

## James Washington, III

### *A Conversation With Rehabilitation...*

On February 7, 2000, I was sentenced to life without parole for a homicide I committed as a minor. That ignorant decision I made cost a young man his life. I can only imagine the pain I've caused his family. They can only imagine I'm still the same juvenile who sat in the courtroom deserving of a sentence to die in prison. Without any restorative justice opportunities available to either of us, his family and I have not had the chance to dialogue in person, if they would even be willing.

I'm ashamed, embarrassed, and very remorseful for my actions. Today, as a young man, I apologize again to his family and mine. The way I used to think had me blind to the full effects of my behavior. My perception of responsibility did not exist. My thinking made me believe I was right. Not that I actually was right, but it was the sum total of what I was taught by my family and the streets since I was 9 years old—as were my abuse of alcohol, tobacco, non-medical marijuana, and cocaine.

I know the natural inclination exists for society to expect the worst of juvenile lifers. Rightly so, since in my case a homicide was committed. As a consequence, this juvenile was not sentenced to a life of proper human development but life in prison without parole.

I am writing these words to speak for me and those of us who were adolescents, whose actions today prove the opposite of our worst yesterday. This does not make us blameless, but it shows that the potential for us to be productive members of society and deserving of a second chance has neither faded nor disappeared.

My name is James Washington, III. I am 34 years old, an involved father of two wonderful teenage daughters. I am also one of the many juvenile lifers incarcerated in Michigan. Today is my 6,266th day behind bars.

When I entered prison, I was a kid. There were no protective measures, extra concerns for my well-being, or separation from violent sexual predators. From day one as a juvenile with a life sentence in the Michigan Department of Corrections, no rehabilitative programs would be offered to me. Programs were only considered for and given to persons with the earliest release date. I have none.

Trying to understand this was confusing on a few levels. Now sober, I had to come to terms with taking a man's life, my life sentence, and learn to accept the fact that there would be no opportunities offered to me for help. To survive, my only option was to imitate what the other prisoners did on the yard.

The general population yard... the yard of loud talking, gang violence, fights, stabbings, exercising, the over-medicated, the under-medicated, gambling, sexual predators, narcotic use and abuse, bullying, tattooing, crying, bleeding, laughing, manipulation, razor-slashing, alcoholism, respectful/disrespectful officers, prejudiced/biased officers, officers who cared sometimes.

The distress led me to a conversation with rehabilitation. The funny thing is, Webster's only advice was the definition of the word. It wasn't much. Nor was I mature enough to see it as a starting point that could grow into an advantage.

Later, I was introduced to a man named Lil Joe. He was 52 years old and had been locked up over 24 years. I was 18. We agreed to work out together. From there we built a friendship that would ultimately grow into a father-and-son relationship, something I never had before. He taught me everything I needed to know about prison and about being a man. What I loved about him the most was he still valued the morals and principles his mother and father raised him with, and he never compromised since coming to prison.

A year later, I earned my first certificate of completion for "Custodial Maintenance Technology." I was 19. It was exciting earning something positive despite the obstacles of my sentence.

Joe underwent open heart surgery and returned to the prison rather fragile. It was hard for me to see him in that condition; even harder for me to stand by and watch him fight on the yard. Without a second thought, I jumped in. When it was over, I was cuffed and placed in the hole. It was my first misconduct ticket. I was found guilty of the assault, and after 40 days in segregation, I was transferred to a different prison. From December 2001 through July 2007, I received nine more tickets. Five of them landed me in seg. I was transferred amongst five other prisons. However, I managed to participate in a three-month class and received a certificate of completion for "Phase II Substance Abuse."

On July 2, 2007 I was found guilty and placed in seg for my 10th ticket for assaulting a prisoner. I have to admit, of all of the times I had been sent to the hole, this time was different. Three months prior, I spoke with my mother on the phone and was anticipating a visit from her for my 25th birthday. April tenth. A week passed but no visit. I was called to the prison's administration building. Through a service window with bars and a metal vent to speak through, an officer pushed a piece of paper to the ledge. All I could see was a blank piece of paper. He pressed it forward and pointed to a tiny sentence written at the bottom of the paper that read, "YOUR MOTHER IS DEAD." Under my breath I remember whispering to myself in shock... "What?" In that moment, a part of me

died, too. “YOU CAN’T KEEP THE PAPER!” He screamed at me from behind the window. But in my mind I wanted to fight the paper! Then with the same attitude, he asked me, “Is you alright?!” What choice did I have? I learned how to deal with tragedies and grief by holding it in. The same way I saw my mother deal with it. Hours later, I was living in prison as if I’d never read the sentence. However, I *had* read that sentence. Little did I know, it would demand my attention, more than my strength, to suppress it.

There I was, sitting in the hole for my 10th misconduct ticket. Without warning, all my emotions came pouring out. Tears cascaded down my face like a spring waterfall. I cried for a lot of reasons. One, my mother was dead. Two, I wasn’t there to help her at the end because I was locked up for life. And, three, I wasn’t able to hold her hand when she breathed her last. The sense of loneliness I felt in the core of my being scared me.

That night I was forced to deal with my feelings, which was foreign to me. Yet, the more I cried, the more I found the strength to explore every emotion I had learned to suppress. Inside my pain, I could not help but think about all the pain I had caused others. And to think, if I felt this way about my mother, I felt the pain I caused my victim’s family. He was someone’s brother, father, uncle, and, like me, someone’s son.

That night, I made a promise to myself and to God: I would not harm another person or do anything illegal ever again. And as my atonement to God for taking the life of another man, I would do my best to do enough good for *two* people. I did not know how this would look, feel, taste, or what it would sound like. I just knew deep down inside it was my only option.

I stepped out with faith in God, which led me to a study course given by Minister Louis Farrakhan titled, “Self Improvement: The Basis for Community Development,” a 21-unit study guide designed to cause self-examination, self-analysis, and self-correction. Equipped with this knowledge, I was well on my way to a new life even though I was well aware I still lived behind metal bars and razor wire fences. Nevertheless, when I was released from segregation I grabbed my duffle bag and headed to my next cell, carrying my promise in my heart.

The last sentence I just wrote took place in my life NINE YEARS AGO. That was the last time a misconduct ticket was written on me. Today is August 28, 2016, and I am a mentor in two programs. The first is “Youth Deterrence.” Once a month, at-risk teens are brought into the prison from Saginaw, surrounding counties and as far away as Kalamazoo, Michigan. They arrive from Saginaw High School, Arthur Hill High School,

Saginaw Juvenile Probation, Interlink Churches, Operation Reach, the Department of Human Services, and community organizations.

Contrary to “Scared Straight,” we deter teens from engaging in criminal activity by showing them their true value. As a mentor, I tell my story candidly and without mincing words, which they easily relate to. By the time we divide into small groups, they are willing to have an open and honest dialogue about their specific issues and more. From there, we empower them with the tools necessary to take steps to change their lives. We end with a goal-setting action plan that shows how to practically achieve the goals they set for themselves. The program is so effective it has unified the most unlikely combination of people; prisoners working with Saginaw County’s juvenile probation officers, police, prosecutors, judges, interns, and community leaders together saving children’s lives.

The second program I mentor in is “Common Ground,” a 14-week workshop within prison offered to those deemed trouble-makers or “the worst of the worst.” We cover a wide range of common life skills (communication, character, values, conflict resolution, and parenting) that are uncommon to the mentees. As a mentor, I use my life’s transition to show it is realistic and practical. Through these mentor programs, since 2012, we have changed the lives of hundreds of teens who were on the verge of throwing their lives away. Participating in these programs has been one of the most redeeming things I have ever done. I’m able to be for these at-risk teenagers what I wish someone had been for me.

Besides these mentor programs, I was blessed through a partnership with Central Michigan University (CMU), the professors who came into the prison, and seventeen honors students who were brought inside prison over a course of three months where we collectively engaged in a course of study titled, “Communication and Social Justice.” The professors designed the course to help us mentors in our quest to better serve young people.

In 2011, before the CMU class and the two mentor programs, I was introduced to a Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) professor. Under her tutelage for three years, I learned college-level literature. At the end of each semester she would invite her current class of SVSU students to come inside the prison to experience a combined class. All students always left with the excitement of having experienced one of the most engaging classes of the semester.

From these college classes I earned certificates of completion. I’ve also earned certificates from classes such as communication, anger management, Cage Your Rage, group counseling, music appreciation, introduction to playing the guitar, substance abuse, Inside Out Dad, biohazard clean up, and basic conversational Spanish.

Before any of these productive experiences entered my life, I remember having a conversation with rehabilitation. But Webster only provided me the definition of the word. Today, not only am I mature enough to see it as a starting point that grew into a promise, I see very clearly my life is an example of the word.