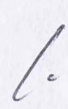


My name is Andrae L. Bridges and I currently reside at the Fox Lake Correctional Institution here in Fox Lake, Wisconsin. I'm a 39 year old African American man who entered the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WDOC) as an angry, hateful, self-destructive, misguided, 16 year old little boy. In 1992, just six days after my 16th birthday I was arrested and charged with First Degree Intentional Homicide-Party to a Crime. I was waived into adult court and subsequently sentenced to life without the possibility of parole until the year 2037. That means I won't be eligible to see the parole board until I'm 61 years old. With the way parole is working nowadays, parole for me in 2037 will probably be unlikely, therefore making my sentence more like life without parole. Wouldn't you agree? Besides, if I were to get out at 61, how much life would I truly have left?

As you can see, I have now spent more time in prison than in the free-world, as I now have nearly 24 years in. Unfortunately the WDOC has changed both drastically and dramatically throughout the years--more on that later. You have to wonder about a state and its Judicial System that would sentence a 16 year old child to life without the possibility of parole until 40 or 50 years into his/her sentence--if parole is granted at all. There's no way a child (18 and under) should even be considered eligible to be "waived as an adult" given the fact that the brain of a child isn't fully developed. Making him/her far less culpable than adults. So why are children justifiably sentenced as such? And in many cases the sentences of these children tend to be far harsher than the adults they're supposedly sentenced as. Go figure! It cost tax payers upwards of \$30,000 to house one prisoner for a year. Multiply that by the 21 years I have left before I see the parole board and you get \$630,000. Now multiply that by 10 more, already proven rehabilitated, one time juvenile offenders like me (\$6,300,000). What a waste!



The words "harsh" and "extensive" are understatements when trying to describe the sentence I received. Please make no mistakes about it, nothing written here is intended to minimize the great harm my crime caused. I take full responsibility for my childhood transgressions. My crime was undoubtedly grave. I have acknowledged my role in the crime and have expressed deep remorse to the victim's family. My life before the crime was turbulent and unstable. It was marked by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by the adults in my life. I do not assert my troubled childhood as an excuse for my actions, I do, however, emphasize its importance as a mitigating factor that warrants a second chance at the life I never had.

Upon being "waived as an adult," I received an "adult sentence," and was thrown into an "adult correctional institution." An institution that didn't allow me to possess or purchase smoking materials from the prison commissary. Nor was I allowed to possess or purchase pornographic materials. When it was discovered that I had violated one of the aforementioned policies I was given an "adult conduct report." Needless to say, I violated the smoking and porn policies quite often, as smoking cigarettes, over a large cup of black coffee, and excitedly paging through some of the then allowable pornographic materials was a great pass-time for my 16 year old self.

I started my incarceration at the double maximum security prison called Columbia Correctional in Portage, Wisconsin. Yes, the place that once housed Jeffrey Dahmer. I was one of the first 16 year olds to enter that facility and I stayed there for a total of 11 years (1992-2003). Because of my age I was quite the celebrity and everybody knew my name. Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of positive influences. Couple that with the fact that I was completely ignorant to the workings of a world teeming with wolves looking to feast on someone every chance they got, and you have prime steak that was me.

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I had "mark" written all over me and it didn't matter that I was in one of the two most popular gangs. In short, I found myself being used and taken advantage of just like I was prior to incarceration. It's by the grace of God that I remained safe and was eventually moved to a housing unit that separated me from the majority of the general population. In that, I gained the strength and courage to think for myself, which attracted me to others who weren't afraid to do the same.

I got my HSED right away and decided to put off vocational or treatment programs so I could work..With a job I'd receive better pay and therefore be able to take better care of myself. I did have the support of my grandmother and mother, but mom could only do so much for me financially because she had my three younger siblings to care for. And being addicted to drugs and alcohol didn't help matters. School, work, and program pay was a bit higher than it is now, as there have been several deductions in pay since 1992. Here's where prison pay stands now:

- Voluntary Unassigned ... No pay
- Involuntary Unassigned ... \$0.05 per hour
- Pay Range 1 ... \$0.12 per hour
- Pay Range 2 ... \$0.19 per hour
- Pay Range 3A ... \$0.26 per hour
- Pay Range 3B (school/program) ... \$0.15 per hour
- Pay Range 4 ... \$0.35 per hour
- Pay Range 5 ... \$0.42 per hour
- Badger State Industries (BSI) ... \$1.00 per hour

I spent 10 of my 11 years at Columbia participating in a now terminated program called Reach Out which gave me the opportunity to mentor and educate at-risk youth that were allowed to visit the prison. It was because of my participation in Reach Out that I realized how much of a hypocrite I was. As I matured, it got harder and harder for me to go before children my age and younger (seldom older), and try to encourage them to stay away from gangs, go to school, make better decisions, etc., etc., when I was doing the exact

opposite. I knew then that in order for me to truly do and be better to and for others, I first had to do and be better myself. I took to being serious about changing my ways. The more successful the Reach Out program became, the more and more successful my personal growth and maturity became. For it was at Reach Out that I first opened up about the mental, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse I had been subjected to as a child. In that, the real growth began.

My time at Columbia wasn't picture perfect. I received a number of conduct reports and did a lot of childish things. I was very insecure and had a fiery temper that often got me into trouble. And women... although I loved them (more like lust), I hated them just the same. All the female staff that came into contact with me fell victim to my anger exhibited passive-aggressively. Yeah, I still had some major issues to deal with.

In 2003 I was transferred to Waupun Correctional--Wisconsin's oldest maximum security prison for disciplinary reasons. Nothing violent. I was found guilty of soliciting a female correctional officer. That's a big NO! NO! so I had to GO! Go! Being transferred to Waupun was devastating at first because I had grown so accustomed to life at Columbia. I didn't know what to expect at Waupun and the fear I felt upon initially coming to prison hit me all over again.

After getting over the sights and sounds of what turned out to be a real prison in terms of look and operations, Waupun wasn't that bad at all. In fact, it turned out to be the perfect testing grounds for the new-and-improved-me. I was tempted by everything from gang banging to drugs and just about everything else you can imagine. None of that moved me though. I wanted to stay the course and that's exactly what I did. There were a few intense moments but nothing that caused me to stumble. If anything, those

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moments aided in my growth. I went on to become a certified welder and was allowed to enter the Cognitive Interventions Program most commonly known as CGIP.

Waupun was the only prison in Wisconsin that had four phases of CGIP, complete with a separate unit just for its participants. The program lasted 18 months and was a truly wonderful experience. I learned how to recognize, address, and change my distorted thoughts and beliefs. CGIP also gave me the opportunity to further examine my abusive childhood, which gave me keys to the doors of my many issues. Then and only then was I truly able to help others--and that I did. Prior to completing CGIP I had 10 mentees, tutored, facilitated three programs and worked as the administrative clerk. If it wasn't for Columbia's needing skilled workers, I probably would have stayed at Waupun far longer than I did.

Prior to leaving Waupun I suffered two devastating losses. In 2004 I lost my mother to a brain aneurysm which I'm sure was due to her continued drug use. I hadn't seen her in years and I will never get the opportunity to see her again, and she'll never know the good man I've become. To add insult to injury, I was unable to attend her funeral. The WDOC had put an end to that some 10 years prior to her death. Then in 2006 I lost my grandmother, who was the one and only link I had to the real world. Granny lost her battle with cancer and I almost lost my mind. When the opportunity for me to return to Columbia came about, I jumped on it.

So, in 2007, after spending four very productive years at Waupun I was transferred back to Columbia to work at BSI as a pressman. Returning to that place was so depressing. I had no idea things had gotten so bad with regards to rule changes and staff attitudes. Knowing that I would make a dollar an hour was the one incentive that kept my head above the clouds. I went on to

participate in a program called Restorative Justice that provided the icing to my cake of successful programming. Restorative Justice allowed me to examine crime from a victim's perspective. I made a number of connections and regained some hope in myself and the Justice System.

After five somewhat turbulent years at Columbia, in 2012 I was blessed with the opportunity to finally have my custody level reduced. I became eligible for medium security and was transferred to Fox Lake Correctional where I now reside. This proved to be quite the culture shock. There's way more movement, more prisoners, less staff, and far more rules to be broken. I love it here but I'm truly saddened by the fact that the majority of prisoners don't seem to appreciate being here. Perhaps because they never had to experience life in maximum security so they take the additional freedoms offered in medium and minimum for granted. Not only that but it seems no one is really motivated to change. It's all fun and games down here. Prisoners only take part in the available programs for the purpose of being pushed through the system. Programs aren't taken seriously, and the same can be said about release/re-entry plans. I refuse to believe the powers that be don't realize this because these are the same prisoners that get out and come right back.

Now here it is I've served nearly 24 years and doing this time has only gotten harder and harder. I'm always on the verge of throwing in the towel and just giving up because all of my efforts seem to be in vain. Having to remain incarcerated is serving me, the community, and tax payers absolutely no purpose. I've completed everything asked of me and some, yet I'm forced to remain incarcerated with no chance of release in sight. Those who don't know any better might believe we (prisoners) have it made due solely to the fact that all of our needs are essentially provided for. Well, think again! We DO

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NOT have it made and I'd be more than happy to trade places with anyone who believes that. There are a number of us ready, willing, and fully capable of taking care of ourselves without tax payers having to fit the bill or society being concerned about us victimizing anyone else. I will, however, say this about prison--I'm grateful for having been sent here because I've been provided both the time and opportunity to grow into a wonderful human being. I now have a real love and appreciation for life and everything it has to offer. Unfortunately, not everyone come to prison and better themselves. I believe the prison system is to blame for that. It is true, you can't make an individual change. But not many people will change when they're not EXPECTED TO DO SO!

Wisconsin prison facilities have been doing its prisoners and the communities from which we've come a grave disservice for far too long because real growth and change IS NOT cultivated or rewarded. These institutions are nothing more than warehouses for individuals society has discarded and essentially given up on. Being that this is called "The Department of Corrections" you'd think one would be sent here for the sole purpose of being "CORRECTED" so that he/she will return to society better off than when he/she was removed from it. Not gonna happen! Helping prisoners become better people will ultimately minimize their risk of re-offending--right? Oh but no, Wisconsin doesn't want that because that would take away from the "Big Business" aspect that has become "The Wis'con'sin Depart Men of Corrections."

It's really sad that prisoners aren't held to higher standards and that some of the programs I had the opportunity to participate in are no longer available. So called budget woes have left us with the just enough to get by as far as education, vocational courses, and treatment programs go. And food and health care for that matter. Some won't even get the opportunity to

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participate in available programs if they wanted to because there's now a seniority lis.. Prisoners are accepted into programs based on the amount of time they have left to serve. That's right, Wisconsin now focuses the majority of their resources on prisoners considered "short-timers" while the rest of us are left to sit. These prisons are packed with prisoners who have lengthy sentences (by design), and therefore make up the majority while "short-timers" are the minority. Mostly made up of prisoners who continuously re-offend.

Politicians and prison officials would have the public believe that we (prisoners) are the worst of the worst and incorrigible. Then they'll find the perfect idiot of an example to support that crap so they'll be justified in keeping the likes of me locked away forever. It's never pointed out how prisons fail their prisoners. But think about it, to invest in us is to teach us--to teach us is to empower us--to empower us is to liberate us. In that, the prison population would decrease right along with the money train and investors. Why does the public not see this?

I can most certainly be considered a success story because I haven't allowed the WDOC and all the mess that comes along with it to get the best of me. Thankfully everything has worked itself out for the good--no matter how bad. This is owed solely to my faith in God. "An untested faith is weak and ineffective. When we face trials with wisdom and endure them with Godly perseverance, we will find blessings never thought possible." I pray that I will continue to be a ray of light for those looking to get out of the darkness that is themselves, perpetuated by the system. No thanks to The Depart Men of Corrections!

I will close with an article that was featured in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel last year:

Moving beyond punishment

I read with interest the recent editorial by the Journal Sentinel (A broken parole system leaves the inmates behind," July 18). The story of Anthony K. Brown is not unique. In fact, I have been corresponding with one such inmate for the past two years who is trying to get an early parole hearing. Andrae was convicted of a brutal murder when he was 15 [16], received a mandatory life sentence and has been in prison since 1994 [1992]. He is seeking an early parole release hearing in 2017. This does not mean he will be released in 2017, but he could become eligible for release. Without the hearing, he may have to wait until 2037 before a release is possible. If he is not released until 2037, he will cost the tax payers \$700,000-\$800,000. Is this cost worth it?

If we as a society are solely retributive in our reactions to serious crime, then Andrae deserves only punishment, and in his case, the maximum punishment under law is what he received and the cost may be irrelevant to us. But do we not want correctional systems to do more than simply punish, and in the case of eligible parole cases (offenders who have done what was asked of them in prison), how has our practice of parole denial and protracted incarceration become nothing short of institutional cruelty? The only way out of this dilemma is to ask more of our correctional systems and to refocus efforts away from being simply retributive and vindictive and recognize atonement and an opportunity for redemption. When we go beyond legitimate punishment, as we have in our faulty parole system, we diminish ourselves and respect for the law diminishes.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, we have more than 1.8 million people in prisons in this country. We have learned that we cannot spend any more of our limited dollars on correctional efforts that not only dehumanize offenders, but, more important, serve no good purpose for the prisoner or society.

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