

## What's in a Name?

For twenty years, I've been incarcerated under an alias. Not because I'm in some sort of witness protection program or running from the mob, but for reasons that require some explaining.

So what's it like to live decades in a place being called the name of someone you're not? I mean, the practice of giving and receiving nicknames isn't anything new. I feel like almost everyone has at one point or another had some sort of nickname that either marked an obvious personality trait, was a spin on a given name, or it was handed out as a term of endearment. People even dabble in irony when giving out nicknames.

The same could be applied to the street/gang lifestyle where I chose to adopt a moniker compatible with the alter ego I created before embracing the culture, where I was damaged enough to be accepted, hyper masculine enough to avoid being bullied, and antisocial enough to hide my insecurities. In this sense, being known as someone other than who I was felt right, because I was in control of which parts of myself to reveal. It's been over ten years now since severing ties with the gang culture and moniker used to anchor myself to that life. In fact, the separation led to a newfound appreciation for the name I was once embarrassed of as a kid. I'd gotten to a place where I didn't mind people knowing me by it. However, there was a difference between outgrowing a nickname, choosing to discard a moniker, and having no control over being addressed as someone you're not.

In April of 2001, I was arrested for burglary. When asked my name, in true criminal fashion, I provided an alias (Raymond Davis) knowing that law enforcement was searching for me, Emmanuel Vaughn, the person guilty of the gang-related murder committed just two months prior in another city. They quickly discovered my identity, and I was charged and convicted of second degree murder at the conclusion of my trial. As a result, I was sentenced to serve out a term of forty years to life within the California Department of Corrections & Rehabilitation (CDCR).

After sentencing, prisoners are transferred, typically by bus, to reception centers, which are temporary housing facilities where prisoners are first introduced into the CDCR prison system. In reception, prisoners receive prison identification numbers they're conditioned to recite almost daily. Then they are later seen by designated correctional counselors who take crime(s), education background, criminal history, family ties, and other factors into consideration before classifying a prisoner as low, medium or high custody. Those factors determine the low to maximum security level of the prison they're sent to to serve out their time. CDCR has a network of 32 adult institutions to choose from. Reception is where the weight of dealing with my alias was initially applied.

Prison transfers are tense, anxiety-filled experiences. They can leave the strongest of people exhausted by the end of a ten or more hour long trip, often peppered with layovers and pit stops along the way. Guards in charge are always zero tolerance. They are meticulous and take every precaution to ensure security is top priority. The entire process reminds me of the high power prisoner transfers you see in movies, minus the black hood over our heads so we can't see. Instead, they black out all of the windows on the bus so we can't see out. Some, but not all, buses are designed this way. To begin, prisoners are first shackled at the waist and then called by name onto the bus, where their legs are then shackled before being led to a seat. When the time came to begin my prison term, I was placed onto the bus at the Los Angeles County Jail under my given name. Upon reaching our destination at North Kern State Prison in Delano, CA, I was removed from the bus under my given name and then escorted to a holding cell with about a dozen other prisoners, where we waited.

Stationed at a podium in the middle of the receiving and release area we were in was an officer who directed an announcement to my cell of new arrivals that loosely said, "When you hear your name, come to the podium to receive your property and CDCR numbers." Alphabetically, he began to call out last names. Naturally, I assumed Vaughn would be last or close to the bottom of the list, but I guessed wrong. After dealing with the second person, I hear the officer call out, "Davis." This caught my attention, yet so many people in prison share the same last name. I didn't dwell on it. When no one approached to "Raymond Davis," the officer bellowed, "You're holding up my program. Let's move it."

I was confused. When I approached the podium, I told the officer, "Raymond Davis was a name I gave the cop during my arrest. My given name is Emmanuel Gabriel Vaughn." He refers to his list and then says, "That's not what I have here." I replied in protest, "I was placed on the bus and removed from it right here under my given name." He again says, "That's not what I have here." In my final attempt to prove who I was, I pulled out court documents that reflect my being sentenced to prison under my given name. He didn't budge. He then says for the last time, "That's not what I have here." On January 10, 2002, I received the CDCR prison number attached to the alias.

Before reality set in, I was optimistic about getting the mishap resolved with someone who was not as busy as the officer was that day. There was no way they'd leave me in prison under a name that isn't my own; right? +

An older prisoner who was back on another prison term and familiar with the workings of prison bureaucracy overheard my dilemma. When I returned to the holding cell, he told me the only person who would be able to assist me with the issue was the counselor I was scheduled to meet in the near future. It's safe to say, I spent the next few weeks in a state of uneasiness about the name issue.

My then mental image of a counselor closely resembled the eager-to-assist guidance counselors of high school days. I must admit, that image fueled the customer is always right approach I brought to my initial counselor meeting. My self-entitled manner not only backfired, it also reflected my naivety as to what prison was all about. I was told the issue could not be corrected, and I was then advised to instruct my family/friends to start addressing mail being sent to me under the alias. Since then, every certificate of achievement I've earned bears the alias. The degrees that I'm pursuing will bear it. Officers address me by it. And before offering my opinion in a self-help group setting, I'm required to introduce myself as my alias before moving forward. Every time I say that name, I feel as if I'm lying.

I've never considered the value of a name until the residual effects of ~~either~~ being called or having to reply as someone else when asked, "What's your name and CDCR number" began to take a toll, effects that were felt most in dark moments of doing stretches of hole time or when feeling abandoned or unsure. In those moments, I've found myself writing Emmanuel Gabriel Vaughn repeatedly on a scratch piece of paper as a reminder of who I really am. It's done to spite not being acknowledged by this place. It's how I struggle to maintain the essence of a name given to me by my grandmother, while existing in an environment designed to ~~center~~ *stretch* psychological and emotional ~~strengths~~ *bandwidth* to its limits.

Emmanuel G. Vaughn