

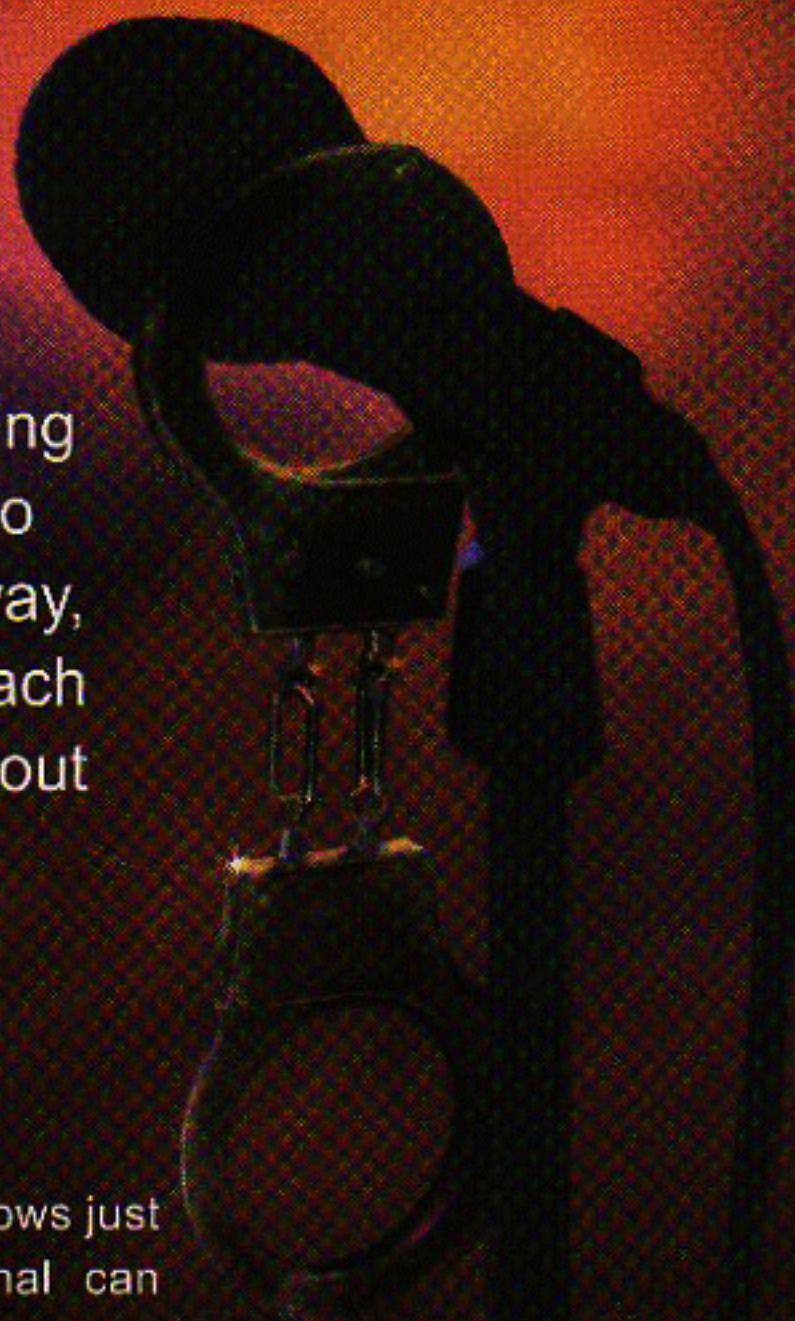
WHEN CRIME PAYS

Sometimes the most arresting speakers are the ones who learned a lesson the hard way, paid their dues, and now teach audiences a thing or two about behavior and motivation

By Kinley Levack

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Anyone who saw *Catch Me If You Can* knows just how compelling—even likable—a criminal can be. Frank Abagnale, played by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2002 film, first rose to infamy as a con man before finding success as a speaker following a five-year stint in prison. Although he made the category more popular, Abagnale is by no means the only speaker with a dark past. Former



Down the Garden Path

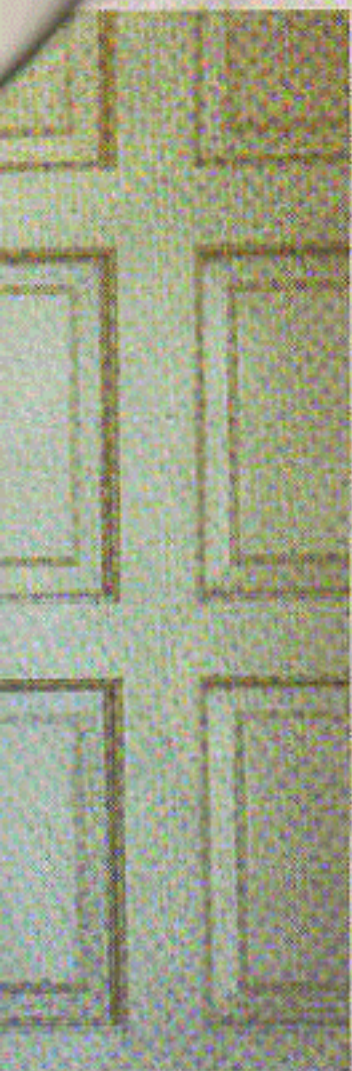


Name: Pegine Echevarria
Crime: Gang Member
(no time spent incarcerated)
\$10,000

For Pegine Echevarria, her three years as a member of a Bronx, NY, gang was a part of her history, not something to share with audiences during her presentations on empowerment and motivation. But a chance invitation to speak informally following a talk at Mississippi State University gave Echevarria an opportunity to freely discuss her past, and she was startled to discover the

impact it had on people.

Echevarria often speaks about sales and leadership now, drawing on her experiences working as an “escorter” for the gang, walking people into situations in which they will be beaten (“Let me tell you, you haven’t done sales until you’ve done that,” she says), then extricating herself from the gang and beginning a new life by moving to Spain.



When she returned to the United States at 23, Echevarria received a college degree, a masters in social work in group and organizational development, and worked her way up the corporate ladder, all the while being "fascinated by how people disempower themselves." She began speaking and writing books, with an understanding that her history didn't need top billing to be effective.

"I'm not going to sit there and tell you my whole story, because [audiences] think 'What's the point for me?'" she explains. "If I'm playing on your emotions for you to feel sorry for me, I'm doing the wrong thing. But if people are saying, 'I appreciate your story; it reminds me of when I did this

or that,' then I'm doing it right."

She is now sought after by clients such as Verizon, Merrill Lynch, the American Cancer Society, and the United States Navy. "I was thoroughly impressed with Pegine and her energy. Our experience with her was phenomenal," says Sheri Sweere, conference director for the 2007 Minnesota Society for Human Resource Management Conference, at which Echevarria spoke in October. "She's not what I find in a typical keynote speaker," she adds, describing Echevarria as high-energy, personable, welcoming, and down to earth. "I'm hoping we can have her back, if not next year, the following year. She's someone I'd love to have back."



Pegine Echevarria discovered her story of leaving gang life and starting over added a personal note to her presentations that resonates with attendees.

thing that happened to me. I needed to be hit over the head with the biggest stick out there." Evans made the most of his time in jail, earning two degrees, which were funded in part by grants from the National Speakers Association (NSA).

During his incarceration, Evans got to know many NSA members, and upon his release they helped him develop his skills as a speaker. "They'd take me to the Lions Club or the Rotary Club and have me talk, then tear me to shreds, tell me what I was doing wrong, and make me do it again next week," he says.

That persistence paid off, and Evans is now a highly touted speaker. When the West Virginia Bankers Association's Ellison wanted to hire him to speak at a July 2006 convention, Ellison encountered pushback from people reluctant to "reward" a former bank robber by having him as a speaker, but in the end, "Everyone enjoyed the presentation," Ellison says. "The whole message is how to change your life. His goal is not to get you to rob banks; it's to change your life."

"My message is very much about adapting to change and overcoming adversity. We all have prisons in our lives that can be confining—bad relationships, eating disorders, not meeting sales goals," explains Evans. He adds that he uses people's curiosity about incarceration not to glorify his past, but to explain that he lived in an environment where "I saw a guy get killed over a 69-cent Paper Mate pen. I saw race riots. And this is the environment I thrived in, so maybe your situation—you don't get along with the guy in the cubicle next to you—isn't so bad."