

## **MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, January 2023**

### **Michelle Cirocco: From Prison Cell Block to Corporate America**



**Michelle Cirocco** is the award-winning Chief Social Responsibility Officer of the Televerde technology solutions company and the Executive Director of Televerde Foundation. Both roles let her help society and businesses overcome the shame and stigma attached to providing employment opportunities to previously incarcerated women. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Michelle shares her own story of being incarcerated for seven years, which resulted in temporarily losing custody of her two young sons. Her powerful message can help us all take the next step toward becoming a force for good.

WC: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to this wonderful issue of MASTERS podcasts. I'm so thrilled to have this opportunity. And by the way, this is months in the planning and scheduling to make this happen. I think this is a great way to start off a brand-new year; we're releasing this in January of 2023. Although I know people will be listening to this in 20 years from now, because that's the beauty of having this wonderful library spanning, I think, 22, 23 years that we have documented incredible stories and topics. And I'll tell you something: today is going to be right in line with all of this. I'm here with Michelle Cirocco, who is Chief Social Responsibility Officer and the Executive Director of Televerde Foundation, which provides women impacted by incarceration with the opportunity to achieve their dreams. Televerde's programs focus on preparing women to enter the global workforce and include personal wellness, workplace readiness, employment strategies, financial literacy, lifelong learning, and mentoring. Michelle joined Televerde in 1999, where she has held several leadership positions, including Chief Marketing Officer. I have to keep on reading this because there's so much to share about this wonderful lady. Michelle was recently named one of the World-Changing Women in Conscious Business by *Conscious Company* magazine and Most Admired Leader—wow—by *Phoenix Business Journal*. Her personal journey of transformation was also featured by *Forbes* in a two-part interview. Michelle is a strong customer champion with a tireless commitment to using business as a force for good, which I'm gonna ask her to dig deep and explain that for us. Now, first of all, Michelle, welcome to MASTERS.

MC: Thank you, Winn. Thank you for having me on your program.

WC: So, I have to just ask straight up, how and why did you become passionate about this? Because usually when we get involved in a cause, we get involved with breast cancer because we lost a loved one to breast cancer. We get involved in advocating for abused children because there's a story to tell. And so usually it's

because we have our own personal stories and commitments: things have happened to us, things have happened to our loved ones, and because of that we get involved, we get active, we get busy. I believe that hope is born out of participation in a hopeful solution. It's usually those people who are standing on the sidelines of a tragedy, of a heartbreak, of a cause that feel so hopeless. Why? Because they don't do anything. You have a story, but you don't do anything with your story. You have something to share that's going to help and save other people, and sometimes people don't take that step. And yet you did take that step. So, I know that's a very long introduction, Michelle, but share with us why you're passionate about this.

MC: Well, I think that it goes back to my own personal story, right? So, as I always say, when you ask a little girl what she wants to do when she grows up, the one thing she never says is, "I want to go to prison." But after getting really good at making really bad decisions and making a total and complete mess of my life, that's exactly what happened to me. I went and saw the judge and heard the words that changed my life forever. And that was that I was being sentenced to seven years in the Arizona State Prison. And up to that point in my life, I had never really had a job. I'd tended bar and worked in restaurants and I had two small children that I had obviously lost custody of. And I knew that when I got out of prison, I wanted nothing more than to have my children back. But I also knew that I wasn't going to be able to do that unless I was able to get a good job. And I had what I consider to be kind of the ultimate scarlet letter—the letter F for felon—and who was going to hire me with a criminal record and no skills and no education? And fortunately, when I got to prison, I first was given the best piece of advice anybody ever gave me in my life and that was that I could spend my time however I wanted. I could spend it worrying about what other people thought about me or worrying about how to fit in or how to be part of the "in crowd" in the prison or I could use this time to turn my life around and become the best version of myself. And so, that's what I did. I started to focus on education and taking care of myself, self-care, mental health, addiction, all of the elements that led to me getting to prison in the first place. But also started to focus on how was I going to get a job and how was I going to have some sort of a career, and that's when I heard about this thing called Televerde. And Televerde was a company that they do business-to-business sales and marketing and demand generation for some of the largest technology companies in the world: SAP, Honeywell, Adobe. And the unique thing about it is they employ incarcerated women to do the work. And so, rumor had it was that if you could get a job there while you were incarcerated, if you were really good at it, when you got out, you could get a job at their corporate office. And I thought, *Well, this is my golden ticket*. Like, I didn't really know if I could do the work but it was the answer to my problem. And that became my mission, was to get a job at this company. And so, when I did, I just figured I would be the best at it and if I was lucky, they'd offer me a job at the corporate office when I got out. And so, that's exactly what happened. It was a company who believed in me at a time when I could barely believe in myself and provided me with an opportunity to learn real skills, marketable skills in sales and marketing and technology, and then offered me a real opportunity after I was

released to have a job. And more than a job: to actually start a career in a meaningful and growing business. And so, from there it's a long journey, but that's how it all began and that's where the passion comes from, is because I know that when you provide people with a real opportunity, you give 'em that chance to change their life.

WC: Do you mind if I ask any questions regarding your incarceration? I mean, you can certainly tell me what is out of bounds and what's not, as part of this conversation.

MC: Yeah. Yep, I am an open book, Winn. You may ask me anything you like.

WC: So, at what age did you enter prison?

MC: I was 29 when I was arrested and on my way to prison.

WC: And did you serve the entire seven years?

MC: Five years, 11 months, and 26 days.

WC: Wow! You got you got that down.

MC: Yeah.

WC: And how old were your children when you went into prison?

MC: My children were three and six. They were two little boys.

WC: Oh my gosh.

MC: And so, my story, that piece of the story, is very stereotypical of what exists inside of our prisons today. The average age of a woman in prison ranges from about 28 to 38 and 80 percent of women in prison are mothers and 60 percent of them have school-aged children.

WC: Were you able to gain custody of your two boys?

MC: My story about my children and my family is almost a little bit like a fairytale. So, I was divorced, it was my high-school sweetheart. We had gotten married young and had a couple kids and when I got in trouble, he actually had come from a very dysfunctional family where his father had left when he was two and he had no relationship with him. And so, he made a decision, when I got sentenced, that he would do whatever was necessary for the kids to be able to maintain a relationship with me.

WC: Wow!

MC: And that he would never talk badly about me or allow other people to talk badly about me to the children. So, throughout my incarceration, I was able to call them weekly and daily and he would bring them to visit. And so, from the years of him bringing the children to visit and the hours and days that we spent in visitation areas, playing games and talking, the two of us remembered why we fell in love in the first place. And so, when I was released, we went that weekend and we were remarried and we became a family again.

WC: Wow!

MC: Yeah.

WC: Okay, now it is a fairytale. Now you got me crying here.

MC: And me, too.

WC: And we're barely five minutes into this. Wow, that's incredible!

MC: Yeah and so my boys have grown up to become incredible and amazing young men. My oldest one, after 13 years in the military, is now working as a volunteer fireman and pursuing a career as a full-time fireman. And my younger one is a technology salesperson. So, kind of in similar industry as what I had grown up in. And he is married to a beautiful woman who's a Phoenix police officer and I have two grandchildren and a third one on the way.

WC: Wow.

MC: Yeah. And so, when I talk about my grandchildren, right, that's what's so important about the work that we're doing at Televerde, is for the women of Televerde. There's over 4,000 women who've worked for the company and transitioned back into the community. And we recently did a study that found that the women were reporting 94 percent employment, which is great, because formerly incarcerated women have an unemployment rate of five times the national average. And they are earning salaries four times the national average. And less than 6 percent of them have ever gone back to prison, which is amazing, because the national recidivism rate is about 60 percent.

WC: And for women it's what?

MC: The national recidivism rate is almost 60 percent—

WC: Wow.

MC: —of people will go back to prison within three years. But what this study found was that the children of the women who worked for Televerde were 11 times less likely to become justice-involved themselves.

WC: That's incredible.

MC: Because unfortunately, that's a statistic that most people really don't think about, is that the children of incarcerated parents are 70 percent more likely to become incarcerated themselves, as adults.

WC: Isn't that kind of the story with most things, that these become generational?

MC: Yeah.

WC: So, you know, grandma and grandpa were addicts.

MC: Yep. Mom and dad were addicts. The kids grew up in the world of drugs. It's commonplace. And so, when I think about my grandchildren—in fact, when they put my first grandson in my arms when he was born in 2020, and I looked down at him, I knew that this was a boy who was never going to know the life of visiting people in prison and the prison yards and prison to him was just going to be something that his crazy Mimi was involved in and talked about, because she was helping people in prison. And so, I knew that that generational cycle was not a thing in my family. And that's—you know, when you talk about “why am I passionate about this,” is that's really where it is. It's helping these women be able to get out of prison and become financially independent and take care of themselves, take care of their kids, become role models for their children so that they can break that cycle and they can have a different thing for their families.

WC: Wow. I like that you say you're going to break that cycle. This ends with me. Yes, this was my story but it will not become the story of my children or of my grandchildren. And that takes a lot of courage and strength, but also the fact that you're vocal about it. You said that you're very transparent and nothing is off limits as we talk about this. I'm curious to know: do your two sons use this as part of their story? Is this something that they are fine to talk about? “Yeah, my mom served time in prison and this is who she is now and this is how she's using her story, to sell hope”? Because I think that that's what you're doing. When a woman is incarcerated, I'm sure what she's thinking is that *My life is over. There's no hope for me*. And then you come along and say, “No I was where you are now and that does not have to be your story. In fact, let me tell you my story,” and your story brings them hope.

MC: I think it does. It's interesting that when you bring this up. And so, for many years working at Televerde and being part of the company, I always shared my story with the women on the inside. As they were starting their journey, I would go in and talk to them about my journey and how there was nothing different between me and them, right? That I just was somebody who decided I wanted a better life and was willing to work hard to make that happen. But beyond that, I never shared my story publicly until 2018. Actually, I was told not to share my story in business and in the workplace. Because I was told that, you know, it was put upon me that it would limit my credibility, right? That people wouldn't see me as a credible businessperson and I was very much about my career. So, when I first came out, I never intended to be running a foundation, a nonprofit, or any of that.

I was a salesperson, I was a marketing person, I was an executive. I was driven and motivated by my career. And, like I said, how I was gonna have a better life for myself and for my children. And so, I just didn't share my story. And then, when I took on this role of Chief Social Responsibility Officer, and the first time I found the courage to share my story publicly at a public event, I was immediately afterwards approached by so many people who thanked me for sharing and told me stories about their mother or their brother or themselves: their experience with incarceration or some other kind of adversity that they carried shame because of. And then a couple of weeks later I shared it again at a women's leadership event and I had a woman come up to me and say, "You know, you could be my mom," she said. "My mom was in and out of prison my whole life," and she said, "I've never told anybody this." She was like seven months pregnant and she was with a man. And she said, "I've never told anyone about my story, not even my husband until today." And so, I realized that when I could find the courage to share my story publicly, then I can allow other people to own their own truth and realize that we don't have to be ashamed of what this is. One-third of the people in our country have a criminal record. In fact, one in two people have an immediate family member that's currently or formerly incarcerated in our country.

WC: Wow.

MC: And so, this isn't something that people should be walking around in shame because it's so common the way that our country has become obsessed with incarcerating people as a way to deal with challenges that they don't understand.

Winn Right.

MC: So, now it becomes pretty much very commonplace for me to tell my story. And I'm always a little bit surprised, like when you said you didn't know when we first started the call. I'm like, "Oh, I thought everybody knows." But it's so—

WC: No, and I'm glad that you are sharing your story, that you're very open about it, because you're right, there is shame and stigma attached to that. The same as there is shame and stigma attached to mental illness and suicide and addiction. And the more those of us who have been through these life experiences are open, we talk about it. I'm very open about my 20-year history of being clean off of drugs. That is a story that I need to tell as often as I have the opportunity to tell because I know that that brings hope and opportunities and help to other people, as well as credibility to myself. To keep that a secret or not to share that information, that side of me, I wonder what that would do to my credibility? So, I'm glad that you made this a part of your story. Maybe we should start talking about Televerde. Give our listeners—because you say that you work for Televerde, so most people are thinking or maybe some people are thinking right now, you know, she immediately went from unemployment to becoming the Chief Social Responsibility Officer for this nonprofit organization. So, when you work within Televerde, what does that mean?

MC: Yeah, let me give you a little background on everything from Televerde and the Televerde Foundation. So, they are two separate organizations. Televerde is a for-profit business that was founded almost 30 years ago, based on the idea that providing women in prison with jobs and training and education while they were incarcerated—that we could build a profitable business while providing them the opportunity to build the marketable skills necessary to transition back into the community into a good job.

WC: What sort of jobs? So, while you were incarcerated you were working for Televerde, a for-profit company. What sort of job did you have?

MC: So, sales and marketing. So, outsourced sales and marketing. So, big companies, big technology companies in the world will outsource their lead generation, inside sales, and technical administration, help-desk-type work to the company. So, making phone calls on behalf of these great companies to generate sales leads or close business for these companies. So, we have today, we have call centers—engagement centers, as we call them—in women's prisons here in Arizona, two in Indiana, and one in Florida, currently employing about 400 women in various types of sales, marketing, and customer service roles.

WC: Are you able to share with us which companies they are doing telemarketing and sales for?

MC: Oh, yeah, yeah. So, it's—you go to the website—but SAP is one of our biggest customers. Broadcom. A company called Aventiv. I mean, we've got probably about 60 different clients at any given time. So, Honeywell has been a client on and off for many years. Adobe. Microsoft was a client for many years. Dell. So, lots of big reputable companies have been working with us for many years in this capacity. And so, the women—then they all are earning a very good wage, which enables them to take care of themselves while they're incarcerated: pay fines, restitution, send money home to take care of their families or their children, and then save a portion of it for their release so that they can leave with a little bit of money in their pocket so that they can restart their lives. And so, then the Televerde Foundation, which I started in 2020, is really an extension of the work. So, because the women work for us while they're incarcerated, out of kind of a little bit of a moral obligation, we have an obligation to them to help make sure that they have what they need to successfully transition back into the community with jobs and the things that they need to make that transition. And so, the foundation, we provide, about a year before they're released, we provide a whole comprehensive reentry program class that they can participate in—it's voluntary—where they work on themselves. So, you mentioned it at the beginning, making good decisions, healthy relationships, family reunification, substance abuse, but then also financial literacy and then workplace readiness. So, we've partnered with Arizona State University to develop our career readiness program, which includes things like workplace etiquette, teamwork and collaboration, résumé writing, interview skills, interview practice, and then we do

job placement for them. So, we partner with other companies to make sure that they get jobs in using the skills that they developed while they were on the inside. So, Televerde doesn't have the capacity to be able to hire every single person that works on the inside when they get out, and so it's our responsibility, we feel, to help make sure that they're able to get into a good job. And so, the foundation provides that service as well as a variety of other services to help with that transition, including ongoing training and education scholarships for them to continue their education, access to apprenticeships, as well as simple things like when they first get out, they get what we call our essentials bag, which is 30 days' worth of personal care products, Uber or Lyft gift cards, bus passes, and resources to be able to get interview clothes, get their hair done, and get some makeup so that they can get started in a professional career.

WC: So, you talk about being a champion to using business as a force for good. What do you mean by that statement?

MC: Well, there's more to a company than just the almighty dollar, right? So, we all have the opportunity in the work that we do to be able to make a difference. And I think Televerde is kind of one of those ultimate examples of how we're running call centers, we're doing sales, we're doing marketing services, but at the same time, we're providing opportunities for people to learn a skill. We're investing deeply in people and their futures and in their careers in a way that's helping them have a better life in the moment but also have a better life in the long run. And I think that's what businesses really need to think about. What is my footprint in the world? Like, how do I use what I'm doing to make things better for someone or something or someplace?

WC: So, I'm sure that the work that you do, obviously, a big part of that is preparing women. So, again, it is about the personal wellness, workplace readiness. You said résumé writing, financial literacy, all of that. But I'm sure, Michelle, that you're also doing work with these companies, helping them prepare, first of all, to get over that myth and being able to hire or thinking that yes, this is a force for good to consider formerly incarcerated women as future employees. So, I'm just wondering what that conversation looks like because they come to you and they say, "I don't know, am I safe in hiring somebody who has been incarcerated?" And you have to help them through that process. Can you share with us a little bit about what that looks like? So, assume right now you're talking to a bunch of business leaders who—they're not just concerned about making a profit, they do want to have that good footprint, as you say, and they do want to make a difference and use their power and their influence in the local community, not just to consume, but to be a contributor as well. So, talk us through that process as though we are business leaders with that power.

MC: Yeah, so, it's such an interesting thing, right? Because you go to conscious and unconscious biases in this area and so, as a business leader, first and foremost is you need good talent, right? And what you really want is motivated and engaged and loyal, dedicated talent to come work for your organization. And so,

in a market where today there are—I think the last thing I just read, there's 13 million jobs available in this country and only 6 million people looking for work. The most recent jobs report: unemployment is lower than it's ever been. And so, companies have to start to think about, *Where am I going to find the talent that I need?* And as I mentioned before, one-third of our country has a criminal record. That's 70 million people. So, if companies are still making people check that box—have you ever been convicted of a felony—and using that as a way to exclude people from employment at their organization, then immediately before you even start, you're excluding one-third of the population. And so, companies really need to take a step back and think about, *Why am I doing that? What is it that I'm—what am I screening for?* Because that's the thing that people have to think about. You know, I still have to check that box and it's been 20 years since I was released from prison. It's been a very long time and that was one of the things that really motivated me in this space is because there was a point in time when I was I was being recruited for a job, an executive-level position, and I had to fill out their online form, and I had to check that box and then it told me, "Thank you for your time." So, I thought to myself, *Well, how is it that I could be 20 years from my arrest, and I'm still carrying that scarlet letter?* So, I would challenge business leaders to first ask themselves, why are you doing this? You know, you need to understand what it is that you're trying to exclude people for and why is it—because if it's fundamentally just anybody who's ever, then you're missing the mark. So, that's kind of the first step. And then once you make that decision, to say, "Okay, I'm going to consider this population," then it's about understanding who are you working with. In many cases, it has nothing to do with the person's life today. Anybody who's been out of prison for more than a short period of time is—it doesn't have any impact on who they are, what they do, or what they're able to bring to the table. So, the only place you really need to think about it is, if you decide that you're going to really embrace a population of people that are maybe just transitioning back into the community, then you just need to understand what their special needs might be, you know? And it's no different than working with somebody, a group of population that maybe has a disability or some other situation, like they may need to go see their parole officer or they may need to take time off to go participate in some classes. But they're people, just like you and me and everybody listening to this, right? It's men and women who—they're sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and aunts and uncles and moms and dads and people who don't want to be judged for the rest of their lives based on the worst decisions they made on the worst days of their lives. And so, I think from business leaders, you have to ask yourself: would I want to be judged for the rest of my life based on the worst decision I ever made?

WC: Right. So, what would a business or a company's first step be? So, they're listening to you right now and they're thinking, *Yeah, Michelle's right? Yeah. Why wouldn't I want to give a second chance? Just because somebody had a misstep in their life, why would I not want to include them and consider them as valuable talent for my company?* So, what would my next step be to be able to embrace this?

MC: The first step is to inspect your hiring processes. So, go meet with your folks in HR and say, “Do we have this archaic step of having people check this box?” If, yes, get rid of it. If you're doing background checks and you're excluding people based on their background checks, I challenge you to ask yourself why. What, specifically is it and how does it relate to the job? So, for example, if somebody's had three DUIs, you might not want to hire them to be a driver. But think about what is the crime relative to the job? Also, when you think about the background checks, think about how long has it been? And are you doing these background checks that go for 18 years? Are you doing seven years? Are you doing three years? So, ask yourself what's reasonable and rational for what you're doing. And then just, when the time comes, have an open mind. Have a conversation with the person that says, just like you would with anybody, why should I hire you? Why should I take a chance on you? Why are you going to be a good candidate for me? And what you're going to find is these are people who are highly motivated and dedicated and eager to learn. And research tells us that people with a criminal record have—there's zero difference in termination rates. And they have their—what's the word I'm looking for? Longevity, tenure, loyalty: 12 percent longer than somebody who doesn't have a criminal record. And the reason for that is that the only thing worse than going to prison is actually having to tell somebody that you've been there. And so, once somebody takes a chance on you, invests in you, then there's a desire to stay and embrace that opportunity wholeheartedly.

WC: Wow. So, this is kind of interesting. You actually are—I know that you're a TED Talk fan and you actually organized and hosted a TEDx event at a correctional facility. Can you tell us about that?

MC: Absolutely. Single best day of my entire professional career. I attended the TEDWomen conference in Monterey and then again in San Francisco in 2015, 2016. And when I was there, I thought, *Wow, wouldn't it be wonderful to take something like this into the prison so that the women could have this experience?* And, you know, the world always conspires to make things happen for me, at least when it's a good idea that comes from the right place for the right reasons. And sure enough, I almost immediately met someone whose job it was to help people do TED Talks in prison. And so, yeah, I organized a group of 25 incarcerated women and a half a dozen outside volunteers and for six months we planned and organized the entire TEDx event, TEDx Perryville, where seven incarcerated women did their TED Talks, and six people from the community, including the founder of Televerde, and we brought in an audience of 250 people that included 100 incarcerated women and 150 people from all walks of life, all over the country, to come in and kind of look behind the scenes of what really exists inside of our prisons. And they watched the TED Talks and they shared a meal together, and just really is such a gift to be able to stand there and see these women share their ideas with the world and to be part of something just so amazing. I'm really hoping and looking forward to the opportunity when I'll be able to do this again. We had originally planned to do it again in 2020 but COVID and all of the restrictions associated with that has prevented any type of event

like that in a prison. But now that we're pretty much on the other side of it, it looks like 2023 may have a TEDx in store for us again.

WC: That's incredible and I checked it out and I invite all of our listeners to do that. So, it's TEDx Perryville Correctional. So, go to YouTube and type in TEDx Perryville—P-E-R-R-Y-V-I-L-L-E—Correctional and check those out. Congratulations on that. That was inspiring for me.

MC: Awesome. Well, thank you.

WC: So, share with us: women who are incarcerated, before they're even able, because I'm sure that there are steps that they have to take, hoops that they have to jump through, perhaps, to become connected with Televerde and start going through the training or the process necessary to become employed, what happens before that? And the reason why I'm asking is, what can we do? As listeners, what is it that we can do before a woman is even considered a candidate, if that's the word that you use, to work with your organization? What more can we do? What's needed?

MC: So, yeah, this goes back a little bit more to the difference between Televerde and the Foundation. So, for the women who work for Televerde, it is an employment process like any other employment process. When the company has capacity, when there's room to hire, they post on the yard and the women apply for it and they go through an interview process and then they get selected and they go through a really comprehensive training program to prepare them to be able to do the job. However, not all women have the opportunity to do that. There are some requirements for the job, including high school diploma or GED. They have to have a minimum amount of time remaining on their sentence. And then they have to actually have enough courage or confidence to even apply for the job in the first place, which many of them don't. And so, the number one other thing that we do with the Televerde Foundation is provide similar opportunities for women who don't have the chance to work for Televerde. And so, what we've done is we've developed workforce development programs. So, basically prison-to-workforce pipelines because I believe that if we provide people with the training and the opportunity to learn a skill, and then access to meaningful employment when they get out, then we can break that cycle, right? Break that cycle of recidivism and poverty and incarceration. And so, we started our first workforce development program in Arizona beginning of last year and we're now in the process of expanding to—we'll have five of them open by the end of this January. Where we are—it's a six-month, full-time program where the women come in, and they do training and certification necessary to become customer service inside sales and computer tech professionals. And then we pair it with that same reentry support program that we do for the women of Televerde, including all of the training and the education that we do, as well as the job placement and post-release support. And so, that program is really designed for the women to be able to have the same or similar experiences to women have Televerde and get out and earn four times the national average, stay out of prison, change their

lives forever. And so, what we're looking for always is support from businesses out there. So, companies can—or even individuals can sponsor women going through our program, they can employ women, they can sign up to become an employment partner. They could sponsor the creation of a workforce development center in a prison nearby because that's really what our model is, is how we create—help companies create their own prison-to-workforce pipelines through the sponsorship and employment opportunities. So, that would be a great place for people to get involved. And of course, Televerde Foundation, we are a nonprofit organization and we are raising money so that we can continue to expand and grow. We'll have five of these workforce development centers open, like I said, by the end of January. Our target is to open five more within the next three years, so that we can continue to provide these opportunities for as many people as possible. And the way that we're able to do that is through donations and support and sponsorships.

WC: So, the Televerde nonprofit organization is not just a steppingstone to help women become employment ready, to then work for a company, a for-profit company within the Televerde umbrella. So, you are working with women in prison, post incarceration, on all kinds of things, to include that list that we talked about earlier: personal wellness, workplace readiness, employment strategies, financial literacy. It doesn't matter whether or not they're gonna go and work for a company that's under that Televerde umbrella. It's just to prepare them for life and for their own independence, correct?

MC: Correct. So, Televerde, the for-profit business, they're employing about 400 women. Televerde, the nonprofit organization, we will be providing professional job skills training and education for about 300 women in 2023, and our goal is just to continue to expand that. I'd like to ideally be providing those opportunities for about 1,000 women a year.

WC: Wow, congratulations!

MC: Yeah. Thank you.

WC: It's incredible what you're doing and I can see why you were named world-changing by *Conscious Company* magazine. That's phenomenal. Just really, really curious before we start to wrap this up. A two-part interview with *Forbes*. Tell us about that.

MC: Yeah, well, it's actually a gentleman by the name of Afdhel Aziz, he wrote a book and he's also got a podcast, but *Good Is the New Cool* and it's about businesses that are doing good in their work. And so, that's his whole kind of mantra is “good is the new cool.” And so, he interviewed me and it's kind of a story of my own transformation and beyond. So, it was one of the earliest publications of my personal story that went out. So, it was—it took courage to do it.

WC: I bet because you share things like that, of course it makes you a target, but it also opens up doors to be that beacon of hope for people.

MC: Yeah.

WC: People will come up and say, “Wow, I had no idea that this was your story. You give me hope. You give me hope to help myself or to help a loved one.”

MC: Yeah. So, what's interesting about it is because there's no takebacks. I can stand on a stage and share my story to an audience, but that's just a small group of people. But, when you share your story into a publication, like *Forbes* magazine, there's no turning back.

WC: Yeah, it's kind of done. You're out there now. It's out there.

MC: It's out there, right, and so, for me, I think what it was, because I mentioned before, the shame and the credibility, and all of those things. I had to get to a point in my career where I knew that my career would not be hurt by this public declaration of who I was.

WC: Right.

MC: And so, that's what—I wish the whole world could get to a spot where nobody's career is going to be hurt by their past.

WC: Right. Well, congratulations. And I just can't thank you enough for your willingness to share all of this with us. I know that this is going to go somewhere. I just feel it. You speak so honestly and openly about your story and your passion and what's yet to come. I know that people are going to latch onto this, so I appreciate that so much.

MC: Thank you. Well, thank you for giving me a platform to share and thank you for helping to spread the word because that's really how this happens. It's changing hearts and minds one at a time.

WC: Michelle, do you have a final message for our listeners?

MC: You know, my final message is always very similar and I've said it already. It's that nobody should be judged for the rest of their lives based on the worst decisions that they made on the worst days of their lives. And the only way we change that is we start with ourselves and how do we look at ways that we can open our minds, open our hearts, and provide opportunities for people to find and fulfill their full potential. And so, that's what the Televerde Foundation is all about and as the executive of the organization, I—any self-respecting nonprofit executive would say you can make a donation at [www.televerdefoundation.org](http://www.televerdefoundation.org) and we would be really grateful to have your support in making a difference in people's lives.

WC: Wow. Thank you, Michelle. I'm gonna add nothing to that other than, again, my sincere gratitude. Thank you so much for this time.

MC: Thank you very much, Winn.