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Lenzell Franklin

Rivers Correctional Facility, Winton, NC

Not a Rite of Passage

When I think about my adolescence, subconsciously, I had already prepared myself for incarceration. During my teenage years, I was hanging out with the wrong crowd, using drugs, and coming in the house at all hours of the morning. My father was not really present, and when he did come around to see me, I did not feel the love that a son should have felt from a father. My mother did everything humanly possible to ensure me a positive upbringing, but without the significant presence of my father, I turned to the street. I learned from the street, where throughout my neighborhood it was somewhat of a “rite of passage” to have gone to jail, survived, and come home to tell “jail stories.”

I can't say that my adolescent life was totally negative, because I got a chance that other kids my age only dreamed of. With the aid and assistance of a loving grandmother and grandfather, I had the chance to attend Catholic school. I was an average student, and I even went on to graduate in high school and attend college. I learned a valuable lesson that no matter what degree of schooling a man was afforded, if something fundamental was missing from his life, then he would turn elsewhere to find it. Once again, I turned to the street, the only thing I knew. This cost me everything, my freedom mainly, but more importantly, the chance to grow into a man under normal, proper circumstances.

In April of 1989 I was only nineteen years old and already incarcerated for the first time. I remember sitting in the D.C. Homicide Division, handcuffed to a desk while detectives questioned me about the crime I had committed. After they had questioned me, I do believe that these very same officers took pity on me and allowed my mother to come visit me. This scene was so vivid and disturbing to me, because my mother had brought along my three-year-old niece as well. So, here was my mother with my niece on her lap, and my mother was crying uncontrollably.

A few years later, I also remember my mother telling me that she was so disturbed when she left Homicide that instead of going back home to North East, she unknowingly headed for the highway and ended up in Virginia somewhere. This is one of those things that sticks with a man for the rest of his life.

Early on in my incarceration, I hadn't realized the ramifications of the crim-

inal sentence imposed upon me. I was now twenty-two and trying to live the life of a twenty-two year old. The only thing that was wrong with that picture was the fact that I had been shipped to Lorton Reformatory. I remember an "old timer" telling me to go to college and learn all that was available. I was serving a sentence of 13 to 41 years and was due to see the parole board in eight years. I figured that school would be there, besides, all I really wanted to do was hang out with my "homies".

I had heard many stories of prison life, but nothing prepared me for the harsh reality of what went on in Lorton. One particular experience made me count my blessings and change my overall attitude about life. I decided to attend the U.D.C. college program at Central Facility, and this was the catalyst needed to get me on track. I went on to finish the college program, receive an A.A. in Accounting Technology, and I also received my master barber's license from an unrelated program. I knew that although I was locked up, my mind did not have to be locked out.

My family was supportive, but my mother used to cry the blues. This was understandable, because I was her only son. But it had gotten to the point where I didn't want to call home, because I knew that she would immediately burst into tears. My oldest sister would get emotional as well.

In 1997, I went up for parole and was denied again until 2002. I went up again in 2002 and was denied until 2007. My family took this last denial badly, but I understand the system and realize what is going on. I also know that the parole commission has a hard job to do.

God willing, I'll be thirty-four years old in July, and as of today I've been incarcerated for fourteen years. I never thought that I'd still be incarcerated at this age, but what's saddening is the fact that my goals now seem unattainable. The main thing that bothers me is the fact that I don't have any children to carry on my name. I also realize that I'm not getting any younger, and from the way this parole issue is going, I'll be incarcerated for the next five years. I understand that I must hold myself accountable for my past actions, and even more than this is the fact that I must face the Creator one day. When I stand in judgment, I pray that my good deeds outweigh all the pain and hurt I've caused.

As I watch the influx of younger inmates into this system, I see a lot of my old self in these younger kids. Eighteen, nineteen, and twenty-year-old kids, just like I once was. I try to reach out to all of them, because they want to listen and be guided and loved. Over the past fourteen years, I've missed many things, but I'll never miss the chance to lead someone away from this vicious cycle. My debt is to society, and this entails showing these youngsters that incarceration does not have to be a "rite of passage."

Jackie Robinson once said, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." If I can reach one person and stress the fact that there is no

need to spend fourteen years in jail, then my task would be completed.

We all need to be accountable, not just for ourselves but for every other citizen as well. Lewis Latimer said, "We create our future by well improving present opportunities: however few and small they be." We need to take every opportunity and use every resource to combat the vicious cycle of incarceration. I've made a vow to try and help anyway that I can, because I owe this to the youth. I finally want to be a part of the solution.