

IN THE GARDEN

As a young teenager at 19 years old I wondered how did I journey from the concrete city jungle streets of St. Louis city and end up working in the garden inside of prison. I signed up for volunteer garden duty just to get out of my cell at the maximum 20 hour lock^{down} prison where I am currently housed at Crossroads Correctional Center in Cameron Missouri. But to my amazement I found the peace of mind and tranquillity that I craved for the right here in this prison garden. Being in prison as someone who offended society can sometimes make a person feel dirty, yet there I was in a garden picking weeds from the dirt. Low and behold, little did I know that reflection upon that moment would become the symbolism of my life.

I had to weed through the errors of my life. IN the quiet of the prison garden I was able to really think as well as reflect. With every weed that I pulled out of the garden it felt as if I was pulling an old part of my criminal self away. Weeding in the prison garden was no longer bored to me, in fact it became a form of therapy for me. As I sat there in the dirt I made myself many promises of how I would change my life.

Also while in the garden I marveled at the many fruits and vegetables that we grew in prison. I looked at the dirt and wondered how could something so beautiful grow from the dirt. Then I thought about my won life. My criminal street life was a life of doing dirt. It led me to being a 16 year old who was sentenced to die in prison for robbery. I wanted to blame the world. Why me? I asked. Why did the system give me 240 years in prison for a crime where no one was seriously injured.

Living a street life can get real hard just like the garden when it is a drought and it doesn't get watered. A garden with all of its weeds even

looks ugly at this time. But when it rains and the weeds get picked then that garden turns into one of nature's ultimate beauties. So AS I sat there in the dirt I wondered how could I turn my dirt troubled filled life into something beautiful? Well I knew that it would not happen over night and it would be a continuous process like tending to a garden. But the seed had been planted and in time it would grow just like the beautiful fruit in the garden had grown from a planted seed. I would have to constantly water that seed of thought and desire to rehabilitate myself into a new man. I would have to weed out the things in my surroundings that tried to choke off my progressive growth.

As I keep pulling the weeds I marveled at the beauty of the prison garden, there and then as a teenager I determined that I would turn my troubled life into something beautiful just like the prison garden. Surrounded by hardened criminals, predators, and the vilest of men I decided to rehabilitate myself and make my life beautiful. I wanted to produce meaning in my life like the nutritious cucumbers, watermelons, carrots and other edibles that we grew in the prison garden. These fruits and vegetables would feed those in need.

There and then I made a vow to myself to feed my mind with books for mental nutrients that would help me transform my thinking into a contributing member of society. Now it is 19 years later and I am 38 years old. I look at the garden from my cell and remember my vow. I am proud of my accomplishments since then. Although my road to rehabilitation has not been without its mishaps because a garden must constantly be tended to, but I have grown in remarkable ways in my life and stride towards rehabilitation. I have wrote 7 nonfiction books and 8 poetry books, including my memoir. I have a paralegal diploma, received a Basic Business Studies certificate

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from Missouri State University of West Plains, and I currently enrolled in Adams State University to get my Associates Of Science degree. I have obtained over 50 certificates for completing rehabilitation classes inside these prisons, started a bookclub based around rehabilitation etc. These are just a few of the many positive goals that I have accomplished and continue to pursue while in prison.

Like the garden that die sin the winter and revives itself in the springtime, I got a new life. It is time to revive myself. Recently the United States Supreme Court ruled that juveniles who were under 18 years old at the time of their crime can not be sentenced to a sentence that guarantees that they will die in prison. The Court ruled that juveniles such as myself must get a new sentencing hearing with a chance to show they are worthy of release one day. The prison garden really helped me along this difficult journey. It let me know that something beautiful can grow from the dirt. Now I look forward to the day when I will get a chance to be released and get there in the world and grow my own garden at home and continue to heal myself in the process.