

My name is Leo Paul Carmona and the date of this writing is Sunday, March 1, 2020

***BACKGROUND**

I was born in Salinas, California on July 7, 1982. I was raised by my parents Leo & kimberly Carmona and my maternal grandparents, Herman & Maria Marquez. The world outside my family unit whilst growing up, was unsafe and terrifying. My parents struggled with severe substance abuse and mental illness. Because of this, there were several times when my parents were incapable of caring for me, so I was frequently volleyed back and forth betweensthe homes of my parents and grandparents.

I was frightened of my parents, though I still loved and missed them during the times when I was not in their care. I grew up in the two neighboring towns of Greenfield and Soledad, California. These towns were fraught with gangs, drugs, and vicious violence. During my entire childhood, I was brutally and relentlessly bullied, both in school and in my neighborhoods. This was mostly because I was very different from my peers. Different in the sense that I was socially awkward, shy, introverted, anxious, and somewhat nerdy, always having my nose buried in a book. I had no interest in drugs, thievery, vandalism, or being a gang-member, so they bullied me quite badly. I never fought back against my tormentors, after my grandparents and my church had taught me to never resort to violence to solve a problem. Year after year, I took brutal abuse, which resulted in my having very little to no self-esteem or confidence. I ended up scared of everything and developed an intense anxiety disorder.

My grandparents were very loving and supportive, but they were elderly, poor, uneducated immigrants, and there was only so much that they could do, though they did dream of me making something of myself. They are now deceased, and I am extremely ashamed at

having never lived up to the potential that they felt I possessed. I only hope that it isn't too late for me to one day still achieve success in their honor.

As a child, I had a confusing view of the criminal justice system, but honestly did not give it too much thought. My grandparents taught me that law enforcement personnel were to always be respected and deferred to, without exception. By contrast, my parents taught me that law enforcement were not to be trusted and should be avoided at all costs. They strongly believed that the police prioritized exploiting and abusing poor people, and ethnic minorities, above helping people in distress and keeping their jurisdictions safe. Quite naturally, the juxtaposition of the two different mindsets created confusion for me, but I actually did grow up to adopt my grandparent's view.

Aside from a traffic infraction or two in my late teens, I never had occasion to encounter the criminal justice system, until I was charged with the offense for which I am presently serving time. Having still believed everything that my grandparents taught me, I trusted the police, much to my detriment. After dealing with them, I allowed myself to be intimidated, threatened, and manipulated into making an absolutely false confession. At this time, I am 37 years old, and have been incarcerated since the age of 21. Barring any extraordinary appellate measures, or a legislative repeal of Michigan's Truth-In-Sentencing law, I will be 47 years old when I become eligible for parole.

***INCARCERATION**

Entering the MDOC on 4/1/2005 was an incredibly difficult and frightening experience and adjustment. As with all new prisoners, I was temporarily housed at the Egeler Reception Center in Jackson for 21 days. I was 22 years old, but I still looked as though I

were in my mid to late teens. Most unfortunately, I was sexually assaulted within the first 48 hours of my arrival, by a man MORE than twice my size and age. Housing staff knew exactly what had occurred, as they had walked by and saw it and did not assist me or stop the assault. The assailant claimed to me, that staff had given him the "green light" to "make my life hell", because they did not like the details and circumstances of my conviction. As a result of this, and because I didn't yet know how to navigate prison, I did not report what had happened to me.

I was attacked two different times by the same man. He would later become paranoid whenever he would see me speaking to people and trying to make friends. He was worried that I would tell someone what he had done. He began telling me that if he kept seeing me speak to other people, that he was going to throw me off of the 4th tier, and that prison staff would simply chalk it up as a suicide. Because that "story" seemed perfectly plausible, I did the following: I took a little scrap of paper and wrote, "I did NOT kill myself. Inmate #xxxxxx pushed me off the tier." (I wrote his actual inmate booking number on the paper, as at that time, our numbers were stenciled across our shirts.) I kept that little scrap of paper deep inside my sock, under my toes. I did that for 2 weeks, until he transferred out to another facility. I did that because I knew that if I ended up dead, no one at the prison would be allowed to touch me, until a coroner would come to take my body, after which, the note would be discovered whenever my clothes were removed to do an autopsy.

On 4/21/2005, I was transferred out of there, and to the Macomb Correctional Facility in New Haven, as a level-4 prisoner. I remained there for about 7 months, before it was determined that my mental state was rapidly declining, after I had been observed as not eating, sleeping, or caring for my hygienic needs. Part of my trouble was that my attacker from the previous prison was at

this facility also, and had began to follow me around and bother me. He was taunting me and telling me that he had a good relationship with staff and was going to get them to move me into his cell so that he could own me and do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted. I rapidly withdrew into myself out of fear, and stopped leaving my room for any reason. I wouldn't go to the chowhall to eat because I was scared of running into him. I also began taking sponge-baths in my room when my roommate was at work, because I was fearful of going to the shower, as he was also in my housing unit.

So I was then sent to the Residential Treatment Program (RTP) at the Harrison Correctional Facility in Adrian. RTP is a somewhat structured psychiatric unit that is located within a regular prison. At this facility, I was still a level-4 prisoner, but there were mental health staff in the housing units, and were almost always available for us. For my own safety, in this unit I had my own room. After approximately 4 or 5 months of never showing signs of being a behavioral management problem, the decision was made to decrease my security custody level and send me to another RTP unit at a level-2 prison.

I was then shipped to the now closed Riverside Correctional Facility in Ionia. I was there until a suicide attempt on Thanksgiving of 2006 sent me to an outside hospital. I returned to riverside, but after attempting suicide again during the summer of 2007, I was sent to the Crisis Stabilization Unit at the Huron Valley Complex in Ypsilanti, which today, no longer houses men. After a few months, this program discharged me and sent me back to Riverside. The mental health staff there were angry and accused me of exhibiting self-injurious behavior solely as a means of manipulating them into extending my RTP commitment. Riverside staff then transferred me right back to Macomb.

After a few months back at Macomb, I reported to staff, that my roommate was pressuring me for sexual favors and that I was feeling unsafe. Naively, I had once thought that this man had been my friend, and he and I had both asked staff if they could bunk us together. Because we had asked for this, and been accommodated, staff were unwilling to move me again. I was simply told that I had better find a way to get along. I then told staff that I was going to seriously injure this man the next time that he tried to do something. I was immediately taken to segregation.

After about a week in segregation, I was sent back to the same housing unit, but to a different room. My former roommate whom I had complained about, began stalking me and trying to get other prisoners to bully me for "ratting" on him to staff and "telling lies about him". Staff had told him about that allegation I had made. About a week later, I was transferred to the Kinross Correctional Facility in the Upper Peninsula. I remained there for 9 years with only minimal problems. (I was robbed and beaten only twice during those 9 years.)

On 10/20/2016, I was transferred to my present location, Lakeland Correctional facility in Coldwater. In just over 3 years here, I've had no major incidents to speak of. I have earned and carved out a (relatively) comfortable niche here. I have a good job, assisting elderly and terminally ill inmates, I have a good housing and bunk assignment, and I have not had a behavioral misconduct ticket in just over 10 years. In prison, that is a very significant achievement. I also volunteer my time and energy by crocheting hats, scarves, and blankets for a local charity that gives the items to children with Cancer. I really enjoy being a part of that. I am also co-facilitating a weekly class on Victim Awareness and Empathy. That is truly rewarding in its own right.

Incarceration for me is like being a caged animal, while not giving in and resorting to animalistic behavior. Many prisoners succumb to the mentality of "If I'm going to be caged and treated like an animal or a monster, then I'm damn well going to act like one." I reject that because I feel like if I were to give in to it, I would never be able to return to being a normal, kind, humble, hopeful and optimistic human being. The rest of my life very much depends on my not "going full convict" and exhibiting all manner of antisocial depravity.

Being physically separated from my two children and other loved ones is beyond difficult. I don't believe there are words which can adequately articulate the level of pain, living in this environment causes. If I have a particularly bad day, or am anxious, worried, or upset about something, I cannot come home and discuss it with someone who loves me and cares about what I am going through. I must simply hold it in and deal with it as best as possible, with whatever coping skills are at my disposal.

In prison, it is frowned upon to show any form of insecurity or vulnerability. The general consensus is that to do so, is tantamount to broadcasting one's weakness and asking for trouble. As with a small hurt animal in the wild, openly showing weakness in prison is like sending up a beacon to every bully, predator and opportunist in this animal kingdom, wherein "might is right", which would serve to welcome all manner of mistreatment.

In free society, if I were feeling such things, I'd have options at my disposal such as confiding in a loved one, close friend, or even a therapist. Not so in prison. In here, one must suffer in silence, unless or until sufficient coping skills are learned and employed, with which to get one through the hard times. I believe that because we wear the label of "criminal", "convict", or "offender", that some staff and free-world citizens feel like when prisoners hurt and suffer, that we are actually

receiving our just desserts. Though in actuality, we are here to rehabilitate ourselves and learn to be pro-social and productive, not to fester with hurt and continue the cycle of victimization. As the Michigan Supreme Court once said, "Offenders are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment".

Through my work in the Victim Awareness and Empathy class, I have learned that "hurt people, hurt people". (The first "hurt" being an adjective and the second "hurt" being a verb.) Prisons are filled with hurting human beings who are or were coping skill deficient. If they weren't, then they would not be in prison for victimizing people. When people in prison feel hurt and helpless, so many of them (I venture to say the majority) allow it to manifest as anger and aggression, because again, they have been conditioned to believe that it is not acceptable to be hurt or helpless. As such, when their pain comes through as anger and aggression, they continue to victimize people, both in here and post release.

As for myself, I turned my pain, helplessness and hoplessness inward and physically hurt myself because I knew that I ought not ever physically harm another. I used to think and feel that hurting myself was the only thing that I could control, and the only option I had at my disposal, that could ensure I would not violate another person, nor lengthen my already long sentence. That was when I had no healthy coping mechanisms.

I have since had the amazing opportunity to learn some positive and effective coping skills which are helpful in about 85% of the time. This is a substantial improvement in my personal development that I am proud of. These skills include such things as prayer, meditation, exercise, journaling and writing letters

and also crafting hats, scarves, and blankets with crochet. I still have those days that seem to be epic struggles, but they are now more manageable with my newfound tools. Looking back to the times when I had none of this, is how I measure the progression and trajectory of my development.

It is not easy for me to maintain ties to the community. It has now been 16 years since I left your world and entered this one. I had a lot of moral support and communication during the earlier years of my incarceration. However, with each passing year, more and more relatives and friends have faded out of my life. I cannot really blame them for this, though it nonetheless is very painful. I am simply not out there and a part of their daily life. As of this writing, I only have frequent contact with my mother. She has been clean and sober since 1998 and we have been able to repair our once unhealthy relationship. She moved the family to Michigan in 2005 in order to be closer to me after I was sentenced to prison.

Somewhere around 2013 or 2014, a rumor that I had died, was circulated back home, in Greenfield and Soledad. I don't think it was malicious, but rather an honest mistake or misunderstanding. After all, my father died in 2008, and he was also named Leo Carmona. In any event, after we became aware of the rumor, I asked my mother to start a Facebook page under my name, to let everyone know that I was in fact, not deceased.

By social media standards, I don't have a lot of friends. Anyone on my friends list who is from California, is likely a relative. While anyone from Michigan besides my mother and sister, is likely a friend who is a former prisoner, whom I met in here. I do not actually see anything from my Facebook page, though if someone posts something of particular importance, or sends me a

direct message, my mother will usually read it to me over the phone. I like to take photos in here while posing with dogs that are here to get obedience trained. I then send the prints to my mother, and she will scan and post them to Facebook for me. Anytime that she visits me and we take a photo together, she usually has it posted before she's even driven away from the prison's property.

I occasionally utilize Facebook as a journal or blog, writing my thoughts and feelings on a particular topic, and sending it to Mom to copy & paste onto a post for me. I like to hear and know if and how people repond to what I have shared. This is one of the few things that allow me to maintain even a small connection to the outside world and to my people. It helps me to feel that somehow I am still relevant and that I still matter.

I have chosen not to use much of Facebook's privacy settings, so that someone need not be my Facebook friend, in order to see what I have posted. The reason for this, is that when I was incarcerated, I lost all contact with my son, who was only 4 years old at the time. Every year on his birthday, (May 20) I have the few baby photos we still have of him, re-posted. In facty I believe that my Facebook profile photo is the very last photo that my son and I ever took together. It is my ardent hope, that one day my son will somehow find my Facebook page and see that though our contact was severed many years ago, he has never been removed from my mind and my heart. The only thing I want more than my freedom and liberty back, is to be reunited with my son, even if only by mail or e-mail.

*LIVING CONDITIONS

The living conditions at the various facilities I have been assigned to have been different. Some have been cleaner than others, while some have been harsher and more oppressive than others. At Macomb and Riverside, I lived in a very small cell with one other person. At Harrison and Huron Valley, I had my own room. At Kinross, I lived in either a room with 3 other men, or a pole-barn that was sectioned into what resembled office cubicles, with 8 men being housed to each cube.

My present location is a wide-open dorm, that somewhat resembles World War I & II-era hospital wards, with rows of bunks very closely situated next to each other. As with many things, there good and bad points to this setup. A good point is that because in a large wide-open room where everyone can see everyone else, would-be thieves (sometimes) think twice about stealing, because they cannot do it without everyone else seeing. A bad point would be, that there is no privacy, peace, or solitude to retreat to, in bad times when one wishes to get away from all the noise and movement, in order to reset and process through a particular stress or problem.

What is being served as food here, is something that one would likely not serve to a pet. There is a current Federal lawsuit pending which raises some serious concerns. Case No. 2:18-cv-10175 has been assigned to Judge Gershwin Drain, in the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division. This lawsuit alleges that the food that is being served is so devoid of essential nutrition and vitamins, that it is causing an array of serious medical ailments, among them, various cancers and autoimmune disorders. Upon your request, I would happily forward you a copy of the amended complaint.

For the last few years, my bloodwork has revealed alarmingly low levels of white blood cells, platelets, and absolute neutrophils. I've not been given an actual diagnosis, but it is taking a toll on my health. I am fatigued literally all the time, I get sick easily, I bruise incredibly easily, and because of the low platelets, I cannot take NSAID pain relievers such as Ibuprofen, Advil, Aspirin, and Naproxen. This is particularly troubling at the present time, when I am recovering from a labrumectomy surgery. After reading the lawsuit mentioned above, I adamantly believe that substandard food is to blame for my health decline.

Furthermore, it was also recently revealed that I had very low vitamin B-12 levels. My assigned health provider told me that this was likely due to not consuming enough meat, cheese, eggs, and milk. My response to her was that I eat what I am served, while I have no control over what is actually being served. We are never served eggs, and we hardly receive "real" meat or cheese, and we can only take 8 ounces of low-fat milk at breakfast and dinner.

Consequently, my health provider ordered me once-weekly B-12 injections for a month, and once monthly injections thereafter. I was also provided with a nightly "light snack bag", which initially consisted of a rotating menu of meat and cheese. Recently, the snack bag menu was changed, and all the meat and cheese were eliminated from these snack bags, and replaced with a tablespoon of peanut butter and 2 slices of bread, every night. So with none of the foods that contain B-12, (meat, cheese, eggs, or milk) my nightly snack bags were taken away.

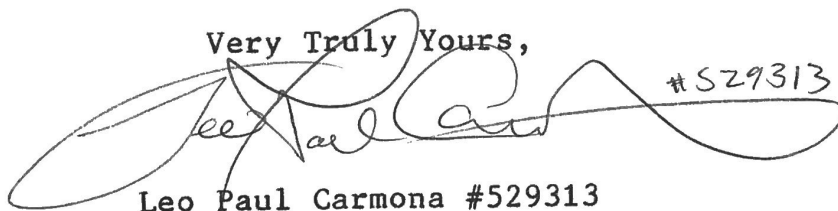
For some unfortunate souls, prison health services can be downright hazardous. Most recently, a man named Richard Neff lost his battle with cancer. Every prison across the state conducts an annual health screen on prisoners. This is usually

done as close as possible to the prisoner's birthday.

Last summer, Neff showed up to his annual and received quite a shock. Upon review of his medical chart, the screening nurse asked why he was not on any medication or chemotherapy for the cancer diagnosis that had been notated in his chart some four years prior. This was news to Neff, who did not even know that he was sick. The nurse then got the ball rolling to get Neff rescreened, wherein it was revealed that the cancer had spread to other organs and was now at stage-4. It was much too late to save his life. There was four years in which he could have been treated, but was instead ignored. This has happened to other people as well, though Neff was the first of two people whom I knew personally. Alexis Noffke, who is the Michigan Legislative Corrections Ombudsman, and Matthew Tjapkes, of Michigan-based Humanity For Prisoners, are both well aware of what happened to Neff.

In closing, I would like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share my story and my thoughts with you and your institution. I think your project is a wonderful idea, and on behalf of my fellow prisoners, we thank you for caring enough to want to effect meaningful change and reform. You are more than welcome to contact me anytime and ask me any other questions that you may have.

Very Truly Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leo Paul Carmona", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right. The number "#529313" is written in the upper right portion of the signature.

Leo Paul Carmona #529313