

Richard Sean Gross FF-9878

My Transformation began almost immediately after coming to prison. I had hoped that my selfish act of revenge against my parents would bring me closure and end the flashbacks from my childhood. I was wrong. Revenge does not bring closure, it brings punishment.

My second realization occurred several months in when I found I was happier without marijuana. The depressant, hallucinogenic drug that I smoked almost every day for 20 years was causing depression as well as derailing success at all my jobs. I began to realize that most every decision I had made in my life had been wrong.

Although help is available, the harshness of prison life is not really conducive to the healing that most prisoners need to get their life together. For most, the boredom and isolation can make their problems worse, especially addiction and mental health issues.

However the boredom can have an upside. I found that I now had time to read books, to draw, to write stories that had always been in my head but not on paper. I used my time to learn history and develop talents as an artist and writer. Eventually, I began to produce work that I could be proud of, giving me a sense of accomplishment and goals to achieve. There is so much that I want to read and so many creative ideas to explore that I should never be bored again. Before jail, I just sat in front of a TV smoking pot, and was bored. No positive transformation was ever going to come from that.

I used the first decade of my incarceration to develop talents and seek knowledge. I believed that the purpose of life was to seek knowledge. Better than what I had been doing but still not the transformation I truly needed. People don't care how much you know, people want to know how much you care. The purpose of life is to help others.

In 2009, I got a job in the leisure library, helping people find books they wanted to read. I enjoyed the job and the fact that people could rely on me to care and to help.

I had done my DOC mandated programs early in my incarceration. I did what they signed me up for and got something out of it. I felt I was done with programs until 2015 when Charles Boyd invited me to attend an Alternatives to Violence Project workshop. He promised that I would not regret it. Not only did I not regret it, AVP changed my life for the better. I did the Basic workshop in March, the Advanced workshop in April, the Training for Facilitators in May; and then began doing workshops as an apprentice facilitator. The positive experience of the workshops helped me to see myself in a new light. I found that I had never been a good listener, nor a caring person.

Even more than the Project itself, the people I have met there have changed me. The outside volunteers who come into prison at their own expense to see if they can help have made me want to be a better person. The positive prisoners who participate in AVP have shown me the way. The thanks I receive from the volunteers and participants for the work that I love doing has humbled in a way that the DOC never could. To take on a challenge and then have people tell you that "you're a natural" at it is incredibly rewarding. When workshop participants tell me that I have changed their lives for the better it gives me a sense of pride that I would have never found on the street. If even one act of violence is ever prevented through my efforts, it is all worth it. I can never undo the violent crime I committed. I can't take back the violence I have contributed to society, I can only hope to prevent more. By participating in AVP, Restorative Justice, and the yearly events: A Call To End Harm and Day Of Responsibility, I have a chance to do this.

For my own personal issues , I have attended AVP workshops focusing on mindfulness and trauma and a program called Houses of Healing. I am not alone in having a difficult childhood. As a matter of fact it is common among prisoners.

I have finally shifted my focus from the hurt that I feel to the hurt that I have caused others. This transformation was years in the making and the most important one of all. Harm causes harm. People who have been hurt tend to hurt others. It is a vicious circle that can only be broken when people take full responsibility for their actions without rationalizations or justifications based upon their own difficult life.

I have transformed myself from a selfish, hedonistic pot smoker into a creative, caring facilitator and I am happier as a result. I am determined to make positive contributions to society either through my writing or through the people I help who leave this jail to make their own positive contributions.