

"Prison is a Gift"

On Valentine's Day 2014 I was a 22-year-old male stuck somewhere in limbo between adulthood and manhood. I walked into Judge Martin's courtroom already guilty and dreading the next step in the process. I walked out shortly thereafter sentenced to 21 years in the custody of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections...not really knowing what that meant for my future.

I was angry, destructive, violent, lonely, immature, heartbroken, rejected, and I had a chip on my shoulder that made the iceberg that sank the Titanic look small. I was in denial about my health, which was failing. As a diabetic my initial hemoglobin A1C @ CRC was 12.8. This means I carried an average blood glucose level of 650, which is X 6.5 a healthy level. I was a danger to myself and others, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Finally, I hated the way I looked, and I felt very much unnoticed.

That was seven years ago. I am sure the lost person who walked into the Fairfield County jail 2,643 days ago would not recognize the person I am today. I am in perfect health and have managed to achieve balance mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I have willed my diabetes into submission and now I'm a strong, solid, 240 lb, grown man. I'm finally okay with not fitting in, and I proudly walk to the beat of my own drum.

Over the last seven years I have spent countless hours working on myself, my character, and the tedious task of hammering out my identity. I have worked to get that chip off my shoulder, and while I'm not sure if it is all gone, it is, at least, manageable. I am secure in my place on the totem pole of society. I'm not the best and I'm certainly not the worst.

If I had not come to prison, I am convinced I would be dead. Coming to prison forced me to take a long hard look at myself and accept responsibility for the selfish choices I made. Before, when I was alone, the only memory I could focus on was sitting in the courtroom watching as the heart of each member of my family shattered.

Coming to prison forced me to see who was really on my side. Coming to prison forced me to cultivate relationships with members of my family that otherwise probably would have remained in disarray. Those relationships have been invaluable sources of strength, support, and manifestations of unconditional love. Prison ushered me from legal adulthood into manhood. Prison took the brick foundation laid in my life and served as the mortar holding the pieces together. Prison showed me exactly what I am made of, and that a rich white kid from the suburbs can earn the respect of leaders of criminal organizations and earn a seat at their table.

Prison taught me to have pride in myself and to place value on my name as well as everything it represents. Prison taught me how to appreciate women and that it is possible to just fall in love with someone without sleeping with them. Prison taught me the value of good quality conversation, as well as the importance of being well versed on a multitude of subjects. Prison

taught me that being sincere and genuine takes work. Prison taught me life moves on and time heals all. Prison taught me looks are not everything and the value of intangibles: love, loyalty, respect, dedication, determination, and discipline. Prison taught me to never judge a book by its cover. Prison taught me it is better to give than to receive. Prison taught me the difference between worth and value. Prison taught me you never know the kind of person someone really is until you give them a chance to show you. Prison taught me our lives are not shaped by the good or the bad but by the people we choose to love and the people that choose to love us. The stronger those bonds are, the less the bad affects us. Prison taught me karma is a thing of beauty. Prison taught me the value of time.

Prison taught me how to follow and subsequently how to lead. Prison showed me what soldiers are willing to die for. To understand freedom in its purest form, you must first experience bondage in its most barbaric. Prison taught me the power of reflection. Prison taught me that if you really want to change there is no substitute for putting in the work.

Prison is a gift I thank God for every day.

Dustin Elizondo