

CONVICT CHRONICLES: brag book

by Leo Cardez

At age 40, I felt like a total loser. I was dealing with a litany of mental and physical complications due to a life suffering from deep depression and addiction. I was an alcoholic, deadbeat dad, broke and oh yeah, looking at a double digit prison sentence. At the urging of a writing teacher at the county jail I put those feelings to paper and submitted them to Prison Health News--a national publication that helps persons in custody address and seek help for health issues. Much to my surprise, they published it.

Something broke in me when I put those emotions on a page and then again when I saw them published. It was hard to write, even harder to know others might read it and judge me, but the response was encouraging. Detainees approached me privately to offer encouragement and thank me for shedding light on a subject mostly ignored in our shadow community: depression. Soon I would be writing essays about mental health issues behind bars, winning awards, being asked to speak at prison seminars. It seemed I'd found something I was good at. So despite my initial hesitations, I became an

activist writer on a really tough topic.

I want to do more. Write a book. Start a foundation. My inner voice chides me, "Why do you think you deserve to be heard? Who are you? You're a no good convict. You suck." I've often come close to listening to that voice and packing it all up and doing my bit quietly on my bunk, splitting my time between sleep and TV. That's when I reach for my brag book.

This brown taped-up file folder is where I keep copies of all my published pieces along with feedback and notes I have received over the years. I keep pictures of my family there along with magazine clippings that work as a pseudo vision board. My goals are humble: I want to help just one person get through what I have already endured. I want to give them hope and purpose. Wouldn't that just be incredible? Maybe, in this small act, I can start to make up for some of the harm I have caused.

Everything in that folder holds some intangible value to me, like the letter from the editor of The Beat Within, a prison newspaper dedicated to inspire and support young detainees across America through the power of writing. David wrote, in part, "Your essays really inspire some of the younger guys. They often look forward to reading your submissions." Even to write that sentence today chokes me up. So I keep all these precious remnants and stuff them into this dingy nondescript folder for safe keeping.

Whenever I begin to doubt myself as a writer or my resolve against an administration hellbent on muffling inmate voices from being heard I reach for my lifeboat and refill my emotional reservoir. Do you, gentle reader, keep something similar? I highly recommend it. It doesn't have to look like

mine. Maybe yours has art or motivational quotes or personal pictures, or maybe it has letters from loved ones or others you've written but never sent; it could be where you store your accomplishments: certificates, report cards, whatever is important to you. Anything that lifts your spirits and reminds you to keep your chin up is a candidate for inclusion.

I would have certainly quit this whole writing experiment years ago had it not been for this anchor--my brag book--and the cherished lifesavers hidden within. It contains proof that I am more than my worst mistake; that I have value and am capable of redemption. Writing is not easy--nor is whatever you do--but my Brag Book keeps me paddling against the current that wishes nothing more than to drown me in social stigmas and self-doubt.

As it turns out, I am not a loser. I just needed the right perspective. I needed to find my purpose, and that purpose is helping. I pray you find yours.

