



Cleveland Lovett is a proud father and a senior philosophy student at Bard College where he maintains a 3.7 GPA. Mr. Lovett was recently awarded the Patricia Ross Weis Scholar award, which is given annually to two students who have excelled in the social sciences. Mr. Lovett aspires to continue his education in a political science doctoral program; and he is also the Chief Operating Officer of Real Shore Developments LLC, a real estate development company for which he wrote the business plan while incarcerated.

Now almost 50 years old, Mr. Lovett has spent much of his adult life behind bars. In 2002, he led police on a high-speed car chase in Manhattan, resulting in him falling approximately 70 feet from an elevated highway and sustaining permanent injuries. Following his conviction in this case for drug possession and reckless endangerment, he was sentenced to a maximum term of over 25 years to life imprisonment. The judge stated for the record, “You are sentenced as best as possible to die in jail.”

Rather than submit to despair, Mr. Lovett used his time inside to further his education and to strengthen the bonds with his family. He also made it a priority to provide comfort and community to those around him. One man wrote to the parole board on Mr. Lovett’s behalf, telling the story of his first day at Eastern Correctional Facility. Upon hearing Mr. Lovett on the saxophone, he stood transfixed: “It was beautiful, it was intoxicating, and I had to thank him for allowing me to feel as if I was no longer here.” A nearby officer remarked that he must be new, and that was a common reaction when Mr. Lovett plays.

OAD began representing Mr. Lovett over 15 years ago. In court after court, the attorneys on his team advocated for the reversal of his conviction or a sentence reduction. Relief finally came when OAD secured a new sentencing hearing, albeit in front of the same sentencing judge. This time, however, the judge granted a reduction, recognizing everything that Mr. Lovett had done while inside and how he continued to maintain hope for the future. As a result, Mr. Lovett was able to appear before the parole board several years earlier, and with OAD’s continuing support, he was released in May 2019.

Mr. Lovett writes:

When times seemed hopeless, when what it meant to be human felt like something forgotten and only imagined, I found inspiration and optimism through my relationships with each and every one of the staff members I met at OAD. Even beyond the legal assistance, this support and encouragement turned the seemingly impossible idea of a college education into a reality.

We at OAD are similarly inspired by Mr. Lovett, who has a relentlessly positive attitude, a gift for music, and the soul of a philosopher.

We are so honored that he will be accepting our Beacon of Hope award this year.