



Rick Brinkley

Minister, State Senator, Recovering Gambling Addict

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Rick Brinkley was the minister of the Collinsville Community Church, an Emmy-nominated television producer in Oklahoma, Baltimore, and New York City, and President/CEO of Eastern Oklahoma's Better Business Bureau and then its Chief Operating Officer from 1999 to 2015.

He became a State Senator in 2010, serving as the Chair of Pensions, Vice-Chair of the Finance Committee, and a member of the Appropriations, Energy, Health and Human Services, and Business and Commerce Committees.

In August 2015, Brinkley resigned his seat as he was being investigated on accusations of embezzlement from his employer. The embezzlement was related to his gambling addiction. He was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison.

As a noted public speaker, Rick travels the country telling the story of his gambling addiction, what it did to his life, and what others can do to regain control of theirs.

If you or someone you know has a gambling addiction, call The National Problem Gambling helpline: 1-800-GAMBLER.

Listen to Rick talk about how his addiction brought him comfort, the day he learned he was under investigation, and his days in prison on the Podcast and website of VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 8:22

Did the Two-step at Five

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling and today's date is November 12th, 2024. So, Rick, would you state your full name, please?

Ricky Brinkley (RB): Sure. Legal name is Ricky Lawrence Brinkley, but I go by Rick Brinkley.

JE: Named after somebody?

RB: Well, you know, as most families do, my middle name is Lawrence and I asked one day why I was named Lawrence and I was told it was my grandfather's middle name; and I asked my grandfather about it and he goes, "That's not my middle name." So that's where we are.

JE: And we are recording this in the facilities of Voices of Oklahoma. And your birth date?

RB: July 25th, 1961.

JE: And that makes your present age?

RB: 63 years old.

JE: Where were you born?

RB: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

JE: Let's talk about your mother: her maiden name, where she was born, what kind of person she was.

RB: Sure. My mom is 87 years old, still going strong. Her maiden name was Fifer: F-I-F-E-R. She was from Collinsville, Oklahoma and graduated from there. My dad is from Monticello, Arkansas. He has passed away; his name was Donald Daniel Brinkley. His father and his uncle were raised in an orphanage, so we don't know much about any of that side of the family. My father's father ended up dying in a bus accident when my dad was eight and my dad dropped out of school and started picking cotton. My favorite part of that is that he was driving a taxi cab at 13, worked his way up, never graduated high school, and ended up becoming that cars were his thing — became the general manager of a car dealership here in Tulsa for decades. And just was a good man who'd overcome a lot and did great things.

JE: That was your father?

RB: That was my father.

JE: And, so obviously, he had an outgoing personality and that type of thing?

RB: Yes, he was one of those people that everyone loved. I mean, I'm still... Some people, who are well known, some who are people I've never met before in my life, will stop me and say, "You know, your dad did this for me, and you don't know this, but your dad is what, you know, kept me going."

One of the stories is from someone who's very well known in this community, but I won't say his name pulled me aside one day and he goes, "My father and your father knew each other through the car dealership," and his father was a doctor, and he said, "I needed to borrow a car; my car was in the shop, and your dad's like, 'Here, I'll give you a car to drive.'"

And he said — the car got stolen and he goes, my dad, maybe go in there and tell him that I had lost this car, a brand new car that he would just let me borrow. And he goes, "Your dad just looked at me and he goes, 'Things happen,'" and he said, "I'll just never forget that. As long as I live, that I was just waiting to be yelled at and screamed at," and you know, and he goes, "I was, like, in high school and he — your dad — just bent over backward to make me feel OK".

And that's who my dad was.

JE: Your mother's personality? And what did she do?

RB: My mom was a stay-at-home mom until all three of us graduated and then she went into the real estate business. She's one of those people that the... Again you will, people like my siblings — I've got two younger sisters — and we will say the same thing that we will be out and people will walk over and go, "Oh, I met your mom and she's the sweetest woman I've ever met in my life."

Now, our response is, "I don't know who you met. That was not my mom."

But we say that laughingly. She is that way. She really is. But she has always had a pretty good sense of humor. And so we have dealt with that.

I kind of tell everyone that she had three rules when we were growing up, which was that when you were four years old, you had to be in the living room every Saturday morning to learn how to dance. So we had the little, you know, 45-78, you know, record players and she would play these 45s from when she was in high school. And I knew how to two-step by the time I was five years old. So we learned all those dances.

When you were six, you were responsible for dinner one night a week. And that meant that on Saturdays, the three of us kids would gather at the table and she would just dump a pile of cookbooks on the dining room table, and we would have to go through and figure out what we were gonna fix — but you could not fix anything out of a box. Everything had to be from scratch. I did Tuesday nights and then we would have to calculate: if you needed a quarter cup of flour, and she needed three quarters of a cup of flour, how much flour do we have to have?

We go to the grocery store. So I got to fourth grade and Mrs Deering was — all the kids were so confused on fractions. And I was like, “Mrs. Deering, just bring in some measuring cups. It will make so much more sense to everybody.”

And so she would be in the kitchen with us on our night and taught us how to cook. And so all three of us kids have that ability to cook. And the third thing was that when you were 14, you got a checking account and you had to balance your checkbook every month. And my mother said that if anything ever happened to her, we knew how to dance, we knew how to feed ourselves, and we knew how to take care of finances. And those are the only three things you need to know to be able to survive.

JE: (Giggling) That's marvelous. That's great.

RB: Yeah, so we learned a lot of great lessons through the years.

JE: So, are you a cook today?

RB: Absolutely. And it's really funny. I've passed it on to my grandson. You know, like all grandparent relationships. He would spend time — I'm "Pee-Paw" and he's "Pie." That's his nickname. I still call him that but his real name is Christian. And he and I would make cheesecakes. He loved cheesecake. So, we tailgated the Oklahoma State Games. He's living in Houston. He and his wife came up and they turned in their request for what cheesecakes they wanted. And so I made their cheesecakes for the tailgate, but they're heavily involved in their church.

And I said to him one day, "What are you doing?"

He goes, "Well, I'm in charge of cooking everything for everybody else."

And there was this part of me that goes, "The baton has been passed," you know, so...

He and I were at a store over the weekend. We met in Dallas. Several of us met in Dallas and we went into a store and he was holding up spices and he goes, "Now this is my go-to spice for rubs on what I'm working on when I'm smoking." So there's that thing of knowing that the generational ability to cook has been passed on.

JE: That is wonderful. Your education — grade school — where was that?

RB: We did not have kindergarten when I was a kid. So I did grades 1 through 12 in Collinsville — graduated from there. I always joke: I was the first person on either side of my family to go to college. I was the first college drop-out on either side of my family. I got an internship during my junior year of college at Channel Six here in Tulsa. And that turned into a job; and left there. I was there for a couple of years. I ended up in Baltimore working for a TV station there, then I ended up in New York City as one of the producers of the Sally Jesse Raphael show in New York City. I came back to go to seminary — your normal job transition.

In the meantime, I had to finish a bachelor's degree. So I was not exactly the most academic student in the world. So I took my transcript, and at that time, it was called UCAT — University Center at Tulsa — where it was OU OSU, Langston and NSU out of Talequah. And I just went around and

said, "What's the fastest degree I can get? I don't care what it's in."

Langston University gave me a degree and 30 credits for what I'd already accomplished in Liberal Education, which is a degree in absolutely nothing, but I went to college.

And that got me into Oral Roberts University's School of Theology. I ended up with a master's degree there and ended up as pastor of a church in Collinsville for 10 years.

JE: Alright. Why go to school of theology? What led to that?

RB: Well, I had been involved in this. When I moved back from New York, I started going to this church in Collinsville and had always worked with kids. When I was in Baltimore, I worked with kids; and they talked to me about doing youth work and I would fill in for the minister when he was out of town preaching. And it kind of just became this unseen calling, and people kind of were like, "You need to do this." And then I ended up, when that senior pastor retired, I became the minister.

JE: Yeah. And the Oklahoma State University School of Education?

RB: Well, what happened was is that in between of all of that, after I had finished the master's degree, I had really started to look at doing a doctorate in higher education administration. And I had started the doctorate and ended up getting a different job. And it was just like, "I can't do that right now. I can't do the schooling right now because I got to finish this job." And, like many of us who have done these things, then never went back and finished.

Chapter 3 – 14:25

Slot Machines

John Erling (JE): Before we move on — and I think our listeners would like to pick up as to when your gambling addiction began. And, so, let me ask you that first: When did it start?

Ricky Brinkley (RB): You know, I had gambled. I was part of an organization that would have two meetings a year. One was in Atlantic City, one was in Las Vegas. And, at that point, it was just gambling like you would do if — because there would be a group of us and we would all go to the blackjack table and we'd play blackjack and then somebody'd go, "Okay, our dinner reservations are done," and we'd get up and we'd walk away.

And, so, I had gambled. It was not an addiction, but I had gambled at that point. The funny part of all this is that, to this day, I have still never had a drink of alcohol in my life. I have never smoked; I have never smoked any weed. My grandmother smoked cigarettes and I took a puff off of one of hers when I was about five and that was the end of that. But never used the drug, never even smoked marijuana — led this pretty chaste life. My friends would always just laugh.

But what happened was is that one day somebody had called and said, "Do you wanna go? We're gonna all go out gambling tonight. Do you wanna go?"

And I was like, "I don't think so. It's just not my thing."

And so they say, "Come on, come on."

And I went, and it was a pretty instant addiction thing for me because when I got there, I went back to the back part of the casino where there were some slot machines with some friends, and we were just sitting there laughing, and suddenly everything outside of that building disappeared. Nobody wanted anything from me. It was me and this machine; and it escalated very rapidly.

JE: How old are you?

RB: At this time? I am guessing I am — and this is really just a guess — I'm guessing I'm somewhere in my early forties maybe?

JE: So then at what part of your career did you start that? Does that put you at the better Business Bureau or does it — where does it put you?

RB: It was. I was at the Better Business Bureau, but there was also a lot of other things that had happened. I'm kind of ... I'm condensing the timeline a little bit. There's also people wanting me to run for office — those kinds of things. And so I just lived in this world where I was — and, again, it's gonna sound very counterintuitive — but I was, you know, still doing some church work —you know, people needing help, people talking, people are always calling, wanting stuff — and I always tell everybody: “I never did anything that I didn't want to do.”

I mean, I was going 80 miles an hour constantly but it was just that first time that I got into that casino where it was just a feeling of... You're writing that high and low of winning, and losing, and all that kind of stuff, and it was just like nothing else mattered — vanished. I mean, everything else just vanished.

JE: So was that when you were at the community church?

RB: No, it was it was definitely — I was at the Better Business Bureau

JE: Alright. Pastor of the Collinsville Community Church for 10 years. And... kind of talk to us about the needs of that church in that community and how you work to... I mean, being a pastor is more than preaching from the pulpit, it's doing everything else.

RB: Absolutely. You know, my son said it best. My son said that, “My dad has been there for everything in everyone's family except for the conception of the children. And if they had invited him to do that, he probably would have been there.”

What happens is that this particular church was something that just connected to me, because it was a church that was started during the depression. There's a group of women who quilted; they all went to different churches, but none of them could afford to keep a minister. And so these women were talking. They say, “Wouldn't it be really nice if everybody in town could go to the same church and we could all have a minister?”

And so they talked to their husbands about it. They talked to different people about it. And then in December of 1930 the community church opened up which was for anyone in the community, regardless of denomination. Part of the bylaws said: "No creed but Christ, no law but love."

And so, as a minister there, it was, it was kind of the best of everything. I mean, we had everything from Assembly of God to former Catholics. I mean, there was everyone was there. So if your tradition was is that you were baptized by immersion, or you were baptized by sprinkling, the general attitude of the church was those are things that are between you and God. They're not between you and the church. And the church grew while I was there. And everyone's in a small town; the minister is just part of everyone's lives. I mean, I went to all the baseball games; I went to the chorus concerts; I went to the band concerts.

And a lot of those people... Now, I left there about 25 years ago that I left there, and I had been there for, you know, for 10 years before that. So over that 35 years, there's people that still call me from that church to say, "Hey, what do you think I should do about this," or "Can you please come and talk to our kids," and, and it's just very relationship based.

JE: How many other churches were there in Collinsville?

RB: Oh, my gosh. I think there were 30 other churches in Collinsville while I was there. I mean...

JE: And that's a small community.

RB: That's a small community.

JE: It's north of Tulsa by about 20 minutes or so. It's considered part of Tulsa, actually. So then what made you want to leave that? And then you did get into television?

RB: Well, I been in television prior to all of this. I left TV, probably, in about 1992 I think. Somewhere in there. I've always said, "I've got career ADD," which is, I can do something for about 10 years. And then I'm like, "I've done this, I

gotta go do something else.”

This is just a really odd story to throw in because also in the midst of this, I had a contract with the Miss America organization to be in charge of their judging program. And so I worked with Ernst and Young who did all the accounting for it — the tabulation of the ballots and those kinds of things — and my job was to get the judges, walk them through the judging process, make sure that they were sequestered all the things that you do. And I still remember one night Kris Jenner of, you know, the Kardashians.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement).

RB: She was one of the judges that year and — I feel like I'm name dropping here; she would never remember me, of course, but I will always remember her — is that we were sitting at a table at dinner. And one of the anchors from Good Morning America was there and we were all sitting around talking. And it was my first conversation, really, with Kris and I said, “You know, I'm obviously not your target audience. So, I have not ever seen your show,” and those kinds of things.

She says, “I get that.”

And I said, “You know, I'm one of those people that if I ever got a reality show, I would be really excited. Then after the first season I would go. ‘Yeah, I've done it. I'm done.’” I said, “I have this habit of, like, a 10 year career ADD and I walk away.” And I said, “The good thing is I've been able to do great things and be able to do all kinds of things, but I've never walked anything out to its logical conclusion of where this would end up.”

And she dropped her fork, and — she was not angry — but she was very emphatic. And she took her fork and she was pointing her fork at me. And she said, “No,” she said, “You walk every opportunity you have out to a logical conclusion.” She goes, “My kids wanted to do a reality show show,” and she goes, “I pitched that show, and I pitched that show,” and she goes, “On the first day, they showed up and we worked for 14 hours; and when the crew left, the kids were laying on the floor in the living room and going, ‘Oh, my God! I'm exhausted.’” And she said, “I looked at them and said, ‘Guess what? You get to get up and do this again tomorrow.’” And she said,

“They were just groaning.” But she said, “That opportunity provided the fact that even back when this happened,” she goes, “my kids will never have to work again if they don't want to.”

They have made so much money —

JE: Off that show.

RB: — off that show, and in the endorsement deals, and all of those things. You know, I remember the son had a sock deal and everything.

And she said — and her line was — “When God opens a door, you walk it out till it ends.” And she goes, “This will end.” She goes, “I'm not a fool. I know this will end. But we are going to take full advantage of that.”

And I think that is one of the failings of my life, if you want to call it that, is that I never did walk anything out to its logical conclusion because my ADD would kick in and I would be like, “I gotta go do something else.”

So that's the reason I left the church. It wasn't any crisis of faith or anything like that. And I still preached at different churches, and helped out when a minister was gone, or they were trying to find somebody. But it was just, “I've got to do something else.”

JE: So then you got into that and then you alluded to the fact that you went to New York. Talk to us more about that.

RB: Right. It's that you...

JE: You said you worked at KOTV?

RB: KOTV, Channel Six.

JE: What did you do there?

RB: I was started out as a producer. I was one of those kids that... I was one of those dorky kids that would watch all the award shows when I was a little. We watched the Grammys, the Oscars, the Tonys, the Emmys, whatever it

was. And I didn't know what the Tonys were. I was from Collinsville, so I didn't know anything about theater, but I would watch the others.

And there was this part of me that just said, "One of these days, I'm going to be there." I always joke that, you know, I had this huge crush on Marsha Brady and I figured that was my pathway to find her was through television.

And so I went to Oklahoma State and was majoring in — then it was called Radio, TV, and Film Journalism, and I ended up with an internship. There was a TV show at the time called PM Magazine and Christopher Lewis and Mary Anne Massey were the hosts. And so I came in as this intern. The producer left.

They said, "Can you fill in until we hire somebody?"

I said, "Absolutely." And so here I am, this 20-year-old kid or 19, 20-year-old kid. It worked. And they said... So the production manager came to me — or programming manager — came and said, "We'd like to hire you for the job."

And it was one of those moments where you realize this is the opportunity I've been looking for. But I had to go home and tell my parents that their first child who'd ever gone to college was about to drop out.

They were, they were very supportive, very supportive. And I think the main reason they were supportive is because my younger sister was about to go to college and they weren't going to have to pay for two college tuitions and all that at the same time.

And so I was there for a couple of years. That turned into another TV show that evolved into a show called Tulsa Magazine, which aired going into the five o'clock news.

JE: Was Doug Dodd a part of that?

RB: Doug had been on PM Magazine...

JE: Okay.

RB: ... but he had left after he had graduated law school. And then that's where they hired Christopher Lewis. And his mom was Loretta Young, which was a big conversation here in town at the time. And, so, we did that. And we did that show for a couple of years; and I just still remember the very first time it was a live show.

And they said, "Can you produce a live show?"

I'm like, "Sure." I'd never produced a live show. Ignorance is bliss.

And so the very first time I was in a booth on a live TV show was the day we went live. But it's one of those things where everything about television made sense to me on how you did it.

And so I did well there. This show was syndicated, and so there were syndicators who are in charge of the syndication, who had come in to visit. They got to know me.

And then Oprah had just left the show "People Are Talking" in Baltimore to go to do AM Chicago. And so she took a producer with her. So they were looking for a producer. Somebody on the program that I was working with gave them my name; they contacted me.

And so I go off to Baltimore all by myself and am producing this show. It was the glory days of local television. I mean, I worked for a TV station that... they also still did PM magazine. They had a documentaries unit. You could literally come in with an idea for a special and they would weigh it out and you could do it.

And so I was working on a local talk show that had three producers, an executive producer, two hosts, an audience coordinator, and a budget to fly in all of our guests. And I was, you know, 20-something — early twenties — just kind of living my best life.

Over time, I was recruited to go into the news department and did some on-air stuff, and also did special projects. The segments that would be in a

ratings period, I was part of a team that created those kind of ... “packages,” as we call them. And those were highly-promotable things. Kind of did that for 10 years and was like, “Okay I gotta start looking for something else.” It was one of those things where you wake up one morning and you go, “This chapter is over; you gotta start looking.”

JE: Do you ever want to be a performer yourself?

RB: Performer? No. I definitely wanted to be on air. There was no question about that. And they provided me those opportunities to keep me around a little bit longer. I enjoyed that.

JE: Did you interview people or what did you do when on air?

RB: I would host programs. Some of the crazy stuff I did was they had a thing called “Dialing For Dollars”, which, you know, we always kind of joke about that phrase, those of my age, but they actually had the show. And so I would do Dialing for Dollars. I did voiceover work — a lot of voiceovers — before them.

The irony of this is that I was also the backup voice and host of the Maryland State Lottery, which was gambling.

JE: (Laughing)

RB: The irony of all of that comes back full circle.

JE: Right, right.

RB: And ended up leaving there and coming back home, wanting to finish up my degree, and I'd kind of check this box of like, “TV is over. It's time to grow up.”

Chapter 4 – 14:25

Sally Jesse Raphael

Ricky Brinkley (RB): One day, I get a phone call from a friend of mine who was associated with the Sally Jesse Raphael show. And she goes, “We've been looking for you for three months. Where are you?”

And I said, “I'm in Collinsville, Oklahoma.”

And he's like, “Where the hell is that?”

And so we were talking, and they ... “We want you to come up and interview for a producer spot.”

And it was really funny. It was a bit of arrogance, but I had already decided that I was done with TV. And I got on the plane. And the reason I went for the interview was is because I knew — I calculated how many frequent flyer miles I would get for the job interview, and that would get me a free ticket for what I needed. I got up there and got to spend a couple of days in New York City.

And it was a city that I'd visited many times coming up from Baltimore. And I'd always go, “I will never live in this town. I will never live here” And went into the studios and met with the executive producer of the program. And it was one of those things where it's like, “This is where I need to be right now.”

John Erling (JE): Tell the folks — Jessie Raphael — what the show was. She was so famous and what did she do?

RB: You know, it was the beginning stages of talk shows and it was the... Phil Donahue was the big name at the time; and then Sally.

Some of the stuff was very mundane. I mean, especially compared to today's world — pretty mundane. We were at the beginning stages of going into the craziness, but there was a bit of — and this is not being arrogant of myself; it is really talking about Sallie herself. There was a bit of elegance about her that, well, like, “I don't do that stuff.”

And we would get close to the edge every once in a while, or sometimes we would ... You know, there's that line you're not supposed to cross and

sometimes we would catapult over it. You know, sometimes we would go off.

And it was really funny. They brought me in one day and they wanted me to watch a demo tape. And I watched it and it was one of the most boring things I'd ever sat through and they said, "Do you have any interest in taking over this show or working on this show?"

And I said, "Absolutely not. I — no — I can't deal with this." And it was Jerry Springer.

JE: Hmm! (Incredulously)

RB: And what happened was, Jerry — not that I know him, but I call him Jerry as that's his first name. But Jerry had been like the mayor of Cleveland, I think it was. And he was well known, had this talk show in Cleveland, and he started this show. And the show had been canceled during its first season because it was just so boring. And they had brought in multiple producers to try to shape it up and it had not worked.

And the producer at the time, that was in that final stages of like, "Look, we've been canceled, we still have to fulfill our number of episodes, but we've got nothing to lose." And they just flung. They went 60 miles an hour and 2.7 seconds and took it to that extreme where it was just craziness and it took off, and then that really changed the course of talk shows for a very long time.

The reason I told that story about watching the Emmys, the Oscars, the Grammys, and all that kind of stuff was — I'm not kidding you — I was second grade, Mrs. Osten's class. I remember watching it and there was this thing inside of me that goes, "You will be there one day."

And I was at Sally and the assistant came in and she's like, "They're pulling shows because you're in the time frame of being here that you qualified for the Emmys."

And, so, we were nominated. You know, I was going to the Emmy Awards as one of the nominees. And it's a story I tell kids a lot that it was one of

those things where all my life I wanted that. All my life, I knew that it was going to happen. And I still remember: we were sitting at the Emmys, it gets to our category, and Sally reaches back, and I've got my ankle over on my knee — kind of my legs crossed — and she reaches back, and she's wearing this beautiful red gown with encrusted with rhinestones on the top, and she reaches back, and she grabs my ankle, and she goes, "Here we go!"

And it was in that moment that I realized we're not gonna win. And I didn't say it out loud, but I was like, "We're not gonna win." And the reason was because I realized that what I had envisioned was them opening the envelope and hearing the words, "And the nominees are..." and my name being said. I had never, in that dream, ever saw them announcing the winner. And so sometimes, you know, I tell kids: "Don't limit your dreams, because you don't dream far enough."

And we didn't win, and it was fine, and everybody was good. But it was one of those things, again, that I was like, "I've checked the box."

JE: Wasn't she kind of a style-setter — her glasses or her hair or something?

RB: She had red hair and she was known for the red glasses. It was her signature item. The funny thing was is that she grew up in Puerto Rico and she did radio. I had friends in TV who would listen to her. I had one of my coworkers in Baltimore who had been in an accident, I think when she was in high school, and she was bedbound. And Sally did like an overnight call-in radio show back when those things existed.

And she said, she goes, "I felt like I knew her, because that's what got me through: listening to this." And then she moved to television. The show started in St. Louis and I got there when it was in New York. But it was very funny. Our studio was directly across the street from our offices on West 57th. And when you walked in, you saw — the first thing you saw — was MTV. And then you went back and that's where our studios were.

And my assistant came over; my family had shown up. They had come in from Oklahoma. And she goes, "I put them at your desk."

I'm like, "You did what?"

And I still to this day remember that because when you are doing a talk show like this — and you will understand this more than anyone else — we did not have the internet. So everything we did was by your rolodex and your phone. And so, and in the world of craziness, my rolodex had a lot of famous people in it, and their numbers, and it had a lot of trashy people in it with their numbers.

And I walk in, and my mom is flipping through my rolodex and it is every kind of sexual — what's the word I'm looking for — fetish imaginable. People who had done this, people who had done that. And I just remember my mom flipping through my rolodex and looking up at me and going, "You know we're not proud of you, right?"

JE: (Laughing)

RB: And that may have been a move to or moving away from TV.

JE: So how many years did you do that?

RB: I did Sally — I think it was 90 and 91.

JE: So then you come back.

RB: So I came back and then that's when I got involved at the church, and when I ended up going to seminar was after that.

Chapter 5 – 12:21

State Senator

John Erling (JE): So then we take you to the Better Business Bureau. Do you leave the church for the Better Business Bureau? And you became President and CEO of Eastern Oklahoma's Better Business Bureau? Was that 1999 to 2011?

Ricky Brinkley (RB): To 2015.

JE: Alright.

RB: Because I was still at the Better Business Bureau when I was in the Senate. And that opened up because the gentleman who had that job was a friend of mine and he had died very suddenly.

JE: What was his name?

RB: Dan Gridley.

JE: Yes, we remember that name.

RB: And so Dan died very suddenly and they were searching for someone and there were people on that search committee who knew me. And they said, "Are you interested in doing this?"

It wasn't something I had thought about, but I had hit my 10 year mark on ADD at the church and I was like, "Okay, this door is opening up, so I need to walk through it."

JE: All right. And we want to get into that more. But then you entered politics too. In 2010, you won Senate district 34. You were a vice chair of the finance committee, a member of the Appropriations, Business and Commerce and Health and Human Services Committee, as well as the subcommittee on education. And that's because you were the producer of the Sally show.

RB: It was a normal job transition, as I say. Yeah. And what happened was that I still did a lot of speaking. I'm stuttering because I wanna make sure this comes out well, which is: I can tell you what I'm good at. I can also tell you what I'm really not good at. If you want me to walk into a room, and entertain a crowd, and give a speech, and get them motivated, and do that. I can do that on a minute's notice.

I've had people go, "Hey, our speaker is not here. Can you fill in?"

"Yeah. What do you want to talk about?"

“Just go do whatever you want to do.”

The worst piece of advice anyone ever gave me is: “Just say whatever comes to your mind.”

And I was just like, “That's the last thing you want to have happen.”

So that was my strength. And don't ask me to do your taxes, don't ask me to repair your car, don't ask me to fix your plumbing. I can't do any of those things.

JE: No.

RB: But I can do this.

And, so, what was happening was, is because of my role in the Better Business Bureau, I was still being asked to speak at different events.

And one night — I can tell you exactly where it was — is that I was speaking at the Skiatook Chamber of Commerce Banquet. And I can tell funny stories that can make people laugh. And there was a gentleman — he probably would not want me to use his name — but there was a gentleman in the audience who had been an elected official.

And on my drive home, he called and he said, “Look, your senate seat's open. You're the guy.”

And I'm like, “Nah...”

You know, and it was one of those things where my grandson was 12, I was living in Owasso; he was playing soccer. It was like the best time of my life because my grandson is the center of my universe.

I'm like, “I just don't wanna just jack up my life. I'm enjoying my life right now.”

And they're like... So they sent some other people to talk to me.

And I said, "The only thing that you have been able to make me do is lose sleep at night thinking about this."

And there was a couple of things that just happened with considering who else was running and those kinds of things. And I said, "Okay, I'm in," and started running for office.

And, for those of you who do not understand, running for office is definitely almost a full time job. I mean, you're working constantly on certain things.

And I'm gonna make a gigantic transition here back to the gambling is that that experience of going and kind of vanishing into the woodwork had already transpired. So people will always say, "Well, he got into politics and he went to hell in a handbasket."

No, that's not true at all. I mean, I had the addiction when I was elected and I was in the middle of all of this; and there's a lot of stress with fundraising money and all those kinds of things.

And there was this particular day where I had, in my personal life, the woman I was dating had called with some news and that was stressful. And then, about five minutes later, my campaign consultant called and said we need \$130,000 in the next three or four weeks. And it I had stopped gambling. I had. I was just like, "I do not need to be seen in a casino."

But it was just a stressor. And I'm sure we're gonna talk about addiction later, but for those of you who do not understand addiction, is that in my life when it came to the gambling, all roads led to the casino, which was: "Today was a great day. Let's go to the casino and celebrate."

"Today was a sucky day. Let's go and see if we can turn things around."

All roads led to — that was the solution to all of my problems. And so that stressor happened, and I went to the casino, and it was a Tuesday. And I went to the casino four Tuesdays in a row and won about \$150,000 and funded my campaign.

JE: What are you playing to win that kind of money?

RB: In Tulsa, it was slots, which is ironic because, when I was gambling — when I started gambling — I'm like, "Slots are the stupidest things in the world. No one should ever play a slot machine."

And I still believe, you know, I don't advise anyone to start gambling, but slots are the worst because they are also the most addictive. They move very quickly. You know, I mean, the game moves as fast as you can push the button and my ADD just spun out of control on that.

JE: So, \$150,000. So, is that the money, then, you needed for your campaign?

RB: And it was really funny because I never told anybody that, you know, because I had quote-unquote, "Loaned my campaign a certain amount of money," which is legal. And, because it's a loan, if you are able to raise money afterward, you can pay yourself back that loan."

And it was very funny because, about two years ago, there was an event in Oklahoma City and my campaign consultant was part of this event. And he and I had met because I was helping him write some stuff for it. And he said, "You know," he goes, "we were always amazed at how much — how fast — you could raise money. You were just a machine at raising money."

And I looked at him and I said, "It's all money I won gambling."

And he goes, "Are you kidding me?"

And I'm like, "No."

He goes, "You funded your entire campaign on gambling winnings?"

And I said, "Yes."

He goes, "Why didn't you tell me?"

And I'm like, "Why would I want to tell you that?" I said, "All I said to you was is that I'd loan money to my campaign."

And we were also getting contributions from other people and adding to it, and filling in the gaps and that kind of stuff. And I had not really made a conscious effort to actually abandon gambling. I will just say, "I was stopping," you know, "abstaining from it," during this time period...

JE: While you were a senator.

RB: Well, no. While I was running, but then I ended up breaking that and it's kind of like any time you relapse, it all starts over and it gets worse. And so I would go through these periods where, you know, I was looked at as being the next pro-tem.

And so I was like, "People do not need to see me in a casino." So I made the wise choice of going, "Well, in that case, I'll just go to Vegas to gamble."

And this is where it really got bad — and, I mean, just horrifically bad — is that the casino... I would fly out on a Friday evening. With the time change, it would be 11 o'clock Oklahoma time by the time I got there. I would go to check in. They, you know, they'd have a car pick you up, they would bring you, you would go to the VIP check in. I would hand over my bags to the bellman and I would go straight to a blackjack table. And — not kidding you — 16 hours later, I would be hungry.

You know, the cocktail waitresses and those kinds of things... I don't drink. And they knew when they saw me, they would tell the next cocktail waitress, "Don't ask him for anything." I wouldn't even take water. I didn't want any. I ... just all I could do ... And, again, the world vanished. I didn't even notice the other people at the table. It was me, the dealer, and the deck.

JE: Are you still playing slots in Vegas?

RB: No, I was a blackjack player.

JE: Okay. And so that's all I did was play blackjack and — primarily, I guess — and, then after 16 hours, I would get up. And I can't stand the smell of smoke. So, of course, I was reeking of smoke in a casino. I would get up and I would go to the steakhouse, and I would set at the bar and I would eat a

steak and then I might go back to the room to take a shower, change shirts, and go back down. And I would play until about noon on Sunday morning. And it would be time to get in the car to go back to the airport.

JE: So, what kind of money are you...?

RB: You know, I always tell everybody, because I do a lot of speaking to 12-step groups, and church groups, and business people, and I tell them this line about gambling, which not a lot of people say, but it's the absolute truth: Winning is the easy part. It's not hard to win gambling. The hardest part is getting up and walking away. You know, a normal person who gambles and hits a jackpot, or hits a great hand would say, "Oh, my God! Look how much money I won! Look at what I can buy," or "Look at what I can pay off!"

When I would hit a big jackpot. And I hit — there was a lot of money. I would...

JE: What's "a lot of money?"

RB: You know, I mean, I could win — win and lose — easily more than \$50,000 in a night.

JE: Mm-hmm (in agreement)

RB: And if you win over \$1199 on a slot machine, they have to give you what's called a W-2G, which is a tax form for you to declare it on your taxes. You know, and I was claiming... Now, that doesn't mean that that's all you want. It just means that on that particular jackpot it was over, it was \$1200 or more.

And I would, you know, I mean, in all honesty, there was more than one year I had to claim more than a million dollars.

JE: Wow...

RB: And people who gamble will realize that, in that world, that's not hard to do. You know, when you're winning it a little bit at a time, you know, and putting it right back in.

JE: But you were so successful; not everybody is successful at it. And that was your bane, wasn't it, that you were good at it?

RB: It's really weird. It's like numbers just float in my head. And even as a child. You know, to this day, I'll drive by one of the billboards that says the lottery — and I think the lottery is the dumbest thing you can play. You know, it's like, the odds are one in 300 million I think on Mega Millions or whatever it is and over 1 in 200 million on the Powerball.

But I will see the numbers and it'll say the jackpot is X number of dollars and then, in my head, I will immediately start doing the math on, “Okay, that's the jackpot.” What is, you know, depending the right — I think it's like 47.1% of that becomes the instant payout if you just want to take it in a lump sum.

And then you do the calculations on the state and local — on the state taxes — and they go, “Well, that person ended up with this amount of money...”

And that is me going from, you know, Harvard to Lewis, you know, on I-44 is calculating. And I've always been that guy with just numbers and that's what gambling did for me and blackjack did for me. It was all about the numbers. And I don't want anyone to think that any of this is justification for doing all this. I'm just telling you who I am. And we're gonna get to this pretty quickly — it fell apart very quickly. Because like I said, it wasn't the winning that was the problem. It was the walking away that was the problem.

Chapter 6 – 12:00

Aren't you Rick Brinkley

John Erling (JE): Do you have an addictive personality?

Ricky Brinkley (RB): Oh, yeah. I mean, I definitely have an addictive personality. Even to the point where, back when computers first came out

and you could play Hearts on a computer, I'd say, "OK, I'm going to start on this project, or I'm going to start working on this sermon, or I'm going to work on whatever." Then I'd tell myself, "I'll play four games of Hearts and then start." Two and a half hours later, I'd still be playing Hearts.

JE: You said you didn't drink. Did you ever think that if you did drink and got the buzz, you might have become an alcoholic?

RB: Absolutely. Yeah. And it's funny because people always ask, "Was it a religious thing?" But it wasn't. I just grew up in a family where you didn't do that. It wasn't like we were threatened with going to hell over drinking; you just didn't do it. For me, it was the escape that led to the addiction, not alcohol.

JE: So, you were at the Better Business Bureau and also a state senator at the same time. How did you manage time-wise with both jobs?

RB: I believed I could manage it. But then you throw in these Friday, Saturday, and Sunday trips to Vegas every other weekend, and my life... Here's what I tell everybody: People always want to talk about the addiction, which I do talk about more than anyone else. But for me, the real downfall was losing control of my life.

I lost control. And this isn't about blaming others — "Oh, everybody wanted me to do this, or everybody wanted me to do that." I agreed to all of it. I'd tell my assistant, "Sure, I'll go speak to this nonprofit." But when it came to things like going to a dinner to clap politely, I'd think, "That's not my thing." I just lost control because I was trying to do everything, be everything to everyone.

What I tell people is that my addiction was bad, and it sent me to prison. But your addiction might not send you to prison. Maybe all roads lead to fishing for you. You're not going to go to prison for fishing, but you might lose your family because you're never home.

What I ask people is, "What do you do when you're stressed? And do you want to do it alone?" If the answer is yes, that's a red flag.

JE: Did it bother you in your public life — at the Better Business Bureau or as a state senator — that people didn't know who you really were?

RB: Yeah. It was strange because that was part of the addiction. I knew who I was. I knew I was an addict. I knew I couldn't stop. But I'd go speak at events, and people would say, "You're the best senator we've ever had," or, "That was the best speech I've ever heard."

I remember one time, after a big political event, I came off the stage, and people were waiting for me, telling me how amazing the speech was. But my left hand started shaking, and all I could think was, "I've got to get out of here and into a casino."

The thing was, I'd hear all these compliments, but I couldn't process them. I'd think, "If they only knew who I really was." And that drove the addiction deeper.

JE: When people adored you, why did you feel the need to escape?

RB: That was my escape. Even when things went badly at the casino, which only added more stress, it was still my escape. I just couldn't deal with people telling me how good I was when I knew how bad I was.

JE: You said you were addicted, but it probably took a long time to admit it to yourself.

RB: OK, this is a story I've rarely told. There was a time when Oklahoma allowed blackjack, but without dealers. Then there was an economic bust in Vegas, and unemployed dealers came to Oklahoma.

I'd never been to an Oklahoma casino before, but one day, I walked into one. It was dingy and smelled bad — not like casinos today. But there was a \$5 blackjack tournament, and I thought, "I'll try this."

It was a multi-night event, and I met other players. We exchanged numbers and would text each other, "I'll save you a spot at the table."

Eventually, blackjack got shut down, and these unemployed dealers

started private games. I got invited to one in Tulsa — just \$5 games, nothing big.

JE: When was this?

RB: Around 2008, I think.

We started hearing rumors about a “big game” in town. One day, we got invited. It was like something out of a movie — 10 tables, open bar, fancy food.

I remember playing blackjack there. A guy walked up to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said, “You’re Rick Brinkley.” I lied and said, “No, I’m not. I get that a lot.”

The woman I was with turned to me and said, “You just denied who you are.” That hit me hard. I realized my whole life had become about denying who I was.

JE: Is that when you knew you were addicted?

RB: I probably knew before, but that moment confirmed it.

I was always the guy who made the right choices. Even in the legislature, I’d tell members, “We don’t do that here.” But I was a master at compartmentalizing.

I visualized my life like a director’s booth with monitors for each part of my life — work, Senate, family, church. But in the bottom-right corner, where a monitor should have been, there was a safe.

That’s where I stuffed all the crap — things I didn’t want to deal with, including gambling.

JE: Some people might call that hypocrisy.

RB: It is. But I’ve talked to God like he’s sitting next to me since I was in fourth grade.

I remember laying in my cheap apartment during a Senate session, having one of those conversations with God. He said, "When are we going to talk about your gambling addiction?" And I responded, "You can have everything, but you can't have that."

As I thought about it, I realized how messed up that was. But I was serious.

JE: You were in deep trouble, weren't you?

RB: Yeah, I knew it.

There were conversations about me becoming the pro tem. But every time I walked into the Senate chamber and saw the portraits of past pro tems, I'd think, "This is never going to happen."

Chapter 7 – 4:17

Trifecta of Hypocrisy

Ricky Brinkley (RB): There's also that whole thing of, you've got to get caught. I think I need to explain. What happened was, I was winning a lot, and sometimes I'd take it home, sometimes I wouldn't. But what would happen is that I would spend money, and I'd have to make up that money somewhere. I ended up taking money from my employer to pay for certain things, and I got caught. And the funny thing was, there was this moment of I could tell that it was coming. And I was just like, I'd known for several years that it was coming.

John Erling (JE): But when you looked at all those pictures and then rubbed shoulders with all the other senators, you knew what you were going through. But you probably said, "Yeah, but he's either a heavy drinker, or he's an alcoholic, or he's chasing around with some woman." Did you do that in your mind?

RB: You know, no. And the reason was that in this trifecta of hypocrisy that I've going on in my life, I was still a pastor in many ways. I gave everyone else

grace, but I could not give myself grace. So, it would be, “there’s a heavy drinker, there’s an affair, there’s this, there’s that,” and you were, like, compassionate.

JE: So then you were one of them.

RB: Yeah, in some ways, yeah. I was one of them. But, you know, I was the guy, and I think people would agree that I probably knew more secrets than anyone else because people came to talk to me about what they were going through.

JE: As a pastor.

RB: As a pastor, right, and they saw me that way. And I’ve never repeated those stories, still to this day. But that’s the thing about compartmentalization: there are walls around every aspect of my life, and they never cross. And, so ...Did I judge them? No. When I’ve said it before, I’ve seen people kind of bristle because they have this thing of, like, “Well, our elected officials should be pure and perfect, and we should hold them to a higher standard!”

I’ve always said no, you shouldn’t, because you’re also saying, “We don’t need career politicians. We need average people!”

If 10% of the population is an addict (which is really far more than that), you should very much expect that same percentage to be that your teachers have that, and your ministers have that, and all of that. So, I never bought into “we all have to be perfect.” This is going to be my “put your hand on your heart and sing God Bless America” moment: this country was founded on the concept that average citizens would lead this country. Average citizens have problems. I thought I was really good at managing it in the midst of it, because when you’re an addict, you really believe that nobody knows, and you’re really good at managing it. That’s the whole part of addiction is the deception that goes with it. So no, I never looked at anybody else and said, “Well, they’re worse than I am.”

JE: Did you suspect, even before you were really caught, that there were people who were thinking you were an addict?

RB: No. And the reason was that I was not married, I lived alone, and it wasn't unusual for me to travel on weekends to give speeches around the country. And so no one knew. Maybe, as it got closer, people whispered to each other that there was a problem. I knew that was happening. I have a very good friend who is in radio, and he talked to me after it was all over. He said, "You know, there was a rumor in the last week of the session that there was a senator in trouble. There were 48 senators, and we all went through the list to figure out who it was, and you were 48."

Chapter 8 – 7:55 Under Investigation

John Erling (JE): Well, in August 2015, you resigned your Senate seat.

Ricky Brinkley (RB): Yes.

JE: Actually, you resigned your Senate seat on December 31st, 2015.

RB: Originally, yes.

JE: And you were then under investigation by the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, an accusation of embezzlement from the Tulsa Better Business Community. So how did you first discover that you were under investigation?

RB: You know, there were some officers who came by the office to talk, and it became abundantly clear why they were there. I think they were very shocked at how transparent I was. They were giving me every opportunity to deflect it and blame somebody else. I didn't do that. It wasn't just blatantly direct questions on a lot of stuff, but they knew what I was telling them and I knew what they were telling me. And so it was kind of like, 'OK, this is it.' And then knowing that you were under investigation - and I literally told no one. I knew there were people who knew obviously through the Better Business Bureau, obviously OSBI knew, but I didn't say a word to anyone for a long time.

People are like, 'Oh my God, prison must have been horrible.' The months leading up to all of this after the investigation were far more horrible. It was a horrible time. It's kind of like what I say about gambling winnings - winning is the easy part, walking away is the hard part. Prison was the easy part. It was everything that transpired before then because your world, in an instant, your world is crumbling. You realize what's happening, your brain is going, 'My life is over and I'm going to be an embarrassment to my family. Oh, my god, my grandson!' - all those kinds of things are going on.

I ended up getting a little spiral notebook and my job every day was to figure out how to kill myself and make it look like an accident so my life insurance would pay off for my son and my grandson. I carried that book with me. I would be in the presiding office, meaning I would be the guy with the gavel during the senate. And I would have my hand on that little spiral book next to me with the gavel on the other hand, because I had to keep my hand on that book because I couldn't let anyone see it. I couldn't let anyone find it. I had to know where it was and I would go home at night and I would Google and look at different ways of doing different things.

Finally went to a man by the name of Jonathan Nichols who's no longer with us. Jonathan was the chief of staff for the pro-temp. We were on the floor and I walked over and said, 'Can I see you in your office?' I think he knew from the look on my face that there was a problem. It was the best decision I made because finally I verbalized it out loud and he picked up the phone, he called somebody else who we all know who said, 'I've got a senator in trouble.' He said 'Come to my office now.' We got in the car, he put me in his car. I was at that point just in a shocked daze and they took me to an attorney. I had never even talked to an attorney at that point and started that, which gave me a sense of relief.

But I still had this thing of like, 'I've got to kill myself before this becomes public because if I kill myself after it's public, then everyone's gonna know I committed suicide.' So I had this deadline I was working under. The session was over shortly thereafter and I went home. It was a couple of days later, it was June — I believe it was June first — the story broke and my world collapsed in about 15 seconds. It was breaking news on people's phones. I had notified my family — I had had a family meeting with my sisters, my parents, my son and said, 'Here's what's coming.' It was the most pissed off

I'd ever been in my entire life. I was so angry, not because of what happened, but because I was still alive.

JE: Alright. Why didn't you commit suicide?

RB: I couldn't. This is a really horrible phrase to use because a gun was never involved but I just couldn't pull the trigger. There were a couple of times I was close, and I talked to somebody else who had gone through not an exact experience but something similar. And I said, 'I would just get in my car and I would drive.' I said, 'I was just driving, hoping a semi would hit me.' I put 4,000 miles on my car in two weeks and never left the state. I would drive from the northeast corner past Oklahoma and then back past Oklahoma and just keep driving that all day long, hoping for a car accident, hoping for something to happen.

JE: You could have swerved in front of a big semi.

RB: I imagined it every single time and I just couldn't do it. And that turns into 'Why are you such a coward? Why can't you?' Whether or not you're a person of faith, whether or not you believe in the darkness versus light or whatever it may be, is that — this is going to be a small sermon for one second. The Bible says that Satan's job is to steal, kill and destroy and he's done it since the beginning of time through deception. He convinces you of things that are not true. Therefore, God — he may never convince you that God does not exist, but he can convince you that you're not worthy. And when you're not worthy, you don't see anything that can possibly be good for you. That's where I was; I was in this dark hole. I always tell everybody it's like I was falling through in a dark black abyss head over heels and could never hit the bottom.

JE: Well, when it became known and then the Tulsa World, it says State Senator Rick Brinkley embezzled more than \$1 million during his 15 years as an executive with the Better Business Bureau, the organization alleged in a lawsuit. They say you've set up corporate entities to receive payments for phony credit accounts and other alleged business expenses. It also alleges that you funneled money from a state campaign fund to a phony vendor. You were pretty creative, weren't you?

RB: Yeah, I mean, I'm always hesitant about this and it's not that I don't want to own it, but I've always had to tell people in interviews — it's like, “I do not want to teach people how to do this.” It's a very fine line to walk. I will just say that I was able to make it work. But it was also one of those things that you also believe the whole time — you never believe you're getting by with it. You always know you're gonna get caught; you know it, but the overwhelming part of the addiction makes you say, 'Well, I don't care if I go down, I go down; but I got to keep doing this.'

JE: They also let you use the embezzled funds to pay your mortgage, pay a pool cleaner, personal credit card invoices and to support a hidden gambling habit.

RB: Yeah. Add it was just... I always feel like I'm defending and I don't want to be that way or being defensive. But I just remember I was in rehab with a woman who had done basically the same thing that I had done. But the funny thing was is that she had kept a ledger and left it by her computer; and when she went on vacation, somebody found it. You always believe you're going to get caught.

Chapter 9 – 6:04

Rehab

John Erling (JE): So you said rehab. When did you...

Ricky Brinkley (RB): Shortly after the story broke, and I had been asking my attorney for a while. I know that gambling addiction is — every addiction is the same addiction in some way. But every addiction also has its very unique, different nuances. And one of the things about gambling addiction is it has the highest rate of suicide of all the other addictions. And the main reason is, you know, there's no urine test, there's no drug test to find out if I failed or not. I get to put a smile on my face and I go, but I asked my attorney, I said, 'I really feel like I need to go to rehab because I said I am in a state where I don't know what's going to happen to me.' They wanted to kind of kick the can down the road a little bit until they felt things were in. Finally, I got to go ahead and there is a rehab facility in

Shreveport, which is crazy to have a gambling addiction rehab next to casinos everywhere. It was also on Stoner Street, which I always thought was very funny.

In the state of Louisiana, when the casinos came — it is very different because we have tribal casinos here, it's a different situation but they had what I would call corporate casinos. The governor in that state said 'That's great, we're glad you're coming, you're going to be bringing a lot of tourism, but you're going to bring a lot of addiction and a lot of issues and you're going to pay for it.'

And so at that time, I don't know what it is now, but for a long time, if you were a resident of the State of Louisiana, you were guaranteed at that time a 37-day stay in a rehab facility for gambling addiction free of charge. All you had to do is show up and show your driver's license and you would be in an inpatient facility. I was able to go there. I didn't have any money. Everything was gone. I was able to go on a scholarship and I went to the Center for Recovery in Shreveport.

It was the first time in months that I'd ever felt safe; and I was surrounded by people with addictions just like mine, and we would have to tell our stories and everybody's story was in many ways alike. Some of them very different. There were nurses, there was a woman who was — this is how bad the addiction is. And I'm not saying, "Oh well, I think that what I did was bad, wait till you hear this." That's not it. But there was a mom that you would call a soccer mom, stay-at-home mom, very influential, financially-sound family. She would take her kids to do carpool, drop her kids off. She'd go to the casino and she would run out of money and she would turn tricks in the parking lot and go back in and gamble with that money and then go back and get back in the car at the end of the day and go pick her kids up.

There was a very good — she and I have to say connected and she was a nurse who was also... we joke about this, so I'm not breaking any confidence or obviously not going to use her name or where she's from. But she was a nurse and she was financing her gambling by stealing the identities of patients, setting up credit card accounts, having the cards delivered to vacant homes. So she'd do her rounds, picking up all these

credit cards that she had ordered. But she also had a driver's license machine in her house where she would make IDs for all of these people with her face on them. And I remember her making a comment to me, she was just kind of walking me through the process and she goes — I just remember her saying, "Arizona is the toughest driver's license to duplicate." And we were in a group counseling session. And the question was, "When did you realize you had a problem?" And she goes, "I never thought I had a problem," and I yelled an obscenity, which you don't do in group, and people just turned to look. I go, "You gotta be kidding me. You were selling meth, you had stolen identities, you had a driver's license machine in your house, making driver's licenses like it was no tomorrow. And you don't think you had a problem?" And she said with a straight face and from the bottom of her heart, she goes, "I just thought I was expensive to entertain." She ended up in jail — in prison as well.

And so that stint in rehab was the best thing that ever happened to me. We went through all the processes and — then to kind of go back to some of the things that you have asked about. I still remember my first meeting with my counselor. He had printed out everything about me and he looks at me and he goes - he just looked at me and goes, "Emmy nominee, TV producer, speaking at events all over the United States, state senator," and he goes, "When's it gonna be enough?" My answer was, "It will never be enough. It will never ever, ever be enough."

JE: What do you mean, "it will never be enough?"

RB: I will never be able to accomplish enough to feel satisfied and feel that I am — dealing with the addiction — good enough because of all of the bad that I am.

JE: Here you are 63, you have 40 years left to live. Do you think you will ever come to that point?

RB: Well, I will tell you that's what rehab does for you. It's a control-alt-delete on your life. And so let me just kind of back up for one second. So I had from June to August, I am doing this stuff including a stint in rehab, go in plead guilty and I'm ready to get this show on the road.

Chapter 10 – 10:45
Gambling Addiction Advice

Ricky Brinkley (RB): But it was seven months before I was sentenced. That was the worst because I didn't leave my home unless I went to a 12-step meeting. I was in a serious depression, but it's still, that experience would talk me out of it. And if people at home have depression are gonna understand this - you feel it coming on, you feel this darkness coming on and you're trying very hard to stop it. You're trying to do anything to stop it from just consuming you and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But all of that was the horrible part. I finally get sentenced to prison. I report about a month later.

John Erling (JE): Can I just stop you at the minute? Because I want to get into that is seven months until you're sentenced. Did you ever feel like going back to gamble again?

RB: It would cross my mind but I knew that it was not a possibility for me. Even if I wanted to, if I walked into a casino, everybody would know who I was. I mean, I know at least one reporter sent people to casinos with my picture. Have you ever seen this guy gambling from Tulsa?

JE: Tulsa entity and paper

RB: Newspaper. Well, it was in Oklahoma.

JE: All right. We were looking for you. So, because you were being spotted, you couldn't do it. Right. Do you think if you'd been anonymous you would have gone back?

RB: And again, I'm not making excuses. I'm just saying the events are different if everybody knows who you are. Like a side note is that while I was in prison there was a guy that I was talking to and his parents did not know he was in prison. I said, how are your parents not knowing you're in prison? Don't they read the newspapers? And he looked at me and he goes, I'm not a senator. He goes, my story didn't ever make a newspaper. So there is a difference. It's not better or worse. It's just different that when everyone

knows who you are. But that helps you to stop me from gambling because if I were to walk in, everybody knew who I was. I walked into a 12-step meeting and people knew who I was. So there's a lot of negative to it, but a lot of benefit.

JE: I could have asked you this later. But now what do you say to someone who's listening to this, who is currently struggling with gambling addiction? What do you say to them?

RB: What I say to people all the time is there's a couple of things. Number one, this is never going to get better. You're trying to gamble your way back to making everything right? That's not gonna happen. The other part of it is that no one has ever said in the history of the world, "You know, if my life could suck and I could be suicidal for six more years, I will feel a lot better about getting well." No one's ever said those things. And so there's no reason to kick this can down the road because what most people will say is now that I'm sober or now that I'm clean or now that I'm gambling free or whatever the addiction may be, I knew I should have done this 10 years ago. And God, I wish I had because when you are not gambling or when you are not using or drinking, I always say the air is easier to breathe. You're never waiting for the shoe to drop, you're never waiting for somebody to say something to you. And it is regaining part of your life.

And now what happens is, you've got like point A where the gambling starts. You may have had 30 years before that in your life. And then you've got point B where the addiction stops. You may have 30 more years on the other side of that, all the great things that you could have experienced between point A and point B are gone. There's no going back but you cannot live in the regret of what you missed because that will take you right back to where you were. Your best thinking got you into your addiction. So you've got to realize that the world is different and you've got to live differently. The combination of all of it, including the prison stay was a great rectifier of what is important and what is not.

JE: So before you go to prison, what about how has it affected your family? Your son, you're dealing with a grandson or your circle of friends. Were there those who immediately rejected you and did some reject you at first and then came back to you?

RB: Luckily I come from a great family who's very supportive. My parents, my sisters, brothers, brother-in-laws, nieces, nephews, all of that. They've been stupendous. My son has been awesome. My grandson. Now I will tell you, I'm not gonna guarantee you I'm gonna get through this without crying. Because in rehab, I would just sob uncontrollably if I had to talk about my grandson. So new people would come and the other people would say if you want to see Rick cry, ask him about his grandson. It's really fun to watch.

And so I called my son and I said I had pled guilty. My grandson and I had never had a conversation about this in those months, I just stayed away. I isolated myself from everybody. And my family would have to come to see me because I wasn't leaving the house. So my son said, I said, I gotta talk to Pie. We've got to have some time alone. He goes, come by on Sunday, we're gonna watch soccer game. Pick him up at this point, he's about 17. And I go down and I said, OK, let's go get something to drink. And we stepped out on the front porch. I started crying and I just kept saying, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry if I've embarrassed you. Everybody knows his - all of his friends call me Pee-paw. He's like - I go, and I'm crying and he looks at me like, what is wrong with you? And we get in the car and he looks at me and he said, when I look at you all I see is my Pee-paw. I'm gonna start crying and he goes and I love my Pee-paw and I was just like, that's exactly what I needed to hear.

And so I was still trying to drive and I couldn't see. So I pulled into a Sonic and we had - I said, I think every Oklahoma family has had one major life conversation in a Sonic drive-in. And so I'm going through everything and for those of you who are going through whatever you're going through, whether there's addiction or not, I think this is - you need to take the wisdom of my grandson. I go through all of the options of what sentencing could be. It could be anywhere from this to this to this because it's not like you see in TV shows - this is a federal system, it's not the state system. There's no worked out, preconceived plea agreement, the judge tells us what it is and everyone finds out at the same time and my grandson looks at me and he goes, well, whatever happens is going to be the best thing that could happen. And I said, how do you know that? And he threw a phrase back at me that I had used with him his entire life, which is stop overthinking this. And he looked at me and he goes, I'm not overthinking

this. I was just like jackass. And so he goes, whatever happens will be the best thing that could happen. How do you know that? And he said because whatever was worse didn't happen and whatever was better, the judge did not see as an option. So whatever happens will be the best thing that could have happened. And that got me through the next seven months.

Whatever happens is going to be the best thing that could have happened and it got to be his birthday was coming up and we'd had the same birthday party for him since he was five, which we went to like a Japanese steakhouse. He was turning 18 and his mom sent out a big text on, we need a head count on who's gonna be there. You can only put six people at a table and I had responded because I didn't want to go because every time we'd gone there, I saw people, people would walk over to the table. I was just like, I don't wanna put him through that. I don't want to deal with it. So I had RSVP'd but how do you not go to your grandson's birthday?

So I call him and he was driving and I decided to be a complete jerk and make him tell me he did not want me to go. So I said, hey, Pa, you know, your birthday is coming up. You know my situation, I don't want to embarrass you with your friends. We're all gonna be there. Maybe your dad and I can take you out a couple of days later. And whether or not it's a relationship or a marriage or girlfriend, boyfriend or best friend or whatever when you're talking to somebody on the phone and there's a pause, you know the difference, even though it's silence, between I'm trying to figure out what I'm gonna say and I'm pissed off. He was pissed off and this was pissed off silence and he goes Pee-paw, you've been at every one of my birthdays and you're going to be at this one and I was not happy about that. And then he said, Pee-paw, you told me June 1st was the worst day of your life and that was the day the story broke - reporter on the front yard the whole nine yards. I said it was, and he said Pee-paw, June 1st was over eight months ago. He goes, the only reason the worst day of your life lasts more than 24 hours is if you keep living it. He goes, stop living it. Wisdom. And the only thing I could say was damn. It's the only thing I could say. And that's - it's so funny that that one sentence or a couple of sentences can have such a profound effect. He's still the best thing that's ever happened in my entire life.

JE: Did you go to the party?

RB: Yeah, I was there. I can't say I was particularly happy to be there, but I kept my head down so people - and I could see people pointing and that kind of stuff, but I was there and I may have not been happy at the moment, but I will never ever, ever regret being there.

Chapter 11 – 20:44

Prison Life

John Erling (JE): So you admitted to embezzling \$1.8 million; you entered a plea agreement.

Ricky Brinkley (RB): The only thing I'm gonna say is that ... This is what I call “Things I would never know if I didn't go through them.”

And I'm not talking about my case. We're going to ignore everything. This has nothing to do with what was said. But when you do see things, do remember that the math in the federal system is interesting. And I'm not saying I didn't do those things, but I just remember my attorney saying, “They're going to come back with a number and you're going to plead guilty to it no matter what it is, because you have to show that you are working with them.”

And the best example I have is there's a gentleman with ... the good or bad about your case being so public is that it's on the internet forever, and people who are going through stuff — Google — and they start looking and they find the story, and I end up getting messages through Facebook of like, “Hey, I'm going through this, what can you tell me?”

And I've had phone calls with people from states all over — people in Oklahoma — just reassuring them that their life is not over, despite how much it is.

And I hear the same things that I was saying when I was going through it; and now that I'm on the other side of it, I tell them to “Knock it off,” you

know. But we all experience those same emotions and issues.

But the best example is that there was a guy who was a banker, and he was a loan person, and he had written some loans for friends and they had given him money that he paid them back. So it was a crazy little thing that they were doing. And I'm not denying that it was not, you know, illegal. I mean, that it was not legal. It was illegal and immoral or unethical, or whatever the case may be, and it gets discovered.

Well, the bank never lost any money whatsoever because he borrowed money from his friend and they paid it back. Well, it ends up, at the beginning, that they decided that the math was is that every loan he ever wrote to these people — over the last — is part of all of it and his restitution was set at \$20 million. But nobody had ever lost any money.

You know, I have a friend who was in with a stockbroker and when they came up with his restitution, because he was charged with insider trading, every trade that he made money on was a crime. Every trade he lost money on was not a crime. So there was no counterbalancing his losses against his wins. So I'm just saying that when you see those things, always understand that there's another side to that story. It doesn't forgive the crime. It's just that sometimes everyone loves a really good news story.

JE: So you were sentenced to 37 months. That's three years, right?

RB: Right.

JE: In federal prison and ordered to pay \$1,829,033 — to the BBB — \$165,000 to the IRS.

RB: Right.

JE: Where do you stand in paying that?

RB: The federal government will set you up on a payment plan and I've been making those payments every month, you know. And so I'm just, you know... Well, in my case, it was ruled that I pay it — and this is pretty typical — the dollar value may be plus or minus a little bit, but it's like, okay, you

have to pay at least \$300 a month or 10% of your net income. Which is what it was in this particular district in Northern Oklahoma. In other districts, those judges get to pick what that parameter is. So, I've been doing that since ... I think I was given like 30 or 60 days once I got out to start paying and I've been paying those.

JE: Right. So then the days leading up to when you're going to enter prison: had you just thought, "Okay, this is good," or, "I am in fear of it," or, "I had this coming," or, "I'm kind of relieved?"

RB: All of those things. I keep qualifying things, but I the experience for white collar criminals is different from non-white collar criminals. It's that, you know, like for me, I had to spend the last month — before reporting — packing up my house, you know, getting all the stuff ready to sell, you know, trying to get... You're just incredibly busy, and at the whole time, all of this is weighing on you, but there's stuff that has to get done. And so you're doing that and I was exhausted. I mean, the white-collar guys that I was with all said the same thing: "I couldn't wait to get to prison." Because, one: I need to sleep. Two: You're in a protected environment. Everybody there's got something going on. You're not worried about making it awkward if you're with your family and somebody wants to say something rude to you. You know, all of that stuff and that weight you're carrying in your chest of your failures, and what you have done to embarrass people, and how you have failed yourself, and how you have not been who you really believed yourself to be.

And the other thing that happened, which is really funny, is that there was a guy who had been to the same prison that I was going to who I didn't know. And he and his wife asked for me to go to lunch with them, and I did. And he'd been out for about 18 months and he said, "I just want to give you the lay of the land so you know what you're doing when you get there."

And he laid out — I'm not kidding you, we were at a Mexican restaurant — he took all these paper napkins and literally covered the table and he drew the entire prison. And he goes, "Okay, when you get there, your family's gonna..."

And this is the other thing that surprises people: I wasn't put in handcuffs and transported to prison. I was sent home. And then it was my family's job to just drop me off at camp, you know, to drop me off at prison.

And he goes, "You're gonna get out of your car, and you're gonna walk down this fence and there's gonna be a gate, and there's gonna be a guy who's gonna — I can almost do it verbatim — there's gonna be guys gonna take you back behind the fence, and you're going to go into a room, and they're gonna strip search you and they're gonna do this, they're gonna give you some really bad clothes, and then you're gonna go into another room where there's gonna be a group of guards who are just gonna yell at you, and yell at you, and yell at you and about how horrible you are and all this kind of stuff. And that's just gonna happen for about 10 minutes and then they're gonna tell you walk where you need to go across the way."

And he goes, "I think it's part of the joke is that you don't know where you're going. They don't give you directions. They're just like, basically, 'Go over there and check in.'"

And he goes, "I ended up walking through the door to the back of the kitchen and you're wearing these very oversized scrubs that you're holding on and kind of like ballet slippers to identify you as being new to everyone; and you don't get clothes for another day."

And so he goes, "I went into the back of the kitchen and one of the kitchen inmates immediately knew who I was. He goes, 'Follow me, I'll take ya.'"

And, so he drew all of this out and he kind of explained all this to me. So as I was going through it, I was just, like, checking the boxes in my head. This is exactly what he told me was gonna happen. So I was very cool, calm, and collected. They strip searched. I was like, okay, that's gonna happen, this is gonna happen."

And I followed his instructions in my head. But if as he got ready to leave, he said, "If you want to take these napkins with you and look at them..."

I'm like, "If I show up with the blueprints of the prison, I think I'm gonna be in deep trouble." And he just started laughing.

But I got through all of that. And there was a lot of senators, a lot of lobbyists, a lot of friends who came and visited me in the time that I was there. The one thing that I would tell them about that they were always just amazed at is that the the inmates had put together, basically, a welcome basket because they would all contribute stuff out of commissary — like a toothbrush, and a little tube of toothpaste, or a stamp so you can write home — and all the things that you need. Because when you get there, you are supplied nothing like that.

And so they were like, “They're, like, welcome baskets?”

I said, “Well, they're not called welcome baskets, but that's what they are.”

And, you know, you get there and, you know, I adapted very quickly. But I've always been able to adapt pretty quickly to where I am. And I know it sounds crazy that you're here and you're in a lockdown, you're in this facility, and most of the people there were primarily there on drug charges. I'm at the lowest level of security at prison because we're not...

JE: Where was it?

RB: It was actually in El Reno. There is a federal prison in El Reno that has a federal prison camp, which is where I was and there's a medium facility behind. And, so, you know, we basically... Our cells — we had four bunk beds in it and a couple of chairs and a desk...

JE: Four in a cell?

RB: Four in a cell. 10 x 10. And it's a pretty cramped space, but you learn to adjust and...

JE: I'm thinking about sleeping.

RB: The irony of it is is that one of the worst punishments that you could get for doing something you weren't supposed to do is they would move you into a cell with someone who snored like a freight train. It was known that you're gonna go to that cell because you cannot sleep with that kind of

snoring.

But I ended up with good cellmates. I mean, I could tell you stories all day long. But one of my favorites was that I was on the bottom bunk and there was a guy from Kansas who was a financial planner on top of me. And then there was a guy across, on the top, who was there for making illegal silencers for guys — if you need an illegal silencer. And then the guy below him was also from Oklahoma and he had been a meth dealer.

And so one morning, the financial planner says to me, “Hey, I can't find my coffee cup. Have you seen it?”

And they're plastic — almost like Tupperware-looking coffee cups — that you can buy in the commissary and make this horrible instant coffee. And I said, “I haven't seen it but I'll look for it.” Well, the meth dealer walks in the room and — I'm going to clean it all up; I'm not gonna use any foul language, but you can insert the inappropriate word in your mind.

I said, “Hey, Matthew can't find his coffee cup. Have you seen it?”

He goes, “If you ask me if I have stole a blanking coffee cup...”

I said, “No, I'm not asking if you stole a blanking coffee cup. I'm asking if you'd seen one.”

And he looked at me and he said, “I may have sold meth to pregnant women, but I wouldn't steal a coffee cup. I have some standards.”

JE: (Laughing)

RB: And I could not stop laughing. And I just said, “I will remember this moment as long as I live.”

So it was definitely a cultural difference. But — and I know it sounds cliché — but there's really good people there that had addiction issues and when the addiction went away, they went back to being good people.

JE: Sometimes they say people in prison — nobody's guilty there. These people all knew they were guilty and didn't refute it at all.

RB: No, I mean, there was one guy who said, "I didn't do what they said that I did." And there's this thing within the federal court system that attorneys are very... there were people like me there as far as cases and that kind of stuff. You could lay our cases one on top of the other, the exact same stories, the exact same things we were told to do, and they were from different parts of the country. So there are people who say, "I didn't do everything they said that I did, but I definitely did do this." That was about as far as you got of denial.

JE: Did anybody get in your face? And for some reason didn't like you?

RB: Yeah. I know you find that hard to believe, as charming as I am, that anyone could dislike me. But there was a guy with mental health issues. There were a couple of guys who came to me and they said... There's a track, it's a gravel oval out in the yard that you can walk, and I would walk in the evenings out there. I did a lot of walking and lost a lot of weight doing that. But they said, "He's paranoid of the government and he's one of these guys that, you know, the IRS does not exist, the government is taking this money and spending it for themselves, and all elected officials are horrible and all that kind of stuff. He found out that you used to be a senator, and they said you just need to be careful."

And I was like, "He's not gonna do anything."

Then one day he charged me on the track, came up and he got in my face, and I just kept walking and ignoring him. So I didn't have any real problem with that at all. Eventually, he was tear-gassed by the guards and hauled out of there for other things, so it could have gone worse. Probably the closest I ever came. And again, these stories are gonna sound horrible, that it was incredibly violent all the time. And it was not, but they would let us play cards in the chow hall, and these tables are bolted to the ground. There was a kid, he happened to be Muslim, and I had done a lot of stuff to help him on paperwork that he didn't know how to do. He was very timid, very scared of his own shadow, terrified of where he was. He had not adjusted yet.

And there was a guy who was a pretty brutal human being, and he was playing cards with us and he just started berating this guy. And I had finally had enough and it was one of the few times I kind of lost my cool and I told him to shut up and play his cards and may have used some choice words in there as well.

And everyone stopped because Brinkley didn't do that. Everyone stopped to turn and we're going, he and I are going back and forth. And the guy who made the illegal silencers walked over and sat down, he goes, "You need to reel it in."

JE: To you?

RB: To me. I said, "You know, I don't care what about this guy says. I said, there's no reason for him to treat people like this. I'm sick of his stuff."

He goes, "You need to reel it in. Just reel it in now."

And I stopped and things calmed down. And two weeks later, that guy beat the eyeballs out of another inmate and just laid the sides of his head open and the eyeballs fell out the sides. So, you know, my snap may not have caused that. But if I had kept going, it was a good lesson in life that you don't always know what the outcome could be.

JE: He might have come after you physically that way. What was your job?

RB: Everyone there has a job. There was — at the time — a working dairy, there was a working farm. So a lot of the guys worked on the dairy and the farm. I was considered old. Everyone has a nickname from all the other inmates. Pretty much, my nickname from most of them was "School" for "Old School," because I was still in my late fifties and they thought I was really old.

JE: So they were in their twenties and thirties?

RB: Twenties and thirties. To be at a federal prison camp, you have to have less than 10 years on your sentence. Most of those people show up with less than 10 years. But there are those who started with 30 or 40 years and have

worked themselves down. So there are some people there who are considerably older, but my job was an orderly. I think I was considered to be a little bit more trustworthy, I guess, because I was assigned three places that they were very particular about who worked. I was to clean the rear guard gate, the mail facility, and there was a credit union on the grounds for the employees that I cleaned.

And so that was my job, mop floors, clean toilets, vacuum, all that kind of stuff. And it was just really fun because I enjoyed it. The guards and especially the ladies at the credit union were like, "You work your tail off." It was the first time of being... no matter how insignificant it may have appeared is that if you've spent your life wanting to make sure you do a good job, even if it's cleaning a toilet, you want it to be the best it can be.

JE: But did you ever look in that toilet and say, "Is this where my life has come, now, to this?"

RB: No. There were those who did.

I've always been a fairly positive person who adjusted well, even in that situation. I was just like, "I'm here because I deserve to be here. I have got to do my time."

And I became the guy that, especially white-collar guys, that if they got there and were just losing it because they'd end up in a cell with three other people. And so the guys who were in that cell had no tolerance of people who were losing their minds, especially if they had a relatively short sentence.

And they would say, "Go see Brinkley. Go talk to Brinkley."

JE: So you became a counselor.

RB: I was Pastor Rick in prison as much as I was outside, and people would come and I'm like, "You got three choices." And I tell people outside of prison the same thing, "You either fight this and it's going to be the longest three years of your life, you succumb to it, which we cannot allow to happen, because you cannot come out of here institutionalized. Or the

third thing is you learn how to make the best of it." And I said, "The vast majority of people in this building have learned how to make the best of it."

And on a ratio, people get, especially people who have been in prison get upset when I say this, that this is what it was for me on a ratio of minute by minute, I laughed more in prison than I did ever did outside of prison.

Because you have people who are, despite what you may believe, are highly intelligent, even if you are a drug dealer. You know how to operate a business. It was an illegal business, but you have a supply chain, you have distribution issues. And these guys are incredibly funny and they're very quick-witted. There were horrible times there, we had inmates commit suicide. There were horrible times and there were times where you would watch children just crying, leaving their father again and watching that happen and people who weren't even associated with it with tears in their eyes.

And then the stuff that people are going through at home, I had support from my family. My father was dying through all of this and he came until he couldn't. And then there is this thing of "I have no control." There is nothing I can do to change that. There's nothing I can do to help. And that can be very brutal at times. And there was one particular person who came to visit me who is now in the United States Congress. And I said to this person, "I think everyone needs to be in prison for six months."

And they were like, "Hey, I know it. Thank you."

But no, I said, "I'm not saying the prison itself but you literally have no cell phone. You have no internet. You can make a phone call every so often. You have access to this very narrowly focused email system where you can have like 12 people that you can email and they've got to agree to it and all this kind of stuff and you have people who have nothing but time."

And one of the things they tell you when they first get there is, "Please do not start marking off the days. It just makes them longer."

But the days were long, the weeks were short. You like, "Oh, my God; it's already Friday."

And you know, I read more in prison than I have ever read before in my life. You talk to people who are going through the same thing. Guys start Bible studies, guys start groups where they sit around and they don't call it group therapy. It's just guys talking and they process stuff and you realize that there is a tremendous amount of freedom and no control when you've been trying to control your universe for your entire life.

Chapter 12 – 6:32

Halfway House

Ricky Brinkley (RB): There was a group of us that met. There's a couple of guys that came to prison after I left, and they knew some of the other guys. We all met, and we went down to the opening day of the Rangers game and watched the Chicago Cubs. We all went out after, and when we were talking, the question came up: was prison good or bad for you? Every single person said it was very good for me because if that hadn't happened in my life, I would still be in the midst of that addiction.

It was horrible. It was horrible what I went through, what I put my family through, and what I put my friends through. Being gone for nearly three years was not good. Walking out on the other side of it, I have chosen not to go back to that way of living. The hard part of it was the seven months coming out of it and the two or three years after I got out because nobody wanted to hire me. "We can't have you; your name's associated with so many bad things. But we know you'll be really great at this." The thing people have to realize is that our skill sets don't go away. Our abilities and talents don't go away. But nobody wants to hire you.

Now, this is where I'm going to say those who are not white-collar were much more likely to get a job. They were all pretty hireable with what they were doing, and they worked in fields where other people had gone through that. It took me almost four or five years to ever get a legitimate — not to say not a legitimate job — but a job that was something I would have been used to.

John Erling (JE): How were you earning any income during those five years?

RB: I mean, you know, I was delivering DoorDash when I first got out because nobody would hire you. Luckily, I didn't have a place to live. I got out of the halfway house.

JE: So you first go to a halfway house. And what happens there? Is that just —

RB: I would say, and again, I'm going to bring something to it that maybe somebody else who had gone through the exact same experience but had not been a senator would add. I was on the appropriation side of all of this. When I was in the Senate, I was voting on appropriating money for the services I was now using in the halfway house. The halfway house I went to, I assume, was the best in the state. It was the only one that could get a federal contract.

There were state inmates there, and there were guys like me who had been to federal prison. We were in these rooms, and we would walk out and look at each other and say, "I didn't see anything like this in prison." Guys with needles hanging out of their arms in the bunk next to you. I knew within four hours of getting to the halfway house who the employee was that would deliver drugs to the room or the employee who would deliver a fifth of alcohol.

JE: This is not being monitored?

RB: I don't even know. There was one employee who, for 50 bucks, would let you walk out the door the minute he got there and count you present at all the counts as long as you were back before his shift was over. This was supposed to be what the taxpayers are paying for, to help these people transition back to the real world.

There was a "computer room" that may have had six computers in it. You were given 15 minutes on a computer to try to find a job, and you had to sign up for it. Most of these guys didn't even know how to operate a computer. I spent most of my days sitting in the computer room, helping them. I was doing the typing and having them tell me what to do. For me, I was what I call "easy money." I was compliant. I did what I was supposed to. The people who had mental health issues or oppositional defiant issues,

who were always combative of everything, were out the door as soon as possible.

I was told I'd be there for a week. I was there for 62 days. My rant on that is not to say, "Oh, poor, pitiful me." It was 62 days of my life that were not horrible. It was not a great place to be, but it was what it was. My rant is because, in the world we live in, taxpayers are paying to try to get people not to go back to prison or make those same choices. If you are being supplied drugs and alcohol while you're in that facility — and the taxpayers are paying for those services — things have got to be better.

And that's how I make my living now. I'm a lobbyist at the State Capitol.

JE: For what?

RB: The fancy terminology is I'm a "contract lobbyist," which means kind of a gun for hire. Anybody can hire you. I do work on criminal justice issues. I work with other lobbyists on other issues.

This conversation is all over the place — addiction, drugs, people who beat people's eyeballs out — and then I go back to talking about God. God can be found anywhere. God can be found anywhere. But there were two places I knew I would never be able to go back to. One was Owasso, which is where I was the senator from primarily. That was the biggest city in my district. The other was the State Capitol.

Then I got phone calls: "We're looking for a lobbyist. We think you could work on this. Would you be willing to do it?" It's really funny. To this day, when people ask me to do something, I always say, "Are you sure about that?"

There's a thing I gotta make sure I talk about at one point...

But then I got a call from the Owasso Chamber of Commerce: "Will you be a speaker for us on this date?"

I said, "Are you sure?"

And they just burst out laughing. They said, "Rick, I wouldn't be calling you if we weren't sure."

Well, on March 1, 2023, I spoke at the Owasso Chamber event that I didn't think I was ever going to be able to be a part of. I got a standing ovation, got in my car, and drove to the State Capitol on the exact same day to work on the floor to be a lobbyist. And both of those things happened on the same day.

JE: Wow. I got a little teary-eyed talking to God on the Turner Turnpike about making it all happen.

Chapter 13 – 12:37

Take Off the Chains

John Erling (JE): About God. Did God choose you? You're a very educated, well-spoken person, can speak anywhere. I hesitate to say this, but to do this. You went through all of that and now you're going to influence many. You've already done that. But influence many, many people because of your experience.

Ricky Brinkley (RB): You know, I don't want to oversell my skill set, but I will tell you that there were a lot of people who would — this is one of my favorite stories and just for folks listening, I've got my eyes shot up because I'm just imagining it all happening again.

I was standing in a chow line and there was a guy standing behind me, I'd never seen before and I thought he was new. I turned around and introduced myself and said, "Are you new?"

And he goes, "I've been here for three years."

I'm like, "I can't, well, I'm sorry, I haven't seen you before." Didn't see him. I don't remember running into him again. One day, all 4 of us were in our cell. He came to our cell door and there are unwritten rules in the prison system of what you can and cannot do, and you cannot walk into

somebody's cell until you have been invited in, you can stand at the door. And he never came in.

And he looked at me and he goes, "Are you the guy who prays?"

And I said, "Well, I, I'm a guy who prays, but I don't that I'm the guy who prays."

He goes, "You're the guy."

And he said, "Will you go out on the yard with me?"

And I said, "Yes."

So we walked out on the yard and we were out there for almost two hours. And he told his story and I'll condense it down very quickly: He had been in the drug business, had been shot in the face, and he would show bullet holes on his body. He showed me and he said, "And I got out of it and I couldn't do it anymore. And he goes, "I went to Los Angeles and I actually started working, you know, on like in the film industry." And he goes, "I was, you know, trying to make it out there and I was there for several years," And he goes, "I came home to see my family..."

And his brother or his cousin said, "I need you to help me with this drug deal."

And he's like, "No, I'm done, I'm out." And he said, "I just drove the car or whatever over to help him, and we got caught."

And he goes, he goes, "I got sentenced to seven years." He goes, "I need to know why God allowed me to get my life together and then sent me to prison for seven years."

And I said, "I don't know." I said, "But I think we're all on this journey of figuring out why we are where we are. I don't care if you're in corporate America, why am I here?"

And he and I prayed on that yard for God to reveal to him what he not why

he's there but or why God did what he did, but to help him walk into that — whatever it is he is supposed to be — that he finds that path and gets there.

Well, he got out before I did. And it was really funny. I got an email from him. He put money on my books for me to buy a pair of shorts to walk the track in. And he said, "I know where you walk the track and I know where that bench is."

And he goes, "Just so you know," he goes, "I'm speaking to a youth conference telling my story. I think I found my way." And sometimes we have to go — probably not the most biblical word — through the crap of our lives to get to the other side of it.

There's a phrase. Winston Churchill said it: "When you're going through hell, keep on going."

And I was speaking in an AME church one night and I made that comment and there was a woman afterward who said, "My grandmother said that story but said that same thing. But she said it differently."

And I said, "How did she say it?"

And she said, "My grandmother always said, if you're going through hell, don't stop at the gift shop."

And a lot of us go through hell, but we take it with us wherever we go. And I still do carry the prison thing with me a little bit more than what I should. But...

JE: What does that mean? You carry it more than what you should?

RB: I carry it because I still know where I was and I still know who I used to be. And this is what I was saying earlier when I said, "There's something I need to tell people," is that you're carrying the garbage of your life because you think everyone knows.

I say to people and business people apparently will always nod their head

as I said, "You know, there's those moments where you're stopped at a stoplight, and your kids are in the backseat and you start going off in your head thinking about all the things that could go wrong at work, and all the things that are, that are happening."

Somebody says, "What are you thinking about?"

And you say, "Oh, nothing much," and you drive on; but you're afraid, "What if this fails? What are people going to say if I don't deliver? What are people going to say?"

And we still carry it with us.

Here's the example I give: I did not go into the Walmart in Owasso for 8 years. I didn't want to run into anybody. Everyone knows. Somebody's going to say something.

And I was very brave: I went to Walmart at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon when there was nobody there. I'm at self checkout and I'm checking my stuff out and I'm like, "Okay, I made it through and I look over and the guy at the self checkout next to me just starts whipping his head around, back and forth, realizing he knows me from someplace."

And he's gonna say something. But he went, he walked behind me and I thought he had left, I pick up my stuff and I turn, he's literally right in my face.

And I just say, "Hey, what's going on?"

And he looks at me and he goes, "You know, I really miss seeing you do the weather."

I was like, "I'm not a weatherman."

I said, I told this, I told this at the Owasso meeting and I said, you know, "I was never so disappointed and relieved at the same time."

And I will clean it up. And he's a friend, so I'll say this. So if Greg Treat ever

hears this, Greg you made the podcast. I'd been lobbying for about 6 weeks and so I finally went to his office and I said, "How much pushback are you getting from me being here?" And he goes, "None; you're not that big of a deal." We both started laughing.

I think everyone needs to understand: You're not that big of a deal. I was at — we're OSU people — so my grandson and I are about to walk in, he's up from Houston with his wife, and we're about to walk into the game, and I look over and there's an attorney from Tulsa that I knew.

And I said, "Hey," and I walked over and introduced my grandson to him and I know that he knows about my background; and he starts asking me questions and it's abundantly clear: He has no memory of what transpired with me because he said, "Now, did you term out and what are you doing?" And I'm, and I was just like, I just kind of roll with it. I said, "No, I didn't term out. I said, but I am now back at the Capitol."

We believe that everyone knows and that everyone remembers every mistake we ever made. We're all just not that big of a deal.

JE: Yeah, but don't you think a lot of people say, "I know, but he paid the price, and look at what he's doing with his life now."

RB: Some do. And there are those people who I mean, you get that, you know, "Hey, look, you know, you're a real inspiration for what you've done." And I'm gonna go back to that other question, which what you asked earlier is that, "Did God put you through this?"

And I said, "You know, when it all started, I had friends who were very devout Christians who said, 'We have to believe that this is God's will for your life.'"

And I said, "No, it's not. God did not say, 'Hey, do me a favor, commit a couple of crimes.'"

You know, that's not the way God operates. The Bible says that God. People say they think God causes all things to happen. What the Bible says is that all things work together for the good and so God can make goodness out

of bad; and I am trying my best to allow him to use me.

But I have always been my own worst enemy. Not that I'm gambling or anything like that. But what I am doing is, I still feel it. I still feel that people — that I have to carry it.

Now, there are days I don't even think about it because I'm so busy and then there's other days where I'm thinking, "You know, do they treat me differently because I have been through what I've been through."

JE: Don't you find, too, that when you're tired and the brain is tired, that those thoughts come to you even more?

RB: Absolutely. And, you know, I always tell everyone the worst place for me to be is inside my head and I tell this to young people and they don't understand it because they don't know what a rolodex is. But I said, "I'm too busy during the day to worry about a lot. But when my head hits the pillow, my brain becomes a rolodex and it flips through every card of my life or everything that I've got to do coming up and then it will randomly pull one of those cards out and I will start thinking about it and I will walk it out to an illogical conclusion."

And then I go, "Okay, Rick, this is ridiculous. Stop."

And then I'll go back and then it'll pull another card or it will pull the same card and I start the same voice over in my head.

And so, you know, and that's me. It's just that I know that if I'm stuck in my head, it will never take me to a good place.

JE: You ever have dreams that you're in prison?

RB: At the beginning, there were a couple. The thing that's most impacted me from prison, believe it or not, is that even though I have now been out — I mean, out of the house, halfway house, for right at six years, going on seven — is that I still sleep in the space of a bunk.

I can be in a king size bed and I will only get in the bed to the point of the

size of the bunk. I can't break it.

The other thing, too, you said about dreams — and this was a dream I had for years: Years ago, in the midst of the addiction, is that I was underwater in the ocean and there were chains around my ankles and they were connected to those, you know, those keystone shaped, gigantic concrete barrier kinds of things that were laying on the ocean floor.

And I could see the light coming through the top of the ocean and I could stick my hand and my fingers would break the water, but I couldn't breathe. And I was struggling to get to the top and I would reach down and I would grab the chains. I was trying to lift as hard as I could. These concrete barriers to get me up. And there was a voice on the other side of the water which, I will say, is God that said, "Quit. Take off the chains."

And I would wake up, gasping for air occasionally. But it was this thing of even in the common sense thing of, "Let go of the chains, unshackle yourself." I was still trying to make it work by pulling the weight with me. And there's times where I am trying to pull the weight with me, where I will just say to myself, "Take off the chains." And it is very freeing to do that.

JE: You brought this to a nice end because that was advice. I always ask, "What advice do you have?" You've given advice. What you gave there was good advice. I knew you would be forthright about this and I really appreciate it very much. And those who are listening to it do too. And I would just want to thank you very much for this. I want a lot of people to hear this — young people to listen to it.

And so your influence will go beyond what you see and where you speak; it'll go on through Voices of Oklahoma.

RB: I appreciate that because, you know, I have friends who were also in the press when their story came out, and I've been very vocal with the press about my journey and their comment is, "You know, I've sold enough newspapers. I'm not gonna talk to another reporter as long as I live."

And my response is that I want to make sure my story is told right. I wanna make sure that everyone understands that you don't have to keep living

the way you're living. You just don't. You're choosing to stay in a place because, even though there's chaos and it's miserable, you feel oddly comfortable there. And no one's going to regret getting their life together.

JE: You're in a good place right now, aren't you?

RB: Absolutely.

JE: Yeah. Should we say Amen?

RB: Amen.

JE: All right. Thanks, Rick.

RB: You got it. Thank you.

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