's toolbox. During one shift, a prison officer collapsed in front of me. I was then left alone with the officer whilst staff members had gone to look for help. My first thought was to check his pockets for any money or valuables. I didn't find any money on the officer, but I found his wedding ring and just as I was trying to pull it off of his finger, I heard footsteps behind me. I panicked and quickly started to perform CPR on the officer so that I could appear as genuine as possible in my 'concern' for him. Some months later, I was told that the prison officer survived and it was confirmed that he had suffered a heart attack. Until this day, I am not too sure if I had helped him live – but he certainly saved my life when he returned six months later to thank me, and to refer me to Forward's (then known as RAPt) abstinence-based programme that had recently begun running in prisons.

I completed the programme at HMP Coldingley, and I initially managed to stay nine months clean. The peace that I began to feel was incredible. I didn't have to fight people anymore, I didn't have to go to bed feeling anxious thinking about how I would get drugs the next day and I could finally eat real, wholesome food in the prison canteen instead of skipping meals and using canteen money to get drugs. Those were the little things, but it really started to make a difference. I did have a relapse, but I felt that I could open up now and I already had a beautiful glimpse into recovery – so I let the prison know what I was going through. With the support of a counsellor, I re-started the programme, got moved to another prison, and that's when recovery really started for me.

For the first time, I could see myself becoming an honest man and the transformation was incredible.

Doing the programme for the second time had a profound impact on me; I stopped using or selling drugs altogether on the 21st of November, 1996 and I have never looked back. Forward (then RAPt) also supported me with moving to an abstinence house when I came out of prison. I started going to AA meetings every day from the moment I left prison – and I still do today. I was then offered a job cleaning tables for an events company. At first, it did hurt my pride and I thought to myself 'How did Scarface become a cleaner?' But three days into the job, I really started to do my job with humility and I think management saw that within me when they then offered me full-time work. During my time there, I caught more than one employee stealing money and I would always challenge them made sure that they gave the money back. For the first time, I could see myself becoming an honest man and the transformation was incredible.

4. Cocoa Delight



The screenshot shows the website for Cocoa Delight, a catering company. The header includes the logo, the tagline "fun food for your event", and a navigation menu with links for Home, About, Pizza, Rental Packages (with a dropdown arrow), and Contact. The main content area features a large image of a chocolate fountain on the left and the heading "Chocolate Fountain Rentals" on the right, followed by the text "The best parties happen with chocolate fountains!". Below this, there are three columns of text, each with an icon and a title: "Flexible packages" (with a group of people icon), "Dipping foods you'll love" (with a heart icon), and "Impressive display" (with a gift icon). Each column contains a short paragraph describing the service.

Cocoa Delight
fun food for your event

Home About Pizza **Rental Packages** Contact

Chocolate Fountain Rentals

The best parties happen with chocolate fountains!

- Flexible packages**
No matter the size of your event, we have a package to suit, just ask if you have questions and we'll do what we can to help.
- Dipping foods you'll love**
We have a wide range of high-quality dipping foods to choose from, with up to 6 at your event.
- Impressive display**
All of our packages include unlimited chocolate, surround base with LED lights, napkins, skewers and a uniformed attendant

A page from the website of Ilario's Cocoa Delight catering company.

A couple of years later in 2000, I started to have a vision for my own business – and that's when I started Cocoa Delight. It began as a catering company for a football club and we used to serve hotdogs, fries and burgers outside of the football stadium. Today, the company has grown and I now cater for a range of events including parties, weddings, and bespoke catering events in London. All my employees are either ex-offenders or are in recovery themselves, and working with them is truly a joy. I was able to transfer those skills that made me a good criminal – such as decision-making – and use it for the greater good by opening a company and giving people with difficult pasts another chance to work hard and find fulfilment.

Life is beautiful now and being in recovery is like winning the lottery of life. I will say it over and over again, but no money could ever match what recovery has given me.

Since being in recovery, I have also returned to Italy and have managed to rebuild relationships with my mother, brother and sister, even though I thought I had lost them forever. This was a really important step for me and was part of my effort in making amends to those I have harmed, as outlined in step nine of the 12-step programme. I am now the son that I should have always been to my mum. The programme also helped me come to terms with the denial I was facing about my drug use, as well as the difficult relationship I had with my mother. She is still the same person I remember her to be from my childhood, but I can adapt now and change my behaviour accordingly – and as a result, our relationship today is stronger than ever.

I have a beautiful relationship with my wife whom I recently got married to. She has stood by my side for almost 20 years and she knows my full story, after having met me in my early days of recovery. In my spare time, I love going for walks with my dog. Life is beautiful now and being in recovery is like winning the lottery of life. I will say it over and over again, but no money could ever match what recovery has given me. I am very transparent about my journey and I even share it with other companies that I work with. When people buy my service, they are also buying my honesty – because that’s what recovery is about. Recovery is special and unique to each individual, and I am a proud owner of it.

Over the course of the coronavirus lockdown, More Than My Past ambassadors like me have been sharing stories of our experiences with the rest of the community, to send a message of strength and solidarity.

Cooking has been such an important outlet for me over the years I’ve been in recovery. Lockdown is the perfect time to give it a go. Check out my contribution to the series...you might learn a thing or two!
