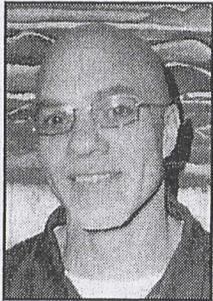


Opinion: Views & commentary from around the community

I Am Not My Past — Part 2

By Matthew Hattley



Matthew Hattley

Over the course of my incarceration I have acquired several skills which will assist me in obtaining gainful employment upon my release. I have various job titles in the following trades: Mechanical Drafting (5 years experience), General Business (18 months experience), and General Mechanic (8+ years experience). While participating in the latter program I received my HVAC Technician Certification (Universal).

I was able to receive hands-on training in all these areas, although I sincerely enjoyed working in the air conditioning and refrigeration field. Not only did I receive an opportunity to learn a lot, but I was able to stay busy in the process. Less idle time, less unnecessary problems... A useful rule for those individuals in prison.

Today my primary focus is the youth — our future leaders. When granted the opportunity, I intend to use my personal experiences to show them that there is more to life than committing senseless crimes, which are usually committed in our own communities. It is time to rebuild and strengthen our families and communities, not continue to destroy them, which we appear to accomplish with such ease. The latter only results in us hurting and/or killing our own people while filling the prison system up in the process. How smart is that? There are no longer any reasons to ignore or deny that this problem exists. Let's see some action.

Education is the key. It all starts with an adequate education which, unfortunately, most of our school districts fail to provide, usually for reasons concerning politics and the distribution of resources. The more we know and understand, the better prepared we are to deal with daily situations, specifically the negative ones, as they occur. Knowledge is power. This is also our key to success and a way out of poverty. We have to stop reacting to situations with physical force, something we've grown too comfortable with. There is definitely a better way, which we would all see if we took the time to recognize such.

In essence, my coming to prison for such an extended period of time forced me to become a better person. I no longer have any desire to hurt anyone or destroy anything. It is time to view life from a better perspective. What many find hard to believe is the fact that I've maintained the morals and values instilled into me as a child. Even after everything I've experienced and had to endure while in prison, I've also managed to retain my humility. My life of darkness was transformed into a world of brightness and unlimited possibilities.

Aside from the stigma surrounding incarcerated individuals, I also have to deal with the negative perception so many people have of me, specifically total strangers and those who have not had any contact with me for the past 22 years. However, words do not carry much weight these days; I must show everyone the new man I've become through my actions. Unfortunately, under the circumstances this is easier said than done. Although I've no desire to give up hope now, I have too much invested in my future as a free, productive, law abiding citizen. I am living proof that the "boy to man" transformation is real to those who can see clearly, without any bias or malicious intent.

I now accept full responsibility for all my actions, past and present. I strive daily for an opportunity to make a significant difference in society. Specifically in the impoverished neighborhoods; my way of giving back. Money should not dictate policy. Assistance must be available to those who need it, not just to those who can make political contributions. If the problem is ignored, things only get

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worse. Of course, this begs the question: was that the primary objective from the get-go?

Now, I understand that after reading these words most people would be anything but optimistic. The way prisoners have been portrayed in the medias for the past fifty years, this reaction does not surprise me. Society in America has very little faith in rehabilitation. Most Americans appear to prefer strict punishment. This is not the case in other advanced countries. A different opinion in this coun-

try will only come about when society is exposed to the truth. That may be coming, and the internet — although filled with untruth and nonsense, too — is chipping away at the blinders worn by so many. It is becoming more difficult to run away from the truth, though it must also be noted that many choose only to see and read material that confirms their prejudices.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is obvious that I have come a very long way since 1992. Yet I still have much to learn; knowledge is infinite. One thing though is crystal clear to me... I am not my past.

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