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HANGING ON TO HOPE WITH LIFE WITHOUT

by

Dortell Williams

I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole in 1989. I was twenty-three years of age. At that time I could hardly imagine doing a minimum of thirty years before even being considered for a reprieve. For I hadn't even lived thirty years of life yet. Still, I pushed on. I learned to type, got clerk jobs to earn some spending change and used state machines to teach myself to be useful. Soon I was adept at computer use and could dictate the terms of my employment, I was an assignment commodity and was even being sought after from people outside. The more I learned about the system, the more sought after I became. I read a lot, learned to write professionally and began to earn money as a scribe. My destiny was becoming more and more under my control as I learned and taught myself. I eventually earned a paralegal certificate, published a book, learned a new language and was asked to teach a writing class. I am now three units from earning an associate of arts degree, and have accomplished more inside then when I was out. Before I new it, twenty-one years had passed.

For those in my shoes that must now endure my trying path I offer the following advice:

RESPECT: Life, particularly prison, is about respect. Respect the guards and they will -- for the most part -- respect you. Even the less professional ones will eventually respect you if you are consistent in your respect for them. Respect other races, other cultures and genders (the women). And despite the stark racial divisions, you can still respect others. The more friendly allies and alliances you build, through mutual

respect, the easier life will be for you.

BE YOURSELF: The best way to earn respect is to be consistent. And consistency is the key. If you are a Christian, if you are a non-affiliate or whatever you are, be consistent and do not compromise. Others will ask you to carry weapons for them, drugs and other contraband. Sure, they'll ride you at first, but if you are consistent with your declines and why, they'll back off and respect you. Stand strong. The vast majority of people in prison just want to program and are descent people.

NOTHING TO PROVE: Like school, prison life often involves moving from one place to the next. God, you and your family are the only persons who will forever be with you. They are the only ones you have something to prove yourself to. Think about it, trying to prove something to each set of people you meet at each new venue. It is senseless. Again, just be yourself.

AVOID VICIES: **Do not** gamble. Plain and simple. I've seen a lot of people wreck themselves getting into debt. **Do not** borrow money. **Do not** use drugs or alcohol. The illusion of an escape is just that, but what I see is people getting themselves in more trouble than had they just remained sober. **Do not** sleep all day. You can't run from this, face it, make something of yourself and get something out of this. You'll feel better about yourself and others will respect you. **Do not** get involved with homosexuals. Respect them as people, but that's it.

DON'T SNITCH: The best rule of prison is to mind your business. Prison is a small and confined place where everyone knows everyone's business and information tends to "leak" out. If the guards ask you for information tell them straight out you don't get involved in other people's business. You have to draw the line so they don't come back. They don't respect snitches among themselves nor among prisoners. I have seen people get used and when they're done with you they will throw you away, put you out there. And life on protective custody yards is worse than mainlines. The guards on those yards respect prisoners even less.

DON'T BITE: Some guards like to play games. Don't bite. When they try to provoke you just ignore them, overlook it and be bigger than their games. You're in a no win situation. If push comes to shove, file a grievance. But first learn the difference between a battle and the war. If it is small and can't do lasting damage, let it go. Prison is about letting a lot of things go. Let it go. You'll win in the end.

PAWNS IN THE GAME: Prison is a place where everyone likes to use others. Don't let yourself be used. Don't put yourself in positions where you'll owe others. Doing "favors" for the guards, missions for the gang (best to retire from the gang -- for real). The best thing is to be independent, be your own person.

GROW: The best thing you can do for yourself is grow. Read books, watch productive television, hang out with people you can learn positive things from. Everyone respects smart, intelligent and capable people. Everyone wants people who can "contribute" not take away. Bridges burn fast behind

the takers. The entire world revolves around "givers", not takers.

MENTORS: There's no shortage of mentors needed for our youth. Even the youth with sense can guide their peers who have less understanding. Each one teach one is a real responsibility and the elders will find it challenging, but also rewarding to be able to positively influence others. I still have guys I've mentored over the years writing me and sharing their appreciation and successes with me. And for those of you frustrated with the decline of the prison environment, let me remind you that it is worth the effort to teach these youth the way it was. Back in the day we were the ones who taught them to be disciplined: Study time hours, reading hours, television reprieves. We must return to that. Lifers are and have always been the "stabilizers" of the prison environment -- because we know it best and what works best. It's about taking responsibility for your own destiny in a positive way.

POLITICS: There are local politics and politics at large. The local politics that we play in neighborhoods and in prison are the politics that drown us, make us do the dirty work of hate groups on ourselves and do nothing to further any of us, for we all get bitten by this self-imposed snake. At the same time, there are the politics at large that dictate who gets deported from one country to the next, that decide which communities get billions and which ones get chump change; politics that decide who goes to prison for life while others serve just hours being processed in and out -- and are then forgiven by day's end. We must change our focus to the larger realm. We fight and compete for corners to sell a few thousand dollars worth of crack while others trade some \$7 trillion a day on Wall Street.

VIOLENCE HELPS THE SYSTEM: It is through violence that local politics clash with politics at large. The politics at large always swallow up the local politics. The overflowing prison yards and SHUs are a testament to this fact. The increase in prison funding after a riot attests to this fact. The increase in sophisticated weaponry -- to be used against us -- after violence are a witness to this fact. How long will we play ourselves as pawns in the larger game?

LIFE'S TWISTS AND TURNS: They say if you are ready, you don't have to get ready. Life has strange twists and turns that are often unforeseeable. Malcolm X went to prison an unlearned thief and womanizer. He was released a reformed, well educated and honest leader. He "squared up." Sure, he was hip, he knew what time it was, but he retired the game and got responsible. And that's what it's really about, being responsible -- for yourself and your community. Nelson Mandela was stuffed in a dirty, cramped South African prison immeasurably worse than the "irritating" conditions we now endure. Yet after thirty years he emerged the president of his country. Nothing is impossible. Joseph, the Biblical Hebrew figure of Genesis who was accused of rape rose from the ashes of an ancient dungeon to be second in command under the pharaoh. Queen Latifah was one of the

first female rappers to not only compete in a male-dominated industry, but even she failed to envision that her hand in educating herself and just trying would lead to the myriad success she has been blessed with. Michelle Obama, actress Hilary Swank and country singer Gretchen Wilson all came from humble beginnings and have surpassed and surprised even life itself. Life has strange twists and is worth living to see what life has in store for the just and responsible. All of these men and women lead in their own destiny. That said, suicide is not an option. Don't even think about it. There's always hope.

FIGHT: Life and freedom is worth fighting for. I have seen prisoners learn the law and favorably change it in court cases. I have seen prisoners write letters to the Legislature and have policies changed. I have seen prisoners write articles that educate the public about nonsensical or wasteful prison conditions. I have seen prisoners teach themselves about the political atmosphere that created sentences that are almost unlivable, and get the attention of politicians. Nothing is impossible.

Personally, the Bible has been my guide and life saver. All of the above advice is found in various places throughout the Bible. It is truly a book of wisdom and thus far I have never found it to be wrong in its practical and prudent advice.

Finally, respect all. That cannot be over emphasized. Even the fools in life. Distance yourself from them, but give every person the respect due them as fellow humans.