



## Strive, Strive, Strive

Bryon Michael Donner has survived trauma, addiction, and a prison sentence to earn his college degree with the support of his ReUp Success Coach. Now, he wants to pay it forward.

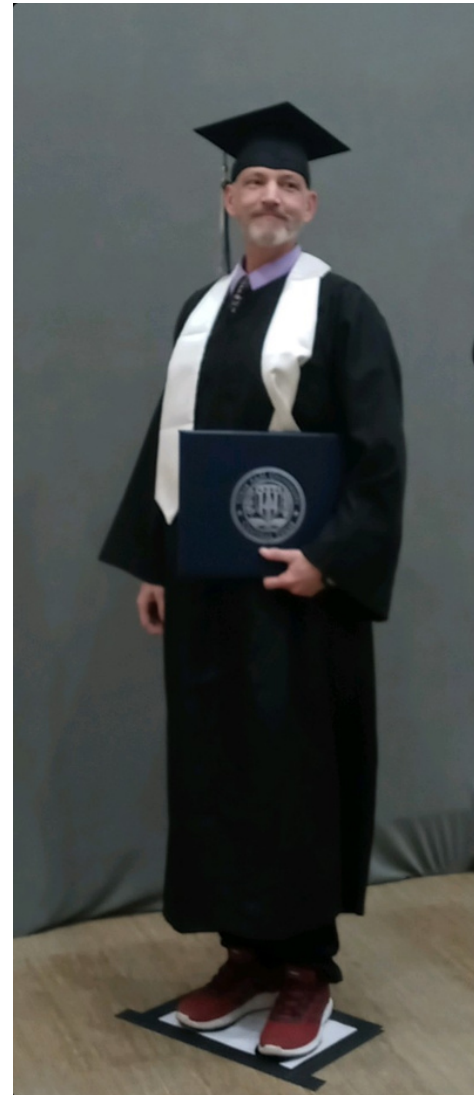
By Meilee D. Bridges  
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Bryon Michael Donner has enjoyed surfing the highs of success, but he's also had to navigate the desolation of rock bottom. In December 2021, Bryon Michael graduated from Texas A&M University–Central Texas with his bachelor of business administration (BBA), majoring in management and minoring in computer information systems. In addition to his own discipline and extraordinary effort, he credits having the support of a Christian men's group, A Call for Men, as well as his ReUp Success Coach, Christine Villa, for his accomplishment.

But the steep climb to this hard-earned achievement was filled with hardship. Throughout his journey, Bryon Michael has had to overcome childhood trauma, recover from a methamphetamine addiction, and endure a prison sentence for felony armed robbery. One might think that finishing college after surviving such harrowing experiences might have been relatively easy, but Bryon Michael says that it was still a struggle. "At times, I couldn't stand any more coursework," he shares. "But I enjoy learning, and enjoying it got me through. I've spent so much of my life running, quitting, blowing up, sabotaging; I didn't want to do it again. I was motivated to complete it, to persevere and graduate, to hold that [diploma] up and say, 'Look what I've done!'"

### Rough beginnings

As one of five kids raised in extreme poverty by a single mother, Bryon Michael moved around a lot during his childhood, attending 11 different elementary schools and relocating from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, to Gallup, New Mexico, to Amarillo, Texas. He describes his childhood as "physically, mentally, emotionally, [and] sexually violent." Although he got along with his classmates at school and generally enjoyed his subjects, such as algebra and grammar, he never truly fit in. Because of the instability at home, he never felt like he could trust others. "That was hard," he recalls. "It really messed me up."



Bryon Michael nevertheless successfully graduated from high school in 1994. He enjoyed economics at the time and thought of maybe becoming an accountant—a “nerdy one with a pocket protector” even, he remembers with a laugh. In September 1994, he instead went to work for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice as a correctional officer. It was an eye-opening experience, one that would give him a brief preview of what he would later experience from the other side of the prison gates.

In the years following high school, Bryon Michael continued to struggle. He tried for three semesters in a row to attend community college, but a methamphetamine addiction prevented him from completing his credits. “I was wild. I was out of control,” he says earnestly. He had also been diagnosed with bipolar obsessive compulsive disorder and prescribed Effexor XR—a drug that was then used to treat depression and anxiety but would later be linked to homicidal ideation. “And when I was younger, I was extremely violent. I definitely didn’t need a drug that gave me homicidal tendencies, especially not at that age and especially not when I was strung out on meth,” he adds.



In March 2003, Bryon Michael was arrested for felony armed robbery. He was 27. For the next 12 years, he would spend his days in various correctional facilities in Texas, where he witnessed, as he describes them, “horrific things.”

“You cannot watch a show on TV; you cannot see a video,” he relates. “You have to be there to see what it’s like. There are moments, even when it’s quiet, that you know you’re in prison.”

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## **A prison-to-college pipeline**

Still, he says going to prison was one of the “best things that ever happened in my life.” He sought treatment for his methamphetamine addiction. He worked as a Service Support Inmate, helping staff with clerical and janitorial duties. And it was while incarcerated that Bryon Michael was able to return to his education.

It took five years because he could only enroll in a class or two per semester, but in 2010, he completed his associate’s degree in general studies through Trinity Valley Community College, earning a 3.88 GPA with honors.

In 2011, he transferred to a different correctional facility in Gatesville, Texas, to begin work on his bachelor's degree with TAMU–Central Texas. “One of my favorite courses was Data Structures,” Bryon Michael recalls. He discovered a love for communications, computers, and technology. Because he and his fellow inmate–classmates were focused on school, “you didn’t get in as much trouble,” he recalls. And compared with trying to attend college in his wilder younger years, Bryon Michael says he “was far more motivated and had more purpose” this time around.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to complete his bachelor’s while incarcerated because inmates were not allowed access to computers and the Internet. But in 2015, Bryon Michael made parole. After completing a required drug-treatment program, he was assigned to an El Paso halfway house where he could leave the premises while wearing an ankle monitor. Months later, he was given a bus ticket and told to leave the state. He returned to Alabama in September 2016.



**Learner  
Pro Tip**

**Coaching has been valuable in successfully completing my bachelor’s degree. Don’t go into it closed-minded.**

**—Bryon Michael Donner**

### **A love of learning**

Bryon Michael found work quickly after leaving prison and appreciated having full-time employment. However, he began to realize that completing his bachelor’s would improve his situation. “I wanted to finish it for myself,” he explains. “I knew I needed it so I could do things with my career—with my future.”

But coaching didn’t just empower Bryon Michael to succeed in academics. One semester, Christine helped him appeal when he was incorrectly denied a Pell Grant to pay for tuition. She also served as his “sounding board,” listening to what was going on with his health and in his life with compassion. “It might not have to do with school, but I could talk about it. . . . Just having Christine there to say, ‘OK, I hear what you’re saying’ and give pointers. She has always given me pointers. A couple days ago, she’s reminding me, ‘Take time for yourself,’ which I do now,” he shares proudly. “She’s an awesome coach. I’ve had something like a mentor in a Christian men’s group, but it has not gone anything like my relationship with Christine. I’m not the same man. I’ve changed.”

Bryon Michael also appreciates that his ReUp Success Coach could lift his spirits when he occasionally sank into despair. He says that although he always felt committed to finishing his bachelor’s, he still struggled with bouts of depression and self-doubt.




But Christine was there to lift him up. “I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to quit school the past two years,” he reveals. “But her attitude is so bubbly. She has been so inspirational [through] dark times. There’ve been times when I could text Christine, set up a time to talk to her on the phone, spend an hour with her, and she brings joy and sunshine.”

With Christine’s guidance, Bryon Michael re-applied to TAMU–Central Texas and began taking classes. “I loved it,” he says of becoming a student once again. He took courses that were “awesome,” such as in leadership and business communication and research, and he enrolled in classes that he was less interested in, such as business law and psychology courses. He may have dreaded having to use APA style in his essays, but, he says excitedly, “I enjoy learning. And I did learn. I love research! I loved writing papers. I can’t tell you how many 12-page papers I have written!”

### **Coaching as life-changing inspiration**

All along the way, Bryon Michael continued receiving support from Christine. “Every conversation I left feeling lighter,” he says. “She was always there whenever I was experiencing a struggle. . . . There were times talking to Christine where I would work through an assignment. After talking to her, I could complete the assignment.”



**Think about what you can get out of it *and* what you can contribute, not just in coaching but in your college education as well. And don’t give up!**

**—Bryon Michael Donner**

**Learner Pro Tip**

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### **Paying it forward**

Thanks to his partnership with his ReUp coach, a feeling of accountability to his fellows in a Call for Men, and his own perseverance, Bryon Michael completed his BBA in December 2021. Christine recalls the moment he shared his good news: “When I learned he graduated, I was ecstatic and so, so proud!” she remembers. “It was an emotional moment being able to see him achieve his goal!”



In addition to fulfilling his academic aspirations, Bryon Michael has also grown as a person. Whereas he might have acted out in violent anger when he was younger, through counseling, he has learned to process his frustrations through writing. He enjoys his current job with Driveline Merchandisers and loves taking on web-development projects on the side. He hopes to eventually apply his college degree in the field of data science.

Bryon Michael's well-deserved pride shows as he recounts his many accomplishments with the cadence of a church pastor. "Look, what I've been through, I have had success," he reflects. "I got an associate's degree while I was incarcerated. I began my bachelor's degree while in prison. I completed my sentence. I graduated from a university. Right out of college, I had employment. I have an awesome job now. I'm stable."



**Learner  
Pro Tip**

**Have a purpose in life, a reason for obtaining a degree, for actually living a successful life. For those who are thinking of going to college or completing a degree, it *is* work. But it is absolutely worth it.**

**—Bryon Michael Donner**

Christine couldn't agree more. "Bryon Michael's will and determination will always stay with me," she shares. "He has gone through many journeys in his life, but he has never given up. It is almost like the more he faced, the harder he fought. . . . I admire this in him and how motivated he was throughout his journey."

Bryon Michael says that what's kept him moving forward through it all is that crucial factor of intrinsic motivation. "I wanted to show that a man like who I used to be—being abused, abusing, in prison—can actually change and be compassionate, be patient, be caring," he says. And now that he's graduated and is looking forward to a brighter future, he wants to have his own positive impact on the community. "I want to pay it forward," he affirms. "Look at what I've been through; it has been work! It takes determination; it takes strength; it takes willpower. I want to encourage people to succeed. Don't just dream. Don't just talk. Strive, strive, strive!"