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LIFE OR DEATH

Serving a life sentence seems like an insurmountable endeavor. At some point I acknowledge that a change in point of view is necessary. Without a change in my view point, I will fail to adjust and live life, instead of soing time. Finding a job, on that gives me purpose and makes a difference. I first worked as a Law Clerk and taught a class in legal research. Next, I stepped into the GED program as a Tutor. I was eventually offered the opportunity to teach academic courses to a group of HYTA(Holmes Youthful Trainee Act)offenders. This program is designed to help prepare young incarcerated people for college when discharged. Teaching was obviously rewarding, occasionally word would come back that former students were attending college or a trade school. I would tell myself...you did good, because no one else will.

Then...came training service dogs.

The dogs belong to Paws With A Cause, and are assigned to me for training. At that moment I began to wonder...what have I gotten myself into? The adventure began immediately with Tucker(my first dog) and I doing simple things like walking and talking and lying about growing comfortable together.

Training was initially simple, Walks To No Where, an exercise in bonding and training the dog to walk at my side in a heel position. Once that initial hurdle is mastered I introduce several different commands. The regimen of new commands continues week after week. I am guided through this process by professional

trainers from Paws With A Cause. Suddenly, I realize that Tucker is training me too. Going through the learning process as partners is at times complicated--some things come quickly with Tucker and I, while others take time. Finally, I realize, when the dog is not responding to commands it is not his problem, but mine. I project a lack of confidence in his ability and he senses that. Case in point--I command stop and Tucker keeps moving, this is because I am not paying attention to my voice and the handling of the leash.

I've been taught to praise and reward the dog for excellent behavior. Praise is in the form of affection toward the dog. This lets him know he is appreciated and loved for how well he is following directions. At first this was very hard to do in prison. Prisoners who show affection are viewed as vulnerable, which could lead to someone attempting to take advantage of you. I had obviously gotten past that stigma when a prisoner asked me, "why do you kiss that dog?"

I said, "because I want him to know that I love him."

Remarking to those around me, "the greatest strength is gentleness," as Tucker and I walked off proudly strutting.

Unfortunately, after four months, just when our bond is cemented, my dog returns to PAWS, and in comes a new dog to start the cycle all over again. I weep tears of joy and sadness at this moment, because I have to let go and trust he will be of service. In the next moment with a lump in my throat I am leading a new charge to his new home.

A joyous day comes when I hear that my dog has become a

Service Dog. Going on to his ultimate destination as a--Detection Dog, K-9 For Warriors, Comfort Dog, or Support Dog. At that moment I realize with a gentle twist of the heart, someone who has a need for assistance is getting the help they deserve, because of my work. I view Life differently, instead of going through the motions waiting to die, I have a purpose for my life. Thinking of the Nietzsche quote, "he who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

Thirteen dogs later, Life does not look like a sentence anymore.