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GTA

## He was in a U.S. jail 10 years ago. He starts law school in Toronto this fall

By **Alyshah Hasham** Courts Reporter

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Ten years ago Ish Aderonmu was in jail.

This fall, the 35-year-old will be starting law school at Ryerson University.

His experience within the criminal justice system, including the time he spent in jail in the United States, is the reason he wants to become a criminal defence lawyer.

“I feel a sense of responsibility to be given such an opportunity,” Aderonmu said in an interview shortly after he got his acceptance letter last month. “I’ve seen the gaps and all the work that needs to be done. And I feel I can make an impact.”

Ten years ago, none of this seemed possible.

On Jan 20, 2010, Aderonmu was arrested by Philadelphia police for dealing marijuana. He’d had it delivered by mail from California, then distributed it to friends who would sell it. He was charged with possession with intent to deliver 10 pounds of marijuana, criminal conspiracy, criminal use of a communication facility and possession of a controlled substance.

He spent seven days in jail before Meryl Silver, the mother of a friend, bailed him out.

“It was quite scary,” he said. “I was a deer in the headlights.”

A year later, he accepted a plea deal on the eve of trial. He pleaded guilty to the charge of possession

with intent to deliver and was sentenced to six months of house arrest and two years' probation — a better prospect than three to five years in prison if he went to trial and lost.

On Feb. 24, 2011, the judge warned Aderonmu a guilty plea could affect his immigration status. Before entering his plea, he said his lawyer assured him and the court that this wouldn't be an issue — something that turned out not to be true.

He was deported a year later; Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested him while he was walking his dog, Sasha. He spent 45 days in jail before agreeing to be voluntarily deported to Canada on Feb. 29, 2012. He hoped he could apply to return. He had to leave Sasha behind with friends.

"I was free," he said as he crossed the border. But, with only a suitcase stuffed with some clothing and his whole life left behind, it didn't feel like it.

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Aderonmu was born in Nigeria but moved to Winnipeg with his family when he was three. He became a Canadian citizen a few years later. Then, when he was 13, his family moved to Cheltenham, Pa., where his father got a job as an imam at a maximum-security prison nearby.

He knew people selling marijuana in high school and in 2009 — when he was 25 — he started bringing in marijuana from California to sell it on to others at \$500 a pound.

"I saw it as an opportunity to 'catch up' to my friends who all came from means," he said. "I tried to pretend I wasn't from poverty... I saw (this) as a way out."

It all came crashing down one day in January 2010. He went to get the package from a UPS deliveryman, but it was an undercover police officer.

After Aderonmu was deported, he lived with family friends in Brampton and then Toronto. The next few years were difficult. He eventually worked in sales, then joined tech startups. But he was terrified his criminal past would come out, that his conviction would mean he couldn't go to the United States for training or other travel for work.

By 2018, he reached a point where he said "f--- it" and quit his job. He started to volunteer with a campaign for Toronto city council and said put everything he had into it. He even [helped a court challenge of Premier Doug Ford's decision to halve the number of city councillors](#). He eventually applied for social assistance from Ontario Works.

Then he saw a ["60 Minutes" episode about Shon Hopwood](#), a Nebraska man who became a law professor after serving a 12-year sentence for armed bank robbery. For the first time, Aderonmu saw a path toward redemption.

"I watched the episode four or five more times," he said. Then he reached out to Hopwood on Twitter and Hopwood encouraged him to apply to law school: "Don't let anyone tell you, you can't do anything," he said.

But Aderonmu had only done two years of community college and one year of university in the U.S. He wasn't sure he could apply.

He reached out to Lorne Sossin, the former dean of York University's Osgoode Hall Law School, and over a coffee talked about his past for the first time. Sossin told him he was the type of person law schools needed.

It was exactly what he needed to hear at that moment. "If he'd slapped me down there, who knows what I would have thought," he said.

Aderonmu applied in 2018 without success, but he kept going.

And instead of keeping his criminal history a secret, he started leading with it — and created a website to share his story.

"I was always hiding something," he said. "It's freeing to just be me and not carry all this s--- around with me."

He began watching cases in Toronto courthouses and shadowing lawyers. He got involved with a [cannabis amnesty campaign](#).

He was also working at a non-profit called Building Up, which helps people with criminal records get jobs in construction.

One of the men he met there had an ongoing criminal trial. In court to lend support, Aderonmu became worried the man wasn't always sure what was going on — like how he felt after his own arrest.

After the man was convicted, Aderonmu helped him get an appeal lawyer so he could get out on bail pending appeal. It worked.

While at the courthouse, Aderonmu paid attention to smaller things too.

There was a sign telling the public to not take food outside the cafeteria. It was ignored by pretty much everyone, and never enforced. But Aderonmu thought of his father, who would have dutifully followed the instruction. After several phone calls and emails, he got the sign removed.

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Silver, the friend's mom who bailed Aderonmu out of jail 10 years ago — she said she considers him one of her children — cried when she heard he'd been accepted to law school. "There is light in his life again. He created that light," she said. "It feels like now there can be real vision towards the future. I just feel like his path is falling into place again"

She hoped Aderonmu will be able to receive a pardon, which might allow him to finally come visit her and her family in Philadelphia.

She said she saw a big difference in him after he decided to be open about his past — but said it was a very difficult decision to make. And seeing what Aderonmu went through, visiting him in prison and seeing him try to rebuild his life afterwards made her rethink her own beliefs about what it means to have a criminal record.

"We say we want the system to be better, but how do we really treat people in the system?" Silver asked.

She said she is proud that Aderonmu wants to take everything he went through and put it toward

helping people, however he chooses to do so. Proud that he'll be able to say to his classmates: "This

has been my history... and it's played a big part in why I'm here today."

Aderonmu's application to Ryerson's new law program was successful because of what he has accomplished since his time in custody, said Gina Alexandris, a special adviser to Ryerson's faculty of law, a position which includes overseeing the admissions process.

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"His experience in the criminal justice system is only one element of who he is and what he brings," she said. "He's had to learn a lot, he's had to research, he'd had to talk to people, he's had to find creative solutions, he's had to endure and move forward and be resilient. All of those are the elements we think future graduates of Ryerson Law should have."

Defence lawyers say Aderonmu's background could be an asset in building trust with clients and that it shouldn't be an impediment to him becoming a lawyer.

It was "refreshing and brave" to hear Aderonmu speak openly about his criminal record, defence lawyer Annamaria Enenajor said. "Being represented by somebody who has gone through the same thing you have or something similar and understands the questions and fears you have upon being arrested ... it's something that can't be replaced with any kind of education."

It's the same reason that defence lawyers think [judges and Crown prosecutors should visit jails](#), and why defence lawyers should be exposed to the reactions of victims of crime, appeal lawyer Mark Halfyard said. "It just builds perspective," he said. "This whole idea that people make one big mistake in their life and they are simply irredeemable doesn't hold true."

Defence lawyer Jordana Goldlist is working on starting a scholarship at Osgoode Hall law school for

people with backgrounds like Aderonmu's and her own — she was convicted of selling marijuana as a

teenager, dropped out of high school and spent years homeless before she turned her life around. She recognizes there are far more people who aren't open about their past.

Goldlist encouraged Aderonmu to apply to law school after he shadowed her in court. He has the capacity to connect with clients, to know what they want to learn about the process and how to explain it to them, she said.

"To move beyond a past mistake in your life is what the justice system says it wants, even if that is not what it does," she said.

Ontario's law society requires that lawyers maintain good character, but a criminal record is not disqualifying. Aderonmu's offence did not involve financial fraud or the exploitation of vulnerable people — which are things the law society is concerned about.

"It's very hard to meet Ish and to know his story and see the passion that he brings to the practice of law and not believe he has the best character suited for this profession," Enenajor said.

Aderonmu said he had his acceptance letter laminated in the fanciest option available at Staples. It was especially meaningful to him that the news came in on Lincoln Alexander Day, which commemorates the birth date of the first Black Canadian to become a member of parliament.

The cost of actually paying for law school is the next big barrier. Aderonmu says he hopes to pay for his schooling through a combination of scholarships and crowdfunding, so that he won't be left with the kind of crushing student debt that would stop him from doing the work he wants to do with racialized and marginalized people.

"I am proud of myself. When I saw that episode of '60 Minutes' about Hopwood I saw this window. And I am so proud I did everything I had to do to get there," he said.

He hopes his story will be that window for someone else.



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