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Confessions of a Bank Robber

Troy Evans used to rob banks and do drugs. Now, he helps protect banks and lives near Arcadia – talk about a 180.

BY MELISSA MORRISON // PHOTO BY BRANDON SULLIVAN

Before he launched a career as a motivational speaker and television commentator, Phoenix's Troy Evans had a long, successful stint in the financial industry. He robbed banks. And this was his *modus operandi*:

"I would get a deposit slip and write on the back side of it, 'Give me all your 20s, 50s and 100s.' Then I would lift up my shirt and show that I had a handgun in my waistband. I'd just tell them, 'Remain calm, nobody's going to get hurt, just do what I say,'" says Evans, 42, whose height is imposing but whose soft-spoken demeanor seems more like that of an accountant than a gun-wielding bank robber. "If I was the only one in there, and it was two or three tellers, I would get them all at one time. It just depended on the situation.

"It got easier as I went on. One of the reasons I think I got away with it for so long is I was very careful about going in there and not making a scene. Just get the money and walk out of there slowly and join into a crowd and act like nothing happened. The closest I ever got to being caught was a patrol car coming in the same time I was driving out. But by that time, I already had my hat switched, my sunglasses off, and the top I was wearing pulled off so I had a different color shirt on."



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Eventually, though, in 1992, Evans was caught and pled guilty to robbing five banks, including a Bank of America in North Phoenix — a disgruntled ex-girlfriend turned him in. Despite the plea, he estimates he robbed “many, many more banks than that” in several states. He served seven-and-a-half years in federal prison, emerging in 1999 drug-free, educated and motivated to make an honest living. Prison, he says, is the best thing that could have happened to him.

Like Frank Abagnale, the noted con artist whose story inspired the Steven Spielberg movie *Catch Me If You Can*, Evans has since used his criminal expertise to help the institutions he used to target. Many of his speaking gigs are to bank employees, whom he advises on how to make their banks unappealing to robbers.

“A bank robber will always take the path of least resistance,” he says. “No bank robber goes into a town, comes to the first bank he or she sees, and walks right in and robs it. That’s not the way it works. They’re going to case it, look for male presence, and look for a quick getaway.”

He’s also become a kind of crime pundit. You may have seen him on CNN in May, telling Anderson Cooper his take on the Kansas bank robber who stripped his hostages down to their underwear, or on *Good Morning America* in July 2004, when he provided insight into the men in black who robbed a Washington, D.C., bank with AK-47s. They were probably gang members, which is unusual, he told Charlie Gibson. “Your typical bank robber is an individual who is acting out of desperation... strung out on drugs, feeding a habit... It’s very much somebody that’s living out of the gutter, from hotel to hotel.”

That’s exactly where Evans was when he started. He was 28, divorced, a father who had lost custody of his son. He was addicted to cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine, as well as prescription drugs.

“At that point in my life, I was so high on drugs I couldn’t even perform the most fundamental of tasks, let alone hold any type of job, so, for me, turning to bank robbery was a natural,” he says. “Either I was going to walk in there and come out with enough money to feed my habit for another 30 days, or the police were going to show up and I was going to make them do something I didn’t have the guts to do myself.”

Banks, it turns out, are actually one of the safer institutions to rob. Unlike pawn-shop owners or liquor-store clerks, tellers are sure to be unarmed. Evans also knew they were

instructed to do what robbers told them. A few years earlier, Evans had dated a teller from whom he gleaned insider information, such as the existence of the “second drawer.”

“There’s a top drawer, the main drawer that they use, but there’s also a second drawer where a majority of the money’s kept,” he says. “That was probably one of the reasons I was able to get more money than the normal bank robber does.” He’d sometimes walk out with \$60,000 stuffed into his pockets.

His first robberies were the hardest. Dozens of times, he’d wait in line, only to chicken out and ask the teller for a roll of quarters. It wasn’t until he was to the point where his next fix was in doubt that he’d get up enough nerve. He emphasizes that the gun was never loaded. “It was there for show,” he says. “I was never a violent person.”

Nothing about Evans’ upbringing suggested that he was destined to become a criminal. He was a star athlete and honor student at Tempe’s Connolly Junior High. College scouts were eyeing him as a pitcher, he says. His father worked at Motorola, later becoming a vice president. After Evans’ freshman year at Marcos de Niza, the family moved to Colorado Springs. Facing a summer with no friends and no organized sports, Evans says he started hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Pot-smoking quickly led to harder drugs. He managed to graduate high school, but says by that time he was high on something every day. Treatment programs never took. He resigned himself to being an addict.

Six months in a federal detention center did the trick, however. By the time Evans was moved to the federal prison in Florence, Colorado, to begin serving out his 13-year sentence, he was clean. He threw himself into getting an education. He couldn’t ask his long-suffering family for a handout, so he worked doggedly for six months to rustle up scholarship money. “I was a felon, no one wanted to take a chance on me,” he says.

Finally, one did. The National Speakers Association gave him a scholarship to cover one class at the University of Southern Colorado. Evans took it, mailed in his report card, and was rewarded with a scholarship to cover two more classes. Eventually, the association funded an entire semester of correspondence courses.

“The end result was me walking out the doors of the prison with two college degrees, both earned with a 4.0,” he says.

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His benefactors turned out to be providential, guiding him to both a wife and a career. He met Pam, whom he married four years ago, through a fellow speaker. Upon his release from prison in 1999, two association members mentored him until he was able to launch himself on the speaking circuit.

One of them was Bill Johnson, a professional speaker who was asked by the association’s scholarship chairman to help Evans.

“It was the most emotional day in my life, I think, when I got the phone call that he was about to be out,” says Johnson, 73, who hadn’t even spoken to Evans at that point. “The first time I’d heard his voice, I lost it. He was just — I’m losing it again now — just his thanking me and... his burning desire to do what he needed to do.”

One of the stories Evans tells from the podium is how one of his lowest points in prison led to his early release. A new warden, he says, took a dislike to him, putting him in isolation for 60 days and then engineering his transfer to the FCI Englewood prison in Littleton, Colorado, where living conditions were intolerable, such as 150 men sharing three open toilets.

“I’m thinking, ‘Why is this happening? All you’re trying to do is improve yourself, get yourself a chance to succeed.’” Evans says. “Things happen for a reason. I’m there a little over three weeks when I hear my name over the intercom: ‘Evans, No. 24291-013, report to records office immediately.’”

There, he was told that his 13-year sentence had been miscalculated, that he should have only been sentenced to eight years, and that he was going home in 10 days. FCI Englewood had automatically reviewed his sentence computation when he was transferred, which is how the mistake was discovered.

“When you look at all the doors that were opened for me, it’s obvious there was some kind of guiding hand,” he says.

Today, Evans is on the road a lot telling his story. When he comes home, it’s to the pleasant stucco house near the Arcadia neighborhood that he shares with Pam.

Evans says he still remembers prison vividly, and savors the simple pleasures he was denied there. He says he is on good terms with his son, who is now 19 and lives in Iowa. He continues to educate himself via a steady stream of books. And when he visits Bank of America, it’s as a customer, and without an empty gun in his waistband.

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