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Stories 4 Wings

2024-1-ES01-KA220-ADU-000255317

Critical Thinking

My Journey to Insight





My name is Nick De Ridder. If you had told me years ago that today I'd be mentoring young people, have a warm home, and run an organization helping people after prison, I would probably have laughed at you. Or just ignored you. Because in the world I came from, dreams like that sounded like fairy tales—beautiful but not meant for people like me.

I grew up as the child of addicted parents. My childhood was anything but safe or stable. Most memories from that time are not warm, but cold. Uncertainty. Fights. Emptiness. I often didn't know where I'd sleep or whether there'd be food. I learned early to suppress my emotions—there simply wasn't space for them. As a child, I was placed in special youth care. That's where I learned to survive, but also to trust no one. If you let no one in, they can't hurt you—that was my logic.

Early on, I slipped into what was labelled “deviant” behaviour. At first, small things. Later, more serious. I felt at home nowhere, so I found my place on the streets, among groups that accepted me—as long as I was tough enough. My file began to fill with terms like “antisocial behaviour,” “lack of empathy,” “high risk of reoffending.” But behind that behaviour was just a young guy who didn't know how to handle his pain and anger.

Only in prison did the realization begin. Not all at once, but little by little. A psychologist had me take a test based on Freud's theories. At first, I laughed it off. What could a test possibly say about me? But when I got the results, I felt something break. The mirror held up to me was confronting: I saw myself—not how I wanted to be, but as I really was.

I wanted to be strong and fearless. Someone others respected. Secretly, I dreamed of belonging and being in control. But what I saw was a wounded boy hiding behind anger and bravado. Someone who was afraid to show himself, afraid of being rejected again. The image I had built up for years fell to pieces. And among those pieces I saw something I had ignored for a long time: myself.

From that moment on, I began to reflect. Why was I always so aggressive? Why was it so hard to trust? Why did I believe crime was my only path?



I began to write, to read, and slowly—so very slowly—I started to understand myself better. At first, cautiously, scribbling scattered thoughts on loose sheets of paper that I hid beneath my mattress. Later, I received a notebook. That became my place—my first true safe space.

I wrote about the past, about my parents, about moments when I had hurt someone, but also about times when I had been hurt myself. I began reading books—about psychology, trauma, healing. I read about attachment, about aggression, about how emotions settle in the body. Every chapter felt like a new key, a chance to unlock a door I had kept shut until then.

I spoke occasionally with the psychologist, but it was mostly the conversations with other detainees that truly touched me. Some had similar stories. Sometimes we just sat in silence together. But in that silence, something began to grow—something I hadn't known before: recognition.

That insight gave me a purpose. After my release, I founded Rebron—a nonprofit organization that supports young people who, like I once did, come into conflict with the law. I don't help them by coddling, but by showing them the hard truth. I de-romanticize prison and criminality—because I know how easy it is to idealize that world when it's all you've ever known.

I show them that healing is possible, but that it begins with being honest with yourself. That taking responsibility is not a weakness—but the beginning of strength.

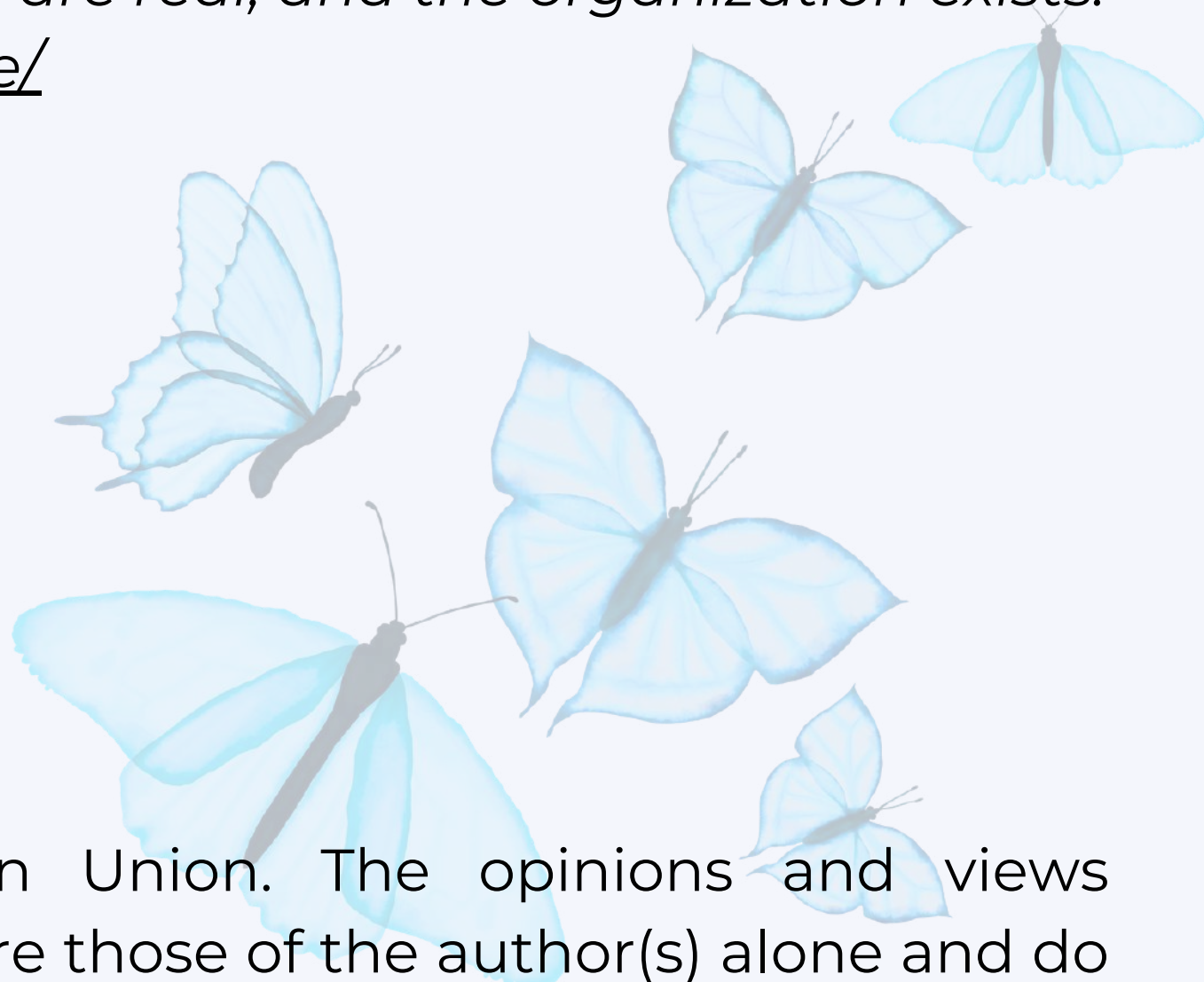
Today, I work with young people every single day, sharing my story in schools, institutions, prisons. I want others to see that they are more than their mistakes—but also that it is up to them to choose to walk that path of change.

And perhaps what makes me most proud: today I have a warm and loving family. A home. Something I never had before but now get to help build.

I live the proof that nothing is impossible. That your past doesn't have to define you. That even from the darkest places, you can create light—if you're willing to look in the mirror and not run away from what you see.



*This is a true story. The names are real, and the organization exists:
Rebron: <https://www.rebron.be/>
Feel free to take a look.*



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