

I'm not very good at robbing banks. I wasn't all that great of a father and, for numerous reasons, a failure as a husband, son, friend and brother. I would have no problem filling volumes with my faults, shortcomings and mistakes, but turns out getting locked up was something I had a knack for.

February, 2013. I'm estranged from a wife who hates me, two young boys who will learn to. I'm homeless, I'm desperate and it's getting cold in Chicago. The drugs, the alcohol and the will to live are all gone. I want to die, so I figure robbing a bank is a sure way to either score enough money to drink myself to death or provide the catalyst to a "suicide by cop". I walk into a bank just outside Chicago with not much more than a hastily penned hold-up note and lots of questions about why my life turned out the way it did.

Fast forward to October, 2016, early afternoon in a Maximum Security Federal Penitentiary somewhere in the northwest corner of Pennsylvania. They've just brought a stack of mail to my cell and in that stack I find three different letters from three different literary journals informing me that my poetry is going to be published in upcoming issues. Though happy, I still find myself puzzled about my life. Being in prison has given me plenty of time to dwell on everything that went wrong. It would have been so easy for me to say the hell with it, to just give up and spend my time learning how to be a better criminal. But I won't. I can't. I have a College Guild assignment to complete, a thank you letter to write, and a few revisions to a short story that will be appearing in a literary journal this fall.

You see, College Guild has given me a purpose and the keys to a car-load of talent I'd never have developed on my own. I can't remember exactly when or how I found them, I'm just glad I did. As to why I initially enrolled, that's easy – there was nothing else to do! There are not many free correspondence courses for prison inmates out there. I figured at worst, whatever it was CG had to offer might give me something to do with an hour or two of the many I'd been sentenced to. I enrolled in the Creative Language course and from day one was met with nothing but honesty and encouragement from each and every one of the College Guild readers I was lucky enough to have.

Slowly but surely, the folks at CG started convincing me that beneath the addictions, the poor choices and the resultant criminal record was a person with some talent. With the guidance and reassurance of my readers, I went from Creative Language to Short Story Club to Poetry. Each course opened a new door, each unit uncovered a shred of ability.

The amount of time and encouragement that a College Guild reader provides truly amazes me. I have been truly blessed by my readers and thanks to their input and critique, I have been pushed to keep bettering myself. I still remember how good it made me feel when one of the volunteers called me a "poet". Hearing that word use to describe me made me think that maybe, with some hard work on my part, I could be more than what I currently am.

I wish I could explain exactly how it felt when I got my first poem published around eleven months after I started with CG. That poem started out as a CG assignment, as has most everything else I've published. I wish I could describe how it felt to start believing I have talent and getting back some of the self-esteem I'd given away over the past forty years. What I can tell you is this – without College Guild, none of this happens. It was with CG's help I picked up a pen to try and make sense of everything, to try and find an answer to why life sometimes takes the turns it does. Truth be told, I'm no closer to figuring it out, but I'm no longer willing to give up either. In each short story, every stanza of every poem I write, I find something new. Apparently others do too and I'm proud of that.

Some time back, CG asked if I'd be interested in being on their Thank You Committee and I couldn't say yes fast enough. If I could, I'd put pen to paper to personally thank each and every person who has ever donated time or money to College Guild. It's the least I can do for an organization that's done so much for me. I've discovered the power of words. I've toiled over my own and I've greedily read those of others. And I'm not alone. Men and women just like me have benefitted from College Guild and scores more will benefit from them in the future. It is an honor and a privilege to be able to thank everyone who makes that possible.