

Catherine Hoke

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Catherine Hoke is a social entrepreneur and criminal justice reform advocate best known for founding the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP) in Texas and the nonprofit Defy Ventures, an organization designed to enable incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people with criminal histories with skills to become successful business owners and leaders. She utilizes her background in venture capital and leadership training to pioneer programs that combine character development with job readiness and entrepreneurship training to prevent recidivism, and ultimately to shift perceptions about people with criminal histories. Her work has drawn national attention for its innovative outcomes; however, it has also been marked by controversy, including allegations of boundary violations that led to her resignation from Defy Ventures. This paper examines Hoke's achievements, the criticisms surrounding her leadership, and the bigger implications of her work for criminal justice reform in the United States.

Born in Montreal, Quebec Catherine Hoke's father, who "nurtured her spirit" moved their family to the United states when she was seven years old. (Hoke, 2019) This is where her entrepreneurial spirit came about, "selling hamsters at age seven, sold golf balls she retrieved from the water, and her father paid her to translate his books because his English was broken." (Wilson & Wilson, 2015) Her father's influence was powerful, pushing her to "build inventions and show the business model to her father." (Wilson & Wilson, 2015) Her resilient attitude showed by becoming the first female on her high school boys wrestling team, and "to this day, she owns the school record for getting pinned the fastest and the most in her first year." (Catherine Hoke, 2019) She proceeded to UC Berkeley where she was "originally turned down for the undergraduate business degree and wrote an appeals letter to get in." (Wilson & Wilson, 2015)

After college, she was “climbing the Wall Street ladder and at 25 years old, making more money than she needed” but felt a growing sense of dissatisfaction. (Hoke, 2019) At the age of 27 in 2004 Hoke’s career path took a drastic turn. Inspired by a visit to a Texas prison, she left her “prestigious job on Wall Street” and founded the Prison Entrepreneurship Program (PEP). (Hoke, 2019) She saw the potential for these incarcerated men to learn skills to become successful entrepreneurs, which she felt would be the positive change they needed. PEP’s business model was built on providing business and character development training to inmates. The program connected inmates with outside business executives who served as mentors. PEP’s results were outstanding, with a “recidivism rate of less than 5% and the employment rate at 98%” for its graduates. (*Catherine Hoke*, 2019) The program received widespread national recognition for its effectiveness. In 2009 Hoke resigned from PEP after admitting to having improper relationships with formerly incarcerated program participants. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice “deemed those relationships inappropriate,” and led to her ban from Texas prisons and her departure from the organization she founded. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2024)

Following her resignation from PEP, driven by her “hatred for injustice and love for the underdog,” Hoke founded Defy Ventures in New York City in 2010. (*Catherine Hoke*, 2019) Branding for the organization centered around the theme of “second chances,” since she saw it as her second chance to help the formerly incarcerated get their second chance. Defy Ventures expanded on the PEP model, operating in multiple states and serving men, women, and even youth with criminal histories. Using a blended learning approach with a large network of mentors, Defy Ventures achieved similar success to PEP, reporting low recidivism rates and high employment rates. Hoke again became a celebrated social entrepreneur, receiving awards and

recognition from organizations such as Ashoka and Fast Company, with Fast Company “recognizing Hoke as one of the 100 Most Creative People in Business.” (Catherine Hoke, 2019)

In 2018, Hoke faced new allegations of sexual harassment by a former employee and allegations of financial improprieties and fraudulent use of data by the organization, which lead to an internal investigation by the Defy Ventures board. The “allegations were apparently passed along to the Daily Beast, an online news publication by Roger Gordon, who had served as Defy Venture’s president for one month.” (Zoukis, 2025) Catherine Hoke voluntarily resigned, denying allegations sexual harassment, calling the claims “categorically untrue and deceitful.” (Zoukis, 2025) The investigation concluded there was “no evidence to support” most of the allegations, it concluded that although “facts were not certain” there was some evidence of an incident that Hoke “engaged in non-consensual touching of a sexual nature with a Defy employee on one occasion in 2014” and “evidence that she had made sexual and inappropriate comments to Defy employees on multiple occasions.” (Zoukis, 2025) Despite Hoke’s resignation, the organization under new leadership “continues to provide entrepreneurial training and support to prisoners who want to start their own businesses once they are released.” (Zoukis, 2025)

After her resignation, Hoke rebranded herself and continued her work under the name Hustle 2.0, which is “an evidence-based, groundbreaking rehabilitation program designed to help correctional facilities foster sustainable change among incarcerated individuals” featuring Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and reaches “800+ prisons and jails in 47 states, where more than 20,000 men and women have graduated.” (*Hustle 2.0 – Maximizing the Potential of People Affected by Incarceration*, n.d.) Additionally, Hoke has authored a book and continued to speak publicly, discussing themes of forgiveness and resilience.

Catherine Hoke's work proves both the potential and pitfalls of social entrepreneurship. Shaped by an early life of resilience and an affinity for the underdog, she believed in her powerful model for criminal justice reform. Despite her repeated personal and ethical failures serving as lessons, illustrating how a leader's actions can threaten the mission and lifeblood of their organization. Catherine Hoke's legacy acknowledges both her groundbreaking ideas and contributions to prison reform and profound ethical failures that define her public image.

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