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Prison: A Way of Life

In 1983 my associations with prisons began. Since then, I have seen many role models go in and out of the system. My earliest memories are of my real father, James W. Gray. He was incarcerated in the Montana State Prison system. It was at that institution that I had the first birthday I can remember. I recall a lot of the visits beyond that point. But even they were short lived. Within a month or two of my father's release date, he made the decision to start a new life, away from his present obligations. I feel his decisions had some effect on the way I was raised thereafter.

In 1984, a man named Brian came into my mother's and my life. I may have only been four years old, but I remember it very clearly. At first he was a decent man. Just out of prison, he got to work and provided for my family. It couldn't have been a year when Brian was caught stealing and was violated. My mother stayed with him, and once again, I retained the memories of Montana State Prison's visiting room.

In 1986, Brian was released, and went off probation. At first all was well, until he started drinking heavily. Between the years of 1986 and 1992, Brian was an abusive drunk, beating my mother on countless occasions. When I was twelve, Brian introduced me to marijuana. My mother had no idea. I feel that due to my lack of self-respect and maturity I was easy prey for Brian's influence. In the fall of 1992, Brian was once again sentenced to prison. He sat for three more years for almost killing my mother.

In 1995, when I was still a kid, my mother's boyfriend influenced me to participate in criminal activity at the facility. This went on for about a year, until my mother caught me in the act. She questioned me, and I was reluctant to tell her. But she found out, and ended the visits to Brian. In the fall of 1994, I had a conflict with a kid at school. I figured I could handle it. So, I took matters in to my own hands. When all was said and done, I was charged with felony assault, and possession of a firearm on school property. The charges were eventually dropped, but not before I spent 146 days in solitary confinement and fifty days in population. The way I took care of the problem sure taught me a lesson. I was never permitted to go back to school, so I went out and found work.

For the next three years I went from job to job, trying to make ends meet. I couldn't hold a job for more than two or three weeks. This was due to my extensive drug use.

During this period, Brian was out of prison and on a rampage. His new source of income was drugs and shoplifting. This was an ongoing problem in the household for many years. In fact, as far back as I can remember, Brian only held one job.

From 1998 to 2001 I was on a steady down hill roll. I sampled many different types of drugs. I was constantly in and out of jail. I had no respect for others, or their belongings. I even stole from my own family. During late 2001 I hit rock bottom. The booze, drugs, and dishonesty had set me so far down, I felt like taking my own life.

For the last two years I feel I have taken a turn for the better. I have been sober longer than I ever have. I'm now learning to cope in society.

Now, of course, with my present situation, I'm serving a twenty-month sentence. All of this came about in late 2001, when Brian was beating my mother again. At that point I was 21 years old, and a man in my own rights. I had just brought mom home from church when Brian freaked out.

Watching this happen my whole life, I finally reached the point of "enough is enough." At that time I had been sober for less than a month. My mother and I were confronted with a drunk so outraged that he started in on me the minute I walked through the door. I managed to direct most of his attention at me, while my mom made a run for it. My mother almost made it to the car before Brian got her. I had only one chance, or so I thought, and that was to go for a gun. I came from around the backside of our house to see Brian dragging my mom by her hair towards the house. In a panic, I fired a warning shot that caught his attention. My mom and I both left, getting as much space between him and us as possible.

Once we got to town I dropped her off at a friend's house. While I went to try to calm down I relapsed.

That same night the County Sheriffs found me at my friend's house. They knocked on the door, I went to the door and was I arrested. I was brought up on charges of felony assault with a deadly weapon, discharging a firearm, and possession of marijuana.

Eventually I was found innocent of the state charges. In mid 2002, my past came back to haunt me. The ATF brought me up on charges. The charges were felon possession of a firearm and unlawful use of a controlled substance in possession of a firearm—hence the reason for my incarceration.

Now, I could sit here and go on feeling sorry for myself, but where would that get me? I personally think, nowhere. I'm 23 years old and have my whole life ahead of me. This is nothing more than an obstacle I must conquer. Before

I self-surrendered I was a little less than two years sober, and learning from all of my mistakes.

I have been in FDC SeaTac for four months. I now have my GED and, unlike when I was young, I am looking at college. I now have goals. I want a family and a chance to make up for my wrongdoings. My hope is that anyone who reads this may see that a person who has done bad things can feel remorse and want forgiveness. Just because a man or woman made mistakes, that's no reason to look down on them.

You see I have a second chance now, and I'm thankful every day for it. I hope that this part of my life that I'm sharing will make it to the hands of troubled teens. I have walked in their shoes and can feel all of the weight of becoming an adult.