

A Story to Tell



The Importance of
Education during Incarceration
as Told by 22 Men and Women
Who Know Firsthand

EDITED BY GERARD ROBINSON

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FOREWORD

Despite our country's recent stumbles, the United States of America remains a beacon of freedom, hope, and opportunity. Our founders, flawed though some of them were, established a Republic of ideals to ensure that America would strive to realize its unique identity in the world. Notwithstanding these aspirations, some 245 years later, our union appears to be quite thin, our tranquility threatened, and the generality of the welfare vigorously questioned. At the "bank of justice," "America's account is overdrawn," but, in Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's remarkable assessment, "not bankrupt." King could see beyond the evils of his day and loved the American people and its institutions, believing they would one day deliver on the promise of justice. Following King, there is still hope, despite the storms that now threaten the nation.

One American institution that tests the tenacity of our aspirational ideals of freedom, hope, and opportunity is our prison system. More than 650,000 incarcerated men and women emerge each year from the criminal justice system to make a fresh start—to reconnect with their families, to find employment, and to contribute as citizens. They emerge at a vulnerable time in their lives and a tenuous place in our society. Of course, we must take seriously recidivism rates and community safety. But American society owes equal opportunity to those who have served their time behind bars—our founding theory of inherent dignity demands it. If opportunity is not available, particularly to those who are placed at-risk of recidivating, how can it be plausibly imagined for all?

Education is a basic requirement for opportunity, and therefore a need for the incarcerated, whether vocational training or academic, because it is necessary for human flourishing. Where education and training are denied, hope flickers, opportunities fade, and the soul withers. When training and education neglect the formation of character and citizenship, attachment to a community is attenu-

ated, involvement in meaningful activities weakens, commitment to one's stake in the common good falters, and belief in the moral goodness of American ideals becomes implausible. (I borrow these categories from Emile Durkheim and Travis Hirschi.) Therefore, leaders in civil society, public policy, and philanthropy should strive to facilitate opportunities for all to flourish—perhaps most urgently for those in our prisons and jails.

The stories you will read here reveal prodigious perseverance through hardships. The souls whose narratives grace these pages brim with strong attachments, thoughtful involvements, deep commitments, and clear-eyed belief. The common thread in their pursuit of flourishing is education, and with it, vocational and intellectual achievements that have affirmed their dignity and equipped them to contribute to society, as well as to serve as sources of wisdom to those whose experiences may have been similar.

As we read these accounts of hope, we must reflect on how they relate to our common vision of a more perfect union. We must contemplate the culture required to realize our nation's ambitious and seemingly elusive ideals. Those seeing this publication will have spheres of influence that are significant for the common good. We trust that these personal stories will inspire such leaders to better the lives in their spheres and to strengthen our common culture whose vitality makes justice, freedom, and opportunity possible for everyone.

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I next want to thank the 22 authors who contributed so much of their time, talent, and reflections to this report. Each author shares real-world examples of such themes as tragedy, triumph, hope, love, violence, or forgiveness. They articulate the unique role that participation in an education program during incarceration—and the teachers, administrators, counselors, and case workers who manage it—played in her or his reinvention process, be it inside or beyond prison or jail walls. I also offer a special thank you to authors that wrote a story for this report during the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States spends more than \$80 billion annually on corrections at the federal, state and local levels. With approximately 10.6 million people going to jail every year, and 2.3 million men and women sleeping behind bars every night, equaling 1 in 100 adults 18 years of age and older, we are the leader among industrial nations in incarcerations and arrests.¹ Although the ideological origins of the American prison system are older than the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the upward trend in the mass incarceration of adults is a modern phenomenon. In 1973, for example, 204,111 people were incarcerated in state and federal prisons. The number expanded to 1.4 million people in 2019.²

Men account for 92 percent of people in prisons, but the number of women behind bars has skyrocketed from 8,000 in 1970 to 107,955 in 2019.³ Many incarcerated men and women are parents of minors that are months old to age seventeen. Nearly half of the adults in state

prisons—44 percent—lived with their children prior to incarceration, and 52 percent of mothers and 54 percent of fathers were the primary income earner for their household prior to incarceration.⁴ At a macro level, more than 5 million children—or 1 in 14 minors in the United States—have had a parent incarcerated in prison or jail at some point during their lives.⁵ Children in poverty are three times more likely to have experienced the incarceration of a parent than are families with higher incomes, and children in rural areas are more likely to have experienced parental incarceration than children living in metropolitan areas.⁶ At the same time, children of the incarcerated are, on average, six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves,⁷ and 23 percent of children with a father who has served time behind bars have been expelled or suspended from school more often compared to 4 percent of children whose father has not been in prison or jail.⁸

1 Zhen Zeng (March 2020). *Jail Inmates in 2018*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ji18.pdf> [p. 2]; and The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility*. The Pew Charitable Trusts. Washington, D.C. [p. 3], <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/0001/01/01/collateral-costs>.

2 Ann Crayton and Suzanne Rebecca Neusteter (2008). "The Current State of Correctional Education." Paper Prepared for the Reentry Roundtable on Education, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Prisoner Reentry Institute. New York, NY [p. 1]; and E. Ann Carson (October 2020). *Prisoners in 2019*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 1], <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.

3 Byron Bain (2018). "Women Beyond Bars: A Post-Prison Interview with Jennifer Claypool and Wendy Staggs," 25 *UCLA Women's Law Journal* No. 2 [p. 89], <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/11s9x7ws>; and for the number and percent of men in prison, see E. Ann Carson (October 2020). *Prisoners in 2019*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington D.C. [pp. 3-5], <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.

4 The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility*. The Pew Charitable Trusts. Washington, D.C. [p. 21], https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf.

5 Annie E. Casey Foundation (April 2016). *A Shared Sentence: The Devastating Toll of Parental Incarceration on Kids, Families and Communities*. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Baltimore, MD [p. 1], <https://www.aecf.org/resources/a-shared-sentence/>; and David Murphey and P. Mae Cooper (October 2015). *Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children*. Child Trends. Bethesda, MD [pp. 2-5], <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/parents-behind-bars-what-happens-to-their-children>.

6 David Murphey and P. Mae Cooper (October 2015). *Parents Behind Bars: What Happens to Their Children*. Child Trends. Bethesda, MD [p. 4], <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/parents-behind-bars-what-happens-to-their-children>.

7 Eric Martin (March 2017). *Hidden Consequences: The Impact of Incarceration on Dependent Children*. The National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 2], <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250349.pdf>.

8 The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility*. The Pew Charitable Trusts. Washington, D.C. [p. 21], https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf.

As in other aspects of American life, race and gender play out unevenly in our correctional facilities. For instance, blacks account for 32 percent of people locked inside state and federal prisons but constitute only 13 percent of the national population. The imprisonment rate for black men is 2,203 per 100,000 black men in the United States, which is 5.7 times the rate of white men in prison at 385 per 100,000 white men nationwide. At the same time, the effects of incarceration impact white men too. Although 1 in 57 white men between the ages of 20 to 34 is behind bars, 1 in 8 white men in the same age category without a high school diploma or GED is behind bars.⁹

In regard to gender, white women account for the largest single group of incarcerated females at 47 percent. This percentage reveals that women of color are the majority in prisons, although this statistic tells only part of the story. Black women's imprisonment rate is 1.7 times the rate for white women: 83 per 100,000 for black women compared to 48 per 100,000 for white women and 63 per 100,000 for Hispanic women.¹⁰

Once inside a prison, men and women of all races do what they can to survive physically and emotionally because 95 percent of them will return to their communities one day. Tragically, too many of them return to prison after release. This is known as recidivism.¹¹ According to a U.S. Justice Department study that tracked 67,966 formerly incarcerated men and women who were randomly selected to represent 401,288 incarcerated adults released from prison in 2005 in 30 states, five in six were arrested at least one time during the nine years after release. In particular, “[a]n estimated 68% of released prisoners were arrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years.”¹² This is a problem—be it human, economic, social, or moral. Our criminal justice system cannot fix it alone. Solutions-oriented stakeholders interested in the principles of civil society must play a part as well.

So, what can we do?

For more than 50 years, lawmakers on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures, philanthropists, educators, social entrepreneurs, and the formerly incarcerated have turned their attention to correctional education programs as a pathway of choice for

9 E. Ann Carson (October 2020). *Prisoners in 2019*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 16], <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>; and The Pew Charitable Trusts (2010). *Collateral Costs: Incarceration's Effects on Economic Mobility*. The Pew Charitable Trusts. Washington, D.C. [p. 6], https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2010/collateralcosts1.pdf. By comparison, 1 in 27 Hispanic men between the ages of 20 to 34 is behind bars, and 1 in 14 Hispanic men in the same age category without a high school diploma or GED is behind bars. For black men, 1 in 9 between the ages of 20 to 34 is behind bars and 1 in 3 black men in the same age category without a high school diploma or GED is incarcerated [p. 8].

10 E. Ann Carson (October 2020). *Prisoners in 2019*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 16], <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p19.pdf>.

11 How to define and measure recidivism remains a tough issue. Here is a working definition from The Pew Center on the State (April 2011). *State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons*. The Pew Charitable Trust. Washington, D.C. [p. 7], https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pes_assets/2011/pewstateofrecidivism.pdf. “Recidivism is the act of reengaging in criminal offending despite having been punished. The prison recidivism rate—the subject of this report—is the proportion of persons released from prison who are rearrested, reconvicted or returned to custody within a specific time period. Typically, recidivism studies follow released offenders for three years following their release from prison or placement on probation. Offenders are returned to prison for one of two reasons:

1. For committing a new crime that results in a new conviction.
2. For a technical violation of supervision, such as not reporting to their parole or probation officer or failing a drug test.”

12 Mariel Alper, Matthew R. Durose, and Joshua Markman (May 2018). *2018 Update on Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-up Period (2005-2014)*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 1], <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6266>.

self-improvement, to address recidivism, prepare for the workforce, or a combination thereof. These are the four categories for correctional education:

- **Adult Basic Education (ABE):** basic skills instruction in arithmetic, reading, writing, and, if needed, English as a second language (ESL);
- **Adult Secondary Education (ASE):** instruction to complete high school or prepare for a certificate of high school equivalency, such as a General Educational Development (GED) program;
- **Vocational Education or Career and Technical Education (CTE):** training in general employment skills and in skills for specific jobs or industries; and,
- **Postsecondary Education (PSE):** college-level instruction that enables an individual to earn college credit that may be applied toward a two-year or four-year postsecondary degree.¹³

Approximately 84 percent of state correctional facilities in the United States offer some type of education programming. They range from 76 percent of prisons offering secondary or GED programs—the largest of the four program types—to 33 percent offering college courses.¹⁴ Although

pre-college programs make up the bulk of educational offerings inside prisons, the interest in postsecondary education remains ever strong. According to the Institute for Higher Education Policy’s assessment of postsecondary enrollment in 43 states, approximately 71,000 men and women were enrolled in some form of postsecondary education during the 2009-2010 academic year.¹⁵ Could more incarcerated people enroll in higher education programs? The answer is yes. According to a report published by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Georgetown Center on Poverty, 64 percent of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons are academically eligible to enroll in a postsecondary education program.¹⁶

Once people are behind bars, solutions-oriented stakeholders believe enrollment in a correctional education program is essential for three reasons.

For starters, millions of people who have entered our criminal justice system have lower educational and career-readiness skills than the general population.¹⁷ The high school completion rate is an example. A 2016 federal Department of Education report about literacy skills of 18-to-74-year-olds identified two points: 30 percent of people in U.S. prisons did not complete high school compared to 14 percent of the general population; and 25 percent of people in U.S. prisons

13 Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles (2013). *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. The RAND Corporation. Santa Monica, CA [p. 1], https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html.

14 Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles (2013). *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. The RAND Corporation. Santa Monica, CA [p. 4], https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html, referencing James J. Stephan (October 2008). *Census of State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 2005*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/csfcf05.pdf>.

15 Laura E. Gorgol and Brian A. Sponsler (May 2011). *Unlocking Potential: Results of a National Survey of Postsecondary Education in State Prisons*. Institute for Higher Education Policy. Washington, D.C. [pp.10-15], <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521128.pdf>.

16 Patrick Oakford, Laura Tatum, Margaret diZerega, and Fred Patrick (January 2019). *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison*. Vera Institute of Justice. New York, NY [p. 10], <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/investing-in-futures.pdf>.

17 See generally Michelle Tolbert (2012). *A Reentry Education Model Supporting Education and Career Advancement for Low-Skill Individuals in Corrections*. Office of Adult and Vocational Education, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/reentry-model.pdf>.

had come from a household where neither parent had attained a high school diploma.¹⁸ But low-educational attainment for the incarcerated is not a new phenomenon. In 1991, 41 percent of people in local jails and state prisons had not finished the 12th grade.¹⁹ Therefore, we should build the literacy skills of people during incarceration.

Second, research affirms the positive effects of correctional education programs on incarcerated men and women. Researchers at the RAND Corporation conducted the largest analysis of correctional education programs—covering 30 years—and they identified the following:

1. Incarcerated people who participate in correctional education have a 43 percent lower likelihood of returning to prison than peers who did not participate in a program;
2. Incarcerated people who participate in correctional education had 13 percent higher odds of post-release employment than those who had not participated;

3. Incarcerated people who participated in vocational training programs had odds of obtaining post-release employment that were 28 percent higher than individuals who had not participated; and,
4. A \$1 investment in correctional education reduces incarceration costs by \$4 to \$5 during the first three years of post-release.²⁰

Third, researchers have also identified important outcomes from correctional educational beyond academics and recidivism. The promotion of personal agency among those leaving prison,²¹ improvement of in-prison safety for staff,²² and stronger families are a few examples.²³

Nevertheless, correctional education is not without challenges. Meaning, giving adults access to education programs is one thing—having them participate is another. Once behind bars, almost 3 of 5 adults (58 percent) did not further their education.²⁴ A host of factors account for this, including program availability, affordability, or simply a lack of interest by some incarcerated people.²⁵

18 Bobby D. Rampey and Shelley Keiper et al. (November 2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. [pp. 5, 25], <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

19 Caroline Wolf Harlow (2003). *Education and Correctional Populations*. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. [p. 1], <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=814>.

20 Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles (2013). *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults*. The RAND Corporation. Santa Monica, CA [pp. 57-59], https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR266.html; and see generally Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Lois M. Davis, and Susan Turner (2018). "Does Providing Inmates with Education Improve Postrelease Outcomes? A Meta-Analysis of Correctional Education Programs in the United States," *14 Journal of Experimental Criminology* No. 3 [pp. 389-428], https://www.rand.org/pubs/external_publications/EP67650.html.

21 See generally Brent Orrell (ed.). (2020). *Rethinking Reentry: Strengthening Programs and Promoting Personal Agency Among Returning Citizens*. The American Enterprise Institute. Washington, D.C. <https://www.aei.org/events/rethinking-reentry-strengthening-programs-and-promoting-personal-agency-among-returning-citizens/>.

22 See generally Amanda Pompoco, John Wooldredge, Melissa Lugo, Carrie Sullivan, and Edward J. Latessa (2017). "Reducing Inmate Misconduct and Prison Returns with Facility Education Programs." *16 Criminology & Public Policy* No. 2 [pp. 515-547].

23 The Vera Institute of Justice (January 2017). *Fact Sheet: Expanding Access to Postsecondary Education in Prison* [p. 1], <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/vera/postsecondary-education-in-prisonfactsheet-for-corrections-leaders.pdf>.

24 Bobby D. Rampey and Shelley Keiper et al. (November 2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. [p. 24], <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

25 Through my conversations with current and formerly incarcerated people, I have learned that some of their peers were not interested in enrollment in any education program regardless of access or affordability. This is not the case for everyone.

For those that pursued an education during incarceration:

- 2 percent completed an associate degree;
- 4 percent completed pre-associate education;
- 7 percent completed a certificate from a college or trade school;
- 8 percent completed grades 7-9, and;
- 21 percent completed a GED or high school diploma.²⁶

Even though only 1 in 5 completed a post-high school program, two-thirds of incarcerated adults when asked to list their top academic programs for enrollment identified a certificate, associate, bachelor's, or master's degree program.²⁷

Correctional education is also not without critical friends. Some researchers and criminal justice advocates believe correctional education is important, although they question the rigor of in-prison academic or vocational programs, the methodological instruments used to evaluate their effectiveness, or researchers' claims about a program's impact on recidivism and long-term earnings for

participants.²⁸ These critiques are worthy of our attention. So is one researcher's innovative approach to address legitimate questions about the fidelity of existing evaluation models for reentry programs.²⁹

Yet, despite growing support for a diverse ecosystem of criminal justice reforms supported by Democratic and Republican governors and mayors, voters, and lawmakers on Capitol Hill as evidenced by the recent repeal of the 26-year ban on Pell Grants for the incarcerated as part of a \$1.4 trillion omnibus bill approved in 2020, educating adults in prison remains one of the most contested ideological ideas in criminal justice policy today.

Why?

Because the big question at the center of this 234-year-old debate about crime and punishment in America is this: Are prisons designed for punishment, rehabilitation, or a combination thereof?

The answer to this question is tricky. Partially because the evolution of American prisons between 1789 and 1965 is a tale of mixed messages that swirl in the winds of a swinging pendulum whose gravitational pull is dictated by fear and freedom. At one point punishment was the sole goal of im-

The PIAAC report identified that 70 percent of people in prison expressed an interest to enroll in an academic program. Bobby D. Rampey and Shelley Keiper et al. (November 2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. [p. 27], <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

26 Bobby D. Rampey and Shelley Keiper et al. (November 2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. [p. 24], <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

27 Bobby D. Rampey and Shelley Keiper et al. (November 2016). *Highlights from the U.S. PIAAC Survey of Incarcerated Adults: Their Skills, Work Experience, Education, and Training*. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C. [p. 28], <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016040.pdf>.

28 See generally Jennifer L. Doleac (June 23, 2018). "Strategies to Productively Reincorporate the Formerly-Incarcerated into Communities: A Review of the Literature." jenniferdoleac.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Doleac_Reentry_Review.pdf; The Council of Economic Advisors (May 2018). *Returns on Investments in Recidivism-Reducing Programs*. The Executive Office of the President. Washington, D.C. <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=811088>; and David B. Muhlhausen and Hugh J. Hurwitz (October 2019). *First Step Act: Best Practices for Academic and Vocational Education for Offenders*. The National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, D.C. <https://nij.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh171/files/media/document/253056.pdf>.

29 For a review of the benefits and challenges associated with existing evaluation models, and to learn about a "platinum standard evaluation model" to assess reentry programs, see Nancy La Vigne (2019). "Reentry Programs, Evaluation Methods, and the Importance of Fidelity," in Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English Smith (eds.). *Education for Liberation: The Politics of Promise and Reform Inside and Beyond America's Prisons*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

prisonment. Another time reforming the prison took precedent over rehabilitation of the prisoner. When rehabilitation of the prisoner did emerge as vogue, the role of in-prison education was of minimal importance until the turn of the twentieth century. With the growth of prisons across the country, and changes in convict leasing laws, the constitutionality of providing an education inside prisons was challenged in federal and state courts before and after World War II.³⁰

Each executive, legislative, and judicial action influenced the pendulum swing between punishment and rehabilitation.

By the 1960s, prison reform was swept into a broader vortex of the Civil Rights Movement where K-12 and higher education for all was a driving force. Prison education benefited from this movement because an underlying ethos for reforming society was to reform its institutions. Correctional institutions were no exception. With this came a legislative and judicial pendulum swing in favor of the rehabilitative ideal. Examples include the following: enactment of *The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964*, which provided federal funds to state and local governments to support adult ba-

sic education programs to address illiteracy in the general population for people 18 years of age and older; *The Higher Education Act of 1965*, which allowed incarcerated people to use federal aid to pay for education under Title IV; *The Adult Education Act of 1966*, which laid a foundation for federal involvement in prison education; and a string of federal court decisions that reimagined the use of the Eighth Amendment's "cruel and unusual punishment" phrase to link correctional education to rehabilitation.³¹

By the 1970s, however, the pendulum swung back toward punishment—or at least away from an expansive rehabilitative ideal. This worked to undermine prison reform in general, which impacted correctional education as well. Causes of the pendulum swing away from rehabilitation include, but are not exclusive to, a downturn in the national economy, loss of jobs, urban riots, a rise in conservatism among Democrats and Republicans alike, a backlash against the Civil Rights Movement, "War on Drug" efforts, and a "Nothing Works" doctrine.³²

During the "tough on crime" era of the 1980s and 1990s the pendulum continued to swing in the

30 For a history of prisons in America, see generally David J. Rothman (1995). "Perfecting the Prison: United States, 1789-1865," in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press [pp. 111-129]; Edgardo Rotman (1995). "The Failure of Reform: United States, 1865-1965," in Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press [pp. 169-197]; Negley King Teeters (1955). *The Cradle of the Penitentiary: The Walnut Street Jail at Philadelphia, 1773-1835*. Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania Prison Society; and Richard J. Coley and Paul E. Barton (2006). *Locked Up and Locked Out: An Educational Perspective on the U.S. Prison Population*. Educational Testing Services. Princeton, NJ, <https://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PIC-LOCKEDUP.pdf>. To learn about the history of college programs inside American prisons, see Max Kenner (2019). "The Long History of College in Prison," in Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English Smith (eds.), *Education for Liberation: The Politics of Promise and Reform Inside and Beyond America's Prisons*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

31 *The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964* (P.L. 88-452); *The Higher Education Act of 1965* (P.L. 89-329); and *The Adult Education Act of 1966* (P.L. 89-750). For a review of legal wins and losses in the battle to get education programs inside prisons, see Ames C. Grawert (2019). "The Legal Case for Education in Prison," in Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English Smith (eds.), *Education for Liberation: The Politics of Promise and Reform Inside and Beyond America's Prisons*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

32 For "nothing works" see generally Robert Martinson (1974). "What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform." *The National Review*, https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/what-works-questions-and-answers-about-prison-reform; and Robert Martinson (1979). "New Findings, New Views: A Note of Caution Regarding Sentencing Reform." 7 *Hofstra Law Review* [pp. 243-258], <https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1230&-context=hlr>. For a counter view of "nothing works" see Francis T. Cullen (2005). "The Twelve People Who Saved Rehabilitation: How the Science of Criminology Made a Difference." 43 *Criminology* No. 1 [pp. 1-42], https://www.d.umn.edu/~jmaahs/Correctional%20Assessment/Articles/cullen_12people%20who%20saved%20rehab.pdf.

direction of punishment and away from certain education programs for the incarcerated. Why? Giving incarcerated people a “free college education” was (and for some still is) an anathema to the hardworking free-world people who paid their own way through college or took out loans to do so for their children. They believed taxpayer dollars should not be “wasted” on educating adults who committed a violent crime, sold drugs to children, or victimized property. Those crimes disqualified prisoners from this educational benefit. This belief resulted in bipartisan support for the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994*. President Bill Clinton signed it and all incarcerated people lost access to Pell Grants to pay for postsecondary education.³³ Some governors and state lawmakers made similar changes to their financial aid eligibility guidelines.³⁴ Concurrently, the “tough on crime” theme also impacted welfare through the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996*, which disqualified lower-income people—mostly women with children—from benefits if they had a criminal record.³⁵ When lower-income families’ and mothers’ social benefits are impacted it will affect the educational well-being of their children at some point.

Through it all, federal and state lawmakers, and judges, did not abolish incarcerated people’s

access to all correctional education programs during the “tough on crime” era that continued into the early 2000s. Federal and state prisons continued offering GED programs, workforce training courses, and certificate programs to prepare people for reentry and to address recidivism. From a legislative standpoint, the *Second Chance Act of 2007* signed by President George W. Bush provided federal funding for education, workforce training, transitional housing, and job placement programs inside prisons, jails, and juvenile facilities.³⁶

More than a decade later, President Barack Obama created the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative. Since 2016, the federal Department of Education has approved 130 colleges and universities in 42 states and the District of Columbia to offer postsecondary degrees and certificates to incarcerated students through this initiative.³⁷ A snapshot of the first three years provided by the Vera Institute of Justice identified that at least 17,000 people have enrolled in Second Chance Pell colleges, and students have earned more than 4,500 certificates, postsecondary diplomas, associate degrees, and bachelor’s degrees.³⁸ In 2018, President Donald Trump signed the *First Step Act of 2018* that calls for increased funding for vocational and rehabilitative programs to create greater access to education

33 *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994* (P.L. 103-322).

34 See generally Lauren Hobby, Brian Walsh, and Ruth Delaney (July 2019). *A Piece of the Puzzle: State Financial Aid for Incarcerated Students*. Vera Institute of Justice. New York, NY, <https://www.vera.org/publications/a-piece-of-the-puzzle-state-financial-aid-for-incarcerated-students>; and Bradley Custer (2019). *The Disenfranchisement of Justice-Involved College Students from State Financial Aid*. Dissertation, Michigan State University. East Lansing, MI.

35 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996* (P.L. 104-193). Rebecca Vallas, Melissa Boteach, Rachel West, and Jackie Odum (December 2015). *Removing Barriers to Opportunity for Parents with Criminal Records and Their Children: A Two-Generation Approach*. The Center for American Progress. Washington, D.C. [pp. 3-4], <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/09060720/CriminalRecords-report2.pdf>.

36 *Second Chance Act of 2007* (P.L. 110-199).

37 Press Release from the U.S. Department of Education (April 24, 2020). “Secretary DeVos Expands Second Chance Pell Experiment, More than Doubling Opportunities for Incarcerated Students to Gain Job Skills and Earn Postsecondary Credentials.” U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C. <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-expands-innovation-higher-education-through-experimental-sites-initiative>.

38 Vera Institute of Justice (April 2020). *Second Chance Pell: A Snapshot of the First Three Years*. The Vera Institute of Justice. New York, NY [p. 1], <https://www.vera.org/publications/second-chance-pell-snapshot>.

for incarcerated people seeking to prepare for success following their release.³⁹

During the past several years, the pendulum swung from punishment to rehabilitation. A host of socioeconomic factors coalesced to make education inside a prison a priority at the state and federal levels. Here are six:

First, current and formerly incarcerated people play an important role in making their case for education programs. Syrita Steib, founder of Operation Restoration in New Orleans, Stanley Andrisse, Howard University professor and the executive director of From Prison Cells to PhD, Kevin Ring, president of Families Against Mandatory Minimums, Vivian Nixon, the executive director of College & Community Fellowship, Terrell Blount, operational director of the Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network, and Mary Heinen, program coordinator and co-founder of the prison creative arts project, provide a few examples.⁴⁰

Second, the winner-loser narrative shifted on Capitol Hill. In 2015, for example, Representatives Chris Collins (R-NY), Doug LaMalfa, (R-CA), and Tom Reed (R-CA) sponsored the *Kids Before Cons Act*. The legislation would have banned the federal Department of Education from providing Pell

Grants to prisoners. The bill was written, in part, in response to the *Restoring Education and Learning Act of 2015* sponsored by Representative Donna Edwards (D-MD) which would have lifted the Pell Grant ban from 1994. Neither bill made any headway through the legislative process, but each highlighted that an ideological divide about Pell Grants for incarcerated students remained wide.⁴¹

Fast forward to 2019 when a more conciliatory, bipartisan narrative was in place. For example, Senators Brian Schatz (D-HI), Mike Lee (R-UT), and Dick Durbin (D-IL) introduced the *Restoring Education and Learning Act*, also known as the REAL Act. This bill would have restored Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students. The list of endorsers is broad and deep, and cuts across ideological, party, and racial lines in ways few criminal justice bills have in a long time.⁴²

Third, the Business Roundtable, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Correctional Leaders Association, and the National District Attorneys Association played a critical role in supporting Pell Grants for incarcerated students through the REAL Act. This coalition signaled that educating incarcerated men and women was good for business and would be supported without sacrificing public safety along the way.⁴³

39 *The First Step Act of 2018* (P.L. 115-391).

40 Syrita Steib, <https://www.or-nola.org/team/syritasteib>; Stanley Andrisse, <https://www.fromprisoncellstophd.org/about-the-director.html>; Kevin Ring, <https://famm.org/about-us/staff-board/kevin-ring-president/>; Vivian Nixon, <https://www.collegeandcommunity.org/vivian-nixon>; Terrel A. Blount, <http://www.ficgn.org/leadership.html>; and Mary Heinen, <https://lsa.umich.edu/rc/people/administration-staff/mary-heinen.html>.

41 Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English (October 18, 2016). "Give Prisoners A Second Chance: Pell Grants for Prisoners Reduce Crime, Save Taxpayer Dollars, and Prevent Recidivism." *U.S. News & World Report*, <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/knowledge-bank/articles/2016-10-18/pell-grants-are-a-good-investment-for-prisoners-and-taxpayers>. *Kids Before Cons Act of 2015*: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/3327>. *Restoring Education and Learning Act of 2015*: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-bill/2521>.

42 Press Release from the Office of Senator Brian Schatz (April 9, 2019): "Schatz, Lee, Durbin Introduce Bipartisan Legislation to Restore Educational Opportunities for Those Incarcerated and Improve Public Safety." https://www.schatz.senate.gov/press-releases/schatz-lee-durbin-introduce-bipartisan-legislation-to-restore-educational-opportunities-for-those-incarcerated-and-improve-public-safety?fbclid=IwAR3RGMes3-thVUcyrWaU3GfXMT2bhqz-wpa6OcX_ikL3_4IUNMIXcUS2GQ.

43 Andrew Kreighbaum (March 2, 2020). "Prison Pell Grants Get Big Support from Big Business, Prosecutors." *Bloomberg Government*, <https://about.bgov.com/news/prison-pell-grants-get-support-from-big-business-prosecutors/>. On a similar note, the Society for Human Resource Management and Koch Industries launched a "Getting Talent Back to Work" initiative to urge employers to consider applicants with a criminal record, <https://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/news-about-shrm/pages/shrm-urges-employers-to-consider-applicants-with-criminal-histories.aspx>.

Fourth, faith-based communities have supported education as essential for criminal justice reform. For example, Prison Fellowship launched “Second Chance Month” in April 2017 to raise awareness about helping people with a criminal record create a new pathway forward. Education is part of this campaign. The United States Senate unanimously passed a resolution declaring April 2017 “Second Chance Month”—and has issued a resolution each year since. As a result of Prison Fellowship’s work, hundreds of faith-based and secular organizations have hosted events in cities around the country to shine a light on the redemptive power of second chances for the formerly incarcerated, their families, and their communities.⁴⁴ Prison Fellowship’s advocacy on Capitol Hill also played a key role in building up bipartisan support for higher education behind bars through Pell restoration.

Fifth, conservatives play a visible role in criminal justice reform. In conjunction with Prison Fellowship, three national organizations—the American Conservative Union, FreedomWorks, and R Street—co-authored “Myth Busters: Pell Grant Eligibility for Incarcerated Students.” These organizations make a compelling case for why conservatives back this initiative and base part of their rationale on four important concepts about in-prison education:

1. Prisoners have the capacity to become productive workers and engaged citizens;

2. In-prison education makes prisons safer and reduces risks for corrections staff and incarcerated men and women;
3. When incarcerated individuals are provided with education and training in prison, they become less likely to re-offend when they are released; and,
4. The reduced recidivism translates into increased public safety and reduced corrections costs—the savings of which can be used toward effective strategies to reduce violent crime.⁴⁵

The American Enterprise Institute is another visible stakeholder in criminal justice reform.⁴⁶ So are the Charles Koch Foundation, the Charles Koch Institute, and the Stand Together Network.⁴⁷

Sixth, meetings between formerly incarcerated students, corrections officials, college administrators, and an elected official on Capitol Hill who has a Second Chance Pell site in his or her congressional district bridged the gap between theory and practice. These stakeholders explained how the program worked, the impact it had on prisons in his or her home state, and the difference it made to families. A number of congressional members and their staff were moved by what they learned.

With all of this said, where do I stand on the issue?

44 Prison Fellowship (2017). “U.S. Senate Declares April Second Chance Month.” <https://www.prisonfellowship.org/2017/04/u-s-senate-declares-april-second-chance-month/>.

45 MythBusters: Pell Grant Eligibility for Incarcerated Students. https://www.prisonfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/PellforIncarceratedStudents_MythBusters_Nov18_v10.pdf.

46 See generally Grant Duwe (2018). *The Effectiveness of Education and Employment Programming for Prisoners*. The American Enterprise Institute. Washington, D.C., <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-effectiveness-of-education-and-employment-programming-for-prisoners/>; Daniel Shoag and Stan Veuger (2019). “The Economics of Prison Reentry,” in Gerard Robinson and Elizabeth English Smith (eds.), *Education for Liberation: The Politics of Promise and Reform Inside and Beyond America’s Prisons*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; Brent Orrell (2019) “Improving Prisoner Reentry” in AEI’s Viewpoint Series; and Naomi Schaefer Riley (Winter 2021). “On Prison Nurseries.” *National Affairs*, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/on-prison-nurseries>.

47 The Charles Koch Foundation and the Charles Koch Institute influence criminal justice reform through investments in research and polling. The publication of *The State of Opportunity in America* report in 2018, 2019, and 2020 through their partnership with the Center for Advancing Opportunity is one example: <https://advancingopportunity.org/the-state-of-opportunity-in-america-reports/>. The Stand Together Network influences criminal justice reform through investments in entrepreneurial leaders and organizations: <https://standtogether.org>.

I believe education should be an integral part of any rehabilitation plan for adults in prisons and jails. My first foray into seeing the rehabilitation benefits of education occurred when I was a Howard University undergraduate volunteer working with justice-involved youth in a program sponsored by the D.C. Superior Court in the late 1980s. Later I supported education programs for incarcerated adults. From that point forward my professional work in education, public policy, and research continuously reaffirms my support of education programs for incarcerated people. At the same time, I also understand challenges and shortcomings associated with education inside jails and prisons. Examples include lack of access to educational technology and research databases, space to conduct classes, accountability standards, and an inconsistent stream of government and philanthropic funding. These challenges also exist for free-world students, but are compounded for those incarcerated. Nevertheless, I remain optimistic about the future of education for incarcerated students, and I expect federal, state, and local stakeholders who support it to continue to address issues of quality that are in the best interest of the student.

My support for correctional education is only one story—and certainly not the most important. When I want to truly understand the impact and importance of correctional education programs beyond my personal and professional experiences (or biases), I seek to learn from people who know this subject better than me. This is one factor underlying the rationale behind the publication of this report.

This report includes 22 stories written by men and women who enrolled in a correctional education program during incarceration at some point between 1992 and 2020. Most of the au-

thors enrolled in prison-based education programs, but a few did so in a jail. Ninety percent of them received their education through direct in-person instruction from a correctional employee, a teacher, a college professor, a volunteer, a paid trade professional, or a combination thereof. Ten percent received instruction online. Some authors are parents. Others are married, single, or divorced. The majority of the authors are out of prison now.

Here is a demographic snapshot of the 22 authors:

- 11 are men;
- 11 are women;
- 41 percent arrived at prison or jail without a high school diploma or GED;
- 59 percent arrived at prison or jail with a high school diploma or GED;
- 45 percent used a Pell Grant to pay for vocational and postsecondary courses during incarceration, including two students that used a Pell Grant to pay for courses prior to the ban in 1994;
- 55 percent used public, personal, and/or philanthropic funds to pay for education courses;
- 64 percent of authors are people of color; and
- 99 percent of authors benefited directly from enrollment in an education program; however, one writer encouraged others to do so while in prison, which sparked his interest to pursue higher education once he left prison.⁴⁸

For privacy and security reasons each author's name is omitted from each story and from the ta-

48 The terms Second Chance Pell Grant Program, Second Chance Pell, the Pell program, or something similar appear throughout the report. Each term refers to the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Initiative created by the Obama Administration in 2015, and administered through the U.S. Department of Education. To learn more about the initiative read the following: <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/12000-incarcerated-students-enroll-postsecondary-educational-and-training-programs-through-education-departments-new-second-chance-pell-pilot-program>; <https://www.vera.org/publications/second-chance-pell-snapshot>; and <https://blog.ed.gov/2019/04/answering-frequently-asked-questions-second-chance-pell/>.

ble of contents.⁴⁹ A quote from each author’s essay serves as the title. Also, please be aware that some authors use a word or two, or a phrase, that may be offensive to some readers. I kept them in the essay out of respect to each author’s voice and authentic storytelling.⁵⁰

—**Gerard Robinson, Editor**

Vice President for Education at the Advanced Studies in Culture Foundation, and Fellow of Practice at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia

Stories

1. “Learning in prison comes with its own set of obstacles.”

In my mind, I was always going to be a “street nigga.” I never pictured myself being successful because I had never seen success. My words are not intended to bring pity or sympathy, but simply to paint a picture so that you can see how education inside prison changed my life. The journey to getting an education in the first place was not easy.

I was born and raised in the poverty-stricken streets of Richmond, Virginia. I was raised by a single mom in the ghetto or “hood” as it is called. No father figure or positive male role model was in sight. I never left Virginia. I never had a vacation because I had no one willing to take me. The streets consumed me—and ultimately shaped who I was at one point in my life.

At the time, I felt as though I would never amount to anything. I dropped out of school at the beginning of 11th grade because I felt education was not important. Although I have a strong mom who did

the best she could, it was hard to work all day and raise a boy in this type of environment. I wanted nice things my mom couldn’t afford, or even consider buying. So, I looked to those I thought were my role models and learned how to sell drugs. I felt as though that was the best way to make money.

Drugs and violence were preferred ways of life for me. Eventually, I became addicted to drugs. Then I ended up in a Virginia prison.

When I arrived at the Haynesville Correctional Center in October 2015, I spent most of my time playing cards and gambling. Nothing educational. I had no real direction for my life. Then one day I learned about a college-in-prison program sponsored by Rappahannock Community College (RCC) from some friends incarcerated with me. This was my third time being incarcerated for the same offense. The previous times, I did nothing with my time. With the encouragement of friends

49 I am aware an author might be identifiable by his or her current job, or work in the criminal justice reform field in general. Another author might be identifiable by his or her academic work. Even if an author is not identifiable, an author might decide to willingly identify himself or herself as author of a particular story.

50 For example, “nigga” appears in stories one and ten.

and my mom, I decided to give the program a shot. I completed my General Educational Development (GED) program prior to going to prison, so I at least had that going for me.

When I enrolled in college inside a prison, I didn't know what to expect. I had been in and out of prison since I was a juvenile. Not once did I take advantage of any program that could help me because I didn't believe in myself. I was exhausted by continually coming to prison, and also intimidated by the idea of college. I decided to try anyway.

Many might think that college behind the wall should be a piece of cake. "They have nothing but time" or "They have nothing better to do." That's so far from the truth. Learning in prison comes with its own set of obstacles. Living in an open dormitory is noisy, making it hard to focus and study. You are surrounded by negativity and past vices that may have taken you to prison in the first place. Drugs and violence are two examples. Study hall time in the library is once a week. Not nearly enough time to study, but you must make it work.

Just the basic courses taught me things that as a grown man I was supposed to know but never learned. This new knowledge of life and the world lit a fire in me that I never before had experienced. I sat in the front of class for the first time in my life. I raised my hand so much that my classmates were irritated, but it didn't bother me because I no longer felt inferior. The more I learned, the harder I worked. Education built within me a new confidence. For once in my life, I actually felt like I could be somebody in this world. I now started to dream and wonder how far I could really go with this.

I'm no longer ignorant to the world because of what I learned while going to RCC inside a prison. For example, *economics* taught me about money and banking. I opened my first bank account after being released. Thanks to *African American Literature*, I read and learned about strong black people like Harriet Jacobs and Marcus Garvey. *Statistical Reasoning* taught me how to analyze

data as a whole and not just accept what someone showed me. No longer will I be tricked or finessed into believing false statements or misleading advertisements. *Religions of the World* showed me that there are so many different ways of life and not just one that you must live by. Last but not least, *World History* highlighted the evolution of this world and the advancements of our past.

I am proud to say I graduated with a 4.0 GPA and earned an associate of arts degree from RCC while incarcerated. Let that sink in. Because RCC is one of the original 67 postsecondary institutions selected by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Program in 2016, I enrolled in courses with financial help from the Pell Grant. Without it, I doubt I could have enrolled in any classes.

Fast forward to my life now. I was released from prison in 2020 after spending seven years behind bars. I have a mindset that I never had before, thanks to education. My childhood environment and the people in it had made me feel as though I couldn't achieve anything. The odds were stacked against me, but I overcame them. When I look at my life as a whole, I realize that the past brought me here, but the choices I've made in the present have helped me evolve into a person with a bright future.

What does this future look like? I recently moved to Atlanta, Georgia to enroll in my dream school—Morehouse College. My goal is to become a sports journalist.

In closing, I want others to know it is not your past that defines you, but what you do from this point forward. I can truly say that my enrollment in RCC while in prison is one of the best decisions I have ever made.

2. “During my incarceration, I also became an educational entrepreneur.”

In 2001, I was sentenced to 55 years in prison. That is a grim outlook regardless, but if that time is spent sedentary, a person becomes hopeless and helpless. I’d never endured a place so laden with violence and trauma (especially since I already had a trauma disorder when I arrived) without having something positive and productive to do with my time. Fortunately, education became my focus, my drive, and my passion. It was my life, and my life revolved around it. It made the unbearable, bearable.

Although I arrived at prison with some college credits, going to college while in prison gave my life purpose and meaning.

As I sit and reflect on my experiences in higher education while incarcerated and the benefits derived from it, I am struck by the myriad changes that occurred throughout that experience beyond the norm of what others may presume them to be.

For me, enrolling in college inside a prison between 2003 and 2006 became my catalyst for self-healing and recovery. I am a trauma survivor. The system had failed me in this regard at every level. I was bound and determined to understand how and why I had the problems I had, and what to do about them. With the help and support of several volunteer college professors, I found those answers. My real help and growth came through those outside educators who truly cared and were invested in me and my education. College helped me achieve wellness in mind, body, and spirit.

It is important to note that any and all help I received in prison never came from any prison official, or the prison system itself. Any programming I received (including attending college), I had to fight to receive. My family was able to help pay for me to complete my college degree.

Once I began finding answers for myself, I not only realized I had received improper diagnoses by the system, but I had also been improperly medicated (nearly fatally). I found ways to heal and recover holistically, without the need for any pharmaceuticals. I discontinued all medications and achieved wellness on my own. I have been medication-free since 2007, something I was once told would be an “impossibility” for someone with my “disorders.” In reality, I was being medicated for problems I didn’t actually have, and those medications actually caused and exacerbated problems.

Without that college education, I would have either died or remained drugged out and incapable of normal functioning, possibly indefinitely. I had no “time” to get in trouble when I was constantly in class, studying, writing papers, or working on projects. My studies occupied my time in a way that made the time actually matter. The time meant something to me, and it meant something to others. I would gain far more than several degrees. I gained insight, knowledge, and experience. Things I will always have that cannot be taken away from me.

A life transformation occurred between 2003 and 2006 when I completed coursework to earn my associate and bachelor’s degrees. Through my life transformation, I learned to help myself, while I also learned to help other people.

With wellness and education, I became a peer facilitator, teaching assistant, mentor, and instructor in multiple areas. I was able to further change my environment through the work I was doing with others by advocating for people (especially those who were unable, for whatever reason, to do so for themselves), and fighting for additional programming (educational and otherwise).

During my incarceration, I also became an educational entrepreneur. Why? I witnessed the dev-

astation women in my prison experienced once their access to college was taken away by lack of funding. Some of those women had to stop classes right in the middle of their semester. Years after college was defunded and the opportunity I had was discontinued, I and several others inside higher education, became involved in what started out as a “voluntary” higher education program. Part of that program was the history project through which we set out to research and write about the very institution where we were incarcerated. What happened was unexpected and has not only changed our lives, it also has changed how others view the history of our women’s prison.

Our discoveries led to us presenting our work at academic conferences across the country (via Skype), publishing articles, and being interviewed for magazines and podcasts—*while still inside prison*. We had minimal access to technology and no access at all to the internet. The majority of our research was done the old-fashioned way: reading books from the library, relying on outside sources to provide us with research materials, and

writing papers by hand. We have won awards for our work and gained national recognition for our scholarship. In fact, our collective work is under contract with The New Press for publication in a book that is scheduled for release in 2022. Our working book title is *The History of Women’s Carceral Institutions in Indiana*. We have now made history while rewriting history.

Higher education during incarceration became the gateway to my life outside of it. My academic record, along with the network of people with whom I had worked over the years I served inside prison, led to my admission into graduate school after my release in 2019. In fact, my acceptance into a graduate program in Indiana helped expedite my release from prison.

Today, I am enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Ethnic Studies at the University of California-Riverside. Higher education in prison was life-changing for me and countless others. It is worth investing in, and fighting for, all incarcerated people who want to pursue an education.

3. “I served 28.25 years of a life sentence, with little or no chance of release.”

In 1990, I was incarcerated at the age of 21 and given a life sentence by a state judge in Richmond, Virginia. I began my sentence in the Greenville Correctional Center. Early on, I was mad at the world and blamed everyone except myself for my predicament. Education was the furthest thing from my mind. I had gotten a General Educational Development (GED) diploma when I was 17 and I thought I was done with my education when I received it.

I was fortunate to have a positive influence in my life that encouraged me to further my education. At the time, Pell Grants were offered to prisoners.

I started taking education 101 classes and did well, although pursuing a college degree was not my intention. The crazy thing is that I realized that I like to learn—something I wish I had realized earlier in life. Unfortunately, the Pell Grants were phased out in 1995, and I had to switch courses and take vocational classes. I did this on the off chance that I “might” be released someday. Unfortunately, I could no longer pursue vocational classes either because of state or prison budget cuts.

With no formal education program to keep my attention, I spent a lot of time reading this and

that, even a Spanish dictionary, trying to learn the language. Then I heard of the Resilience Education program offered through the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. The goal of the program is to offer inmates classes in business and entrepreneurship to help us transition back into society by obtaining skills.

It sounded wonderful. The problem, however, was that I did not meet the requirement of being within three years of my mandatory release date. I had no mandatory release date because I was a lifer. I kept asking everybody—the prison leaders and the Resilience professors too—to admit me into the program, hoping to gently wear them down. I kept receiving a “no.”

With a lack of something constructive to do, I devoted a lot of time and energy into working on a proposal. The basis of my proposal is, and was then, inmates building houses on the inside for displaced people and families in need. I used a lot of postage stamps sending that proposal to anyone I thought might spearhead it. I always tried to make the proposal better. I decided to see if I could get the Darden program instructors and MBA students to offer me some feedback on the proposal. They gave me positive feedback, and I like to think that they were a little impressed with my desire to make that proposal happen (a desire I still have).

Eventually, Drs. Greg and Tierney Fairchild—co-founders of the Resilience Education program—*changed* the rule that required inmates to be within three years of their mandatory release date, which allowed me to take their classes. This decision opened the door for me, and others like me.

I jumped at the chance to enroll. Once in the courses, I learned about banks, loans, and credit. For someone who never had any banking experience before, and would have probably never even opened an account or gotten a credit card, this was huge. They used a Socratic method of teaching—classes were centered on discussion rather than just lectures. This was a whole new way to absorb and discuss information. It was engaging in a way I had never experienced. I completed all three of the

Darden certificate courses, learning entrepreneurship, business basics, and financial literacy.

To say this Darden program had an impact on me is an understatement. Education was my saving grace and the path that led to my very improbable freedom.

I served 28.25 years of a life sentence, with little or no chance of release. I had come up for parole 12 times before. A number of things worked in my favor over the years that led to my release from prison in 2018. I entered the Darden program to get an education, period. At the same time, I believe the practical education I received from the Resilience program, plus all the other things I had done over the years to improve myself, played a role in my release from prison and preparation to start a new life.

When I got out of prison in 2018, I put what I learned in the business courses to work. I started with a credit-builders credit card, and I have built up a credit score of 766. I even recently bought a vehicle on my own with no co-signer. This is my second new truck in less than three years, though I had a co-signer for my first one. With continued support from the Resilience Education faculty and MBA students, along with my family and trusted friends, I have built an incredible life in the less than three years I have been out of prison.

During my nearly three decades in prison, education is what kept me hopeful and positive. It occupied my mind in such a way that I learned to think linearly and to see the big picture and all the possibilities. This always helped in choosing the best possible paths and making the best choices for my future. I hope to pay it forward in order to help those on the inside and those who are returning to society, which is why I am sharing my story. I pray that it is inspiring, that it leads to real change in someone's life, and that it allows for individuals to deal with the issues that led them to poor decisions and incarceration.

More importantly, I was able to take responsibility for my life, my actions, and for being where I was. Now, I strive to further my education and, at 52, even aspire to return to school.

4. “Out of four children, I was the only one who dropped out of high school.”

I’ve made a lot of bad choices in my life. As a result of those choices, I was arrested in 2015. My incarceration lasted a total of five and a half years. It was definitely a horrible situation, but I was determined to make something positive come out of that bad experience. I wanted to use the time wisely and be productive, and more than anything, I wanted to better myself.

At the age of 16, when I was in 10th grade, I dropped out of high school. I never received my high school diploma, so the very first goal I set for myself when I arrived at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women was to get my High School Equivalency Test/General Educational Development (HiSET/GED) diploma. To accomplish this goal, I first had to take the Test for Adult Basic Education. To my surprise, I scored a 12.9 and was immediately placed in the high school equivalency class to begin working to obtain my diploma.

Having to focus on school while being incarcerated was a difficult task. The environment in which I had to learn and live made it hard to focus at times. The stress of being incarcerated was also overwhelming. Yet, I was able to manage and balance it all. I had the support of teachers and fellow students. I passed my HiSET/GED on the first try. I always seem to doubt myself and what I’m capable of doing. So I was in total shock and disbelief when I received the results. I couldn’t believe that after all of these years I had finally received my diploma.

Out of four children, I was the only one who dropped out of high school and who didn’t earn a diploma. I couldn’t wait to tell my parents the news. They were so excited and proud of me. It made me feel so good about myself. I had always procrastinated and put off my education to do other things, but I finally achieved my goal in prison.

It gave me confidence that I had never had before, and it motivated me to strive for more.

After I obtained my GED, I had difficulty getting into vocational school because my release date was so far away. Instead, I began participating in other programs that were available, such as anger management, parenting, substance abuse, and some faith-based programs as well.

Then in the spring of 2018, I received an invitation to attend a meeting about a college-in-prison program for women with longer sentences. The School of Professional Advancement at Tulane University, and Operation Restoration, a New Orleans nonprofit that supports women and girls impacted by incarceration to recognize their full potential, restore their lives, and discover new possibilities. Approximately 20 women had been chosen to attend, and I was honored to be one of them. Tulane University is very prestigious, so of course I had heard of it, but I never thought I would have the opportunity to enroll. I was beyond ecstatic, and so grateful, to be chosen for this program. When I told my family, they were so happy that so many good things were happening for me.

I’ve been taking college courses for three years now, and it has been a wonderful and challenging experience. These classes have helped me to become a better person. They’ve helped me to believe in myself and have kept me grounded and on the right path—away from trouble and from doing the wrong things. This experience has shown me that I have the potential to be a better person than I was before my incarceration.

Although I regret the bad decisions that led to my incarceration, I am grateful for the access to education I received while in prison. Receiving an education has given me a lot of resources and help that is enabling me to achieve things that I never

thought possible. Prison is not the best place to get an education—not by a long shot—but I know from personal experience how important it is for education programs to be in prisons, and for them to be available to all people regardless of how long they are serving.

I was released from prison in November 2020, and I am proof that people with long sentences do get out of prison. I continue to take courses at Tulane University. I also remain connected to Operation Restoration and I am thankful for its help with my

transitional needs. For example, the Restoration life coaches helped me enroll in the Returning Citizens Stimulus Program, which provides financial support to people released from incarceration due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In closing, incarcerated women need education just as much as anyone else so that we can do great things upon release. I am determined to finish my degree and can't wait for whatever the next chapter of my life holds after I complete it.

5. “I started experiencing something that not even the drugs and alcohol could deliver in the end.”

In my life today, I am the proud father of four wonderful children. I have been blessed with an amazingly smart and beautiful woman, and have countless others in my life who love and support me. For employment, I am a reentry specialist for an impactful nonprofit called RISE. In my role, I get to work with graduates of our Nebraska-based prison program to help them successfully navigate reentry back into their communities. Additionally, I am involved in my church, a 12-step recovery community, and the Alternatives to Violence Project. I truly enjoy giving back and helping others.

I would love to tell you that I have always been this version of myself. Far from it. Because of choices that I made in the past, that I now truly regret, I have spent a total of 15 years of my life incarcerated in Nebraska. I grew up in a household with a very angry alcoholic under our roof. As I got older, I chose to emulate some of his lesser qualities. This led me down a path of substance

abuse, crime, numerous stays in county jails, and ultimately three separate prison terms.

At the end of my last meth-fueled binge in 2012, I was arrested and placed back in prison for violating my parole. I was facing felony counts in five counties at the time, and mathematically speaking, I could have ended up spending the rest of my natural life in prison. Along with this, my 12-year marriage was dissolving, and I was losing the rights to my four children. By that time, I had burned up pretty much all my relationships with family, friends, and loved ones. This “bottom” was finally low enough for me to look at my life and decide it was time for me to do something different.

Once inside the system, and residing at the Diagnostic and Evaluation Center in Lincoln, I asked my case manager to go to Substance Abuse Treatment (SAU). This resulted in my transfer to the Omaha Correctional Center (OCC). This was my first time going to treatment, so I did not know what to expect. I was pleased to find that the

counselors truly wanted to help people get well. After about a month of going to classes, I committed myself to the recovery process. During this six-month treatment program, I was taught how to break down my thought process. After a few weeks, it became apparent that I had been making irrational and selfish choices, rooted in my emotions, pretty much my entire adult life. Once I realized this, I was then able to work on making choices that were more in line with my values. My counselors, and a few of my peers, helped me transition to this new way of decision making by sharing how they were able to do it in their own lives.

I successfully graduated from SAU's six-month program in November 2013 and then stayed on the unit as a resident mentor for an additional three years to help others with substance abuse issues. Afterward, I moved into a general population unit for my final year at OCC.

I have been clean and working a program of recovery since July 5, 2013. During my time at OCC, between 2013 and 2017, I completed over twenty different educational/self-betterment programs. One of the last ones I completed was RISE—a six-month course with a focus on character development, career readiness, and entrepreneurship.

RISE is a nonprofit organization that has been running cohorts inside the Nebraska State Correctional System since 2016. Anyone residing at a correctional facility where RISE classes are offered can fill out their application. RISE accepts everyone who completes the application process, which is a hefty questionnaire that includes a three-page essay on why you should be accepted. Sometimes an institution will step in and say that a certain individual is not allowed to participate in RISE at that time. Two of the most common reasons for this are programming conflicts (required classes taking place at the same time as RISE classes) and behavioral misconduct (an individual has been found guilty of a certain rule infraction and received sanctions).

One of the most beneficial experiences I got from RISE was going over the material twice a week in

a group setting with a RISE program coordinator leading the way. This provided an opportunity for us to grow both as individuals and as a community by creating a space to get real and vulnerable with one another—something that is rare inside a correctional facility, but oh, so needed. These sessions gave me an opportunity to look at everything I had learned up to that point and challenged me to go deeper.

Along with the personal and professional character development, RISE teaches participants to create a business plan. I personally believe that this entrepreneurship component is important because it pushes us to get out of our comfort zones, and it helps us see that even though we have made mistakes we can still be successful. On graduation day, RISE brings 20 to 40 volunteers into the correctional facility to judge the business pitches of the RISE participants, who are called Builders, in a *Shark Tank*-style setting. Most of us Builders are borderline terrified of pitching in front of strangers, but once we do, most of us say we are glad we did. Along with the valuable feedback we receive, we also come to realize that there are many people who are ready to accept us back into our communities. This is priceless, as many of our incarcerated citizens believe those days have come and gone. I know I had.

After graduating from RISE, I continued to stay engaged with them after being selected as one of the peer facilitators for the next cohort of Builders at OCC. I did this until I was transferred to the Community Correctional Center in Omaha. This is where RISE offered me a job, and I have been working there since January of 2018.

So, what have I gotten out of educational programs during incarceration?

The first thing I found was hope. Then I acquired some self-honesty. These two things propelled me down a path of transformation where I started finding principles that were completely foreign to me. They include honesty, integrity, forgiveness, acceptance, tolerance, faith, compassion, kindness, mercy, patience, and grace.

All the programs and educational platforms in which I got involved showed me how to place value on these principles and implement them in my life—something I had never done before and had absolutely no idea how to do. By learning how to live in this manner, I started experiencing something that not even the drugs and alcohol could

deliver in the end: inner peace. This serenity in my life gave me the motivation to keep going and eventually led me to find purpose for my life, which is servanthood. I try to be as selfless as I can be, one day at a time, no matter where I am or who is or is not around.

6. “She would say each time I came out of solitary confinement, ‘You done yet?’”

The turning point in my life wasn’t prison, it was education. My mother used to dream of having a child who went to college. She loved to read. I did not. Yet here I was in prison earning a college degree from the Boston University Prison Education Program (BUPEP) as valedictorian of 2009. Imagine me! I stood at the podium sharing my congratulations with several women who stood with me as we each earned a bachelor’s degree. My brother, his wife, and my “partaker” sat in the audience. I had never felt so much love and pride in one room in my life! It is those moments that define our next steps. What direction we walk is up to us.

I wasn’t always a good student. I played hooky a lot. Ironically, my grades were not that bad. I left school completely at the age of 16, and I started working full time and supporting myself. I went to a night college to become a certified nursing assistant when I was between 16 and 17 years old. I would conduct my research and learn skills depending on the life situations in which I found myself. Years later, after I had my daughter, I went to Massasoit College for a short time. Law skills were needed for one thing or another at the time. My daughter always saw me typing or reading to learn. I never read a book for the pleasure of purely enjoying it, only when I was on a mission to battle something. I was always the fixer.

There comes a time you can’t fix everything. For me that time was when I went to prison. I was 31 years old and received a second-degree murder sentence. My daughter was 10 years old. Life as we had known it was gone. The person I was disappeared at that moment. Everything was gone.

It is not surprising that I didn’t start my sentence very well. I had a hard time adjusting to an unfamiliar world I knew nothing about. I was no angel. I had minor things on my record. Adjusting to the underlying prison rules was a new battle for me. I was a very independent person and filled with fear, hurt, and anger. Unfortunately, this was my new home, forever.

It is no surprise I spent a lot of time in and out of solitary confinement. Most times for minor things, but for long periods of time. I didn’t agree with how the institution was being handled. I would write the governor, appeal disciplinary reports, while advocating for more education programs. While going in and out of solitary confinement, you have time to think and observe others. During this time, I had been watching people leave prison with nothing to show for their time: no General Educational Development (GED) diploma, no college, no personal growth. I wanted to avoid the same fate. I had spent enough years wasting time.

A friend who stood by me through every trip I made to solitary confinement just happened to be in BUPEP. She would say each time I came out of solitary confinement, “You done yet?” Then talk about school.

I never really thought about how I felt about education. Yet I needed to do something of value.

It was different when I went to prison. I had to admit to people that I didn’t have a high school diploma. All the education I had completed was under the assumption I had one. I was in my forties. Shame at not being educated washed over me. My friend’s question, “You done yet?” stayed on my mind. Finally, I said to myself, “I am done!” That is when I decided to pursue an education. I had to take my GED exam and earn six college credits from Bunker Hill Community College. Then I was able to start the next semester as a Boston University student. The pressure began.

What a challenge for someone my age to try and learn again. My first paper was covered in red ink. I was discouraged and wanted to quit. The professor and fellow students encouraged me to be patient. My partaker, Joanne, gave me support and calmness. I was blessed. It wasn’t easy writing 20-page papers by hand or researching papers with no internet. Yet, if you are determined and dedicated, it can be done.

While incarcerated, my education led me to advocate for women as a professional. I became the Boston University coordinator inside my prison. I had my own desk, computer, and filing cabinet. My job was to register and place students in their courses. I loved this job. I met professors who cared about each and every student in their classrooms. I watched folks just like me who were in trouble or acting up begin to change. They didn’t want to lose out on the opportunity of school. Change began with each student.

I went on to advocate for the Partakers Program so more students could receive academic support teams. After a long battle, I was approved to facilitate a program I created called Listen, Learn and

Change. It is a program for first- and second-time offenders that gives an orientation of what prison has to offer, the best forms of communication, the available programs, and what is possible as told by the voices of incarcerated individuals serving life sentences. You can learn from the ones who have been impacted before you. I am told the program still runs today.

It has been through all of these connections that the path of my life began to transform. One of those connections sent me a job description they thought was perfect for me. They were right.

Today I am the regional manager of the Petey Greene Program. This program works to inspire and support academic learning within prisons, jails, youth correction centers, and reentry programs. We support learning and inspire our community of learners and our university students to reimagine and advocate for a more equitable criminal justice system. As the supervisor, I build partnerships with community organizations, universities, and our correctional systems to collaborate academic learning and support for all justice-impacted people. I am particularly passionate about this position because this is where my education began.

Education and connections transformed me to become the person I am today. I have the rare opportunity to give back what was once given to me. Education equals opportunity, while the support you receive from others gives hope and encouragement. When you put them together they are a perfect fit. So perfect that I am still a student today. I am currently enrolled in the criminal justice master’s degree program at Boston University. The fact is that I am only where I am today because of the people who have supported me and believed in me. God has opened up doors, all the doors, while He closed others.

7. “If you did not have the necessary self-discipline, you were bound to fail even with the help of your peers.”

My original sentence consisted of 26 years with no parole. What were my immediate thoughts? My life is over. What am I going to do with all this time? What can I do besides sit in prison?

I arrived at the Jessup Correctional Institution (JCI) in Maryland on January 4, 2013. Shortly afterward, I enrolled in church and every program I could. When I spoke with my parents they encouraged me to enroll in college courses if available. At this time, there wasn't a credit-bearing college program offered inside the prison. Nevertheless, I enrolled in JCI's scholars' program—a non-credit bearing college program that allowed inmates to participate in college classes without earning college credits.

Although I wouldn't receive college credit, I began taking the non-credit bearing courses because I would receive the knowledge. Enrollment in an education program changed my perspective. I believed my time in prison did not have to be wasted but could be utilized. In fact, this program prepared me to take actual college courses because three years later the JCI scholars' program was succeeded by the University of Baltimore's Second Chance Pell Pilot Program. Unlike the JCI scholars' program, participants in the Pell program received access to accredited courses that lead toward a degree. This altered my prison paradigm. Prison began, in my mind, to transform literally into a university.

I was elated to be able to call home and tell my family I was working on a degree. I was excited to go to class, and it lightened my spirit. Yet completing these courses took serious effort, energy, and commitment. If you did not have the necessary self-discipline, you were bound to fail even with the help of your peers.

This brings me to my next point. Getting an education while incarcerated taught me to manage my time, and how to sacrifice. It helped me to build a solid work ethic. You may or may not know this, but everything in prison is “supposed” to be run on a schedule. There is a time to eat, a time to shower, a time to exercise, and a time for other activities and programs. I can't forget the time to get on the phone or have a visit. If you have an institutional job, you really are juggling. After all that, add the responsibilities of real college with real assignments. This is when you must make your own schedule and stick to it. You must find a balance. This is where you cannot confuse being busy with being productive. Sometimes you have to minimize your focus to get the best results. Some things should just be cut out.

By necessity I learned to sacrifice some things. If I planned to do my best and retain the information I was taught, then I had to make sure I had the mental space and energy to receive it. I cut back on recreational activities. I didn't go outside or exercise as much. There were days when I didn't get a chance to get on the phone. The impact that the educational program was having on me was more important than those things I had to give up. These were necessary sacrifices for the greater good.

After implementing these changes, I must say that enrollment in an education program caused me to tap into my latent potential. Amid the things that take place in your average prison environment, I had to be responsible and accountable for my own life. I had to maneuver around the chaos to stay on track. I had to employ all my faculties to remain focused on pursuing my degree regardless of what was taking place around me. I could organize my thoughts and make time to succeed. After a while, I could juggle school, work, church, and other activities. I even was able to tutor other students.

The impact that the college program had on me while I was incarcerated was phenomenal. I learned how to manage my time, sacrifice, build a solid work ethic, and tap into my latent potential. My paradigm was altered. Instead of going from the court to the cell, I went from the court to the classroom.

I believe an in-prison college program made such a difference in my life because it afforded me the opportunity to progress when I thought I would stagnate. The program also offered outside support and encouragement, which is pivotal to anyone's growth and development. I believe that an in-prison college program will make a difference in the lives of others in the same way.

8. "It was something that nobody in my family had ever done."

Prior to prison, I struggled with many different drugs that could have led to a major overdose. Fortunately, God saved me from it all. Still, I found myself involved in activities that resulted in my incarceration.

On my way to prison in Arkansas, I had the realization that I had no control over what was taking place in my life at that time. So, while we were cruising down I-40, heading to jail, I told myself this was my one opportunity to make a difference in my life and show the world that change was possible. Education was going to be a pathway to a different life for me—but this was easier said than done. I was a junior high school dropout who didn't go back to school after being admitted into Children's Hospital in Little Rock as a result of sudden health issues. Nevertheless, with God giving me time in prison to sit down and focus on myself, I decided I would become a new person through an education that I obviously did not yet have. I knew that, if anything, my education was something that nobody could ever take from me.

My decision to pursue an education after being out of school for almost 13 years was frightening to me. I was nervous about enrolling in General Educational Development (GED) classes. I

wasn't sure if I was going to be able to pass the tests, or if I was going to have to start at the bottom and work my way up. I took the placement tests and passed them all. Then I enrolled in the GED program.

One day while I was standing in the "pill call line" waiting for my medication, I saw Ms. Stormy Cubb, who I knew was the director of sponsored programs for Shorter College. I stepped out of line and walked up to talk to her about the process of enrolling. Shorter College is a private historically black junior college founded in Little Rock in 1886, and one of the original 67 postsecondary institutions selected by the U.S. Department of Education to participate in the Second Chance Pell Experimental Sites Program in 2016.

Ms. Cubb told me that the academic term had already started, but she would see what she could do. In the interim, she did two things to help me. First, she made a phone call and spoke with the prison guard on duty who was getting on me for stepping out of the "pill call line" without permission. Second, she ran to her car to get an application for me to fill out so she could turn it in when she returned to her office that same day. I was so excited to be given this chance to enroll into college. It was something that nobody in my family

had ever done. I wanted to be the first one to show them that I could do it.

I gave up some evenings to complete my courses. Do not get me wrong, it was rough at first. But I worked hard, and I started receiving “A” letter grades. This fueled me to continue along my path for success. I continued my courses behind the walls until I was released from prison on July 2, 2018.

I was in total shock once released. I did not even want to leave my own bedroom. With all of the anxiety, I was nervous about showing up on the Shorter College campus to apply to continue with school. I had an image in my head that people would think badly of me due to my past life experience. With the help of the college’s financial coordinator, Pamela Conard, I was guided through every step to complete my financial aid application so I could start attending classes.

After I started classes on campus, I struggled with social anxiety, and then I had a stroke. I was not able to attend classes in person, but that did not stop me from completing my assignments and turning them in on time. I finished the term with the completion of 54 credits and a 3.66 GPA. Afterward, I took off the next semester and summer to recover.

Unfortunately, during my recovery from the stroke I became homeless and fell back on the path of

drug use—but my problems did not stop there. Because of memory loss from the stroke, I was locked out of my email account. I worked very hard trying to type in the password every which way I could possibly think of, and suddenly it said I was logging in. I was so excited to get into this account! As I was scrolling through months and months of missed emails, I came across one labeled Honor Society. I clicked on it and read, “Congratulations! You have made the honors list for 2020! Please join the Honor Society.” I immediately began to cry because I had missed the best day of my life, and I just knew it was too late to begin this current semester. I emailed the Shorter College president to explain my situation. With help from the president and staff, I was able to start classes a month later.

Today, God has delivered me from drug use. He is constantly working in my life and showing me that there is a brighter future for me. I plan to graduate from Shorter College. Despite the rocky roads I have traveled to get me to this point in my life, beginning with the ride to prison on I-40, I did not give up. The educators in my GED program and Second Chance Pell Program never gave up on me. I will become successful because of all I experienced inside and outside of prison.

9. “I’m a very proud, educated mother who can sit down with her kids and help them.”

My first prison stay was when I was incarcerated in a federal facility located in Alderson, West Virginia, serving a 10-year sentence. When I think about my stay in prison, I reflect on how I got there. Growing up I was left on my own because my parents were addicted to drugs. I literally had to take care of myself and my siblings. I was a teenager on my own. I

had no education and no knowledge, so I dropped out of school in the seventh grade and didn’t obtain a General Educational Development (GED) diploma.

Before I went to prison, I couldn’t even help my kids with their homework because I didn’t have any basic educational skills to do so. To be honest, sometimes I felt my kids had more education than me.

So, while I was in prison, I enrolled in educational classes to obtain my GED. I knew I needed to do this to not only better myself, but to finally be a mother that my children were proud of. That was and still is important to me.

I was able to take my time and completely understand the work that I was doing. I was taught by some of the best educators that the federal prison system had to offer me. They took time to teach me and to help me understand course materials I couldn't process. Along with the teachers, other inmates tutored me as well until I was able to learn for myself.

There were times when the work seemed difficult. I thought I would never understand it. But the teachers were patient. They truly never gave up on me. The teachers taught me, they coached me, they mentored me. In fact, they never got agitated or upset because it took me a long time to figure something out.

However, there were some challenges to getting my GED. It took me a little over a year to obtain it because I was transferred several times to various prisons. This was unfortunate because with each transfer I had to begin again with new teachers. It became kind of hard for me to be transferred from here to there while completing my studies. But I never gave up my journey to earn my GED. Now that I have it, I won't allow anything to stop me from bettering myself and my family. I am a much better person now, and a productive person in my community.

During my time incarcerated, I obtained several trade certificates such as Telemarketing and Communications. I sought these types of trade skills because I knew they would make it easier to find employment. In fact, they helped me to get my current job as a custodian/maintenance worker. In addition, while on parole, I enrolled and graduated from the Helping Others 2 Win Program located in Baltimore, Maryland. In this program,

I learned how to communicate my concerns and solve problems. The part of the program from which I learned the most was how to accept failure and know that I can make changes in my life's goals to become successful.

Before I participated in these programs, I was ashamed of myself for letting my family down. Now, I am so proud of myself. I'm a very proud, educated mother who can sit down with her kids and help them with their homework, and talk with them about the importance of having a good education. I strongly agree that anyone who is in jail or prison should be educated, and that the system should make it mandatory that they receive the education they lack before returning them back into their communities. I know for myself. I am never going back to prison because I know the "Do's and Don'ts" of life for living in society today.

Honestly, if it wasn't for being incarcerated, I'd probably still be uneducated today. I likely would have gone back and forth to prison as well. As a mother of three, I saw my kids heading down the wrong path and following in my footsteps. This included putting education last in their lives. Now that I'm back home, and involved their lives, they see the value of an education.

Because of the prison education program, I became a strong woman and a successful role model for my children. I had three children when I went to prison, and I now have another baby as well. I am a better mother to her than I was for my first three children. In addition to making me a better mother to my children, my education has opened doors for me to apply for jobs, successfully complete job applications, and write my own résumé. Although this may sound strange, I can say prison education saved my life.

10. “He snatched the book from me and violently flipped through pages.”

“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair...”

—Langston Hughes, *Mother to Son*

From sexual abuse, eating in the trash as a child, homelessness, drug addiction, to prison—my very life was at the threshold of unpurposed meaninglessness! I was the middle child of five children born and raised in New Brunswick, New Jersey, by a financially and emotionally stretched single mother. In addition to my father being deliberately absent, my uncles, aunts, cousins, and everyday role models were also governed by the impactful pitfalls of the same environment that seemingly consumed our desires to advance.

Within the scope of my limited and confused reality, it was convenient to believe that “circumstances govern.” There were extended periods when my day-to-day expectations were thoroughly met if I was fortunate enough to secure two bags of weed, a 40-ounce beer, and a place to eat and sleep. In attempting to capture some of my youthful life experiences, I recall cry-writing these words in a book I published titled *That’s Deep! Reflections on the Aftermath of a Black Student*:

The streets raised me... but
Mama helped out,

And jail was my father that
influenced my life’s route.

The “block” was my home—because
my house had no models,

So, I chose my ’hood niggas, pissy
corners with broken glass bottles.

My motivation was hunger and
a place to lay my head—

And my instincts controlled
my eyes, which saved me from
being filled with lead.

My social circumstances changed
my religions, I even pondered,
Who’s our creator?

But God was a blur because
of an empty refrigerator.

These activities finally caught up with me, which resulted in my incarceration in East Jersey State Prison (Rahway) in the early 1990s on drug charges. When I was in prison, God revealed to me my innate and unpacked love for reading. This occurred in a most unusual manner.

Once inside prison, what ignited my newfound desire to read did not come from a need to enroll in an education program. I had already earned a high school diploma. I was a 6’9” former basketball star in my high school league. I just needed to do my time in prison so that a two- or four-year college could give me an athletic scholarship upon release.

The thing that ignited my desire to read was daily harassment by a harmful, grossly ignorant, weightlifting ritualist in my prison. On a day-to-day basis, I vividly recall hearing this impressively built physical specimen ridicule me for being “skinny” and “weak.” I especially recall the intimidated laughter of the fearful fanbase who encouraged him. Although I am tall and can fight, in prison you don’t want to be known as “weak” or anything close to it. This makes you susceptible to beatings, rape, or worse.

After the first week of hearing his obnoxious voice, coupled with his very splintered 227-word vocabulary, I randomly uttered to him a seemingly easy challenge. In my hand was a book written by Donald Goines, a former prisoner who authored urban fiction. I said to him, “If you can read one sentence in this whole book, I will lift weights with you every day for the rest of the month!” He snatched the book from me and violently flipped

through pages in search for a familiar word. He couldn't find one. Why? He could not read.

The sheer deafening silence from his vocal lackeys who saw this occur spoke volumes about the already awkward and potentially dangerous situation. Dangerous for me because he and his boys could have attacked me on the spot for embarrassing him. Dangerous for him, too, because his boys saw him as "weak" for the first time. He threw the book on the ground and walked away. I picked it up and started reading it again.

From that very moment, I acknowledged that "Knowledge is Power!"

I then began to read so much that my mind lulled me to sleep several times a day. Suddenly the prison uniform and burdensome prison walls became confined, cathartic opportunities to learn. The prison library was a safe haven for learning. Inexplicably, the awaiting, untouched books of intellectual sustenance were seemingly barricaded by a hidden barrier of willful obliviousness. I cannot say the same about the always fought-over newspapers and magazines. With access to everything from the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, to the King James version of the Bible, my damaged inner child was comfortably incubated with new life through self-education.

The impact of educating my mind opened new paths to self-worth and self-sufficiency. Ferocious reading in prison opened my sealed eyes and led me to reimagine my cultural worldview. Finally, the entrenched layers of hurt, isolation, unlove, and the embarrassment of being an elementary and high school *special education student* were destroyed by the mustard seed belief of I CAN! Better reading, thinking, writing, speaking, and teaching were my goals.

I was not the only beneficiary of my newfound interest in reading. The strange thing is that the muscle head I challenged to read asked me to teach him to read. I did. It was not easy, but at least he wanted to try. Then other guys in prison came to me for help, and not just for reading. They sought help with writing letters to their mothers, their girlfriends, or their children. I even helped one guy write a letter to prison and court authorities, which played a role in his early release.

Although challenging, the prison walls and I had a symbiotic relationship from which I greatly benefited. I now understood the simple, yet profound assertion brilliantly articulated by Tupac Shakur: "Real eyes, Realize, Real lies."

Once my eyes became actualized through my infant stages of the educational process, I began to explore the different avenues of cultural oppression that have adversely destroyed countless others. God saved me from oppression's unwitting grips and education is now my toolbox to rebuild countless crystal stairs.

My post-prison plans to go to college were still on my mind. I wrote letters to basketball programs while in prison. A college in Maine awarded me a scholarship after incarceration. I played there, but a tragic death in my family resulted in my transfer to a college in New Jersey to play basketball. Once there I was physically injured and lost my scholarship, but not my passion for learning. I went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Sociology. Today, I am a doctoral candidate in Education and Christian Leadership at Liberty University.

11. “Knowledge I learned from the courses helped me to stay calm in the face of adversities that I would encounter once released.”

My thirst for education really started four years into my 18-year sentence inside the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women (FCCW) located in central Virginia. I began to enroll in the many vocational courses that were offered. I earned certification in four trades, and I received my cosmetology license. I began to think, what next?

I figured there wasn't much opportunity to expand my mind in prison outside of vocational programs. Then, I was given the chance to apply for the Sunshine Scholarship, which offers inmates the opportunity to receive a college degree. I applied and was accepted into Piedmont Virginia Community College located in Charlottesville. I graduated with an Associate of Arts degree in 2015.

I thought I had exhausted my educational opportunities at this point, but I was wrong.

I was working in the FCCW prison library one day and I walked Drs. Greg and Tierney Fairchild. They are affiliated with the Resilience Education program offered through the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. They were talking about an in-prison education program that would be offered to inmates to help them transition back into society by obtaining skills in business and entrepreneurship. I was excited about the opportunity, but little did I know the process to get in was going to be a little challenging. I had to fill out an application, submit not one but three essays, and on top of that, have a face-to-face interview. They really wanted to make sure that you were ready and prepared for the educational journey on which you would be embarking.

When I found out that I was accepted into the program I was overjoyed. The three courses were

going to build off of one another: Entrepreneurship, Financial Capability, and a capstone called Foundations in Business. Now mind you, I was only 20 years old when I went to prison. Technology and everything else had drastically changed in the free world, as did the way that business was conducted. Having the opportunity to work with MBA students and my fellow classmates helped ease some of the anxiety that I had on my first day. The knowledge and understanding that was shown by my classmates and the MBA students was astounding. I completed my certificates in May of 2018 right before my release in June.

My transition back into society was fairly easy. I was able to find employment days after I was released because my employer was impressed with the skill set that I learned from the Resilience Education program. I was glad to have a job because many formerly incarcerated individuals do not. At the same time, the company did not make full use of my skills. They made me a door monitor at minimum wage. Therefore, I went in search of another job and found one very quickly, but not before making a budget, which I had failed to do with my first job. Within a month at my new job, I was doing floor support, which involves explaining company policy and why procedures were adopted. I then became a team lead on the social media site for the same company, utilizing all of the skills that I learned in the Resilience program. Even though I enjoyed my job I knew that I was destined for more.

As much as I enjoyed working for someone else, I wanted to work for myself. My entrepreneurial mind kicked in, which led me to develop a better plan of action. Then one day my sister and I start-

ed Top Notch Professional Cleaning, LLC. We obtained a couple of clients on our own, but we needed more to sustain us. I decided to reach out to Dr. Tierney Fairchild to see if she could assist us. Without hesitation she agreed.

Within two weeks we had a full team of mentors in their newly designed Resilient Professional Community. Three people helped us build our business brand and guided us in marketing our business so that we can become successful: Billie, an MBA graduate; Megan, an MBA student; and Whitney, Resilience’s program director, who I met while incarcerated in FCCW. I knew there was a lot of work that goes into starting a business because of what I learned in the Resilience Education program. However, understanding the full scope of it all proved to be a little more challenging than I had originally thought. Fortunately, the Resilience network was, again, here to help me.

Honestly, although I had an opportunity to enroll in numerous courses provided to me while incarcerated, the Resilience Education program saved my life. On the inside, it allowed me to be able to keep my mind free from distraction and to keep my mental stability. Once released, I realized how vital being able to keep that mental stability while inside of those walls would aid me in my transition into society. The knowledge I learned from the courses helped me to stay calm in the face of adversities that I would encounter once released. Most of all, the support from Drs. Greg and Tierney Fairchild made me feel as if success was on the horizon. Their belief in the program—and in me—made all the difference in how I was able to begin to see myself become mentally healthy and prosperous upon my release.

12. “By helping ‘2nd chance dogs’ find a new life, I was reciprocating the generosity.”

At the age of 23, I was incarcerated in the Virginia Department of Corrections (VDOC), with a term that would run from October 2007 until February 2020. The highest level of education I had completed upon entering prison was 10th grade. I had dropped out of high school because I saw little relevance in school in general, and how it would contribute to my future in particular. Why go to college and get myself into substantial debt with student loans before I had the opportunity to step into the real world? Plus, I’d witnessed others go to college and not get an occupation in their field of study. This discouraged me. It seemed backward to me at the time.

It wasn’t until later in life that I realized that the college degree and student loan approach to life after high school was an investment. In retro-

spect, I can see how naive my reasoning actually was at that time. When I went to prison, I had to rethink my plan for life.

During the initial phase of my incarceration, reality struck me in two ways. First, I realized that higher education would not only better me as an individual, but it would also increase my chances of succeeding post-release. Second, education in this context could provide a coping mechanism during my prison term. Therefore, I enrolled in numerous educational programs with the goals of successfully reentering society and becoming the man that my grandma prayed for and would be proud to see me become.

I enrolled in the prison’s General Educational Development (GED) program in 2008 and graduated in 2009. My first major educational milestone was completed. Initially it did not appear to be

that big of a deal to me. However, in retrospect, seeing where I am today in life, I can precisely see the value of enrolling in that GED program and how it changed the course of my life. The information that I had learned became applicable to my everyday life, particularly as it introduced me to computer literacy.

My next major and defining education opportunity presented itself when I enrolled in the Pen Pals dog program. The VDOC operates the program inside a few prisons for incarcerated individuals who are carefully screened and selected to work with second chance rescue dogs. I enrolled in the “Canine Handling” educational course during my 90-day probationary period and obtained a certificate recognized by the Commonwealth of Virginia. This credential certifies that I have mastered the necessary skills and am qualified to seek employment in the following occupational/job titles as defined by the Department of Labor: Dog Bather, Animal Caretaker, Dog Groomer, and Animal Trainer. My mentor, Katie Lockes, was the professional dog trainer in charge of all dogs and personnel. Shortly afterward an “Animal Trainer” Apprenticeship was birthed in the VDOC, and I enrolled in it.

In 2015, I transferred to another facility that had a dog program as well. By the grace of God, I was accepted into the Animal Assisted Compassionate Activities dog program because of my experience and educational credentials in this field. This program was facilitated by a great mentor of mine, Donald Keck, a senior psychologist of 30 years. The program entailed intensive study of the curriculum, namely “behaviorism,” watching a vast number of critical training DVDs, training the staff’s dogs, and doing therapeutic visits in medical and reentry housing units within the facility.

In 2016, I was transferred to Haynesville prison to help launch a new dog program. With psychologist, reentry specialist, and dog program facilitator Morgan Dummond, along with her dog Scout Penelope (who I trained), we successfully launched a dog program called Bandits Aban-

doned Rescue K9 (B.A.R.K.) The mission is to help rescue dogs learn necessary socialization skills and find new homes. Scout obtained both her Canine Good Citizen Certification, which is approved by the American Kennel Club, and the Therapy Dog International Certification. She also made therapeutic visits within the facility and at hospitals. (Scout Penelope crossed over the Rainbow Bridge in early 2020).

While still in the dog program in 2017, my greatest accomplishment of all came when I enrolled in the Rappahannock Community College (RCC) Second Chance Pell Grant Program. Ironically, I learned about the RCC program through the owner of a dog I was training at the time.

She asked me if I would be interested in applying for the Second Chance Pell Grant Program. Immediately my response was yes! At that very instant I knew that this was the Hand of *God*, a divine encounter, and that the opportunity to attend college had been restored. I had dropped out of school in the 10th grade. Now was my opportunity to drop back in and redeem myself. I wasn’t about to let this chance of a lifetime escape me again!

Classes such as economics enabled me to grasp how things would work in the real world with my business. Other classes such as English and literature equipped me with the necessary writing and publishing skills to create a business plan, and later to write my own step-by-step training manual to go along with my business. I was able to achieve all of these goals before my release.

The RCC program also afforded me the opportunity to juggle rigorous college courses, while training both personnel and dogs, which were real-life responsibilities. Essentially, by helping “2nd chance dogs” find a new life, I was reciprocating the generosity given to me through the Second Chance Pell Grant Program. I completed the program with a 4.0 GPA and received my Associate Degree in Arts and Sciences in May 2019.

Now, I am back in society. As of August 2020, I established my own business—Juliean’s Coer-

cion-Free Doggy Training, Socialization & Grooming, LLC. This opportunity was contingent on the education and socialization skills that I was able to obtain through enrollment in various certificate and degree programs at different prisons during

my 12.5 years of incarceration. The skills that I possess enabled me to become a productive citizen within the community in which I now reside. This is why I believe we need education programs in prison.

13. “It was a distressing time for me. I had funding for only two more semesters in 2001.”

Prior to my incarceration in 1997, I was a student at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. I originally thought that I would never be able to complete my degree while incarcerated. I had always loved education, and I was grateful to be able to enroll in college at the Indiana Women’s Prison (IWP) in 1998. At IWP, students worked all day and attended classes at night. College programs in the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) were funded with state dollars. It was four years after the Omnibus Crime Bill under the Clinton Administration ended Pell Grants to incarcerated people in 1994-95.

Similar to the Pell Grant, Indiana higher education programs received funds through the State Student Assistance Commission of Indiana (SSACI), which provided incarcerated students eight semesters to earn a bachelor’s degree. Most university programs in the state offered students access to associate and bachelor’s degrees. When I arrived at IWP there were two colleges with satellite programs at the facility. It was a rare and amazing choice between Ball State University (BSU) and Martin University (MU). Each school possessed a great reputation. Each received funding from the SSACI budget to provide an in-person program. I chose MU because of its long-standing history of supporting the black community and its founders’ mission.

From the MU website:

Marking its 40th year in 2017, Martin University is Indiana’s only Predominantly Black Institution of higher education. It is steeped in a history of service and open to a diverse population of students. Rev. Father Boniface Hardin, O.S.B. and Sister Jane Schilling founded Martin University in 1977 in honor of two Martins—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and St. Martin de Porres, who served the poor in Peru in the 16th and 17th centuries and became the first biracial Catholic saint.

Growing up in Indiana and knowing MU’s history, it was the automatic choice for me; however, this university offered only bachelor’s degrees. Therefore, when I enrolled in MU I knew that I would not receive the six-month time cut for earning an associate degree. I was okay with that choice.

With two universities on site, the culture of the facility revolved around education. Courses were in the evenings, and like thousands of students outside of prison, I worked all day and went to school at night. The education building was always abuzz with activity day and night with General Educational Development (GED) programming, vocational classes, library traffic, and computer lab study hall.

By law, incarcerated students in Indiana were given eight semesters to complete a four-year degree. Then a major shift occurred by the time I made it to the end of my junior year at MU. The corrections department terminated its contract with MU, leaving BSU as the sole provider. I do not exactly remember all the circumstances, but I recall MU was told by IDOC to offer an associate degree like BSU or leave. At the time, MU offered only a bachelor's degree, but BSU offered associate and bachelor's degrees.

This was a distressing time for me. I had funding for only two more semesters in 2001. MU's departure and the question of transferable credits to BSU left me wondering if I would ever graduate. BSU ultimately took less than half of MU's credits. I became a first-semester sophomore again when I should have been a senior. It floored me. I was so worried that I would not graduate after all of my work and effort to pursue a degree.

When the state (or in the case of federal Pell Grants) offered exactly eight semesters of support to incarcerated students to attend college, why then would universities across the state, but especially inside the same facility, not have an agreement about the transferability of credit? In my case, these two universities were in the same facility, but they offered as great a barrier to me as if I was transferred to another prison in another city.

When universities and colleges don't offer incarcerated students a reasonably seamless transfer from one educational institution to another, they become an extension of the carceral state by weaving themselves into the punishment that incarcerated students experience. College programs, especially those existing inside prisons, must be student-centered.

Because the movement of students from facility-to-facility can occur in a moment's notice in prison, let alone from school-to-school in the same facility, any responsible college program that claims to serve the incarcerated student must have a plan. Before faculty teach the first class and ad-

ministrators arrive to enroll students, plans should be in place for credit transferability and degree continuity. Universities and colleges in the same state should create coalitions. In an effective coalition, college-in-prison programs should come to an agreement with the support of the main university and input from incarcerated students of what degree programs will be offered and the transferability of class credits across programs.

The purpose of these coalitions is to provide students with a synchronistic experience of college programming that best serves the student versus posturing over the excellence of one university's program over the other. Such elitism and competition, among other travesties of college-in-prison programming, ultimately doesn't focus on the student's experience or outcomes. This literally infuses precarity and instability into the incarcerated student's experience. Such competition is myopic and disruptive.

When you add the disruption of in-person learning, and synchronous distance learning in a pandemic, it becomes critical that program administrators, universities, and departments of correction place the student's experience at the center when creating and operating higher education programming in prisons. Failure to do so can stifle a student's ability to stay invested in the process and to achieve a credential while incarcerated.

In my case, I was forced to attend BSU, and as noted earlier, I ran out of the allotted eight semesters to complete my degree. Fortunately, one BSU faculty member created a scholarship fund, and with the help of some Franciscan monks in Muncie, Indiana, they provided the rest of my tuition so I could graduate with my bachelor's degree after 11 semesters. For their kindness and generosity, I will always be grateful.

I will never forget the worry and fear of not being able to complete my degree with the allotted funding, the subsequent precarity crafted by others, and how both temporarily threw me into a turbulent period that superseded the experience of my incarceration itself.

14. “Being incarcerated did not mean we would receive any less in our education.”

Growing up inside a prison environment in Arkansas is not an easy thing. I was 22 years old when I first got incarcerated. Once inside, I was not very wise and fell victim to the machinations of prison politics. The constant battle against the steep hatred and violence of prison culture, and where I fit into it—either because of my age, my ethnicity, or both—left me mentally and spiritually empty. After several years of this struggle inside of me, I grew tired of feeling empty and sought a way out. I attended general education classes and reentry programs, all of this in preparation for my next big move.

I had known about the opportunity to go to college while incarcerated for some time, but as a high school dropout, I never really put too much value in an education. However, with the constant support and encouragement of family and friends, I signed up for the Second Chance Pell Grant Program offered inside my prison with support from faculty at Shorter College, a private historically black junior college founded in Little Rock in 1886. It was, at the time, one of three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the Second Chance Pell Grant Program.

To be honest, I signed up for the Pell Grant program because, in my mind, I thought this was going to be another simple program, one more program just to say, “I did it.” However, I could never imagine what Shorter College would do for my life.

I started Shorter College in spring semester 2019 while I was still in prison. The teachers at Shorter left their campus to come teach us weekly. Once inside the prison, the professors were very clear with me and other students about one thing: Being incarcerated did not mean we would receive any less in our education. This grabbed my attention. From the first day of class I was hooked. I was now fully committed to learn all that I could.

Throughout the school year, I have had the wonderful opportunity to meet great teachers who have taken their time to teach me and answer all of my questions. Among them are two standouts: Mrs. Joyce Campbell and Mrs. Janet Anokye.

Mrs. Campbell’s Principles of Entrepreneurship class has been the most beneficial to me. She taught me the subject, but the most outstanding thing she taught me was to have a vision of my success. Mrs. Campbell not only taught out of the textbook, but she also made it her personal goal to motivate me into action, to instill in me a desire to want to better my situation, and to build a business plan. Every day she would push me, constantly encouraging me to have a plan for my success. In a time when I had no idea what I would do after prison, or how I would make a living, Mrs. Campbell was the guiding light in helping me design my goals and life plan, and teaching me the value of having a life worth living with the correct principles.

Mrs. Anokye’s World History course introduced me to some of the greatest people in history. Her style of teaching not only grabbed my attention, but she also made me interact with that person. J. J. Rousseau is one example among many more philosophers and thinkers. Her course helped me to look at things differently and to keep an open mind. Mrs. Anokye calls this critical thinking. This requires me to look beyond the simple things and not to judge someone by the way they look but by the content of their mind. She taught me to look into all the facts before deciding, and most importantly, to respect others’ ideas. In her class, I was able to grow beyond the simple-minded prison mentality. I learned how to expand my opportunities. I learned to accept people for who they are, along with all their faults and mistakes.

Since my release from prison in 2020, I have put into practice all that I have learned. On the job

front, what I learned from Mrs. Campbell helped me put together my résumé, which helped me get a great job in an awesome company. On the school front, I am proud to say I successfully enrolled in Shorter College as a free person only weeks after my release from prison.

The help that I have received in transitioning from a student in prison into an independent student in college has been outstanding. For example, the prison-to-college transition team helped me complete academic and financial forms that needed to be signed, and updated my student information

online. They even reached out to my teachers to let them know how things are progressing for me.

My time at Shorter College has convinced me of the importance of an education. Not only to gain knowledge, but also to build strong positive character. For me, Shorter College has not just been another school for me—it is a life-changing experience. Although COVID-19 has changed the way students and faculty interact with each other, I am proud to say that the quality of the education at Shorter College has not changed, nor has its commitment to my classmates who are still in prison.

15. “She helped me create a better ending to my narrative.”

I arrived at jail with a college degree. I also arrived as the mother of a black son and as a member of a family of loved ones I had left behind. I carried them with me in every move I made, which included my decision to pursue more education during my incarceration. When you are behind bars, you take whatever you can get, especially as it relates to college courses. These programs are always hard to get into, and most often they have unrealistic admission requirements.

But my life changed one day when I learned I could attend a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) through Howard University’s Prison-in-College Program.

When I learned the Howard University “*Veritas et Utilitas*” motto means Truth and Service, it spoke to my core. I have always been a servant leader, and nothing could ever change that. Because I had prior college experience, I was motivated to apply for classes, and I motivated others to apply as well. Once I was accepted, nothing could have prepared me for the encounter I would have with an instruc-

tor who voluntarily left her campus to come inside a jail to teach a group of incarcerated women.

For starters, I found it astonishing that Dr. Bahiyah Muhammad, the program facilitator and an associate professor of criminology at Howard University, looked like me but could speak with so much power. This was an intellectually enriching experience for me. She had the whole class captivated, listening and waiting to digest more. She inspired me, she uplifted me, and she allowed me to soak up her essence and reapply it to my life. She helped me create a better ending to my narrative. She taught me to stay Woke!

Because of what I was learning in Dr. Muhammad’s course, I prepared early for class and eagerly waited for our classroom escort officer to bring her to our meeting room. I could count on this class to bring me a sense of freedom. Not just of mind, but also of body and soul. Dr. Muhammad refilled my mind with truth and her educational servitude helped me to erase my faulty thinking. She would later be dubbed “Dr. Truth.”

Each reading assignment reflected a piece of cultural relevance to who I am and connected directly to my heritage. I enjoyed critically thinking about the articles, book chapters, and op-eds assigned for the course.

There was trust, truth, and resilience in each of our classes. We covered topics related to children of incarcerated parents, a subject that I felt could have been unbearable. But the way Dr. Muhammad taught the course, and the manner in which she invited students to bring their real stories to the classroom discussion behind the wall of incarceration, allowed me to carry my son with me into every class. To my surprise, our discussion around the effects of parental incarceration on children was enlightening to me as an incarcerated parent with a child.

Having a black female professor was helpful. Dr. Muhammad took great care in everything she brought inside and introduced to our minds.

This was not always the case in other college classes. For example, I have participated in college courses while in jail where the required readings spoke negatively about black people. Specifically, a book in one course described how dumb, ghetto, and broken black women were supposed to be. I couldn't find a good logic or purpose in requiring the class to read such literature. I asked the professor why this text was selected for reading. The professor was offended by my question.

For me, that reading was not worth the nightmares it created in my cell. The book was tone deaf and inconsiderate to all the black women in the class.

Not just to me. That particular reading did not advance my writing. It did not help me to critically think about any of the theoretical frameworks presented in the course. Rather, it led to internal anger and frustration. This was not what I signed up for. I was taking the class for pure knowledge.

By comparison, the HBCU framework reminded me of my greatness as I searched for truth from within a carceral space. It helped humanize the people behind mass incarceration and gave me vision for my plan to reenter college after incarceration.

This is why it is important for HBCUs and black faculty, specifically women, to teach college courses in prisons and jails. There should be racial and gender equity in the college programs that are offered to incarcerated people. It makes a huge difference when your professor looks like you and understands your plight because of her own lived experience. There was great care put into the curriculum that guided Dr. Muhammad's course.

After my release in 2019, I enrolled into the University of the District of Columbia, a public HBCU. I have recently had conversations about transferring into Howard University's Ph.D. program in criminology under Dr. Muhammad's mentorship. I have been inspired by her real example of truth and service.

16. “Like Frederick Douglass, I had found my key to freedom in the power of an education.”

The chains of prison life are heavy, brutal, and strong. How was I able to deliver myself from something so determined to bind me for the 22.5 years I spent locked up in a Maryland state prison? I found the answer in the power of an education.

Back in 1997, I stood in front of a judge as he pronounced a life sentence. The weight of all that time literally caused my knees to buckle. When they placed me in the holding cell, and I found myself all alone, I cried convulsively. Instantly I felt devalued, dehumanized, demoralized, and depressed.

This was not my first incarceration. In fact, this was my third. The other two “bits” were small and provided me no sense of time for introspection. In my ignorance I had seen prison as a rite of passage, a place to build my rep, a place to find new drug connections, and a place to take a vacation from the rough and tumble streets.

My third incarceration was different. As a lifer I had two choices. I could either accept my fate, succumb to my condition, and drown in a sea of darkened forgetfulness, or I could fight with all my might to break free from the chains that were pulling me under. I decided to fight.

I started reading and searching for my key to deliverance and personal freedom. Eventually, I came across a book titled *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. He spoke about his enslavement and how he realized his key to freedom was in the power of an education. Once awakened to the idea of freedom, he wrote: “It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.” Ultimately,

the education he found forever spoiled him and made him unfit to be a slave.

After reading this book, I too started looking, feeling, listening, and grasping for freedom and the education that would make it possible. All prison offered was a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, which I had already earned. Then I devised a three-part strategy:

Find My Lane and Stay in It: Like a highway, prison has many lanes of travel. The prison *fast lane* is for those who have not yet come to the realization of self, but instead attempt to perpetuate many of the same behaviors that brought them there in the first place. The *medium lane* is made up of those who want no trouble, but instead are focused on those things that will enable them to progress toward their goal. The *slow lane* is for those who are mentally and/or emotionally stuck, who know they are stuck, but for whatever reason do not care about their “stuckness.” They move through the prison with absolutely no purpose, good or bad. I stayed in the medium lane and worked on my goal of freedom through education.

Help Others Because It is the Best Way to Help Yourself: Since I already had my GED, I decided to become a tutor, which kept me close to the educational experience. I also worked on the character flaws that continued to sabotage my progress. I took every Anger Management, Alternative to Violence, and Decision-Making program offered. I read self-help books and took Bible correspondence courses. These things became like a floating device—helping to sustain and prepare me—in that ocean of darkness that had engulfed me when I had entered prison. I applied what I learned while working as a facilitator, giving others what was given to me and gaining empathy in the process.

Stay Prepared: Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a Roman Stoic philosopher, stated that, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” I knew that if I stayed in my lane and prepared myself, a substantive educational opportunity would come my way.

In 2012 a self-enrichment (non-credit bearing) college program entered my prison from one of the local colleges. I was one of the first to sign up. In 2015 the Obama Administration implemented a Second Chance Pell Grant Program that enabled some prisoners to take accredited college courses. By 2017, the University of Baltimore was among several schools participating in the program. As a result, a select group of individuals in JCI was given a chance to participate in a credit-bearing undergraduate college program. I was one of the students chosen. Was it “luck” or was it “preparation meets opportunity” that resulted in my selection? I say the latter.

On October 28, 2019, I stood again in front of a judge. This time I was armed with the weapons my education had afforded me and a reentry plan with the University of Baltimore. On that same day, after spending 22.5 years in prison, my shackles were loosened. The court had looked at my exemplary prison record and my academic accomplishments and agreed to give me “time served.” Like Frederick Douglass, I had found my key to freedom in the power of an education.

Today, I am still a student at the University of Baltimore. My major is Real Estate and Economic Development. My lifelong goal is to continue to learn, to continue to stay in my own lane, to continue to help others, and always be ready when opportunities come. I attribute my newfound freedom to two powerful forces: God and education. God makes all things possible, and an education creates infinite possibilities. Without them, I would still be stuck behind bars, struggling to find my way out.

17. “I am equally proud to say there are still women who recognize me on the street today.”

I dropped out of high school when I was in 10th grade. Until then, I had always been on the honor roll. When I got to algebra, however, I hit a wall. I just could not understand this new math. I always expected to do well in school, so when I struggled, my confidence was shattered, and I quit. Later I went to prison. For me, having access to education programs was the silver lining of being in the Louisiana Transitional Center for Women.

When I got to prison I promised myself I would make a new start. I was even more motivated when I heard that I could earn a college degree while I

was incarcerated with the support of a Pell Grant. I immediately enrolled in high school equivalency classes so that I could pursue higher education after that. This time around, I was determined to make math my strong suit. I discovered that I excelled at geometry (probably because I come from a family of master carpenters), and just like that, I found my path to understanding algebra.

I finally passed my High School Equivalency Test/General Educational Development (HiSET/GED) exam, and my scores were so high that the education staff at the prison encouraged me to become a

teacher in the program (in my state, incarcerated people serve as the primary adult education instructors). They didn't put me in my comfort zone of social studies. They made me teach math. I am proud to say I rose to the challenge, and I am equally proud to say there are still women who recognize me on the street today and tell me they would never have passed math had it not been for me.

Once I enrolled in college courses it was a whole new ball game. The content and delivery methods were much more challenging. I was most eager to take classes in communications. I always felt that it was not my strong suit. My self-esteem was so low, but I wanted to get out of my comfort zone. I was nervous about speaking to a room full of people, and I thought classes in this area would help me become a better teacher. I also knew that I had to complete a substance abuse class in prison, and I worried about revealing my deepest, darkest secrets to a larger group of people.

Learning more about communications put my mind at ease. Each time I took a course on the topic I got a higher grade. The final exam was always a presentation before a room of people, and that constant practice made public speaking less intimidating for me. I also learned that communicating is much more about listening than speaking. I know now that I need to be quick to listen and slow to speak. I don't have to know everything. I can learn from other people. This lesson helps me tremendously in my work today as a life coach and teacher with Operation Restoration, a New Orleans nonprofit that supports women and girls impacted by incarceration to recognize their full potential, restore their lives, and discover new possibilities. I work in both education and social services, and both fields require me to be in tune with what people are telling me about themselves

and what they need. Having access to college courses in prison helped prepare me for my career when I was released.

While I appreciated the opportunity to earn my Associate Degree in General Studies while in prison, the online delivery method left something to be desired. I learned on a tablet that I had to sync in the education office every time I wanted to ask a question or get an answer from my instructors. This kind of delayed communication was especially difficult with subjects like math, where rapid-fire questions and answers are a necessity. Also, the lack of instructors and support staff on-site often left my fellow students and me to fend for ourselves. Some of us had not been in school for a decade or more. No one was there in person to help us, so we had to help each other. People who had previously been through the courses helped me, and I was able to help other students in turn. This situation was very frustrating at times, but this experience showed me that I and other women like me have within us the intelligence and resilience to achieve academic excellence. Without each other, we could not have done it. *We* are the reason that we became educated. *We* made it happen ourselves.

I want education providers to know that high school and postsecondary education programs do make a difference, but you should always try to make your programs better and more responsive to students' needs. Any current or formerly incarcerated woman who thinks she is not smart enough to go to college, please know that I had that voice in my head too. (And I still do sometimes!) But if I can do it, you can too!

18. “We laid the foundation for an accredited student organization.”

While incarcerated between 2013 and 2019, I participated in postsecondary education programs at the Omaha Correctional Center (OCC) in Nebraska. This experience changed the entire dynamic of my time in custody and gave me hope for my future as I worked on finishing the bachelor of science degree I had started years before. This experience materialized in two phases.

The first phase started in 2015. That year the Nebraska Unicameral took up prison reform after decades of mismanagement and neglect. One of the improvements signed into law provided grants to organizations that offered programming to inmates to reduce recidivism rates. One such organization that received funding was Metropolitan Community College. The college’s 180 Re-entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) offered courses inside our prison walls for the first time in recent memory. This program’s purpose was to provide services and support to incarcerated individuals, and those transitioning from correctional facilities and treatment centers, to make a successful reentry to achieve their education and employment goals.

I participated in 180 RAP business classes and built upon previous courses that I had taken before incarceration. My entry-level classes focused on marketing and business law. They were intellectually stimulating and gave me something to pass the time constructively; however, these classes were essentially provided in a vacuum. The OCC did little to support the program or provide the assistance necessary for students to succeed when their incarceration ended. Additionally, despite the program’s desire to offer an associate degree, it did not seem like it would be possible given the limitations on the variety of classes offered. After several quarters, I started to get discouraged by the lack of progress. Enrollment in the program was limited and highly competitive, so I stopped

attending and released my roster spot to other prospective students. I figured I would resume my education upon my release.

The second phase began in 2017. That year the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) received private donations to create the Nebraska Prison Post-Secondary Education Project. At the time, the project’s purposes were to introduce UNO classes, lecturers, and instructors to those inside OCC and to begin teaching introductory courses to incarcerated students. Because my undergraduate career had begun at UNO in 2001, I jumped at the chance to take these classes while still incarcerated.

The first class that I enrolled in was “Autobiographical Reading and Writing.” It was the first writing program I had taken in years, but it was still exciting to resume taking classes again. The professor, Dr. Daniel Wuebben, and I bonded over the fact that I completed my first assignment on a typewriter, which is a rarity among inmates due to cost. Later in the semester, Dr. Wuebben approached me and floated the idea of collaborating on a paper as his coauthor. His concept: The typewriter and its application in prison literacy.

Over the next year we developed our idea using Swintec’s typewriter operating manual as an example. We wrote and rewrote our article several times. Dr. Wuebben continued to teach classes at OCC, and I continued to take them to support our project. Even so, restrictions existed on communication between volunteers and inmates, as such, ours remained tightly controlled. Nevertheless, we made it work. Our article received peer-review approval after hours of hard work and was published in the *Community Literacy Journal* in May of 2019!

I reached my mandatory release date after my sentence concluded in March of 2019. Although

I could not enroll in UNO classes that spring because my release occurred after registration had closed, I was still invited to attend a symposium on correctional education held at UNO during that semester. It was at that symposium where I met several noteworthy administrators who were impressed with my published work. One individual, an associate dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service, asked me to speak at a hearing before the Nebraska legislature about my education while incarcerated. The hearing was before the committee that oversaw the grants to the organizations from which I benefited while incarcerated. Although I could not attend due to a scheduling conflict, I provided written testimony to the committee and made my voice heard. My testimony impressed the dean, who put me in touch with a financial counselor in the registrar's office to discuss potential funding to allow me to finish my senior year at UNO.

With the help of several public and private grants, I was set to complete my undergraduate degree a year later. Although COVID-19 prevented me from participating in an actual graduation ceremony, I received my Bachelor's Degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice in a virtual ceremony

on May 8, 2020—nearly 19 years after I started my educational journey at UNO.

In the last semester of my undergraduate program I connected with another contact I met at the spring 2019 symposium, Dustin Pendley. He is an administrative coordinator in the English department. He approached me to discuss an opportunity to help start a student organization on campus dedicated to formerly incarcerated students. Together with other formerly incarcerated students, all of whom were in graduate school, we laid the foundation for an accredited student organization that helps formerly incarcerated individuals locate the resources needed to begin college or return to finish their degree. I served as the president of the TRAC (Transform Renew Achieve Connect) student organization until the end of 2020. This opportunity also motivated me to continue my education. Recently, I finished my first semester of a master of science program at UNO.

None of this would have been possible had I not received the opportunity to participate in classes during my term of incarceration.

19. “Most of the women incarcerated with me didn't have any education either.”

During my incarceration, I knew I really needed to be a part of a prison educational program. I was lacking basic educational skills, and the ones I did have I needed to learn all over again. Before I was incarcerated, I received my General Educational Development (GED) diploma. Unfortunately, I never used it. I did not use any of the knowledge that I had received from obtaining the GED. I lost a lot of knowledge from being

in the streets, and I only used the knowledge I needed to survive.

While in prison, I was given an assessment test. The results showed that I had eighth-grade level reading and math skills. Based on that, I knew I needed to enroll in a program if I wanted to better myself and become a successful person. I did not want to remain a repeat offender using the system as a revolving door.

So, I enrolled in a vocational program. What I loved about this program was that I learned specific trade skills such as carpentry, landscaping, electrical/maintenance, and plumbing. Vocational education programs gave me hands-on training that helped me find a job when I got out of prison, better my life, and be a productive person in society.

As I began my educational journey, I realized that most of the women incarcerated with me didn't have any education either. I was in the same boat. All I knew was how to count the money I made back in the day. I didn't believe I needed anything else. Then I realized that once I learned the basic skills needed to get a job, I could begin the career that I wanted.

I was excited to enroll in educational programs. They became the highlight of my incarceration. After I enrolled, however, I ran into several obstacles that delayed me starting the program. For instance, the waiting list was so long that it was at least six months before I could begin my first class. Still, when I started, it was the best thing to come into my life. I was as excited as a kindergarten student on the first day of school.

I was so nervous. Even though I didn't think less about myself, there were times I did not speak in class because it was hard for me to understand what the teacher was saying. Why? I didn't know the meaning of words or understand the things that were being explained to me. I had to change my thinking so that I could become a better person. I knew I had to conquer my fears of learning.

When I think back on my past, prior to my educational journey, I didn't even know how to read the ingredients on a product, or how to write something without getting frustrated. Sometimes I did not know how to spell the word or even say it. Finally, I began to speak up in class in order to understand what the teachers were saying and what they meant. I began learning more and more and using the skills I needed to improve myself. Although developing self-assurance took a while for me because I was ashamed, thanks to prison education programs, I successfully completed the program.

In my opinion, educational programs should be mandated in all jails and prisons. Many inmates do not have the basic education or skills to better themselves in order to become productive people once they return back to their communities. For me, I felt like there was no turning back once I got my education. I knew being educated was the number one thing I needed for my rehabilitation. Although there were some challenges along the way, such as needing a teacher or tutor to assist me with one-on-one sessions, it was worth every minute.

The impact of an education for me is that it helped open doors and continues to afford me opportunities I would not have received had I not completed the program.

Currently, I'm still in the process of enhancing my education by attending self-help programs such as Helping Others 2 Win (HO2W) and Helping Oppressed People Excel (HOPE). Although I graduated in 2016 from HO2W, I still use all of the skills I learned from the program. This includes how to communicate effectively, how to apply problem-solving and coping skills, how to control my emotions by using breathing techniques, and how to ask for help. In the HOPE program, I volunteer my time to inform people in need about various community resources such as the Food Bank. I also help with the collection of donations for back-to-school supplies. Through these experiences I help others by giving back what was given to me.

Prison would have been a revolving door for me had I not pursued an education. It saved my life, 100 percent.

20. “I had been kicked out...and made to attend a school for troubled youth.”

In 2000, a judge asked me stand and said something to the effect of: “I hereby sentence you to a 14-year determinate sentence to be served in the New York State Department of Corrections.” I recall looking at my mother, who was visibly shaken and crying as she stared back at her son in shackles and heading to state prison. I do not know how long she cried for that day, but I know I would have done anything to turn those tears of sorrow into tears of joy.

I entered New York State Prison after my sentencing. Men who had been to prison before told me that many of the programs had ended—programs like Network that offered certificates in addiction recovery, anti-violence, and decision making. New laws rendered tens of thousands of people in prison like me ineligible for the Comprehensive Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment Program, and every college program offering associate and bachelor’s degrees had ended.

Today, I know why college programs closed. Six years prior to my incarceration, President Bill Clinton had signed into law the now much criticized 1994 Omnibus Crime bill that effectively ended college-in-prison programs by rendering people in prison ineligible for federal Pell Grants. Under then-Governor George Pataki, New York followed the federal government’s lead and ended the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) aid to people in prison, and without this funding, college programs closed almost overnight.

Prior to the 1994 crime bill there were approximately 772 college or post-secondary education programs running in 1,287 prisons across the country. That number dropped to 8 by 1997, which was three years prior to my incarceration.⁵¹ That means 99.99 percent of the college programs had closed.

The first prison the Department of Corrections (DOC) sent me to was the infamous Sing Sing prison, from whence the phrase “up the river” derives. Experiencing reality through metal bars forced me to reflect on the poor decisions I made after I found my brother had committed suicide in our home, and on my years of drug use. I also reflected on the hurt and pain I caused my family, and those whom my actions had affected, such as the trauma I must have caused the people in the banks I had robbed. All of these actions led to society placing me in a cage.

Yet, because of my limited education (I had been kicked out of Albany High School and made to attend a school for troubled youth that should never have allowed me to graduate), I lacked the conceptual frameworks to fully explore the web of meanings, both systemic and personal, that shaped my current existence.

Prison is a total institution where you constantly feel what Michel Foucault calls the panoptic gaze. In this sense, the prison serves as society’s unapproving stare, peering into the soul in such a way as to instill the notion that you are nothing more than the sum of your failures.⁵² I recall walking into the chapel building looking for the transitional services program and realized what I had been told concerning college in prison was not entirely true. By mere accident, I walked into a college classroom where New York Theological Seminary offered a Master’s of Professional Studies degree. As a Christian, I thought God was playing a trick on me because I didn’t even have four college credits to my name, let alone the requisite bachelor’s degree to apply for the program.

Once I knew a master’s program existed, a strong desire to acquire an education developed within

51 <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2019/08/22/college-in-prison/>

52 Michel Foucault (1955). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books: New York.

me. Actually, this desire initiated after a spiritual encounter I had that began my Christian journey. The men from the master's program were leaders in the jail, serving as aides in different programs. Some of them became my mentors as they saw something in me, when all I could see was failure.

Eventually the DOC moved me to the Eastern Correctional Facility where I learned from students in the program that Bard College offered courses through the Bard Prison Initiative. Four years into my sentence, I was one of 15 students accepted into Bard College. Everything changed. Life, even life in prison, took on new meaning. I was no longer an inmate whose existence was reduced to the department identification number the state gave me. I was a Bard College student...and I began to dream again.

I thrived in Bard because the school had the philosophy of treating us just like students on campus. This demonstrated through authentic relationships that who we were, and what we had to say in our classroom conversations and in our writings, had value.

As I poured over readings of literature, history, philosophy, and sociology, my mind opened up to thinkers that shaped the world. I began to see myself anew as I imbibed concepts that helped me critically reflect on my life and role in society. I was no longer defined by the system as a societal pariah, but was, instead, a college student. In the process of intellectual engagement, my humanity was validated. In time, I earned an Associate of Arts Degree in Liberal Arts and a Bachelor's Degree in Social Studies. Ten years after walking into the New York Theological Seminary's college classroom accidentally, I went back to Sing Sing and earned a Master's of Professional Studies in Urban Ministry.

After reflecting on the biblical story of King Manasseh, who, after years of being removed from his position because of the destruction he caused in his country, returned from a prison in Babylon and rebuilt his hometown of Jerusalem, I had a strong desire to return to my hometown—a

place where I had once lived in such a harmful way—and to use my education to serve my community, joining others in efforts to make it better. I served at a homeless shelter, partnered with city officials and a local nonprofit in developing education programs for at-risk youth, and coordinated wraparound services to help people returning from prison thrive in society.

At the same time, my thirst for knowledge continued.

Not even two years out of prison, I was accepted into Yale Divinity School. I earned a Master of Divinity degree in 2016 and was awarded one of Yale's top honors, the Walcott Calkins Prize, and a Master of Sacred Theology degree in 2018. Yet the highlight of my time at Yale was to stand with my mother in front of my class, a picture that will hang on the wall at Yale through the years beyond our lifetime. It was at that moment I finally turned my mother's tears of sorrow into tears of joy.

Today, I am an ordained minister and director of my church's prison ministry. I am also a Ph.D. student at Georgetown University, and a Patrick Healy Graduate Fellow. I work as the Senior Federal Policy Associate at the Vera Institute of Justice.

Not too long ago I had the privilege of returning to Eastern Correctional Facility and offered the Invocation and Benediction at Bard's graduation. I reflected on the fact that the decisions made in that horrific space radically transformed my life's trajectory. Benjamin E. Mayes said, "The tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goals to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream." I realized it was in that space that I regained my humanity and found the will to dream while living a nightmare. The life I have today would not be possible without the education I received during my incarceration.

I am not unique. There are hundreds of men and women who are serving their communities as directors of nonprofits, professors, counselors, youth mentors, business owners, and more be-

cause of the education they received in prison. It has been 27 years since the 1994 crime bill was signed into law, and the vast majority of people in prison still don't have access to college programs.⁵³ One of the motivating factors for the work I do today is that I wonder how many other lives could be transformed by higher education programs in

prison. More importantly, I frequently ponder the question of who we would be as a society if we maximized the human potential of the 2.3 million people we incarcerate, over 94 percent of whom will one day be our neighbors. I firmly believe if we expanded higher education in prison we would all be better off.

21. “Education kept me grounded, all the while holding me responsible as well.”

I went to prison at the age of 16 and spent a total of 21 years inside Louisiana correctional facilities. Going to prison at such a young age, I thought my education was over and there would be no future for me.

I started my incarceration in a parish jail where many women were going to school to receive their General Educational Development (GED) diploma. I was so scared, quiet, and timid at that time that I could not make myself enter the classroom. Two years passed, and one day I was walking past the room where women were taking the pre-GED test with my head hanging low. Overseeing the group was a man everyone called “Coach.” He saw potential in me and asked me to come take the test because someone else had dropped out. I went in there and passed with flying colors. This was how education became important to me.

From then on, I took advantage of every educational program I could take, which included an associate degree program. I soon came to realize that I should not pass up an opportunity for education. Empowering the mind is very rewarding and stimulating when you have been away from society for so long. Education kept me grounded, all the while holding me responsible as well. It made me devel-

op a greater maturity, giving me the ability to set goals and plan for a brighter future. The more I learned the more I saw things in a different light. It created a craving to succeed.

No doubt enrolling in an education program improved my life from the inside out. Education does change minds because it teaches people how to think better and how to find alternatives to the way they used to do things. It serves as a platform to assist you with a better future. It gives many people hope again. Education played many roles in my life. Examples include renewing my confidence, sparking an interest in continuing my education, giving me a sense that prison time went by faster, and improving my self-image and pride. Most important, I discovered that I am more intelligent than I had previously given myself credit for.

I was released one semester before earning my associate degree. The online platform that the educational programs created allowed me to continue my semester like I would have if I was still in prison. There I was, home three months and holding my associate degree in my hand from Ashland University with support from a Pell Grant.

53 The Vera Institute of Justice (January 2019). *Investing in Futures: Economic and Fiscal Benefits of Postsecondary Education in Prison: Fact Sheet*. The Vera Institute of Justice. New York, NY.

I could have chosen to not continue my education, but a hunger inside would not allow me to stop. The drive never left me, and now I have my bachelor's degree. My dedication to education in prison made many people admire me and want to help me. It was through education that I was able to learn the basics of technology, adjust to society, and find a job.

I was in prison for 21 years, so technology was new to me. When I was released I knew I needed technology to find employment. My education in prison was crucial in this way. Knowing that communications is the heart of modern business, I was thrilled to be able to major in Applied Communications. Earning this degree was a huge plus for me in networking to find a job.

Right now, I am a life coach and mentor who helps formerly incarcerated people reenter society. This includes helping people get a driver's license, a job, a place to live, and medical care.

At the end of the day, education helped me regain my self-esteem. Plus, education empowered me to be confident that I could navigate through life with the knowledge I have gained. Being a student helped me to gain independence and responsibility, all the while increasing my knowledge, analytical, and problem-solving skills. I was able to attain a good quality of life because education was the light of my life for me. As it removed misconceptions, it helped to gain awareness. Prison education has been proven to have a significant impact on the future lives of incarcerated people, and I am one of them.

22. “The push to restrict the Pell Grants was purely political.”

I walked into the Maryland State Penitentiary with a sentence of two death penalties and 21 years at the age of 18 for a crime that I had not committed. After 10 years my sentences were commuted to two consecutive life sentences. In 2013, after 32 years in prison, I won a Writ of Actual Innocence and gained my release. What helped to sustain me during my three decades in prison, and upon release, were workforce and in-prison college programs.

About seven years into my incarceration, I had my epiphany that I needed to reclaim my life—define my dash, if you will. I refused to let my circumstances define me. I decided to control how I was going to deal with my situation and circumstances. I got involved in positive programming and productive employment training, and eventually enrolled in Coppin State University in 1992, a public HBCU in Maryland.

About three weeks into the first semester our World History professor sprung a pop quiz on us. Admittedly, at 32 years of age, with a 13-year gap since last being in school, I had a high degree of test anxiety! When I aced that pop quiz, I realized that it was not the same as when I was last in high school/community college. I was absorbing information like a sponge. I wanted to learn!

Why?

I knew that I had more to prove than any “citizen” student. I needed more than a piece of paper saying I had a degree. I needed the knowledge and education. Wherever life was going to take me I was always going to be operating at a disadvantage because of my prison record. The only equalizer for me was to be truly educated. From that moment on I never looked back. I never missed

a class, never was late with an assignment, and earned good grades. I jumped from taking 17 credits that first semester to maxing out at 21 credits each semester. I finished every semester with a 4.0 GPA. It was extremely lucky for me that I had chosen to do that.

I was in prison before 1994, so I used the Pell Grant to pay for my courses. Other guys did too. But all of that changed during my junior year because the federal government took it away from me. Here is why.

In 1994, Congress passed, and President Clinton signed, the *Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994*. Among other things it included a removal of eligibility for incarcerated individuals to qualify for Pell Grants. The *Higher Education Act of 1965* made federally funded grants available for students with financial need. Incarcerated individuals fit that criteria and were funded to pursue a higher education credential. The enactment of the crime control law immediately ended the college-in-prison program at my facility.

Fortunately, because I had been taking the maximum credits every semester, I was able to graduate as a junior from Coppin State in spring 1995. After only completing six semesters I was able to fulfill my degree requirements for a Bachelor of Science in Management Science with a concentration in Economics and Finance.

The push to restrict the Pell Grants was purely political. It was campaign rhetoric and easily digested by a misinformed public. It is easy to stoke someone's ire by stating the obvious of what it costs for parents to send their kids to college versus a convicted offender receiving a "free" education. During the 1993-94 school year the U.S. Department of Education invested \$6 billion into the Pell program! Approximately 23,000 incarcerated students—less than 1 percent of the approximately 4 million Pell recipients nationwide—participated in the Pell program at the cost of only \$30 million. In the big scheme of things, the amount of Pell money incarcerated students received was pennies compared to what other students received.

This was never a competition or a lottery that an applicant could lose to an incarcerated person. Your eligibility was determined by income status and need. Poor "free-world" and "incarcerated" students alike qualified for a Pell grant. And no "free-world" student lost a Pell grant because me or my in-prison classmates received one. As a side note, did removing the inmates' access to the Pell Grant somehow lower the costs of tuition for the regular tax paying citizen? Quite the contrary!

As I reflect on my life, I am proud of the things I've accomplished to help other people like myself, or to help loved ones with someone in prison or jail. My accomplishments are not for self-aggrandizement. I am merely representative of the men and women who pursued educational opportunities while incarcerated, many of whom were/are way smarter than me and achieved more, including master's degrees. They represented a minority of the prison population by seeking educational opportunities, but they have also proven to be the most successful upon re-integrating into society once given that opportunity.

My own return and reintegration into society several years ago has provided me with many opportunities and blessings—none of which would have been possible without my educational foundation and the opportunities I had while incarcerated. I have a successful career and serve on several nonprofit boards, and for five years I was the director of the largest community-based reentry program in Baltimore.

Currently I serve as the Director of Business Development for a financial services company. I actually get to work in the field of the college degree I earned in prison. Yet it wasn't that piece of paper that got me there. It was the education that piece of paper represents. It was the hunger and thirst for knowledge and betterment of self that I shared with so many thousands of my comrades, all seeking our paths while behind the walls. Education was the key to unlocking the prison gates.

These are my words I live by: "With education comes empowerment; with empowerment, confidence. And when you're confident, you can succeed."

CONCLUSION

Each author's story is about personal transformation and the role participation in an academic or vocational program during incarceration played in it. For many authors, the road that led to their incarceration was paved with broken promises and broken dreams. Once inside a jail or a prison, the educational road each author traveled was never paved with gold and silver. Meaning, the authors were not "given" an education. They earned it—through tenaciousness, resilience, and determination. They also built their success upon partnerships and funding.

Stakeholders who are interested in academic and vocational programs as a pathway for rehabilitation for incarcerated students should work with organizations and people already referenced in the report. Here are others to consider:⁵⁴

- Nonprofit organizations such as the Education Trust, the Brookings Institution, Unlock Higher Education, the Second Chance Educational Alliance, the Brennan Center for Justice, RespectAbility, and Dream Corps;

- Greater Washington, D.C.-area university scholars such as Dr. Marc Howard at Georgetown University, and Drs. Andrea Cantora and Renita Seabrook at the University of Baltimore; and
- University-affiliated research institutes such as the Center for Justice Research at Texas Southern University, and the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.

In closing, each one of us has a story to tell and an opportunity to impact the stories of others through our personal and professional decisions. Each of the 22 authors told us a story. How we choose to use these stories is up to us.

54 This list is not meant to be exhaustive. It includes groups and people with which I have a relationship: the Education Trust, <https://edtrust.org/issue/lift-the-ban/>; the Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/why-are-employment-rates-so-low-among-black-men/>; Unlock Higher Education, <https://www.unlockhighered.org/>; the Second Chance Educational Alliance, <https://scea-inc.org/about/>; the Brennan Center for Justice, <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/congress-should-reinstate-pell-grants-incarcerated-students>; RespectAbility, <https://www.respectability.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Disability-and-Criminal-Justice-Reform-White-Paper.pdf>; Dream Corps, <https://www.thedreamcorps.org/>; Dr. Marc Howard, <https://prisonsandjustice.georgetown.edu/people/director/>; Dr. Andrea Cantora, <https://www.ubalt.edu/cpa/faculty/alphabetical-directory/andrea-cantora.cfm>; Dr. Renita Seabrook, <https://www.ubalt.edu/cpa/faculty/alphabetical-directory/renita-l-seabrook.cfm>; and the Center for Justice Research at Texas Southern University, <https://www.centerforjusticeresearch.org>. For work about prisons and people published in *The Hedgehog Review* at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture please read the following: Leann Davis Alspaugh (Fall 2019). "The Graduate: How Do You Assess Rehabilitation?" *The Hedgehog Review*, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/eating-and-being/articles/the-graduate>; John J. Lennon (Summer 2016). The Murderer's Mother. *The Hedgehog Review*, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/meritocracy-and-its-discontents/articles/the-murderers-mother>; and Leann Davis Alspaugh (August 3, 2016). "The Murderer's Reckoning: An Interview with John J. Lennon." *The Hedgehog Review*, <https://hedgehogreview.com/blog/thr/posts/the-murderers-reckoning-an-interview-with-john-j-lennon>.

Although I support a diverse array of education programs for incarcerated students that have rehabilitative purposes, I am equally supportive of an incarcerated student's desire to pursue an education for the following reasons: self-improvement; self-enlightenment; for fun, laughter or creativity; for reasons that have nothing to do with a pursuit of a certificate, credential, or degree; and for reasons that may have nothing to do with recidivism or workforce development.

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