

Series: *Justice Today* podcast

Episode: Portraits of Recovery: David Gibbs

Guest: David Gibbs of Baltimore, Maryland

Description: David Gibbs explains how he escaped an addiction to alcohol and drugs that began when he was eight years old

This transcript has been edited for brevity and clarity.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Welcome to *Justice Today*, the official podcast of the United States Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, or OJP, where we shine a light on cutting edge research and practices, and offer an in-depth look at what we're doing to meet the biggest public safety challenges of our time. Join us as we explore how funding, science, and technology help us achieve strong communities.

I'm your host Karen Friedman, the Director of Criminal Justice Innovation, Development, and Engagement at OJP's Bureau of Justice Assistance, otherwise known as BJA.

September is National Recovery Month, an occasion when we acknowledge the millions of Americans who have transformed their lives by recovering from addiction or substance abuse disorder. Today's guest is my friend, David Gibbs of Baltimore, who I met when he entered recovery almost four years ago.

Regular listeners of this podcast know that before I joined BJA, I was a Circuit Court judge in Baltimore. David and I met in that court. He took a plea in front of me and I was overseeing his probation. I had the privilege of watching him overcome an addiction to alcohol and drugs that had dogged him for decades. And I'm so honored and happy that he has agreed to share his remarkable story with all of us.

Thank you so much for being here, David. It is so great to see you.

DAVID GIBBS: It's always a pleasure.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So, David, you and I met in 2019. You had just completed a year of incarceration, is that correct?

DAVID GIBBS: Yes, ma'am.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: You were about 40 years old at the time. And you were struggling with an addiction issue that began when you were only eight years old, is that correct?

DAVID GIBBS: Yes, ma'am.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Why don't you tell us about your early life and how all this got started?

DAVID GIBBS: Well, it all started before I was eight, with my behaviors, taking things out of my mother's purse and my aunt's purse. I really had a problem with authority back then.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Shocking. I would have never pegged that.

DAVID GIBBS: It basically all started with family cookouts and gatherings, sneaking into a cooler, getting a beer. I kept doing that and I liked it. I come from a long line of alcoholics. My father, my grandmother, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, the line goes on. So, it was, kind of, in me already. And once I took my first sip, I was hooked.

Then it became the thrill of being able to, "Oh, let me go to the cooler and get a couple of beers and sneak them and put them under the couch." From there it progressed.

I was good in school at that time because I was in elementary school. I was doing good and paying attention. But once I started drinking and doing more sneaky things, it just started going left. But the good thing about it when I was in the fifth grade, I was in the gifted and talented class.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I always knew you were a bright guy. That was never the issue.

DAVID GIBBS: No. It wasn't.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: It was the more of the authority (problems).

DAVID GIBBS: It was more of that.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: You were in a single-parent home, correct?

DAVID GIBBS: I grew up with my mother all my life.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I know you guys are still very close today.

DAVID GIBBS: Yes, we are. And I know my father, but I don't stay in touch.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Got you.

DAVID GIBBS: So, from there, when I turned nine, I started messing around with marijuana and doing things that I shouldn't have been doing. Breaking laws. I was in criminal activity at a very young age.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: When did the harder drugs come into your life?

DAVID GIBBS: The harder drugs started coming in when I was 11. I had started messing around with sniffing cocaine. I was smoking marijuana. I was drinking. But when I turned 15, that's when I started sniffing heroin and smoking crack cocaine.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: When was your first stint in rehab?

DAVID GIBBS: My first stint in rehab was when I was 18, and it was in 1997. I was trying to avoid two jail sentences.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So, I wasn't the first judge to send you to rehab?

DAVID GIBBS: Absolutely not.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Well, I'm glad to hear that. That makes me happy, actually.

DAVID GIBBS: That didn't turn out well. When I was like 15 or 16, that's when I started really getting in trouble with the law. I had already been introduced to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings and counseling and all that. So, I was getting ready to turn 18. And they had sent me to NA, and I did good for a while. I had pretty much almost four months clean. And, you know, I have a problem with women, so...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Again, shocking.

DAVID GIBBS: I have a problem with women. So, I got in a situation, and I didn't handle it well. So, I went out and I got drunk, and I came back, and they sent me over to jail. I wound up doing 16 months. When I came home, it didn't stop. I started using again and things got more out of control.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Were you able to hold down a job?

DAVID GIBBS: Yes. I got kicked out of school when I was 15 and my mother gave me two choices: "You're going to either get it together and go back to school, or you're going to go to work. Because you're not going to lay around my house." So, I started working at 15.

But after the first two years, I started getting in trouble. I was really out there getting high. I spent a lot of time in and out of jail. When I went to rehab, it was like I kind of took it in, but I didn't, because I was young: "I don't want to go to jail, so I'll do this." But I wound up going to jail anyway.

So, when I came home from that, I was at home 30 days. Wound up getting locked back up because of drugs and alcohol. And when I came home after that, I got hit by a car.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Oh, wow.

DAVID GIBBS: I almost died in April of 1999. Right here on Reisterstown Road, I almost died. So, they gave me pills. They didn't work. I started using narcotics again. Everything spiraled out of control.

I was still out there, drinking, drugging, breaking laws. My mother used to say, "Keep your kids away from my son. You're talking about the wrong crowd. He is the wrong crowd."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: When we met for the first time at the beginning of your probation, things did not go so well, to say the least. What were some of the things that you were dealing with?

DAVID GIBBS: When I met you, I just came home from prison. It was 2018. I was homeless at the time because of my addiction. I was staying in and out of hotels for a period of time until my mother couldn't afford it. Then I was actually sleeping on the street. The only coping mechanism I had was to continue drinking and using drugs. Even though you were like, "Look, if you don't get it together, you know what's going to happen."

In 2019, that's when I had—I don't know—an epiphany. I was in One Promise (treatment center), and I had given a urinalysis and it came up dirty. I was messing around with fentanyl, I was drinking, I was smoking marijuana, and I was smoking cocaine. At least I thought I was.

When I got the results from the urinalysis test, the counselor told me that she had found alcohol and marijuana and fentanyl in my system. And I asked her—like I'm looking on your face now—I said, "Well, excuse me. Where is the cocaine at?" She said, "There is no cocaine in your system." I said, "No, something ain't right. Because I know that I used some cocaine before I took the test yesterday and the day before I came in the group." She said, "There is no cocaine in your system."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: So, you knew that you bought something off the street that wasn't right.

DAVID GIBBS: I knew I was smoking fentanyl when I thought I was smoking cocaine. So, at that moment, I told her to give me the number to go dance again (i.e., to go back to rehabilitation), because I had to make a change in myself.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I remember one day you coming to court, because we were seeing each other pretty much on a monthly basis. And basically, you begged me to put you in jail, said that you couldn't take the rehab anymore, that you had no interest in getting clean. Just send me to jail and let me do my time. Do you remember that day?

DAVID GIBBS: I got a little clean and it was getting overwhelming. I remember that day. What was the State's Attorney's name?

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Allison Reynolds.

DAVID GIBBS: Ms. Reynolds. I remember that day because I told her, "Excuse me, can I speak?" And I said, "Look, can you just send me back?" And both of you all was, like— I've never seen a look on nobody's face like that—just like, "Send you back where? To prison?"

I felt at that time that it (rehabilitation) was being forced on me. I wasn't really ready to stop doing what I was doing. But you was like, "Well, even if I wanted to, by law, I can't." And I remember, I said, "Why?" You was like, "Because you're doing everything that's been asked of you to do." And it didn't dawn on me, like, "Dummy. You're complying with the program."

So, when you told me to go back and think about it, I thought about it. And when I came back to see you the next month, you was like, "Well, how you feeling now?" I said, "A little better." And it took maybe the second time after that when I came back, and you was like, "So, do you still want to go back to prison?" "No. I'm good. I'm good."

Because I started feeling some things, and I started growing, and I started paying attention to what was going on and the changes that I needed to make. But, you know, I was still—I got kicked out of one part of Gaudenzia, sent to another part.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Gaudenzia is a very well-known drug rehabilitation program in the State of Maryland.

DAVID GIBBS: And when I got kicked out of the second part of Gaudenzia, they sent me to Penn North Recovery. That's where I graduated, an alumni. You remember, you came to my graduation.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Of course, I came to your graduation.

DAVID GIBBS: That's when I made the final decision to really change my life. I was done with the drugs and alcohol. That was the beginning of my life.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: It seems like your realization of how dangerous the drugs out there are getting, and how you really don't even know what you're using because fentanyl now is everywhere, scared you straight a little bit.

DAVID GIBBS: This is a funny thing, because I've talked to people since I've been clean. They said, "Well, what was the big deal about the fentanyl, because you said you was using fentanyl?" I said, "Well, I can't take a decent blast without worrying about going out (dying). It's bad enough if I'm sniffing the fentanyl, and I could go out off of that. But now I'm smoking it, too." And I was, like, "No, I can't do it no more."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I remember coming to your graduation from Penn North, from the treatment program, and you were clean and sober for the first time since you were eight years old. What did graduation feel like for you?

DAVID GIBBS: It felt that I finally finished something, you know? I got my GED when I was in prison. And it's funny that my mother had said, "Well, you need to do something or you're going to be 35 years old in prison, getting your GED." And, damn if I wasn't 30-some years old, in prison, and got my GED.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Well, mom knows. Mom knows.

DAVID GIBBS: I said, "Ma, I wasn't quite 35." She said, "Well, you was close."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Tell us a little bit about your relationship with the court system. You were in and out of the court system a lot, right?

DAVID GIBBS: Pretty much all my life. When I came home from jail in '98, I had a good run for about eight years, and I didn't get in any trouble. And then it stopped. Then I got in trouble.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: You said that there were other judges before me that tried to get you into rehab?

DAVID GIBBS: Yeah, a few. Between '98 and 2008, I tried on my own a few times. I was always kind of connected to Narcotics Anonymous, and I would go back to meetings here and there. But I've been to about maybe 12 treatment centers.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Why do you think that our relationship worked? Was it just good timing?

DAVID GIBBS: I believe it was. The first time you threatened me, it was like, "Look, if you don't get it together, you're going to have to go back, because you're not doing anything." After that, it was like you gave me a chance and you were still working with me. And I was changing in the process.

It showed me that somebody with authority actually cares enough to keep giving you a chance, dummy. So, you want to show your appreciation by making the change. Because usually, my dealings with judges was like, "All right. Prison. Jail. You don't want to do nothing, you don't want to do what we're asking you to do? Okay. Send him over."

When I met you, your focus was not to send people to jail first. It was to give chances. I've seen you give some chances, and I've seen you send some people to prison, too.

It's simple. When somebody is giving you a chance, if you're working with them, the chance that they're giving you is going to build a good relationship.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Did I send anyone to jail who you wouldn't have sent to jail?

DAVID GIBBS: No. I remember a couple of people—especially one person in the courtroom, that I would've sent him to jail, too. And I've seen you give more chances than you should have. I was like, "Damn, if I was on the bench, I would've sent them a long time ago," you know what I'm saying? I know if it was me (on the bench), then I would've went back, too.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I don't underestimate how hard it is to get clean. I'm fortunate that it's not an issue that I've ever had to deal with, but I've worked with people who have. I've learned enough about addiction and have seen literally the way addiction changes the chemical composition of the brain, and how decisions no longer become your own. The drugs take over in your decision-making process. I know how hard it is to do what you did. And that deserves applause.

DAVID GIBBS: Yes. Now, there are so many chances and opportunities in Baltimore to get clean, to me and a lot of other people that I know, it's easy to get clean now. The hard part is staying clean.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Let's talk about that a little bit. Because really, recovery is not just an applause moment. It's not like, "Oh, you're clean now. Applause. Have a good life." It's a day-to-day, hour-to-hour, sometimes minute-to-minute process.

DAVID GIBBS: It is. I do a lot of things for myself on a daily basis. I tell myself a lot of things that keep me clean and sober because I don't want to be that guy again. That guy that people looked at like, "Oh, here he come." Or, my mother was like, "Oh, he's going to ask me for some more money." My son and mother are like, "Oh, I got to hide my money," you know what I'm saying?

But I've done some things.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: People in the throes of addiction do things.

DAVID GIBBS: I've done some things. But now, my mother can ask me to hold her rent money. Or she can say—like she just did, because she was away for a little while—"Look, I need you to pay the landlord. I'm going to send the money over." Or, "Do you have the money and I'll give it back to you?" And I had the money.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That must've felt really good.

DAVID GIBBS: That really brought me to tears. Like, I must be doing something different. I must be changed.

And then, when I gave it back to her the next morning, she said she gave it straight to the rent man, she didn't count it. I said, "Dang. You didn't count it?" She said, "No, I didn't count." And then, I thought, "Why would I have done anything with your money when I had it sitting next to my own money?" You know what I'm saying? It's a small thing, but it meant a whole lot to me.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: It's a huge statement on her part. It really says she trusts you.

DAVID GIBBS: Yes. Nobody would've gave me that type of trust (before). She sees the difference. I mean, it was a transition. Not just for the person that's getting clean and sober, and trying to stay clean and sober, but it's also a transition for their family, too.

Because your family is so used to you being in a position where they had their foot on your neck and they could get you to do whatever. You know, "Well, I know he's going to want something. So, boom, I can get him to do this and go outside and shovel up the poop off of the ground, or go outside and pick up 15,000 cigarette butts, and I'll give him \$10." You know, boom, whatever.

It got to a point, once I got clean, that I told my mother, "Look, ma, I love you, but I'm not in that position anymore. I don't have to be your personal Kunta Kinte anymore." She used to call me her personal Kunta Kinte. She's like, "Well, I'll just give him a couple of dollars so he can do whatever, and he's going to do whatever I need him to do." She had to transition with my transition.

When I had celebrated my three years clean and sober, me and her sat down and had a real heart to heart.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That was in March, right?

DAVID GIBBS: That's right. She said, "You know, it took me a while, especially in the beginning, because we've been down this road before." I've never had a year clean before. I think the most I've had was six months, maybe four months, or whatever. But she said, "The transition was hard for me. Because I didn't know if you were serious, how long it was going to last."

And she said, "Now, you just celebrated three years clean and sober. I know that it's a good, solid path that you're on." And I said, yeah, because I looked at myself in the mirror today. And I said, "Wow, I like this guy. I really love this guy today."

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That's awesome.

DAVID GIBBS: I mean, I can still be a asshole sometimes, and a jerk. But I'm looking at myself now, and it's like, "I like who I am today." I'm not perfect, but I'm a whole lot better than what I was.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: That's amazing.

DAVID GIBBS: A lot of people see the transition in me. Now, people come and ask me for help.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I know that you talk to other people in recovery or going through treatment about your experiences. What do you tell them about what you've learned? What advice do you give them about successful recovery?

DAVID GIBBS: You have to want this, you know what I'm saying? It makes me mad that people now—and they have always done it—they use recovery programs for different reasons. It affects the people that are there for the reason that they're supposed to be there. If you don't keep the focus on you, then it's not going to work.

It's a selfish program. That's what they tell you in the rooms of Narcotics Anonymous. I've always looked at it as, "If I don't get me together, if I'm not right, then nobody around me is going to be right."

So, I have to stay right and stay on the path. If you slipped or you used, what are you going to do now? You want to go back in a program, or what? You have to surround yourself with the right people. I have a good network. My network of people has a lot of clean time. If I get in a bind mentally, or I feel like I might use, I can call or phone people. I got people with over 300 years of clean time on my phone. I stay close to people that's doing what I want to do.

And I talk to a therapist now. She really helps.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Good. I love it.

DAVID GIBBS: These past three years, I've wanted to put my hands on so many people.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: She talked you off the ledge?

DAVID GIBBS: Yes, she did. I mean, I'm not perfect. I still fly off the handle sometimes, but I try not to move on the actions that come in my head. I was in a couple of riffs last week.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Listen, we all have experiences with other individuals that are really disturbing. It's how you deal with those situations.

DAVID GIBBS: That's the big key. My therapist gets on me. She said, "Stop waiting so long to call me. Every time you wait so long to call me, when you call me, it's like three

atomic bombs done blew up. And then, you want to hold me on the phone for two hours." But she helps me.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Good. I'm thrilled.

DAVID GIBBS: I was also thinking about doing some things that a lot of people always told me to do. Like go to peer recovery and...

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I think you would be a great peer recovery specialist.

DAVID GIBBS: I think that within the next month or so, I'm going to have the time to do it. Maybe not go all the way back to school, but I can still do the peer recovery and get certified and registered.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I'm sure Penn North could help you do that.

DAVID GIBBS: I have not just Penn North, but I have other resources that can help me. I have you. And I have other people, too. It's like, now I'm all about progress and productivity.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Awesome.

DAVID GIBBS: When I talk to people (about recovery) now, I'm not just talking to them. I'm talking to me. I've got to stay on top of what I'm doing because it's easy to slip. Oh, it is. Because, you know, them Coronas look real good. Nice and cold. And the froth, you know.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: For the hot summer.

DAVID GIBBS: Yeah. It looks good. The weed smells good. But I know where it's going to lead. I know where it's going to take me. The person that I am now, I'm not going to like the person that came before.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I remember him.

DAVID GIBBS: That was a piece of him. You didn't see the actual him. If you'd seen the actual him, you would've been like, "Oh, yeah, send him back to prison."

But it's little things that I pick up on now since I've been in this process. The behaviors come before the drugs come. If I revert back to them old behaviors, then I might as well just go ahead and pick the drugs up.

So, I try to be a positive influence to myself, first and foremost. Because if I'm not a positive influence for myself, how can I be a positive influence for anybody else?

I have a 12-year-old son. And my 24-year-old, he's battling with alcohol and drugs, too. His mother said, like, "You watched your father all your life. What's wrong with you?" I said it, too. I said, "The example was in front of you your whole life. What happened?" He's grown, though. He's 24. It's nothing I can do.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: The 12-year-old, you're still...

DAVID GIBBS: The 12-year-old, I got him. I told him, I said, "Whether you like it or not, until you turn 21, you can't do anything." I said, "If you think about it, you can't even go buy drinks until you turn 21." So, I said, "I want to give you the opportunity to live your life without anything involved in it."

I want to give him the opportunity to experience life without any type of substance involved, you know what I'm saying? That way when he turns 21, if he chooses to smoke weed and do whatever, he's grown. I have nothing to do about that. But I can tell you, it's just going to mess your life up, you know what I'm saying? All your opportunities and whatever is just going to go down the drain.

I think about that sometimes. With the 30 years of alcohol and drugs, where would I be if it wasn't for that? You know, I probably would have been a judge.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: There you go.

DAVID GIBBS: You know what I'm saying? I might have been. But I appreciate the experiences and the trials and tribulations I went through in my life because it helps me stay where I'm at and helps me help somebody else. So, that's where I'm at now, is, I'm trying. I want to help as much as possible.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: Well, I'm sure that there are people who are listening to this podcast that you have helped today.

DAVID GIBBS: And that's what it is. As long as I help one person, that's all that matters.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: David, thank you so much for being here with me today. I'm so glad we got to have this conversation. I know whoever is listening really benefited from it.

DAVID GIBBS: I hope somebody did.

KAREN FRIEDMAN: I'm so incredibly proud of you. Your journey has just been remarkable, and you've accomplished so much. I look forward to seeing what else you're going to accomplish in the future.

Thank you, everyone, for listening and for joining us on *Justice Today*.

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