

lifestories

*narratives of life
and
its lessons*



FOREWORD

from U.S. District Court
for the Southern District of Illinois

A sad commentary on life in America is that too many people are participating in the punitive aspect of the criminal justice system. As of year-end 2007, a record 7.2 million people were behind bars, on probation or on parole in this country. As of June 30, 2008, those numbers had increased 0.8% and in prisons alone the population had grown to 2,310,984 persons (federal, state and local). As a nation, we have to do better, for ourselves and our families.

In the Southern District of Illinois, 37% of all criminal sentences are for drug related offenses, the largest segment of the broad spectrum of crimes dealt with in the district, putting the offender in a particularly difficult position because of the all too-often strain of addiction added to a criminal record. Virtually all federal offenders sent to prison must be released to the supervision of a federal probation officer following incarceration. While on supervised release, the former federal detainee will have been provided with an order by the sentencing judge containing standard and special conditions with which to comply or face additional prison time.

The stories and thoughts in this booklet are from offenders currently on supervised release and who additionally participate in the "Court Assisted Program" (CAP) for extra support and help. Probation officers and CAP will help, but the supervisee is the first line of defense between liberty and

a return to prison.

Those who shared their stories in this booklet, join with us in the hope that some aspect of their stories and lives will serve as examples of what to avoid. Further, and more hopefully, the fact that these strong people were able to recognize what went wrong and could pick themselves up and set things straight, serve as examples of what can go right when one puts one's mind to getting it right once and for all. The stories are sad at times, but inspiring above all else.

David R. Herndon
Chief Judge

**from the United States Attorney
for the Southern District of Illinois**

When I first heard about this new program, I was unsure whether it would work. Nevertheless, I wholeheartedly supported the idea and hoped for a good result.

Since that time, I have had the opportunity to follow the progress of the program and have been able to attend some of the sessions personally. The stories contained herein prove that my initial fears about the success of the program were unfounded. If success is measured by lives changed for the better, the program is clearly a success.

I applaud Judge Wilkerson, Chief Phyllis Nelson, and all those who worked to achieve this success. I also salute those

participants in the program who used this unique opportunity to take a different and better life path. While Judge Wilkerson and others gave you the support and guidance you needed to make this change, in the end the choice to make a better life for yourself was yours. Your stories have inspired me. I encourage you to use this experience to inspire others who are facing the challenges you once faced and to help them find a better way.

A. Courtney Cox
United States Attorney

**from the Federal Public Defender
for the Southern District of Illinois**

The experiences related in "lifestories" are both moving and tragic. The pain of addiction lives with each of you everyday. But, do not lose heart. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., observed: "We must accept finite disappointment, but, we must never lose infinite hope." All of us in the Court Family have hope for you all. We will continue to pray for your success in recovery."

Phillip J. Kavanaugh
Federal Public Defender

**from the United States Probation Office
for the Southern District of Illinois**

We all have a life story and all of us have learned a lesson or two in a painful way. The narratives and outcomes contained herein are truly heart-wrenching.

Consequences sometimes are disquieting remembrances of the “other” path we should have taken. As I made sense of the life stories, it reminded me of some of the not so well-thought out decisions I have made in my life.

So, for those who contributed your story I commend you for your courage and your willingness to once again relive a time in your lives that changed your lives forever. Thanks for changing our lives with your soul-stirring remembrances!

Phyllis Nelson
Chief Probation Officer

**from the Honorable Donald G. Wilkerson
U.S. Magistrate Judge and C.A.P. facilitator**

As a United States Magistrate Judge in the Southern District of Illinois, people come before me every day at their lowest point. Many times they have just been arrested and are facing very serious consequences from the federal judicial and penal systems. Many of these alleged offenders are back in court for revocation of their supervised release. Supervised Release is a list of conditions imposed by the

court that a previously convicted person has to abide by to remain free in society. These conditions can be stringent, but many of the conditions are simple, such as, “don’t commit another crime.” For reasons too numerous to name, many ex-offenders can’t or don’t abide by these conditions and are sent back to prison.

To that end, the Court Assisted Program (CAP) was instituted by the Court and U.S. Probation Office with cooperation from the U.S. Attorneys Office and the Federal Public Defender here in the Southern District of Illinois. The Court meets with participants of CAP twice a month just to give encouragement, help with any problems and to put a human face on the Court system hoping that this intervention on the front end will help these persons with their assimilation into the community and prevent a return to prison.

The community service component of CAP allows these ex-offenders to personally contribute and be a part of the communities in which they reside.

This booklet is a part of that community service. We hope these stories are life lessons that demonstrate a person can fall and get back up. We hope they are educational and inspirational.

Donald G. Wilkerson
United States Magistrate Judge

The Court Assisted Program

CAP, like a drug court, is based on the belief that if high-risk offenders are offered the right type of assistance and are held accountable, they will stand a better chance of leading a law-abiding and drug-free life.

CAP allows the Court the opportunity to take an earlier and more active role with the offender during supervision and puts the Court in a better position to offer incentives that can only be offered by the Court.

CAP is more intensive than traditional supervision. In addition to the offender meeting with the probation officer and service providers, the offender is required to appear before the Court twice a month in an informal session with other CAP participants, probation staff and others.

The narratives you are about to read have been written by some of the first participants in the CAP of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois. Although the participants' identities have been concealed, their experiences have been revealed to enlighten. They have agreed to share because it is hoped that each story will reach someone and turn around a life that may be headed in the wrong direction.

We *all* hope you, the reader, will receive this in the spirit it was given.

Remember, the lesson is yours to learn.

IT'S NOT WORTH IT

It's not worth it. I began trying to sell drugs in '93 when I left the Father of my children. I was determined to prove to him that I could and would make it without him. And, that I did. It's just that there was consequences and repercussions. I started out selling dimes and twenties. That was cool for a while. It paid bills. But, I wanted more. I wanted me and my kids to have the name brand gym shoes and designer clothes also. So, I decided I wanted to sell bigger pieces.

That was on and my clientele got bigger. So did my head. Whatever I thought I wanted, I bought. For instance, my cousin and I was sitting on her porch one day and, I believe it was in March of '99, and someone rode past in a Mustang convertible. And, I said to her that I was going to get me one that summer so we would let our hair fly in the wind.

Not even a minute later, I told her that I wanted it now. I got my convertible that day. It was a waste of money. I didn't even get to enjoy it the whole summer. Like my mama said, I was doing too much, too fast. Knowing I didn't have a job and the police know all of this. I turned a deaf ear and continued to do me. Selfish! Not thinking of how my children any other family that might have cared about me.

That summer of '99 is a year I'll never forget. The Feds started building their case against me and on July 1, 1999, that was my first count; July 8th, second count; and, on July 20th, my third count.

The night before I was arrested, I had gotten a call for a sell and I had my oldest son with me and he watched me as I got my product together. I asked him if it bothered him what I was doing; he said, "No. The only things that scares me is you might go to jail." I felt really stupid at that moment. I didn't know what to say because I knew I didn't want to stop.

The morning of July 20, 1999, when I got up, I told my co-defendant that this is my last day, that I was getting out of the game. You know you have to be careful how you say things because the words you speak just might come true. That was the day that the Feds did their buy bust. My life was not my own from that day forward.

After I got to St. Clair County, I talked to a lawyer and he told me that I had only three options: trial, open plea or plea agreement. I knew the counts against me were true so why take it to trial? An open plea. I didn't fully understand that. So I did a plea agreement. I knew the counts against me were true. I remember each sell and I knew my CI [Confidential Informant].

On May 12, 2000, I was sentenced to 151 months Federal time. That was 12 years and 7 months of my life that was taken from me and my family. The day of my sentencing when Judge Herndon said that he had to sentence me under the guidelines which was a 151 to 188 months. My mama asked me how long was that. I told her and she began to cry and said, "I'll be dead in 12 years."

That hurt me so bad. And that statement to this day hurts when I think about it. It took all I had not to break down right then and there. I was trying to be strong for her, to let her know I was going to be okay. I was doing wrong and I got caught and I had to do the time.

Twelve years is a long time to be away from your family. You have no control of your life when you're incarcerated. The FBOP (Federal Bureau of Prisons) has the right to house you wherever they choose to as long as you receive proper medical and habilitation.

I learned this little bit of information when I wrote my sentencing Judge after being housed in a state prison in Troy, Virginia. I was one of many moved there because the Female Federal Prisons were starting to get overcrowded. So, they started to warehouse us wherever there was room.

I was miles away from my family and that is the hardest part of being locked up. No one wants to drive that far. Before I was moved to Greenville [IL] Federal Prison Camp, I hadn't seen my family in 7 years.

I only ended up doing 8 years and 9 months. And, that was only because the sentencing committee finally agreed to make the guidelines for crack cocaine and powder the same. Had that not happened, I would have served my initial time out. I was released on May 1, 2008. Even though they announced the guidelines, it is my belief that they will still find a way to give you a lot of time.

So, please, take my advice and don't get in the game. It's not worth it. If you can't find a job, go back to school. It's hard finding a job if you don't have skills and a felony record. It's hard finding an employer that will trust you. Once you are in the system, your life is not your own. There are some people who hope you can make it once you are released. And, there is that percentage that just know you will violate and return.

I am one of the lucky ones who has family that is trying everything within their power to help me. And, if it gets too hard for me on my own, I'm not too proud to go back home to my mama's house. Thanks to the Court Assisted Program that some of the Federal officials have put together. It shows that there are some people who care and want you to succeed.

And, I will do everything within my power to stay out and prove society wrong. Even though you might think the money looks good. And, you like the attention and want to flash, it's not worth it.

In closing, I would like to thank Judge Wilkerson, the probation department and everyone else who is taking a chance and believing in us.

THE REAL DEAL A Dealer, His Story

My name is not important, only the facts detailed in this story matter. You see, my story is not unlike many of yours, but, then again, maybe it is, or so you'd like to think.

I came from a hard-working "middle class" family, maybe even upper class for East St. Louis. Both my parents were professional people: mom in government and dad in law enforcement. Both parents lived at home and had a controlling hand in my upbringing. It was always obvious to me that they loved each other very much. So, where did it all go wrong, you may ask?

I was a very good student, gifted programs all through school, as well as a talented athlete. Only one problem existed. I was spoiled rotten! New cars, the best clothes, greatly admired by my peers, not a care in the world, until after college.

Upon returning home from college, I found myself in the same position as a lot of you, a new daughter and two more children on the way. When it was all said and done, I had four, out-of-wedlock children, by three women I hardly knew.

It seemed to me that no matter how hard I worked, at one time, three full-time jobs at once, I could only make ends meet! Being spoiled and immature, all I could see was that nothing was left for me. Being spoiled had given me serious

problems with immediate gratification. I was a P.I.G.!

During this time, a friend's uncle offered me a chance to make some extra money. Sell drugs!!! Before I knew it, I was in too deep. The "business" consumed me. All of my time and effort went into making it more profitable and successful for me. I suddenly was able to take care of my kids and "live large," all at the same time.

Nothing could be better right? Wrong!! You see, I'd confused my needs with my greed. Now, enjoying the life and loving it, I didn't know how to stop nor did I want to. I turned down some really good jobs during this twenty-plus-year period. After all, no matter what they paid, I could make that in a day.

I lived fast, pretty women, expensive cars, nice clothes and jewelry. I was considered "royalty" in East St. Louis night life.

I looked up one day and I was 40 years old, had a lot of fun, but, hadn't saved hardly any of that fast money. Everything that I have now came from hard work and sacrifice. You see, luckily, I had started working construction as a union laborer ten years earlier. I mainly worked to satisfy my mom and to have health insurance.

Deep down though, I still considered dealing as my main occupation. I planned on doing both until I retired. After all, I was so smart, they'd never catch me, it would be a fairy-tale ending.

And, then, it happened!!! I got busted! I had to forfeit \$17,000 to the Federal Government and pay an attorney \$40,000 to represent me in court. It's a good thing I'd finally started to save some money, but, now, that was gone.

On top of all that, I spent six years, 11 months and 13 days in Federal prison. The woman who "loved me," left me during my incarceration and my mother had two heart attacks. I remember lying in my bunk hoping I'd get to see my mom alive again. I had never felt that helpless in all my life.

I asked myself was it worth it and the only logical answer I could come up with was, "Hell, no!" My being in prison really affected a lot of people who "really" loved me. People who really cared for me and not my high-priced lifestyle, or what they could get from me.

During the years I was gone, my kids grew up and became young adults. I had always been a very good provider, but, not much of a "true" father. So, the whole idea of dealing to be good father was just a lie. For years I'd told myself that I did wrong to do right when in actuality, deep inside my heart, I knew that was a lie, too.

I did wrong to feed my greed which far exceeded my need. Only one good thing happened to me in prison, I grew up! I started to think about how my decisions and actions would affect those who loved me. It was time to stop thinking only of myself!

Upon my release, I feel like I've been one of the luckiest men in the world. My mother lived through her ordeal and is doing better. I was greeted, with open arms, by family and "real" friends and I've regained the trust and love of my children. I've even got a new grandbaby. I still had a job waiting for me and, all and all, life has been good! I can finally smell the roses.

My advice to any young person today would be to slow down, really enjoy life, real life, not rapper's life or dope man's life. Go to school or learn a trade, and, by all means, don't let my story become yours . . .

WHEN I BECAME A MAN

I grew up in East St. Louis. I bounced around a lot with all kinds of family members and foster homes. I had a bad anger and temper problem because I wasn't with my mom. So, I took out all my problems on the world.

My anger turned into violent acts on innocent people. Then, I got introduced to crime. So, I turned to the street life. I been on the streets since I was 13 years of age. I have had several run-ins with the law at a young age. Then, drugs came into my life when I was around 15 years of age. I felt that it was a quick way to make money and also to hide my problems I had bottled up inside of me.

I became very violent and didn't take no mess out on the streets. My life was a mess. I dropped out of school in the seventh grade and never went back.

So, I ended up on the streets until I was 25 when I went to federal prison. After sitting in federal prison for a few years, I realized there's got to be something better to life than the way I was living. So, I decided to get my G.E.D. and I decided to take some courses and learn some trades so upon my release, I could utilize these things when I got home.

I also took Anger Management classes to better my temper. It helped out a lot. Also, I found out that I needed guidance in my life, so, I found God and got structure as well. So, I got to know my mistakes and my shortcomings.

So, that's when I became a man and accepted my responsibility for my actions.

Then, the drug program helped me grow even more because I found out a lot about being an addict, even if I just used marijuana. So, now, I am home and I am a father and I am doing better for myself without all the world things. And, I am happy and content with my life.

So, first off, you have to admit you have a problem, then, find a solution on how to deal with it. Then, work on it, one day at a time.

PAY ATTENTION! Be Smart, Make the Right Choice

To you who are reading this, I ask that you pay attention and by the time you get through reading this article, it will help you make better choices in life. I recently was released from prison, doing 11 years on a 13-year sentence for selling drugs.

Now, let me tell you how I ended up in prison. I am 34 years old. I am the second oldest of five children. As a child, growing up, my mother was an alcoholic and my father was a drug addict who always stayed in prison.

Right now, as of today, my mother is battling cancer from the many years of abuse that she put her body through and my father is still a bad addict who's in and out of prison.

I started making bad decisions early in life as a child. Reason being, I had no guidance nor no one paid me attention. My mother stayed drunk all the time, so therefore, that allowed me free time to just do about anything I wanted to do.

I didn't have to worry about daddy because he was in jail. I ran the streets all night, watching the older guys smoke, drink, hustle and do whatever else they did at 3 a.m. in the morning.

I really wasn't focused when I was going to school. For one, I didn't want to be there because I didn't have the finer things in life like a lot of other kids, such as named brand

clothing and shoes. It made me feel ashamed that I had to wear the same clothes maybe three times in one week.

I also used to sit in class all day and think about what me, my brothers and sisters were going to eat. It was really hard for me growing up as a child from as far as I could remember to about the age of 16.

I had to live with dealing watching my mother and her friends drink and get high all night; watching my father struggle with his drug addiction when he was there and not in prison; living year after year with no air in the summer and no heat in the winter. I could remember my brother and sister standing in the kitchen with the oven door down trying to stay warm while getting ready for school.

I got tired of every time I went to eat something, the roaches would be in my plate before I could get to it or when I went to lay down, the rats would already be on the pallet we made on the floor because we didn't have any beds to sleep in.

Like I said, my life finally took a turn when I was about the age of 16. My mother finally got approved for public housing so we moved to the projects. That's when I began to make all the bad choices in the world. I started hanging with a lot of my cousins who were already doing illegal activities.

I looked at the life style that they lived, such as having all the finer things in life. I felt like I had missed out on a lot as a child and here was the opportunity to get a chance to get

all the finer things in life that I had missed out on.

Well, that was the worst decision I could have ever made. Because of the choice I made at the age of 16, six years later, at 22, I had to go and serve 11 years in federal prison for selling drugs.

This is my story. Read it, learn from it. Be smart, make the right choice. Don't end up writing a story like mine.

SOME GOOD ADVICE

In most cases, teens start experimenting with drugs, alcohol and sex. It usually happens on weekends or during recreational events, one night, smoking marijuana or drinking beer on a Saturday night with his or her friends. Then, it begins to be all weekend long after you get the good feeling it gives you. After a period of time, this progresses into one or two nights a week plus the weekend.

Then, the problems start happening. You might get a D.U.I. [Driving Under the Influence] or it could even be family problems. You could even have work-related issues such as testing positive for drugs or alcohol. It's hard to maintain a job while doing any of this. It could go on unknown for years, but, there will come a time when you slip.

So, now you have money problems. How can I afford to buy dope or alcohol? There's always a dealer that will front you something. Then, at some time, they want their money and, of course, you won't have it or you cut short something or someone else to pay for them. I've seen it a lot of different ways in my time of using. Some people will resort to stealing or several other illegal things to get dope.

There's always a slick person in the crowd.

The one I know decided he would manufacture on his own. He managed to start growing marijuana, so he didn't have to buy anymore. He grew so much, he decided he could make a profit, so he began dealing. Things were going good, he

was working and also had a second income from the weed.

Now, there comes a time when the weed and booze isn't enough. Cocaine and meth was at the opposite end of the street. This guy gets a recipe and locates some material to manufacture meth. He loses his job, but, things are going so good with the drugs, he starts producing more.

The money is great!

He's buying boats, trucks, motorcycles and, basically, anything he wants. What he don't see is, his usage of the drug has increased a lot. His name is out there even more than before. People have to know your name and what you have to do business.

The drugs make you very paranoid and you always carry cash. Then, comes the guns. And, prison. That's not a good move at all.

So, some good advice would be: Stay drug free and stay close to your family. Work hard for what you want. Set goals for yourself and complete them. Take life one day at a time and enjoy it.

A REFLECTION A Reflection of the Things I Shouldn't Have Did in My Life

As I look back on what was why I ended up in the Federal Prison system, I can only shake my head: because I didn't have to be in that situation, because I had three little children who depended on me. I was a single parent who should have thought of them first before trying to sell drugs which I knew was wrong.

But since being in the Federal system, I have seen and read a lots about the drug epidemic. And, I have asked myself a thousand times how could I let myself get caught up in the trap of selling drugs like the so many of us locked up for a long time. But, as I reflect back on a lots of the questions, I asked myself while locked up, maybe God was telling me something for own good by my being in the situation I was in.

The 13 years I was in the Federal system has taught me a whole lot of things. I have come to the understanding any fool can sell drugs, drive new cars, have lots of money and all kinds of women hanging around them. But, when you get caught, all of that is gone and all the people who thought was in your corner are all gone.

And, then you hear and find out why they were your so-called friends and it all comes crashing down around you, what a fool you have been. You are angry, at first, wanting to beat them all down, but, as you come to realize, didn't no one

twist your arms to make you do or play Mr. Big, partying and surrounding yourself with those people.

Since my release from prison, I have come to see by doing positive things to better myself while in prison, I can use the same positive things out here in the free world. I see the drug dealers on the corners or driving their new cars, blasting their radios. Now, I just smile and shake my head, because that is not the life for me. I am trying to have a father's relationship with teenage children and tell them to get their education and go on to college, to be better than I am and make something of their lives.

And, my advice to all young people coming up in the 'hood or wherever: You can have a good life by staying away from drugs. And, those who sell, smoke or try to influence you to use by calling you different names, just say no and do what you know is right. It will keep you out of trouble and the Federal system or State court which will land you in prison for a long time.

I can be a witness to that.

THROUGH THE BARREL OF A GUN

Life is a journey by itself, but, what happens when that journey is approaching a destination?

It all started with me on September 25, 1987, the day I seen my life through the barrel of a gun. People, in general, will tell you that situations in life happen to you for a reason, but, until you go through it yourself and experience it, you have no idea how it is.

The day started as normal as any other day, but, was I in for a surprise at the end of it. No one knows when and how it's going to happen; you kind of just prepare yourself for it. Sad, but, that's just how the world developed to be.

So, without further ado, I would like to share with you the dramatic night that changed my life forever.

Who'd ever think that I would be put in a situation like this on that night? As I got myself together and exited my residence, the night seemed kind of routine, but, that just goes to show you how your life is easily put in front of you and can easily be taken away from you.

I guess when you're not the center of attention than the average person isn't really worried about being robbed at gun point. I've realized that it's eyes on you at all times, but, it's impossible for you to watch them all.

It's three o'clock in the morning and I'm just leaving the

club, on my way home. I've did this plenty of nights, so, the last thing I'm thinking about is someone being outside of my home when I get there. It wakes you up in a sense, because you get in this comfort zone, and, sometimes, you tend to forget to stay on your toes and watch what's going on.

But, when faced with a situation like this, you're never really the same after it. You're kind of like a war veteran who's having flashbacks and one who's on the edge. As I took my ride home that night, I thought to myself, "I've lost a lot of people in such a short period of time," who would have thought that I was almost put in that category?

So, I finally reached my destination to encounter something I wasn't prepared for. As I locked my truck, I heard a mangled voice behind me, demanding I get down on the ground. Now, I'm thinking to myself that this could be my lost couple of breaths I'm taking right now. And, not only that, I turn to my other direction to spot two more individuals running down the street towards my way.

In my mind, I'm like, "What is the hell is going on?"

By this time, my body is turning warm and my adrenaline is pumping. So, after giving them everything I had, I closed my eyes and prepared for the worst.

Surely it's done, it was just like a storm when it's done and it was over. Racing to my door, thoughts are still trying to process, like what just happened and what do I do now? Three dudes and an assault rifle, and, I'm still here.

Something is not right with this picture.

The crazy part about it is you never know when it's coming, but, when it does happen so fast, you're in a state of shock when it's over.

I HAD IT GOOD, OR SO I THOUGHT

I start my life story out by saying if I would have knew then what I know now, I would have made a different choice. Fast money and fast living can have its benefits, but, also, its downfalls. Looking back on my life, I had a good job with benefits such as health care, union and a 401(k) package. I also had child support and other bills where I thought that if I just had a little more, I would be alright.

At first, things started out slow and I was able to pay my bills and do things with my kids. But, I was never satisfied with what I had. It was always “I needed a little more.” And, then, my little more turned into “I need these rims” or “I gotta have these shoes.” “My kids want to go here and I just gotta be able to take them there when they come over.”

After a while, I stopped taking my children places and was devoting all my time to the streets. My homies needed me more than my kids did. Or, if I wasn't out there, I was going to be missing out on something. ***The streets became my life.*** Not once did I look at how I was hurting myself or my children. Making money and hanging out became my life.

Being the schemer that I thought I was, I came up with a reason for my job to put me on stress leave. That way, I could devote all my time to this lifestyle I so depended upon. I eventually stopped spending time with my children and devoted all my time and energy to the streets.

Things were going great at first, or so I thought. I had met

someone new and the pressures of having to deal with two households were tearing me apart. I stayed in the streets more and I thought that money would solve all my problems.

Well, it didn't and after my whole life came crashing down, I knew that I had lost everything that was dear to me: my children, my job and the peace of mind I had were all gone. Laying in that jail cell, wishing I was free, just to go back to work or spend quality time with my children again, really tore me up.

The woman in my life had really put up with a lot from me. I had changed. I lost sight of the things that were important to me for the things I wanted. I realized that I was more happy struggling and working and being free than I was laying in that bunk incarcerated.

Sometimes, it takes losing everything. You have to realize what's important in the long run. While being in prison, everyone I know moved forward with their lives. I'm the one starting over, wishing I had just been content with what I had. Fast money, the cars, clothes and the freedom to do what you want when you want comes with a price. Losing what is most precious to you is what you give up when you want things the easy way.

So, now when I feel stressed about things I want, I know to take my time and work hard for them and I will have them. I will always remember the hell I was in called prison. Nothing is worth being that miserable. I am finally a functional member of society.

MY NAME IS YOU

I have a story to tell.

It started 47 years ago when I was born in a world of mystery. My mother was poor and my father was absent. Although we were poor, my mother made sure we had the basic of necessities. I thank her each and every chance I get for her will and determination to see me and my siblings through some hard times in our lives. Some of us turned out to be model citizens, some didn't.

I remember her telling me and my siblings how important an education was. I didn't think so, led to believe it was for those with a brighter complexion than me. How foolish I was back then!

Once I got older, I took off to look for my father. I needed to get to know him. I found him and that's when my life changed, profoundly. I thought it would be for the best, but, it was quite the contrast. It was far different than being with my mother. I was introduced to a life of complicity and duplicity, but, during that time I was having the greatest time of my life, so I thought. Oh, how wrong I was! It was the beginning of the end of a life of complicity.

I left my father after I thought I had learned enough to go out on my own. I married and started a family. My wife and I have five children and some out of wedlock. I never thought what I was doing was so wrong. I thought I was the man. I was making all this money, I had all these cars and

women. Shit, I was living the American dream. You couldn't tell me different until reality hit me.

My first reality check was that my first wife divorced me and took everything. A year later, I remarried and nine months later, I was indicted. My whole life as I knew it was over, so I thought. But actually, it was the beginning of a new life.

I remember when the judge handed me down ALL of that time, I blamed everybody but that one person who was responsible and that was me.

It took some time for me to realize it, but, the truth, no matter how painful or surreal, *it is what it is*. You can stay in denial or change your paradigm. I choose to change mine. I said, "I am going to work on me." So, I started evaluating my self and came to this conclusion that I needed to work on my spirituality, mentality and physicality.

I am going to conclude this by saying: Without God, we aren't anything. Without an education, we deny ourselves many opportunities and if we do not take care of our physical composition, we deny ourselves vitality.