

Vijayakumar's Reintegration Journey



Meet Vijayakumar, the founder and Director of Bravehearts SRM Services Pte Ltd. The motto of his company is: Braving all odds. As an ex-offender, Vijayakumar said that the motto served as a self-reminder that no matter how bad the situation was, it was important to face it positively and not be discouraged by negative remarks.

Vijayakumar has been passionate about football since the age of 11. He would skip school to play football with his friends. Worried about his studies and the company he mixed with, his parents forbade him from playing football. However, things did not improve. He disobeyed his parents, continued to skip school and even picked up smoking from his peers. To help him stay away from bad company, his parents made the difficult decision to send him to a boarding school, hoping that he would mend his ways. Vijayakumar had no choice but to agree to the arrangement.

Boarding school was a brand-new environment for him. There were many boys of the same age as him and as such there was a lot of tension and competition among them. He began to engage in similar errant behaviour to fit in. By the time he was 16, neither his education nor behaviour changed for the better. Due to his bad behaviour, he was not granted permission to go home for many weekends. As time went by, it made him more distant from his family members.

Vijayakumar's father asked him to be enlisted early to National Service (NS) at the age of 16, hoping that it would make him more matured. He did not face much difficulty in adjusting to the age gap between him and his peers when he enlisted. His peers indulged in clubbing and gambling, and would bring him along and paid for his drinks. In return, they expected him to jump to their defence when a fight broke out. Eventually, he got used to getting involved in fights.

For the first time at the age of 17, he was arrested by the police. He was locked up and was charged for affray. He was fined \$1,000 and none of his friends were there for him. It was his father who attended the court session and bailed him out of jail.

After he completed NS, he got in touch with his childhood friends, went back to his old ways and got into fights. When he turned 18, he fell in love with a girl and she became pregnant. Being a father did not improve his behaviour. He continued to be involved in gang activities instead of caring for his child. At 22, he was arrested under Section 55 which allowed police to detain a secret society member without trial. He was confined and had to follow strict regimes in prison. It was then that he truly understood the meaning of freedom. He felt lonely and he yearned to see his family members. Seeing his father break down in tears during his prison visit had a lasting impact on Vijayakumar.

He finally realized his mistakes and decided to further his education in prison to prove his determination to turn over a new leaf. It was not easy. He studied very hard for his examinations, did well and was subsequently released from prison.

Despite his good qualifications, he could not find work easily and decided to venture into the construction industry. He worked hard and was promoted to a supervisory role after 1.5 years. He continued to take up courses to upskill himself and eventually became a safety officer. His parents were heartened and proud of his progress.

One day he bumped into a former friend he met in prison. His friend told him that he envied him for being able to lead a decent life now while he struggled to stay clean. Vijayakumar felt sad hearing that and was determined to help ex-offenders to the best of his ability. After consulting his younger brothers, Vijayakumar decided to venture into the logistics industry. It was an opportunity for him to set up his own company and provide jobs to his friends. Currently, he owns more than 18 vehicles and has obtained ISO certifications for his company. He pays his workers based on six working days, but they only work from Mondays to Fridays. Saturday is called "Charity Saturday" at Bravehearts, where the workers do their part to help the elderly and needy.

During the COVID-19 period, he continued to pay it forward by delivering medical products to polyclinics and hospitals. He also helped to deliver food rations to migrant workers in dormitories during Ramadhan and delivered care packs to the Yellow Ribbon beneficiaries.