



*Reflections*

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## **Correcting the Corrections**

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**F**rom age fifteen to age twenty-six, I've become institutionally accustomed to the smell, look, feel, consequence, and regressive mindset of the judicial system. My experience started with the structural chaos of juvenile detention centers and ended with the inmate/officer coercion of correctional facilities. As the result of an entire childhood filled with verbal and physical parental abuse, feelings of anger, hate, and loathing didn't take long to outwardly manifest themselves towards societal challenges and authority figures around me.

I've lived in the ghetto and the suburbs, giving me a unique opportunity to experience the justice system from both angles of the social construct. As a Hispanic minority in a majority Hispanic environment, racial profiling wasn't as much of an issue as it eventually became in a predominantly Caucasian environment. The issue that I dealt with had more to do with being discriminated against for the way I dressed and the people I hung around with and the places I went. Desensitized as a kid by a culture of drugs and violence, yet acknowledged as gifted by teachers, I lived with a conflicted identity for years. However, things drastically changed in the suburbs as I was confronted with both open and hidden racism in and out of school. Before long, I started finding refuge with old neighborhood friends, which led me to join the Almighty Latin Kings.

Weeks before turning seventeen while in a stolen vehicle with "my brothers," a police stop quickly turned into a high-speed car chase shootout. Once handcuffed, I was severely beaten and left with permanent scars as a reminder of this brutality. As a Latin King, my introduction to prison life was constantly occupied with education from the Latin King manifestos created by its many learned predecessors, but it didn't end there. Being thirsty for knowledge and an observant type of person by nature, I quickly learned the informal ropes of targeted communication with certain kinds of inmates. Charming relatable manipulation was the key to every discussion; getting the slightest bit of useful information from someone gave you an advantage over them if the day ever came where it needed to be used. Despite what the corrections administration would like to project, quality of life in prison is primarily determined by gang leaders, or the most feared and respected man or group. In this atmosphere, so long as there is no visibly blatant use of violence, the correction officers prefer their shifts to be uneventful, rather than responsibly

follow every required procedural obligation. This predominately lax culture allows the inmates to dictate the daily well-being of everyday life for most prisoners who aren't protected by a gang or group of men. Rookie officers tend to do the extra work most other officers overlook. They eventually fall into the same routines of the veteran officers, due to the stress. Very few corrections officers are consistently thorough and true to the integrity of their titles.

There aren't many educationally productive, stimulating, and positive tasks inmates are required to do unless they choose to read or attend educational studies or church services. In prison, the primary education an inmate receives consists of:

- Ways to better improve their criminal activity tactics.
- Largely futile judicial loopholes and defenses they could use in their case(s).
- Learning to survive in prison by swindling, strong-arming, and exploiting other inmates, officers (especially female), and female staff.
- Maliciously calculated behavioral changes in body language and speech expression to befriend selected officers to receive food preference, extra leniency for misbehavior, and sought after inmate work privileges for more freedom away from their cells.

The dog-eat-dog traits that the prison environment develops resembles a shark tank where the more inferior sharks pray not to be eaten, doing what they must to survive, while mimicking the traits and behavior patterns of the top feeders by showering their egos with constant praises. These more inferior followers are well educated by their leaders on how to live within the principles, values, and doctrine within the gang, prison, and street life. Any formal education an inmate receives while in prison is severely jeopardized by their affiliation with any gang or group due to fear and necessity to survive prison life. As a result, they develop a more ruthless identity to be utilized in the streets.

You now have a better understanding of prison life from the inside, but it's crucial to understand how continuing education in and outside prison can improve inmates' lives while lowering the recidivism rate.

Arts-based education in prison is an immensely useful tool of expression and stress release for inmates. It can guide them towards increased literacy skills (Brewster, 2014). It allows them to healthily release any stress they harbor from the feelings of missing out on the lives of family, children, and friends on the outside. Their helplessly vulnerable position weighs heavily in their minds and hearts; having them relive the guilty pain of past mistakes can potentially trigger self-destructive behaviors, further damaging any effort made at positive progress.

In my opinion, better and more targeted higher education programs associated with colleges and universities are key to establishing a higher rate of success if/when the inmate is released. Also, more work release and subsidized housing programs are unquestionably vital and crucial for facilitating the redirection of the inmates' lives upon sentence completion. I strongly believe my ability to function and adapt successfully to diverse environments was key to how I managed to overcome the racial discrimination, police harassment, and negative stereotyping that I experienced upon moving to the suburbs. The quality of life change in itself created a clear

contrast to the life I left, reminding me of where it could return if I allowed the social negatives of my environment to affect the opportunity I was given to pursue positive change in the suburbs. It's undeniable that many inmates may reoffend or succumb to the social pressures they encounter. With that in mind, the agencies involved in inmate reintegration must emphasize the need for helpful and forward-thinking communication between local police departments and inmates.

An emphasis on educational programs to successfully attain a GED, Associates, Bachelors, or graduate degree is vital for the success of an ex-offender. Age and maturity levels are unavoidable factors that could debilitate the future success of an offender, depending on severity of charge, and regardless of prison educational programs. However, like I discovered, a time will come when enough back stabbings from a trusted circle of friends, personal mistakes and heartbreaks, court visits, and economic stagnation slowly changes the heart and mind for the better. It is then when the perceived worthless education an inmate received becomes demonstrably valuable as they reintegrate back into society.

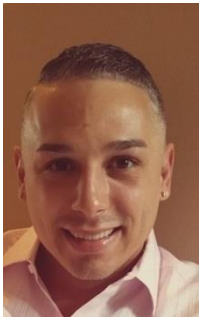
The desire for proper education isn't predominant when the need to survive your daily circumstances is paramount. Whether home or street life, the mind's constant need to protect itself from perceived dangers and fears, real or imagined, from a harsh environment prevents any ability to pursue a better life through education. Many times, the continuously negative and toxic circumstances in the lives of inmates' families, friends, and relatives have created a residual cycle of learned hopelessness in their own lives. Education is the only way to provide inmates healthy navigation, inspirational motivation, and personal belief that – notwithstanding their hopeless circumstance – there is a way to improve out of it, further reducing a chronic victimhood mindset.

Having a criminal record of over five pages, which includes but not limited to felonies, severely hindered my chances at finding an opportunity for growth with any meaningful employer. I've settled for working emotionally demeaning jobs, which devalued years of knowledge and admirable resiliency that I saw as crucial to my eventual success. Initially, my talents were welcomed by some employers; sadly, I determined that they were solely interested in exploiting my talents for their financial gain. Those same employers fired me when I dared to speak up. Despite the amount of money and time spent on books and tests to get my insurance license, not one employer was able to keep me on payroll or would even consider interviewing me, due to the conflict my criminal record caused with the commercial insurance regulations in the state. With only a GED, an extensive background in sales and business, along with a self-taught, quick-learning work ethic, my record surrendered me to working unfulfilling and undesirable jobs where I faced unequal treatment and unfair rules. So, education is key; but so is a change in labor and employment policies for those with criminal records who genuinely demonstrate a strong desire to reach their full potential.

In closing, I'm reminded of statements made by two of the world's most influentially successful people in modern times. In an interview, Bill Gates was once asked what super power he would like to have. His answer: "Being able to read super fast" (Barker, 2015). Billionaire Warren Buffet, when elaborating on what life lessons he could share with others, regardless of background or age said, "The more you learn, the more you'll earn" (Venables, 2013).

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