

Written Testimonial

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The Enlightenment By: Alvin C. Hill # 05/07/2020

A few minutes after noon on October 3rd, 1984, I was born to an alcoholic mother and a father that was addicted to heroin. We lived in Detroit until my father passed from an overdose four months later. My mother, pregnant with my little brother, packed up and moved us back to Benton Harbor, MI, where her family lived.

I did great in school and was accepted into the Gifted and Talented program, but at home I got caught up in the gang culture and street life that surrounded me. I caught my first case at the age of eleven and my mother lost custody of my brother and I shortly after we would be separated and shuffled between juveniles and foster homes for about 18 months before our older siblings, my father's children, got custody of us and moved us back to Detroit with them.

I lived with my older brother for a little over two years, but we couldn't get along, so I ended up doing a program at Boyssville in Monroe, MI. After completing that program, I lived with my older sister for nine months before being sent to Children's Village in Pontiac, MI. My state F.I.A. worker informed me that she was looking for a supervised independent living program for me and she found one a few months later. The first program wasn't ran well, so she found a second one and I was in that program until I caught my first case as an adult, at barely 18.

My senior year of high school, I started selling marijuana to make a little extra money. I wasn't getting along with

my siblings and my pride wouldn't let me go without. After a few months, I saw an opportunity to make more money, selling harsher drugs, so that's what I did. A couple of the older guys I was running with were doing armed robberies, so I stepped into that and shortly after I was sitting in the Oakland County Jail fighting for my young life,

After taking a plea for about 6-8 years, the prosecutor reneged, stating that they had made some miscalculations in my points. Once I realized that this only happened after my co-defendant got a mistrial and they wanted me to testify against him at his retrial, I decided to take the plea for the new guidelines of approximately 9-11 years. My court-appointed attorney has since been disbarred and my better understanding has led me to believe that a lot of others should follow.

Of course the system was designed for justice and equality, but as a young black male with very little support, I threw my life at the mercy of the justice system and... I was a victim of it. I wasn't innocent, so I took my time like the man I claimed to be. No one made me commit a crime. I take full responsibility for my actions then and now. My story is not much different than most of the guys incarcerated... and that's the problem.

I started my MBOC time in "quarantine", which is actually called a "reception center," but is just one of the facilities in Jackson, MI used to do exams, both physical and mental, and designate inmates entering the Michigan Department of Corrections. Once I was checked out and cleared, I was sent to Saginaw Regional Facility. There are level 1's, 2's, and 4's at these types of facilities, but they keep them

separated. I was supposed to be in level 4 for about nine months, but a couple fights, some I got away with, one I didn't, meant I was there over two years. After sending the case manager multiple kites, I decided to rush in his office at court time to find out why three months had passed and I wasn't reclassified to a level 2. This meant it had been over 15 months since my last misconduct report and the waiting period was only one year. He showed me where the mistake had been made, took a minute to correct it, and assured me that he would make it up to me. I just hoped he learned to answer his kites.

I guess he made it up to me by wanting me to camp status, but the camps in lower Michigan (which were all closed later) would only allow inmates with less than 24 months left on their sentence, so I was shipped all the way upstate to Baraga Maximum Facility, which had a "poll-barn" for about 200 level 1 inmates. I was a long way from home, but I barely got visits in Saginaw, so I was okay with the distance and after adjusting to the open setting, I got comfortable on the other side of the bridge.

After about 18 months at Baraga, I was sent to Camp Kitwen, which was about 20 minutes up the road. I had heard about "rackets" or "hicks", but Baraga was cool other than a couple ass holes. Camp Kitwen had a lot more of those ass holes, but when I was a youngster in Saginaw one of the old heads said, "I can teach you how to make this knife or I can teach you how to write a grievance."

It's up to you." I, wisely chose the latter. At Camp Kitwen I had to fight bogus tickets and confront some officers about policy, but overall it was a decent two years.

In 2009, they closed the remaining camps in the MDOC and Camp Kitwen was on that list. I worked in the kitchen the whole time I was there and the steward told me that he would make sure I was on the list to go downstate and I did. My first stop was Pugsley in Kincheloe, MI. Some of those officers were more racist than the officers over the bridge, but once they seen I wasn't a young clown, they left me alone. I was sent back to Saginaw, but to the level ~~1~~ ². Then, after a couple of months, I was sent to Bellamy Creek Borms in Ionia, MI.

"The Borms" was the worst facility I have ever did time at. Besides the counts every 45 minutes, laundry being sent out, open showers... The officers did whatever they want to. One of the sergeant was reading my Rolling Stone magazine during roll call and I tried to explain to the officer that that was against policy, but she told me to "shut up or write a grievance." So, I asked for a grievance and wrote it up. She waited until count time, called count and then wrote me a ticket for being out of place at count.

When I went to get heard on the ticket, it was the same sergeant I wrote the grievance on and he told one of the officers to keep me in his office until he finished "tearing my shit up." I walked out of his office and back to my locker and started packing my own things up. I beat their ticket, but I stayed in level 2 for six months, because I disobeyed a direct order to stay in his office while he tore my shit up.

Bellamy Creek level 2 was a lot better than the dorms, but I was about six months from being the parole board and I knew it was better to be at a level 1 when you see them, so I did what I had to do. I was at Cooper Street (JCS) in Jackson, MI about five months before I seen the parole board and I was very honest with Mr. King, who all but confirmed that I would receive my parole. Before I went home, I had to complete a re-entry program, which meant I was heading to Detroit.

With 72 days left, I was transferred to Ryan Road and seeing Detroit after close to nine years was disheartening. It seemed like a ghost town and what was left of it was barely standing. There were a few decent classes, but overall the entire program was a sham. Everyone did just enough to say they did their job and I went home to my sister's den with a plan to do whatever I had to do to get everything I wanted.

I was living my best life, having my first child recently and my second one on the way when I was pulled over and taken to the Livonia Police Station. There I was confronted by the DEA, who informed me that I had been watched for eight months and they were building a federal case on me. Two months later, I was snatched up, drug into court and released on bond. I talked to the court-appointed attorney and had flashbacks of my state case, so I hired an attorney who fought with me for close to two years and made sure I came out with my skin attached.

During the whole process, I didn't know what I was being charged with, so my lawyer and I go to find out and the prosecutor spells out my options as followed: They want to pursue RICO charges, which means I will be looking at a minimum of 14 years for the amount of 70,000 pills. I could go to trial or plead out to that charge... or I could cooperate and they would drop the amount of pills to just 6,500 pills and my guidelines would be 78-94 months, or 6½ years to about 8 years. They would knock off 25% of the time for my cooperation and another 25% of my time if I would agree to testify against my co-conspirators.

With some real good math and a little estimating, I could plea out to the RICO charges and be sentenced to a minimum of 14 years or I could cooperate with the DEA and receive as little as 3 years... or go to trial and receive even more than the 14 years. I knew well how the last option turns out. My co-defendant that received the mistrial was later retried, found guilty and sentenced to 12 years (3 more than me). After talking to my lawyer, he explained that a trial would be expensive, but I wasn't worried about money, so we prepared to go to trial.

I wouldn't say I "called their bluff" or anything like that. I think the DEA had bigger fish to fry and me going to trial would only expose their hand, mainly snitches, so they offered me the plea for 78-94 months and 6,500 pills and I took it. My lawyer submitted a motion with my sentencing memorandum and the judge granted it based on the prosecutors own sentencing memorandum stating that someone with a higher criminal history category (VI) than mine (II), receiving 68 months for the same charges. The judge

felt it was only right that I be sentenced to less than the 68 months the other person received, so he sentenced me to 60 months. I had about two months to get my affairs in order and the main thing I had to get together was my mind.

Here I was over 30 years old and heading back to prison after spending most of my 20's incarcerated. I was still married, even though I had lived with my girlfriend for the past two years. I had two kids who were both two and another one on the way. I had no education, but I'd learned enough to build my own entertainment company, which had finally become profitable... And I'm leaving everything I know and love with no real sense of direction. I knew that the only way I would come out of this situation better than I came out of the last one is if I went into it with a better attitude and a plan.

I walked into FEL Milan on July 3rd, 2017 and I was told about college classes, so I signed up for them. The next semester wouldn't start until September, so I spent the summer in the library and Resource Center, where I watched Great Courses in Business and Entrepreneurship. By the time I started college, I decided that I was going to get my associate's degree in Business Administration and I wouldn't stop there. I would continue my education upon my release.

During that first semester I took a FYS (First Year Student) class and the curriculum was about the differences

between good students and bad students. I realized I had a lot of bad habits and fixing them would help me perform better in school, but more importantly, I would do better in life by instituting some of these changes in my day-to-day activities. I decided that I would push myself to maintain a 4.0 grade point average, which I did.

Once I graduated from Jackson College last year, I enrolled in Blackstone Career Institute and recently completed their program for paralegal studies. I am in the final trimester of the LCP (Life Connections Program) here at Milan and all of the classes, books, and materials have allowed me to see things clearer and I know that I won't make the same choices (not mistakes) that I made before.

I am not writing this to receive a pat on the back. I truly understand what was asked of me when I received the invitation to participate in this project and submit my testimony. The main reason I spoke at length about my past and my present was to shed light on how and why I came to the understanding that I have landed on. Now, I can take you a little deeper, because you will be able to see my truths.

There is no way to describe prison in enough detail for someone who has never experienced it to understand it. In fact, each of us who have been through this situation has a totally different experience and point of view. What I can tell you is "Prison Is what You Make It." You can sit in here complaining and crying or you can make the best of a bad situation and come out a lot better than you came in. I have, obviously, chosen the latter.

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I would love to blame my current situation on my upbringing, and it may have something to do with it, but it is not the reason I'm here. My lack of parental guidance may have contributed to some of the bad decisions I've made, but a decision means I had other options. There are people who grew up in worse households and worse environments and grew up to do great things. Nothing and noone in the world can stop me but me.

This is where I see the major difference with me now and me ten years ago and in the same situation. I have less than a year before my home confinement date, so I will be home soon. As I prepare to return to the community, I am fully aware of the power that I possess and I know that my fate is in my own hands. I didn't realize this before, so I went about life waiting for things to happen or thinking that the easy way was the only way... or blaming "the system."

I wouldn't dare say that "the system" is fair. It wasn't designed to be fair. The people making the laws aren't worried about what happens when they break the laws. Obviously, favors will be called in and "mandatory" minimums will become "advisatory" minimums. I heard a commercial on the radio with some young white guy pleading for the public's sympathy about the opiod ^{crisis} ~~epidemic~~ and I read an article in Time magazine on the same topic, both making it appear that it only effected the upper and middle classes of America. This could

not be further from the truth.

I am only 35, but I can assure you that the crack epidemic was handled very differently. Even the recent change in the crack laws show you how a black or lower class drug is viewed totally different than a white or upper class drug. Crack cocaine is not as pure as uncut cocaine, but the sentencing ratio was just recently changed from 100:1 to just 18:1. Look at how many low-level drug offenders are doing 5-10 years in prison, because they are black or brown, while white people are being sentenced for the same amount of drugs and given alternative incarceration, such as treatment centers and outpatient programs.

In order to make the changes I needed to make I had to look past all of the issues in the system, but that doesn't mean I have to be blind to them. In fact, understanding the rules helped me understand that the odds are against me and to succeed I had better be prepared for the fight of my life. That is why I have chosen to further my education and leave the streetlife behind me.

When I look around see most of the guys in here wasting time, not signing up for college or anything else to help them get ahead in life, I don't blame them. I know first-hand that any real change starts in the mind and as long as they feel like they have a chance in the streets, they will never feel the need to change their thinking or behavior patterns. Trying to convince them of the possibilities of doing the right thing is like talking to a brick wall. Most people will look for and find any excuse to do wrong if that's what they want to do.

Even the things that the system has in place is being abused instead of used properly. The MSOL is based on a "truth in sentencing" philosophy, which is supposed to mean you do your time and you go home. The parole board would make sense if they were considering you for early release, but they won't let you out a single day before your release date and can usually find a reason to "flop" you for 1-5 years at a time until the end of your stay, which is the backside of your sentence. Where is the truth in that?

The federal sentencing guidelines have things in place that act as a "three strikes" rule called the "career criminal" or "armed career criminal" statutes, which have mandatory minimums. They have passed a "second chance" act and a "first-step" act, but they haven't really taken the first step at giving guys a second chance. Some of the things that inmates are entitled to, such as halfway house time or early release credits have no set guidelines, so counselors and case managers look for reasons to not submit the necessary paperwork, which requires them to actually do some research and work. So, even when things are in place, there are ways for "the system" to work around them.

In order for this system to function properly, everything has to be transparent and a system of checks and balances have to be put in place. Prosecutors have too much discretion and it's leading them to abuse their power by overcharging defendants, forcing them into pleas and cooperation. They should never be able to tell

a defendant that he's looking at two or three times more time if he decides not to cooperate, as they did in my case. They are no different than slave owners using slaves to catch runaway slaves or even Africans to capture other Africans and send them off into slavery. What happened to "if you do the crime you do the time?" Our current president recently acknowledged this absurdity.

Once again, understanding this process has lead me to my current system of beliefs. Knowing that I cannot do anything about police tactics and maneuvers, however, so I had to change the one thing I have control over, ME! ... I thank God every day for helping me see the light.

I don't know how much this will help you, but writing this has really helped me alot. I am available for any meaningful correspondence.

Peace and Love,

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