

If You Can See It, You Can Be It By Chef Jeff Henderson

Chef Jeff Henderson

Unleashing My True Potential

My journey from the streets to the stove

Sometimes, you never know where your life will take you. For me, my journey involved a decade in prison—and a second chance that I never could have expected.

My Inspiration to Change

During the 10 years that I was incarcerated, I began to educate myself. I built relationships with intellectual inmates, and these individuals gave me a global view on life and business. They taught me everything I needed to know, from investing my finances, to how to properly present myself with confidence.

Fired from a sweeping gig in the yard for slacking off, I was reassigned to kitchen duty as a dishwasher. I dreaded being locked up in a prison kitchen, mainly because I could never imagine any good would come of it. But, in just a short time I was promoted to a cook, and to my surprise it was something I enjoyed doing.

Perseverance and a “first in, last out” work ethic helped me climb from dishwasher to executive chef. If I could go from selling drugs and surviving prison, to having my own cooking show, anything is possible.

Inmates started praising my food, and it felt good to get those pats on the back and hear, “Your meatloaf was good, Jeff.” That reassurance and praise helped build my self-esteem and led me to believe that I could turn cooking into a legitimate career. Finally the blinders came off; I was born again.

Prison, or what I like to call “Federal University,” was where I discovered my potential. I read and experienced things that allowed me to grow. Prison was my salvation—it opened my eyes to a bigger world and taught me how to harness my skills in a more constructive and positive way. If I had not gone to prison when I did, I would not be here today.

Life After Prison

When I was released in 1996, I felt like I was in a time warp, having been locked up since 1988. In the eyes of society, I was just another ex-con with a criminal record, so I had to catch up.

I hit the pavement searching for kitchen jobs. It was hard work because I had to start from the bottom. I had no work history, so I leveraged what I did have—my story—and I began to market myself. Many doors slammed in my face, but I never gave up. I became laser focused, mastering everything related to high-end cooking. I learned by reading culinary books and training under many talented chefs.

My first big break came at the hands of one of the top African- American chefs in the country, Robert Gadsby. I had written to him from prison to inquire about job opportunities, but got no response, so once I was released I decided to pay him a visit. I was so persistent about working in his restaurant that he eventually brought me on as a dishwasher.

In the beginning, I worked for free to prove to him that I was worthy of the position; then he started paying me \$5.59 an hour. Although the pay was small, the experience was priceless. Gadsby taught me well, but I wanted to continue to get better as a chef, so I moved on to work at other fine restaurants throughout Los Angeles.

In 2000, I moved to Las Vegas and landed a job at Caesars Palace. I became the first African-American Chef de Cuisine at Caesars Palace, and later the Executive Chef at Café Bellagio. This was a true defining moment in my

life and career, a badge of honor and a title of achievement—something many people said I would never be able to accomplish. Whenever someone said I couldn't do something, I proved I could.

If You Can See It, You Can Be It

I have always been a visionary. I envisioned success at an early age. I learned that in order to achieve any level of greatness, you had to believe you could get there. With a criminal background and no formal training, I struggled in the hospitality industry. Perseverance and a "first in, last out" work ethic helped me climb from dishwasher to executive chef.

If I could go from selling drugs and surviving prison, to having my own cooking show, anything is possible. Despite the many challenges in my life, I believe it was my reaction to those challenges that dictated my success. I am a living example that anything is possible when you find your passion and commit the time to master it. I saw myself as a successful chef, and that's what I became.

Paying it Forward

My mission in life is bigger than the kitchen. Today, I pay it forward by using my story as a tool to inspire disadvantaged young adults and felons in schools, prisons and community centers across the globe, letting them know that no matter who they are or where they come from, they have the potential to make it.

I will continue to inspire and travel the world—uplifting people and spreading the gospel of change. Since the day I stepped out of prison, I vowed never to return, to make my parents proud and to be here to raise my children. I am thankful for my life and my family. They keep me focused, and having a strong, supportive wife definitely keeps me grounded.

Chef Jeff discovered his passion for cooking in a most unlikely place—behind bars. The creator of the Food Network's reality series *The Chef Jeff Project* and the host of *Family Style with Chef Jeff*, he is one of the most influential African-American chefs in the country. A frequent media guest, Chef Jeff has appeared on *Oprah*, *Today*, *Good Morning America*, and *CNN* and has been featured in *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. His inspiring life story is now in development by Will and Jada Pinkett Smith for a major feature film.