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Higher Education: The Key to Rehabilitation!

Because there is over two million people presently incarcerated in the United States, we, as a nation should be motivated to become engaged with the issue of higher education for prisoners. Yes, nobody wants to pay for prisoners to go to college—but what is the alternative? Releasing them, letting them return to your community without voting rights, lack of job prospects, and no education.

Imagine that!

This would only lead to more crime—a prisoner who returns to society without the adequate tools to compete in an already volatile economic situation is more likely to commit another criminal act leaving you vulnerable and putting your safety at risk.

No matter which way we attempt to color it, this is a crisis that needs to be addressed. As a new generation of concerned citizens, the objectives that the previous generation struggled to achieve become ours. Unfortunately, this includes answering the fundamental question of what we should do with our swelling number of incarcerated individuals.

If we are to look to the future with optimism and hope we must have the courage to challenge conventional thinking.

We must act!

Especially during times when incomes have fallen, core expenses have risen, and million of families are working harder than ever to make ends meet. If we dare to strengthen all segments of our society, and live up to the ideal that here in America, we rise and fall together

we must begin from the bottom up—we should empower our most vulnerable, our weakest, our incarcerated, and hope for a better future. These hopes are within our reach.

As a man who has spent the past twenty years in prison for a shooting that left another man dead, one of my deepest fears was figuring out how I was going to change my life and make amends for my past actions, if that is at all possible. To be honest, I don't know if I could ever atone for my actions. But that did not keep me from imagining how, within the range of opportunities available to me, I could redefine who I was.

And then, Bard happened.

Bard is an elite private college that offers various degrees to inmates in New York State. The beauty of the program is that despite its strict, highly skilled curriculum, it has expanded the minds of many inmates, taught them that education is an exercise in true liberation by which they can create, imagine, and participate in the transformation of their world.

Bard became the place where my fate became a journey that was shared, shaped, and remade by people who had the courage and spirit to believe that, against all odds, they can come into a place with very little hope and re-ignite in men, who have been cast off by society, a burning desire to rise above the poor choices of their past.

For a prisoner, having the opportunity to obtain an education does many things: for one, it demonstrates that there is no reason why life once set on its course cannot change, and why man should not be judged by a single deed, but rather a lifetime of action. From my own personal experience each class, each debate, and each successive semester in pursuit of my degree has made me more intimately acquainted with my flaws and potentials. Receiving my college degree has been a humanizing experience, it has provided me with an opportunity to look into my daughter's eyes and speak to them about the importance of education, an experience

where students and faculty, no matter the situation or place, literally reinforce the decency of the human spirit.

If it were up to me, a college education would be the litmus test for what rehabilitation and the policy of re-entry is all about. The distance between the rhetoric and reality, between what we as a society say about ourselves and what we, in practice actually do.

Higher education can be the benchmark of a prisoner's responsibility towards being a positive good for his or her community, a symbol that illustrates a commitment to honor his life long debt to his victim(s). It is an inmate's way of recognizing the sacrifice of his loved ones—those individuals who for years defended them despite their wrong choices.

Higher education, for inmates would mean freedom, a kind of psychological liberation where they can actually see themselves restoring rather than destroying. It is not enough, as we have witnessed over the past twenty-five years, to just punish the incarcerated. Many of them will be released, returning back to the community, your community. A fact that urges me to leave you with a question: Would you rather that prisoner being released; a potential neighbor, to be someone who is angry, bitter, and ignorant or would you rather him be educated and determined to stand on the side of responsibility, freedom and human dignity? The choice is yours; I pray you have the wisdom to choose the latter.