A Second Chance for A Changed Life, Told with Brutal Honesty

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A second chance for a changed life, told with brutal honesty

He’s looked at law from both sides now, and The Arthur A. Duncan II ’12 likes being on the right side.

It wasn’t always that way.

Born in Los Angeles and raised primarily in Buffalo by his grandparents, Duncan fell in with a bad crowd in both places. In high school in LA, he skirted the edges of gang culture and suffered abuse from his cocaine-addicted stepfather. Back in Buffalo, he met up with some childhood friends and found himself selling drugs. He served three years in prison.

It’s then that Duncan’s story takes a hairpin turn. Determined to change his life, he enrolled at Erie Community College, earned an undergraduate degree at UB, completed law school, passed the bar and was admitted to practice. Today the former felon is an assistant corporation counsel for the City of Buffalo, working in the litigation department.

Duncan tells his made-for-Hollywood story in Felon-Attorney, a 256-page memoir published by Mascot Books. It’s a no-holds-barred account of his descent into criminality and his arduous journey to becoming a practicing lawyer.

“When I graduated from the Law School, I was 43 with a wife and five kids,” Duncan says from his office in City Hall. “If you’re in a job you don’t like… it’s never too late to go back to school.”

– The Arthur A. Duncan II ’12

Duncan says he had dreamed of becoming a lawyer, but assumed that dream was moot because of his record. But a supportive professor at ECC looked into it and found that someone with a felony conviction could be admitted to the New York State Bar if he was cleared by the Bar Association’s Character and Fitness Committee. The catch: He would have to complete law school and pass the bar exam before going before the committee. There was no guarantee he would be admitted.

He took the risk. “I believe that God was with me,” he says, “so I stepped out on faith and believed that I could do it.”

The risk paid off. But nothing about the journey was easy. After graduating cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in legal studies, he was waitlisted for two years in a row at SUNY Buffalo Law. He decided to spend his 1L year at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, making it a three-hour drive home to Buffalo. He was so concerned with his family responsibilities, Duncan says, that his grades suffered in that first semester. But he buckled down, got the grades up and transferred to SUNY Buffalo Law for his last two years.

Now, as an attorney, he helps with Buffalo’s response to lawsuits as varied as slip-and-falls on city sidewalks to injuries and bullying in the schools. He’s also active as a deacon at First Calvary Missionary Baptist Church and helps mentor young men there, and tells his story in motivational speeches to students and community organizations. He and his wife, Latisha Duncan, are parents to five children.

Felon-Attorney, Duncan says, was written piece by piece as he made his way through law school, and really came together in his final year at University at Buffalo School of Law. The book is one way he can make a difference in the lives of others who are struggling.

“I got a second chance,” he says, “and people got in my corner and looked out for me. I want other people to believe that you can have a second chance and be successful despite something you did in your past.”