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Mayor Emanuel Interviews Advocate and Former-Gang Member Benny Lee on "Chicago Stories" Podcast

On this week's episode of [Chicago Stories](#), Mayor Emanuel sat down with former Vice Lord Benny Lee to hear his inspiring journey from gang life and death row, to education, advocacy, and helping others move their lives forward as the CEO of the National Alliance for the Empowerment of the Formerly Incarcerated.

Benny's Chicago story began when he was growing up in the city's West Side during the 1960s. As he told Mayor Emanuel, his entry into gang life was gradual, and borne out of a need for him and his friends to protect themselves against the neighborhood's racially-tense atmosphere.

"We were like a group of young guys—mainly 6th, 7th, and 8th graders—banding together, really, to protect ourselves," Benny said, "but there were some older Vice Lords in the area and they noticed us, and one day they surrounded us and they said 'if y'all gonna be around here, y'all gotta be Vice Lords.'"

It wasn't long until Benny would up in the first of multiple stints in prison.

"I had a home invasion, armed robbery, a brief shoot-out with the police, hostages, the whole thing made the newspaper," Benny told Mayor Emanuel. "Strung out on heroin, and that's what brought me to those desperate needs. And so I ended up in prison at 19."

Like Benny's entry into gang life, his turnaround was also gradual, and began out of a sense of responsibility to the members of community as younger men began joining him in prison.

"These were the sons of girls I went to grammar school with, and they would call home and tell their mothers about me, and their mothers would come to the phone and ask me to look out for their babies," Benny said. "So I started feeling a sense of responsibility to my community while I was in prison."

At first, Benny put out mandate to every young Vice Lord to get a GED or a high school diploma, and if they already had that, they'd have to take up a trade. But he didn't stop there. Seeing the lack of resources in prison, Benny began to advocate for greater educational opportunities for his fellow inmates.

Over time Benny eventually renounced his ties to the Vice Lords, and began pursuing his own education and new career that would include being a counselor, college professor, and advocate for the formerly incarcerated, as well as a husband and father.

It's a career that continues to this day.

"I get a chance to see a lot of this new generation, and show them the difference in serving time and making time serve you," Benny told Mayor Emanuel. "I can always go back to the other part of me that can hustle, because I still believe I can break a crap game, pick a pocket all that stuff, but that part of me is so weak now. The strongest part of me now is this 5-year-old grandson I got."

Be sure to listen to the full episode as Benny and Mayor Emanuel also discuss his own family, his time on death row, and the challenges facing the recently incarcerated.

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