

## MY JUSTICE EXPERIENCE, SO FAR...

Coming to prison actually saved my life. Due to sexual abuse as a child, I started to drink and abuse drugs very early in my life, at age nine. I don't remember any real childhood in which drugs and alcohols did not play a part. The road of my life was inevitably leading to one of two conclusions. One was prison, the other one death.

It is quite possible that I actually did die in the five-car collision that was the beginning of my present ordeal. I recall looking down on the truck, as if I were floating above it. Regardless, I survived. My victims, however, did not. Two young women were killed for nothing more than being in my way at the time.

After I ran the red light, I was convicted of murder by extreme indifference to human life and sentenced to fifty years. That was sixteen years ago, and I have been incarcerated since that fateful day.

There is a saying among addicts, that you will never be able to kick your addiction until you have reached your personal bottom. That is the place where you have finally had enough of the lifestyle; you are sick and tired of being sick and tired. The death of those two young women was my personal bottom. Had they not died, I would be dead now. Their sacrifice was the final straw for me to choose to live. I owe everything I do in the future to their sacrifice. I have tattooed their initials into teardrops on my fingers, so that I will never forget what my selfish diseased mind has cost. I now have more clean and sober time, here in prison, than I had my entire lifetime on the streets.

Over the past sixteen years, I have seen the Washington state prison system change drastically, mostly in administration and tightening strictures, both in freedoms and budgetary concerns. I used to be able to smoke, own personal clothing, work in prison industries, choose who I decided to live with and eat with, and find affordable education.

I fully understand why they removed tobacco products from the prison. There were aggravated medical costs in caring for the men who use the products. There are also concerns about a healthy environment, both in which to live and work. It was pretty rough and violent around here for the first year, but after all the withdrawals are over, you don't miss it. Besides, you can still purchase tobacco on the black market. Usually this comes through the prison guards. State legislature made sure to lessen the penalties, ensuring a lucrative alternative income (higher than illegal drugs) for the guards, while making it risk-free for them, as well.

Taking away our personal clothing, however, was merely to let us know who is in charge. There was a claim that it was costing the state too much to launder our items, but we washed them by hand in a bucket in our cells, using detergent we purchased from the commissary. So, I don't buy that excuse. Sure, you could say that we were using the

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clothing as 'money' in the prison, that we wore gang affiliated 'colors,' etc. We all know why they took the clothes away, just to take them away.

So it is with all the small 'creature comforts' we like to claim in prison. For example, we used to be able to purchase plenty of personal property, such as textbooks. Now we are required to keep less than two boxes in our cells. Actually, we are only allowed to keep the items that would fit into two boxes in our cells. We are no longer allowed to keep the boxes themselves, because they allow us to keep our cells tidier, and the guards cannot write you an infraction for a messy cell.

About four years ago, they stopped calling us "inmates" and started to refer to us as "offenders." We find this to be a derogatory term, because it insinuates that we are irredeemable. You can check out the dictionary definitions for yourself, and reach your own conclusions. We still like "inmate," "convict," "prisoner." We do not like "client," "patron" or "resident," which seems to infer that we actually like the service we are receiving. It is just another form of poking us with a stick, mentally.

We are aware that the purposeful taunting by guards is designed to cause distress. They want us to "go off," proving that they need more money to spend on more guards, more pepper spray, etc. If you assault an officer, they now get a year off with pay. We get a new charge and more financial obligations, to pay for their medical fees and time off.

Since the start of this subliminal harassment, I prefer to just call us "brake pads." It fits with the idea that we are merely property of the state. We now arrive at prison through a gate which is marked "Receiving and Distribution." We, quite literally, are numbered. We are no longer allowed to complain about who we are thrown into a cell with. After all, brake pads don't complain about which shelf in the warehouse they are stacked on, what other brands of brake pads are sitting on the shelf next to them, or any other aspects of the brake pad business. We are not allowed to complain about who we are forced to sit next to at meals. To do so could invoke a hate-crime charge and two years or more in isolation.

Recent budget cutbacks are forcing the state to show what they are doing to rehabilitate the prisoners. This means that the Prison Industries jobs that pay up to \$1.25 per hour (before mandatory deductions of 50% - 95%) are reserved for short-term prisoners, serving less than five years. There is a maximum 10% allowance to employ lifers (those serving 15 or more years) in Industries. The other option for work in prison is a Class III position, paying \$55 or less per month. This "gratuity" pay scale has not increased since at least 1992. We are now also required to switch jobs every one to seven years, depending on the position. This is to insure that prisoners do not get too much knowledge about any prison operations. The claim is that the guard will become complacent after seeing the same face in the area for any length of time. If you were to tour this prison, you would find that complacency seems to be a pre-requisite to work here, in the first place. It would make more sense to change the guards around in any one area.

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If you owe any LFO's (Legal Financial Obligations) they are accruing interest at 12%. I started out owing \$65,000. At my last yearly review, my balance is over \$180,000. Since I am long-term, there is no chance of my getting an Industries job, where 20% is automatically deducted to apply towards them. I would even give an extra 20%, if I could work there. The state recently changed the law so that it is possible to be relieved of the interest on LFO's, provided you pay off the principal. However, if the LFO's are restitution, there is nothing you can do to get out of paying off the entire amount, including the interest. I am pretty sure that even Bankruptcy is no longer an option. And, of course, any money sent in from family members is subject to a 35% - 95% deduction, right off the top, to be applied towards those LFO's. I anticipate that if I survive my sentence, I will be released from prison with a check for \$40 and a bus ticket. I will be between the ages of 73 and 81 years old, with a legal debt of over a half million dollars.

Meanwhile, commissary items have increased over fourfold in pricing. Our fees for recreation have increased, and our medical co-payment is due to increase this year. Some medical issues, such as allergies, are not even treated any longer by the prison, so your only course of remedy is to pay the relatively luxurious prices for generic items that may or may not actually provide any relief from symptoms. I presently spend 30% of my prison gratuity (of \$55 monthly) for over-the-counter medications. I feel just like an old-time coal miner, enslaved to the company store.

The only educational program provided by the state is a mandatory GED fulfillment. There used to be some college level classes available. Those are now few and far between. I love learning, so I took as many as I was allowed to take. I have earned a second Associate Degree while imprisoned. However, classes are no longer available to me, without paying for them myself. If any future programs do become available, I will be at a C-3 reference level, meaning that they really must be hurting to fill the chairs up before I can get into them. Again, anyone with five years or less get a priority. I often see inmates get seats in these programs, with only a few months left in their sentence. They never finish the program, while I am not allowed to participate.

I am at one prison, however, that has a grassroots program called University Beyond Bars, where college level courses are available. I am currently working towards a Bachelor degree in Business Law, Psychology, and Philosophy. The instructors donate their time and money. The program is completely self-sufficient, operating on fundraisers/donations. This means that some semesters we need to provide our own method of paying for final exams (\$300 - \$400 average), while when times are good, the program pays for them.

This prison is also home to the Concerned Lifers Organization. Again, this program is not supported by the state taxes. It is merely a group of men who wish to keep their living environment as safe and secure as possible. We have sponsors who are past and present members of state legislature. We invite speakers from the outside. We hold fundraisers to assist in programs on the streets. We take major concerns to the Superintendent. It gives

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us a sense of community and humanity. We are trying to "give back" to the community, both inside and outside of prison.

The CLO is a grassroots organization. We are inspired by the "Restorative Justice" movement, which aims to restore what was stolen and destroyed, and work together with the community and victims. The focus is taken away from merely warehousing prisoners. We are also involved with People4Parole.org, who is trying to revive some sort of meaningful parole/early releaser for Washington prisoners. We have also played a role in restoring voting rights to felons upon release. They used to be disenfranchised until their LFO's were paid in full. Now they only have to be out from under the Department of Corrections jurisdiction to regain their right to vote.

Groups like UBB, CLO, and the Black Prisoners Caucus all work individually, as well as in concert, to improve the lives of the men here at Monroe Correctional Complex. They are not state funded. They are supported from the inside and outside of the prison by people who sincerely care about conditions in prison. I have gained more self-growth from these programs than from any of the state-run programs I have been mandated to complete.

There is a consensus among prisoners that Behavior Modification programs are basically garbage. I have enclosed a copy of a Prison Legal News article which covers one such program. I have heard stories from many prisoners who have completed the various "Integrity" programs of Washington State. The consensus is that they merely "went through the motions," "said whatever 'the Man' wanted to hear," and "did whatever they had to do to get done (with the program) and go home." Also, since the programs required 'snitching' on others (holding each other accountable), they resorted to forming teams that would take turns telling on each other.

The state's latest catchphrase, "evidence-based programming," is what they are selling to the taxpayers. Well, where does this "evidence" come from? Anyone who decides not to participate in the programs will not be able to give any opinion of its effectiveness. If you don't "jump through the hoops" when you are involved with the program, you will be punished and evicted. Again, no positive opinion of the program will be offered as "evidence." Of course, those who did complete the programs will give a great reference to the Man, since they will lose privileges if they do not comply. The effect is the same as when giving information under torture; you say what they want to hear, to make the suffering cease.

When alternative Restorative Justice programs are offered, the "evidence" that is offered to bolster those programs is not allowed to be considered. The state initiates the programs that are sold by their pet investigators, with monetary incentives to implement them. Any and all information coming from any other source is ignored or ridiculed. Additionally, some programs are still too new to have any positive "evidence" to back them. It is a vicious circle. Ignore anything that is not offered by the state funded evidence broker. Additionally, where is any evidence from Washington State that their programs are effective, whether skewed or otherwise? I have heard, with my own ears, high-ranking DOC officials admit that their Sex Offender programs do not work, but these programs continue to be implemented.

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The current prison punishment scheme does not provide for any incentive for prisoners to behave. Truth in Sentencing requires that you do all your time. We can be punished for misbehaving. We are also punished for the misbehavior of others, as well as a perception that we just *might* misbehave at some future time. In the end, it is up to the individual to decide whether he or she will do something more with his or her life in prison, besides play cards and lift weights. I have chosen to further my education and try to find ways to give back to the community. These choices of mine are not assisted by any state funded programs. They are only assisted by the programs initiated and supported by non-State volunteers.

The truth of the matter is that 90% of prisoners will be released back into society, with no more additional marketable skills than janitorial or assembly line production. They will be given \$40 and a bus ticket to their county of origin. The programs that have proven to reduce recidivism, such as mental health treatment, chemical dependency treatment, and education are being abandoned as the funds necessary are funneled off to pay higher administrative wages and employee benefits. There is further talk of removing the *free* programs to make space for Behavior Modification programs. Again, should cost effective programs that work be removed to make room for expensive "proven" programs that really don't work?

My prison time has certainly been punishment focused. Long sentences are not a deterrent to others. If someone is going to commit a crime, they just do it. The majority of people who commit crimes are not even thinking about it; they are operating on autopilot, fueled by drug addiction and economic despair. Many are just babies trying to fit in with some sort of surrogate family. They don't know any better, and after one mistake they are incarcerated for a very long time. The state does not wish things to be any different. From the time of the Reagan era, incarceration has become a large business, designed to grow. We need to switch gears, focus on Restorative Justice and something that will work in the long run for everyone concerned. Simply warehousing people just doesn't make sense.

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