

My name is Justin Kopepasah, and I'm a Lead Software Engineer working in WordPress for over 15 years. Today, I'm not here to talk about my normal WordPress subjects, but instead to share a deeply personal journey about how WordPress and its inclusive, open community played an instrumental role in my reintegration into society.

Why do I feel this way? Well, because I am a former convict. One who found a new lease on life through technology and software development, specifically by discovering WordPress many years ago. That discovery led to many late nights of self-taught programming, constantly diving deeper and deeper into the world of WordPress and its community. Now, 15 years later, I can say with 100% certainty, just like many of you here, without WordPress I would not be where I am today.

The year was 2008. The housing market had just crashed, and we were in the midst of a financial crisis later to be known as the Great Recession. I had just been released from prison, and on the way home that first day I needed to pick up some

essentials and necessities, as I was starting over, with absolutely nothing. My grandfather handed me some cash and I walked inside a superstore with my shopping list in hand. Amidst the aisles teeming with countless products and bustling shoppers, I was suddenly paralyzed by an overwhelming fear. A fear of my past being discovered. A fear of not belonging. I panicked and quickly bolted out of the store, empty-handed.

While I have never experienced such a dramatic attack like that again, that same thought, the fear of people finding out my about my past, follows me around to this day. As a matter of fact, it is only now, for the first time here at WordCamp US, that I finally found the courage to share my story publicly. But that fear still exists, both for myself and many others, due to societal pressures and countless hurdles placed on individuals like me.

Fortunately, I did get very lucky in the beginning, securing my first job working in a warehouse, stocking and shipping packages, all because a family member reached

out for me. Unfortunately, most turns after this were filled with rejection and fear, often pushing me back into the never-ending maze of the unknown.

For 15 long years, this fear has gnawed at me. A constant shadow that trailed my every move. Wherever I turn, society's doors seem to close on me, simply because of mistakes from my past. It's as if I was walking through a maze designed to box me in, shut me out, and prevent me from belonging.

Over the course of my career, I have applied for nearly 600 jobs, with hundreds of interviews and next-stage approvals, often meeting and exceeding both the expectations of the interviewers and job requirements. Of all those applications and interviews, most were denied at the background check phase. Seventeen of these companies sent me official offer letters, all of which I accepted and signed. However, thirteen performed post-offer background checks, and rescinded the offer before my first day, leaving me to start the process all over again.

For a few of the signed offers, I actually started working. Going through onboarding, getting set up on the necessary systems, and familiarizing myself with the company processes. Later I would get a company email, informing me of an impending background check which required my approval. Of course, I would agree, cross my fingers, and wait in fear. Two companies let me go when the background check returned, one of which occurred just earlier this year. These were the most heart-wrenching moments in my career, knowing you have what it takes, that all your hard work has paid off, only to be let go because of something you did 18 years ago.

To this day, when applying for jobs, I still have this constant expectation of rejection, despite having been given an offer letter or even starting work. Almost as if I am waiting for the moment when the company comes knocking, telling me to pack my things. These rejections are demoralizing and mentally exhausting, especially after so much hard work to prove otherwise.

The societal stigma doesn't only apply to employment, either. Trying to get rental housing is virtually impossible. Applying for loans to start a business venture or buy a home, have also resulted in denials. To this day, some platforms like Airbnb still prevent me from joining, due to my criminal history. Even investors perform background checks, further limiting ones ability to build something from nothing.

For former convicts, this society operates on the mantra "IF EXISTS, REJECT". This is regardless of the crime committed, the time past since the conviction, or the changes the former convict has demonstrated. Rejection, after rejection, after rejection. This pass-fail mentality with background checks prevents former convicts from reintegration, often leading to recidivism, of which the United States has one of the highest rates in the world.

My story is not rare. As many as 100 million people in the United States bear the mark of a criminal record. That's nearly 1 out of every 3 people in this country. Of this, roughly 24 million, about 8% of our nation's population, have a felony

conviction. And while those certainly create the biggest barrier for one's future, the societal stigma doesn't just apply to felonies. Even minor infractions, such as writing a bad check or too many motor vehicle citations, can result in a lifetime of closed doors and lost opportunities.

Nine years after my conviction, I decided to try my luck outside the United States. In drastic contrast, while still focusing on WordPress and software development, I quickly found work for companies from other countries. To my amazement, companies from South Korea and Australia evaluated me not by my past mistakes but by my present potential. They offered opportunities I could not find in United States, recognizing what I bring to the table now, and not pre-judging me for what happened much earlier in my life.

Living abroad was a very happy time for me. No more stigma from society, nor fear of background checks. No longer worrying about my past following me around at every turn. I was able to build meaningful business and personal relationships,

joining WordPress communities, attending and hosting WordPress events, and even speaking at several WordCamps across Asia. I grew confidence in knowing my skills were not the road block, it was my criminal background.

I found that while the United States puts emphasis on justice through perpetual punishment, other countries focus on restorative justice, enabling former convicts to become productive members of society. Many countries even have laws and programs ensuring former convicts find housing and work, giving hope and meaning beyond serving a sentence. By contrast, in the United States there are laws actively preventing former convicts from entering certain industries, including many laws barring licensing necessary to work in specific fields.

Most doors remain closed to former convicts, further hampering their ability to move forward with their lives.

As an example, while in college, before landing a career in technology and WordPress, my first major was Forensic Science. It was a field of study that brought joy into my life for three whole semesters. Then, when visiting with my

academic advisor one day, I passingly mentioned my criminal past. Later that week she pulled me into her office, advising me to switch my major, stating that no government agency will hire me because of my background. I was devastated.

It's a system designed to perpetuate our alienation in this society.

But thankfully, I discovered WordPress and the openness of its inclusive community.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging. If we're to truly embrace these values, we need to encompass all shades of the human experience, even those that are created by ones mistakes. And that's where WordPress shines! In this community, I found acceptance, meaning, and — most of all — belonging. People helped me, and I contributed to the growth of others, never once feeling shunned away. I found work at amazing companies, and to this day, I will never forget what the owner of 10up told me when I mentioned my criminal past before my background



check. That was the first time I ever felt completely and wholly included by a leader in WordPress, despite knowing my criminal history.

WordPress, and its amazing, open community, helped me understand that there is hope, and we must continue to foster this inclusiveness in all of our decisions and actions, everyday.

So, I challenge each one of you to educate yourself. Learn about the obstacles within our justice system. Understand the hurdles that people with criminal records face and, especially if you're an employer, think twice before rejecting potential talent due to mistakes of their past. It's these mistakes, we as humans make, that help us become better people, help us grow, and enable us to be more inclusive and understanding of others.

So let's each of us be wholly inclusive, just like the WordPress community. Thank you.