Want to Do Less Time? A Prison Consultant Might Be Able to Help.

For a price, a new breed of fixer is teaching convicts how to reduce their sentence, get placed in a better facility — and make the most of their months behind bars.

From left: The founders of White Collar Advice, Michael Santos and Justin Paperny, with their vice president for sales, Sam Mangel, in Santos's home office in Laguna Niguel, Calif. Philip Cheung for The New York Times

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By Jack Hitt
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Hugo Mejia remembers when his Xanax habit ran off the rails. It was around when his small-time Bitcoin-cash exchange business blew up and he was handling millions of dollars, and the whole thing turned into what federal prosecutors called a money-laundering operation.

It all started so innocently. Back when Bitcoin was new, there were people who wanted to flip Bitcoin for dollars and others who needed dollars for Bitcoin. In these early days of cryptocurrency, going from dollars to Bitcoin or vice versa wasn't as easy as it is now, but Mejia figured out how to make it simple enough. He became a "human A.T.M.," balancing a trade of Bitcoin with a trade of dollars and charging a little vig each way. "I'd make 150 bucks for the day," he said. "And that was my day. That was my hustle."

Word got around, and Mejia got new customers — some of whom wanted to change quite a bit more money than he was accustomed to. "Now, I'm not a stupid person," he told me. "I knew these individuals weren't involved in the horse and concession trade like they said. This was getting out of control, and I was in too deep."

He was putting 2,000 miles a week on his car, picking up suitcases filled with as much as $150,000, even $250,000, in cash, which he would have to take home until he could work out the Bitcoin flip. He asked me: “So if you had that kind of money, Jack — for example, if I may, under your bed — could you sleep comfortably, really?”

Suddenly, he was demanding a lot more from his Xanax. “It went from nervousness and stress to fear and depression,” he said, all of which found creative ways to express itself. One day he woke up to find his eyes were bleeding from the inside. Mejia was diagnosed with retinopathy and began getting regular injections into his eyeballs to save his sight.

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Then, one very early morning last winter, it all fell apart. Some 25 federal agents from a joint Homeland Security and I.R.S. task force stormed his house in Ontario, Calif. “They pounced on my home like I was El Chapo,” he said. His aunt and mother were handcuffed, and Mejia was detained in his den by agents who grilled him for hours.

Mejia, a U.S. Army veteran and former schoolteacher, insists he had never messed up like this before. He always thought of himself as a hardworking, regular guy. Mejia is good-looking in a middle-aged Vin Diesel sort of way. He certainly didn’t recognize himself in the Department of Justice news release that was issued shortly after his arrest, painting him as an international financial mastermind facing as much as 25 years in federal prison.

He also couldn’t get a straight answer about anything. He hadn’t even been formally arrested yet; he was a “target” in a much bigger investigation. The federal authorities really wanted the identity of a certain guy whose money Mejia handled, but Mejia says he never met this person. He quickly suggested a proffer, a deal, but the feds wanted to know more about his client; Mejia insisted he didn’t know any more and found himself in an impossible situation. If he didn’t tell them something, he was facing serious time.

Of course, he hired a lawyer — one who described himself as a cryptocurrency expert. But soon, Mejia discovered that their expensive sessions mostly involved Mejia’s tutoring his own attorney in the complexities of the blockchain. He was already going to plead out and sensed that he was in the grip of an inescapable process, so he fired that lawyer (and the next one) and wound up being represented by a court-appointed attorney.

In the meantime, he started scouring the internet madly, to see what he could learn about his future. “I would scare myself watching videos of jail,” he said. Mejia had entered one of the Kubler-Rossian periods of the prison-bound, self-terrorism. But then Mejia stumbled on a video of a guy named Justin Paperny, himself a former financial criminal, who was all over YouTube dispensing “so you’re going to prison” advice in a confident peppy patter, answering questions newly charged defendants might not even think to ask. Mejia loved this guy and spent hours watching his videos. “It would kind of calm my anxiety,” he said. The big fears started to seem less terrifying. He learned that he would most likely be going to a low-security prison, where “violence is not even common, let alone rape or anything like that."

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Justin Paperny leads White Collar Advice, a firm of 12 convicted felons, each with their own consulting specialty based on where they served time and their own sentencing experiences. After a deep dive into Paperny's YouTube lessons, Mejia knew he had to hire him. This was 21st-century America, and this was precisely what he needed: a prison consultant.

Maybe you've heard of these consultants recently. After a prominent felon is sentenced, a spate of stories often appear about these backstage fixers for the wealthy, consultants who can help get a client into prisons that one might prefer — say, a prison that has superior schooling or CrossFit-level gyms or lenient furlough policies or better-paying jobs or other refined specialties. The federal prison in Otisville, N.Y., for example, is also known as "federal Jewish heaven" because of its good kosher food (decent gefilte fish, they say, and the rugelach's not bad). When those Varsity Blues parents were busted for paying backdoor operatives to engineer their kids' college admissions, it was also reported that many hired prison consultants to game out the aftermath.

Paperny's business is a natural market outgrowth of a continuing and profound shift in America's judicial system. Almost everyone facing charges is forced to plead guilty (or face an angry prosecutor who will take you to trial). In 2021, 98.3 percent of federal cases ended up as plea bargains. It's arguable that in our era of procedural dramas and endless "Law & Order" reruns, speedy and public trials are more common on television than in real-life courthouses. What people like Mejia have to deal with as they await sentencing is a lot of logistics.

The idea of a prison consultant might conjure an image of an insider broker or fixer, but they're really more like an SAT tutor — someone who understands test logic and the nuances of unwritten rules. Yet prison consulting also involves dealing with a desolate human being who has lost almost everything — friends, family, money, reputation — and done it in such a way that no one gives a damn. So they're also a paid-for best friend, plying their clients with Tony Robbins-style motivational insights, occasionally mixed with powerful sessions about the nature of guilt and shame.

On television, the journey to prison is nearly instantaneous: a jump cut to a slamming cell door. But in the real world, it's a set of steps, routine bureaucratic actions that involve interviews, numerous forms to complete and dates with officials. A lawyer is your legal guide to staying out of prison, but once that becomes inevitable, a prison consultant is there to chaperone you through the bureaucracies that will eventually land you in your new home, easing your entry into incarceration — and sometimes even returning you to the outside, utterly changed.

When I first started talking to Mejia and sitting in on his consultations, about a year ago, there was rarely a meeting when he wouldn't slip in some version of the story of his crime. Mostly he tried to emphasize that he wasn't as guilty as his plea made him out to be, that he wasn't really, deep down, a criminal at all. He would tell it over and over again; it would pop up in almost any conversation, often wedged into a conversation after a "for the

record" or "I just want to say" or "Jack, you might be interested to know."

The tone and the desperation of that repeated story — I was in over my head; I'm not a bad guy — always had a kind of curdling effect on the listener. It was tiresome, but also, on some level, it felt familiar. In much less calamitous circumstances, we've all vamped our way through some variation of it. It's every culprit's first draft of his own story, because it's human nature; it's irresistible. In "The Shawshank Redemption," when Tim Robbins first insists that he did nothing wrong, Morgan Freeman beams. "Hell, you'll fit right in, then," he says. "Everyone's innocent in here."

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One of the first things Paperny advises a client like Mejia to do is to stop doing that, especially before sentencing. You pleaded guilty already. You did it. Own it — because the vamping will almost certainly annoy any judge or civil servant who hears it, and you'll wind up with a much longer sentence. That's arguably the most crucial piece of advice that Paperny provides to his clients, for the simple reason that when you're going to prison, you have to formally tell your story to all kinds of people.

The storytelling officially begins a few weeks after a guilty plea (or a conviction by trial) in a sit-down interview with a law-enforcement officer whose specialty is writing up a pre-sentencing report, which will be given to the presiding judge. The descriptions of the crime come largely from the plea agreement, which is, naturally, centered on the proposition that you are a heinous criminal and a moral fugitive. Think of a Wikipedia biography that tells the story of the worst moment of your life, with everything else about you salted away in footnotes. This is what the sentencing judge will read before deciding precisely how long you will be confined — and it's a story that will follow you throughout your stay with the state.

"They call the pre-sentencing report the Bible in prison, because it is one of the first things a case manager or counselor will rely upon," Paperny said. "It will influence early release, your half-house time, your bunk, your job and so on." And the person writing that story for you is someone who's already heard every version of the breathy, stem-winding explanation imaginable. "They're used to us saying, 'We're sorry because we got caught,'" Paperny said during one of his meetings with Mejia. "Or, 'We paid back the money because we don't want to go to jail,' or, 'We cooperated to avoid prison.'"

Many lawyers send their clients into this interview with the standard legal advice to say as little as possible and limit the damage — good advice during an arrest or even in the courtroom. "But this is the most important interview the defendant will ever have, and you'd be stunned at how many defendants do not prepare," Paperny said. "This is a chance for you to change the narrative." At the moment Mejia says hello to the interviewer, all the material the officer has on the table is focused on the crime. And if Mejia surrenders to the mighty tug of self-exoneration, then the focus of the story remains the legal transgression and the biography instantly turns into a profile of a career criminal.

‘One guy got up there trying to explain all kinds of [expletive] and making excuses. That’s the wrong thing to do.’

Instead, Paperny and his colleagues coax a full biography out of each client. They encourage you to write out a full life story in the form of a letter, then rewrite it with editors working through every line, then ask you to read it over and over until, eventually, you sit down for a mock interview. By the time the officer is conducting the real interview, the story he hears is a full autobiography with a beginning, a middle and an end. And somewhere in there is this speed bump in the narrative — your crime.

During these early sessions, a client will often spend time with Brad Rouse, who is the firm’s expert in written narrative. In his previous career, Rouse was a well-known theater director in New York, a Harvard graduate whose credits include the 2012 musical about Andy Warhol, “Pop!” and Billy Porter’s 2005 one-man show, “Ghetto Superstar.” His 2001 revival of the Harold Arlen musical “Bloomer Girl” earned him a segment on CBS’s “60 Minutes II.” But those aren’t his real credentials. Like everyone on Paperny’s consulting team, Rouse has served time in federal lockup. About 15 years ago, he fell heavily into drug use and ended up dealing “five, six, seven types of drugs” — until some 10 agents burst into his West Village apartment.

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Often, when clients first encounter Rouse, they are in that post-plea misery marked by social paralysis, thousand-yard stares and near catatonia. It’s a delicate time. Suicide is a real risk. “I remember when I piled furniture up in front of my window, because I’m on the sixth floor,” he said. “I had such a desire to kill myself.” Many of the people he talks to have basically been law-abiding high achievers who justified crossing some line for the first time, lost everything and were staring into a near future of incarceration. “They feel like they’ve dropped through the dance floor and it’s over,” he told me. That’s where the conversation often starts — scattered details, eventually gathered into coherence. “It’s like directing a one-man show,” he said, except the audience is also one person, the judge.

Throughout the spring, Mejia was kicking drafts of the letter back and forth with Rouse and Paperny, and I read them as they became more and more refined. Mejia’s pre-sentencing interview was scheduled in June, and by early summer, a different character began to come into focus — a 15-year-old striver who rode a bus for an hour to work as a liquor-store stock boy and who once won a competition with his “King Lear” monologue, who then left home to become a reconnaissance specialist in the Army before returning to Los Angeles for college and eventually a master’s in business administration. Mejia’s story (which is about half as long as this article) has a Hallmark TV-movie quality to it. But the result is intriguing, almost like one of those standout obituaries, only the subject is still alive.

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your inbox.

One unexpected feature of these narratives is how much of the story hints at a rehabilitation that has yet to fully manifest. More than a few felons awaiting sentencing told me that they were already paying back their victims. Many just get jobs — one former C.E.O. I spoke with was working for minimum wage — while others have started entire businesses and kept them operating straight through a lengthy prison term. Part of the reason Paperny pushes his clients to get back to work, any work, is to provide some good, upright-citizen material for the pre-sentencing report, but also to break out of the paralysis that Rouse describes. After Paperny got caught, he remembers letting whole days and weeks go by, ordering two double cheeseburgers, two fries and a shake from In-N-Out while compulsively playing online chess, until the onetime trim U.S.C. college baseball player staggered around his house topping 200 pounds.

If you've ever listened to a podcast, maybe you've heard an ad for MeUndies. The company was started by a man named Jonathan Shokrian, just before he was sentenced to a short prison term in 2014. He hired Paperny on his way in and ran the company from prison, later expanding it after meeting a bank robber named Grease who, it turns out, was a marketing savant (look it up; worth the read). So by the time Mejia was prepping for his pre-sentencing interview, he had already set up several new enterprises, one of them an online store that sells Rolexes, which can be paid for with crypto (watchhodler.com).

But how the letter handles the present tense is the most vivid transformation. All the self-exoneration has been slyly edited out. The first-person confessional tone is searing. "I write this letter feeling humiliated and heartbroken," Mejia begins. "I know now that I crossed a red line that exists for important reasons. At first, exchanging cash for Bitcoin seemed legitimate. I see now that I was wrong." He closes by addressing the judge directly: "It was important for me to show you who I really am. I accept full responsibility for my action and will never return to your courtroom as a criminal defendant."

Hugo Mejia at home in Ontario, Calif. Philip Cheung for The New York Times

The tenor here feels pious, as though somehow the whole process has reverted to the religious origins of incarceration. Guilt, confession, penitence — this legacy vocabulary of criminal justice calls back to a time when confinement was about reform and salvation, before modern punishment turned exclusively on physical torture, the amateur savagery of shower-rape jokes, random beat-downs, the cruelty of solitary. But put all the parts together, and the buoyant takeaway for any judge reading it is that maybe his job is already done. Nothing isolates one's crime, and all the moral dereliction that comes with it, quite like a story in which the jail time, which hasn't even started, already seems to be receding into the past.

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When the rapper Stat Quo was busted on charges of participating in a scheme to steal millions of frequent-flier miles, naturally he hired a lawyer, but still he was freaking out. "So I went on YouTube. And I was just looking up, you know, 'What do you do when you have been named in an indictment?'" Stat Quo, legally Stanley Benton, came across the same videos Mejia found and started, in his words, "binge watching." Every topic that was haunting him — what to do when you're actually indicted, picking a lawyer, preparing a sentencing memorandum — each had its own video, narrated with Paperny's trademark confidence. "OK," Stat Quo remembers thinking, "this guy knows what he's talking about." So he hired him.

On the morning I caught up with Stat Quo, he had just gotten back from a Pasadena kitchen where he was cooking breakfast for the homeless three mornings a week. He started doing it years ago, long before he got in trouble, and stayed with it. "Actually, it's important for me to see that, you know what I mean? Because you know this Hollywood stuff that I'm in — you will lose sight of reality sometimes, you know. My friends' houses look like malls."

His full story was pitch perfect. He'd never tangled with the law before, and he has a family. Still, he had the usual long-winded take on his own innocence (his friend had offered him discounted airline tickets, and he bought them without knowing that this friend had gotten them by hacking into other people's accounts and stealing their miles). But when Stat Quo sat down to work on his narrative, he totally got it. He knew that anyone walking into a pre-sentencing interview is presumed to be a hardened criminal, but a Black rapper?

"My case was out of Dallas, Texas. And let's be honest here," he said, "not the most progressive state for a Black man. And listen, I'm not Drake black. I'm, like, Shaka Zulu black. You know what I'm saying?" Three of the other defendants who used these stolen miles got real time. "One guy got up there trying to explain all kinds of [expletive] and making excuses. That's the wrong thing to

do. But he didn't have anyone to tell him, because that's just your natural instinct when you get in front of somebody. 'Judge, wait a minute, man. I ain't do nothing. Come on now. Hold on, man. You know, I'm just out here' — *slam*." That guy was sentenced to two and a half years.

"My judge saw me differently," he said. "She's like, 'Based on what I've read about you, you shouldn't even be in here.'" In the sentencing hearing, Judge Jane Boyle said aloud, "I wonder if he even should have been prosecuted." Then she said, "I'd like to give you six months probation, but I can't." Then she turned to a court officer for clarification. "Do I have to give him," she asked, "a year probation?" Informed that the guidelines required at least one year of probation, she imposed exactly that. "That's because she was able to read my story," he said.

Much of Paperny's advice comes from his own attempts to avoid prison when the Ponzi scheme he enabled collapsed. After being nabbed, he figured he would outsmart the feds with a series of artful dodges and deceptions. In the midst of constructing this web of lies, Paperny insisted that he take a lie-detector test. "I immediately Googled for information on polygraph examinations," Paperny writes in his self-published confessional, "Lessons From Prison." He found a $350 online course, which taught him all the "ostensibly proven techniques" to evade the lie detector. "By tightening my sphincter when answering questions," he wrote, "I supposedly could manipulate the machine's findings of truth to suit my purpose." And yet even though he "practiced so fervently" and then "squeezed my innards when appropriate," the polygraph administrator informed him afterward that "the machine indicated with an accuracy measurement of better than 99.99 percent" that he was lying.

"Justin," he added, "you're going to prison."

Once that reality set in, Paperny prepared the same way everyone does, and how his clients still do — Googling "what happens when you go to prison?" He learned a jumble of information, but then the day came. Paperny reported to the Taft federal prison camp in California, changing his street clothes for a prison outfit. He quickly discovered that there are lots of rules in prison that Quora doesn't have the answers to, and routines you have to discover by yourself.

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Soon enough, he met people and was told about people. There was a guy known as Dopey, another known as Road Runner. He heard about a mysterious figure named the Kingpin, who had served the longest and hardest time. And then there was Drew, the hustler on his floor who lured Paperny into accepting a contraband mattress, a dangerous first step because getting caught by the guards doing anything shady can easily win you an extended sentence. It was all dizzying, so Paperny decided to lie low and do what most inmates do — exercise and try to stay out of trouble.

After a few days, the Kingpin was in the TV room and introduced himself. His name was Michael Santos, and he was busted for dealing in 1987, at the height of President Ronald Reagan's war on drugs. For a first offense, at age 23, Santos was sent to federal prison for 45 years. Whatever Paperny might have been expecting

— a battle-scarred lifer, a guy who could turn a Bic pen into a shiv — Santos wasn't it. Instead, he was a self-educated man whose years of reading transformed him into something far beyond your typical jailhouse lawyer — more of a jailhouse philosopher, concerned with the metaphysics of confinement.

'Our team is a big proponent for avoiding recreational sports in prison, like softball, because unless you're going to be a softball player when you come home, then I don't think you should play softball four days a week.'

Santos wanted to know if Paperny had ever read "The Divine Comedy." "In Dante's epic poem," he said, "Virgil offered Dante a way out of the forest." Santos encouraged him not to worry so much about the softball league or the card games or all the other time-wasters available to prisoners who instinctively believe that their years behind bars are meant to be useless. He encouraged Paperny to read Aristotle and to "know thyself." He told him he should really read Sun Tzu, too, and learn to "know thy enemy."

Like any sane convict, Paperny thought: You're kidding me. That's the wisdom of the centuries? Are you serious? Paperny wondered what the point was of all this Reader's Digest philosophy, but he found the books interesting. Who, he wondered, was his "enemy"? Maybe, Santos told Paperny, the enemy is not a who. "Maybe it's a what," he said. "Maybe it's a prison term. Maybe it's an unfulfilling career that leads you to misery, or to bad decisions that land you in prison."

At the time, Paperny was dealing with a lot of practical prison problems. He was working in the kitchen, under the thumb of an aggressive inmate who trafficked liberally in Holocaust denial. And then there was Santos, slowly teaching him to look past the office politics of prison and try to see his confinement as a bounty, a gift of years to prepare for what comes next. Think of prison as a business-planning session, Santos told him — he'd been thinking that way for years. He'd already written several books, about getting through prison. Paperny was due to get out a lot earlier than he was, Santos pointed out, so maybe he could get a jump on the obvious business idea — advising incoming felons on how best to handle a future of prison. When Paperny got out in 2009, he founded the business, with Santos joining on his release four years later.

Today, Paperny and Santos are business partners, co-founders of White Collar Advice and another business called Prison Professors, which is Santos's attempt to make their services and philosophy available to anyone, not just the white-collar felons who can afford their fees. (Paperny told me those fees range from a few thousand dollars into the six figures.) Santos's intention, long before he got out, was always much bigger than consulting with white-collar criminals, whom he described as merely the "consumer side" of the business.

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"It's way more important to me to help the million people that are in prison who keep recidivating," he said. To that end, the other side of the business seeks to recreate for thousands of prisoners a certain encounter Paperny had not long after meeting Santos. "When I went in, I was a fat, miserable, self-loathing white-collar defendant blaming everyone but myself," Paperny said, "and adjusted to prison like you do, complaining and exercising seven, eight hours a day." Then the Taft prison camp philosopher sidled up to him at the gym one day. "And Santos said to me, kind of joking, like, 'Hey, bud, how much are people going to pay you to do those pull-ups when you get out?' And I'm like, 'Nobody.' And it was an aha moment." Santos believes that inmates should think of confinement not as punishment but as a continuing education for a future newly conceived.

"Our team," Paperny said, "is a big proponent for avoiding recreational sports in prison, like softball, because unless you're going to be a softball player when you come home, then I don't think you should play softball four days a week — so, every choice should relate to the life you want to live when you come home."

When Santos did get out in 2013, he had to get familiar with a few new technologies — email, YouTube, basically the entire internet — but has since crafted a series of videos into a kind of freshman course on how to navigate prison. They are now available in all the prisons of Washington State and California, sometimes with the lure of sentence reduction for inmates who complete them. A former warden who knew Santos has helped install them in the parts of the federal prison system. There are courses on setting goals, being accountable, attitude. "You're not doing this for a G.E.D. certificate or to get a lower bunk pass or an extra bowl of Wheaties," Santos said, but to attain "success as you define it." No matter how energized Santos might get talking about these expanding programs, he's still the jailhouse philosopher and epigrammatic inmate who can casually sit back at the end of a riff to tell you that he means to upend the entire American penitentiary system through the prisoners themselves — to bend the arc of justice back to its history, when confinement was a call not for sadism and misery but for contrition and deliverance.

On the morning of Mejia's sentencing last November, Mejia met up with Paperny outside a coffee shop in Santa Ana. It was on an elegant block shaded by Chinese elm trees and crepe myrtle — with the stunning, new Ronald Reagan Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse looming high above. Clerks and bailiffs with their belt badges and ID lanyards stood around drinking coffees. Mejia showed up in a shiny new suit and introduced Paperny to his fiancée and his mother. He excitedly told us that the day before, his lawyer briefed him on some new, clever arguments he would be using to ask for no jail time, just probation and home confinement.

Paperny held out an open hand, as if to slow things down, and reminded Mejia that the state was asking for nearly five years. It would be unusual for a judge to stiff a prosecutor by giving Mejia no time at all. "I wouldn't be surprised if you got three years," he said, trying to lower expectations. Paperny often finds himself at odds with the lawyers, mostly over details where he's relying on his own hard-won experience.

The expectations game aside, Paperny was very concerned, agitated almost, about some specific advice he had written to Mejia in emails and mentioned in numerous Zoom consults. There were a series of steps that had to be taken to secure the best possible outcome. There would be a back and forth between the two lawyers, and then the judge would pronounce a sentence. Right afterward, Mejia had to make sure his lawyer asked two questions: Will the judge recommend a drug-rehabilitation program? (This can knock up to a year off a sentence.) And would the judge recommend that Mejia go to the low-security camp in Oregon?

Inside, Judge Cormac Carney of Federal District Court reviewed the details of the crime and noted that his sentencing guidelines called for 57 to 71 months. Before he invited each side to make arguments about what the actual sentence should be, he spoke expansively about Mejia's army experience, his hardship as a child, his eye disease — clearly, some version of Mejia's biography had made its way to the judge's bench through the official bureaucratic channels that Paperny taught him to work. Then the prosecutor, Jason Pang, took the lectern and also admitted that he was impressed with Mejia's story, noting that Mejia's plea and expression of remorse were "worthy things" and that his military service was "something that the court needs to consider." He recommended "the low end of the sentencing guidelines."

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Mejia's court-appointed attorney, Michael Crain, stepped up and dialed things all the way back to the case itself. Mejia got busted, he explained, because a confidential informant got him talking about laundering money with crypto. Crain challenged the government's tactics, arguing that the C.I. was probably trying to lower his own sentence and that much of what Mejia had said that implicated him in major felonies was really nothing more than "puffery." You could almost feel the air in the room change — the morality play we'd all been watching had become a courtroom drama. He went on to pull from that week's headlines, pointing out that the day before the QAnon Shaman had gotten only 41 months in connection with the Jan. 6 assault on the Capitol. With that, Crain asked for probation. No jail time.

"Well, after hearing from everybody," Carney said, "I am going to impose a custodial sentence of 36 months. Three years." Mejia's mother, who was seated in the gallery, lowered her head. The room went silent. Paperny sat up on the edge of the bench, grabbing the back of the pew in front, and strained to make direct eye contact with Mejia, who didn't forget. He leaned over and whispered to Crain, who asked if the judge would back Mejia's request for drug rehab.

"I will make a strong recommendation for that," he said cheerfully. Then Crain said he had another request. Mejia had asked him to be placed in a particular prison. "My experience has been, I don't think the court is going to recommend a particular facility," he said very politely, "but if the court is inclined to do so, we have a name in mind."

"I'll do it," Carney said.

"It would be the Sheridan federal prison camp that's in Oregon," Crain said.

"I'll make the recommendation," the judge said.

Paperny clenched his fist behind the bench and, safe from judicial review, pumped the smallest bit of air.

Within hours, many news outlets ran the story about a major financial criminal getting hard time. (Fox Business: "Man gets 3-year prison sentence for Bitcoin money laundering.") But outside the courtroom, Paperny, full of pep, pulled Mejia aside and explained the math. "The day you show up, you'll get five months off for good time, that's 31 months," he said. "And you'll get nine months off for completing the drug program, that's 22. And you'll probably get seven or eight months in the halfway house, so it's 12 to 13 months." Throw in his health issues and the Cares Act, if it applies, and Mejia might be home in less than a year. Paperny added that he had a few clients currently in Sheridan who would be there, first thing, like a welcome wagon.

It took a while before Mejia brightened up and then grew chatty. He turned to me to marvel over this odd sense of relief he was feeling — of "clarity," he said. Paperny whipped out a selfie stick, and he and Mejia recorded a real-time video about what just happened and Mejia's sense of purpose. Michael Santos, who was not there, was very much there. After Paperny turned off his phone, Mejia's talk quickly shifted to his businesses, the future. He told his family he was going to make the businesses run while he's gone. He was in full planning mode. There was plenty of time before he had to report to prison for him to make it into a "turnkey situation" for his employees. Down at the corner, a fresh set of bailiffs and clerks sipped their lattes. Just past the Chinese elm trees, Mejia took his fiancée's hand, and they walked away.

Jack Hitt is the creator and a co-host of the 2017 Peabody Award-winning podcast "Uncivil." He last wrote about sting operations to expose celebrity psychics.

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