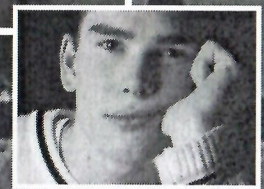


What You Do Today
Can Change Your Life...

Forever



You Could Be Me



*Tales From the Inside
To Those Still Free*

Introduction

I am an inmate. My name is now a series of numbers. It used to be Ney before I decided to let the state rename me. I have been in prison for almost 30 years at the time of this writing.

During those 30 years I have met thousands of people who are like me. By "like me" I mean someone who came to prison at an early age, and have grown old waiting for a day that will never come; the day they go home.

These people are black, white, red and yellow; tall, short, heavy and skinny; they are poor, middle class and rich. No two are alike. But there are a few things about each of them that are exactly alike. One is their belief that they are good people, people who didn't think they were going to come to prison. Another is that every single one of them wishes they would have made better choices at that younger point in their life that led to their downfall. The final thing they all share is now they know it's too late, they will probably die in prison, away from their brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers.

I spoke with some of these lost souls, the ones that were still sane, and I asked them to tell you a little bit about themselves. I did this because I never forget, not for a second, that in many cases the people in here with me are good people. Good people like you, who have made mistakes. And I know their goodness is still alive in them even though they themselves are lost to a life that will never know another happy day.

In every case I saw a spark of hope in their eyes. Not hope for themselves, but for you. I saw a spark of hope and excitement in their eyes at the chance to tell their stories, and perhaps, save someone from a life like theirs.

Don't let them down. Don't throw this booklet away without hearing or reading their stories. Let them think that maybe, just maybe, they were able to say something that made you realize just how easy it would be to end up in here with them. Don't deny them their hope, and don't deny yourself of a life of freedom. Don't be like these people, dying slowly, one day at a time.

Listen to what I'm telling you. After I got locked up I found out I had been wrong about the way I had been living my life. But no one in charge has asked me if I've got my act together now. Do you know why? Because they don't care. It's too late for me. There is no way to stop it now, other than by dying in prison.

Now is your chance to get your act together before it's too late. Once you commit the crime the process is out of your control. You are now a criminal waiting to get caught, sentenced, and sent to prison with the rest of us.

Use the wisdom in this booklet to save yourself. You still have a chance. If you're reading this, it could be your last chance.

The men who shared their stories with you in these pages are what society considers to be the scum of the earth. To me they are men who have made bad decisions in their lives; decisions that have ruined their lives, and the lives of others. They are just people, just like you. The difference is no one reached them in time to help them avoid the life they now live. Their lives could be a glimpse into your own future. Don't let it happen. Don't be them and don't be me. Your future is not carved in stone. It changes with every decision you make and every action you take. Choose wisely. Doing bad things will eventually get you in trouble. Being in trouble for 30 minutes is bad. Being in trouble for 30 years has been something I can't describe. It's been so bad that I have committed myself to saving others from the same fate. Be a success story. Live a life free of the horrors of prison. Do it for the men on these pages. Do it for the people who love you. Do it for yourself, you deserve it.

You could truly end up like any of us in this booklet. Please don't. Good luck.

Ney



Some Final Words

During my time in prison I have met some truly good and truly bad people. All of them agree. If they could have fixed things when they were young everything would have turned out differently.

Many of them wanted to stay out of trouble because they knew they might end up in prison. But due to the people around them, and what they might say or think about them if they did things like turn down a joint, or a drink of alcohol, or just wanted to avoid trouble, they went along with what was going on around them. And eventually found themselves in prison.

Be your own person. No one can come to prison for you. If you get caught – and you eventually will – you are the one coming to prison, not the ones you were trying to impress.

You want respect? Don't be a follower, be a leader. Have your own voice. Make your own decisions. Control the course your life takes. Respect will be yours.

If someone suggests doing something that could lead to trouble; put some distance between yourself and what's about to go down – just dip. If they are trying to talk you into doing something that could get you in trouble it was probably because they were either afraid to do it themselves, or wanted someone to share the blame with. Either way, they can't be looking out for what's best for you.

Another thing: Not everyone thinks things through. They truly can't see that it's going to end up bad if they do something stupid.

You on the other hand now have the information in this booklet, and the years of experience it took to put it together.

I know you think the people in this book don't understand what its like to be you. Well let me say this. They have been on the streets like you are – young and free with the whole world before them. You on the other hand have never done most of your life in prison as a result of doing something stupid while you were young. Not yet anyway. They know more about what it's like being in your situation than you do. You do not want to know what its like to be them!

Jay 16 then – 36 now

(We just wanted to scare him)

I came to prison at 16 for first degree murder. I didn't pull the trigger: my friend did that. We were driving and some guy was messing with us on the road, looking at us and stuff. Just to scare him, my friend wanted to fire a shot at his Blazer. I handed him my sawed off shotgun, that was in the back of the car. He rolled down the window, when the Blazer turned off, and was way down the street, my friend fired once towards the Blazer to scare him. I freaked when the rear window shattered. We didn't know it until later, but the driver of that vehicle was a school teacher, coming from choir practice. We didn't know the bullet from the shotgun hit him in the center of the head. He died an hour later. The bullet that was only meant to scare him somehow killed him.

My friend who pulled the trigger only got convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to 40 years in prison. But I received a life sentence. How is that possible? I'm still trying to figure it out 20 years later. If you want my guess, it's this. I was in a family. What outsiders call a gang. By being in a gang, and the reputation it brings, people tend to fear and/or respect you. I feel that I was respected. Unfortunately there was a price for my respect, and that price was extracted during my trial. I was known by the police and that reputation more or less ended my life.

Now I'm a member of another gang. We all wear blue shirts and pants with a white stripe down the side. It's the chain gang. I'm a convict now and all of my brothers and sisters from the past have forgotten me.

My advice, live your own life. Don't do it in prison. Do the right thing and think your actions through carefully, because if you don't, you could be me.



Mike 16 then – 38 now

(So I did what the rest of my friends were doing)

I consider myself as a pretty good guy. But now, looking back, I guess I did some things that other people consider bad. I guess I just couldn't accept the fact that we were poor. Anyone who's been there will tell you, seeing all of those rich people with good clothes and good cars used to drive me crazy! I just couldn't see how anyone could get enough money to buy those things. So I did what the rest of my friends were doing at the time, I took it!

Now, when I think about the way things went down, I don't see how it could have ended up any other way. Stealing is stealing. I just started with something small, candy and stuff. Before I knew it I'm taking anything I think I can get away with. At 14 I stole my first car. I wasn't even old enough to drive it, and didn't keep it for more than a few hours. All we did with it was ride around. I never got caught for that.

The one I did get caught for was a car jacking. Back then I wasn't calling it that. I just wanted what I wanted.

Unfortunately a law had just been passed that made car jacking with a gun a life felony. The bad part about it was I didn't even have a gun! My partner did and I didn't even know it!

So now I'm doing life in prison. No hope for parole. Nothing. I'll never forget the way my mom broke down in the courtroom when they found me guilty. A lot like I did when I got back to my cell that night.

That was 22 years ago. I wish cars were never invented. Better yet, I wish I would have listened to my girl. She knew where I was going and I didn't. Now I'm not going anywhere, ever. Just please, be careful, you could be me.



What Can You Expect In Prison?

(From the voices of experience)

"To grow old before your time."

"To go to bed hungry every night."

"To be hated by society."

"To be afraid."

"To be strip searched at 3:00 in the morning."

"To learn your mother died and you never got to see her before she went."

"To take showers with several people at a time."

"To go years at a time with never riding in a car."

"To be told what to do, every minute of every day."

"To hate Christmas, your birthday, or any other holiday, because in prison its just another day."

"To never be able to trust someone."

"To never touch someone, unless it's during a fight."

"To have your 5 year old child ask when you are coming home and having to tell them never. Then to have that same child ask if it's because you don't love them anymore."

"To go months at a time without talking to one person who cares about you."

"To see a dog only when he's sniffing your cell for drugs."

"To hate yourself for throwing your life away over something stupid."

"To wish you were never born."

"To share a cell with someone who has killed someone, then having to go to sleep."

"To never be allowed to cry, and to want to cry every single day."

Vernon 14 then – 50 now

(It was never my plan to hurt anyone)

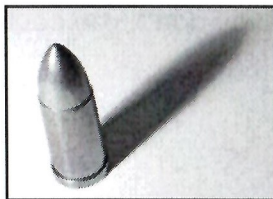
I guess I started messing up before I was old enough to go to school. By second grade I was disruptive in class and wouldn't do any of the work I was assigned. That continued until I dropped out of school in the 8th grade. Around the time I dropped out of school I got my hands on a small pistol, a .25 automatic. I felt I needed it since the neighborhood I lived in was so rough. From there it was only a matter of time before having a gun got me in trouble. I couldn't see the fall coming, only the fear, which I thought was respect, in the eyes of those I pulled the gun on.

So, many guns later, in 1982, I was arrested for a crime involving a gun. This time it was a .357. I bailed out of jail, then went on the run from the police. Since I couldn't use my own name, in order to stay free, I had to commit more and more crimes to earn money.

Before I knew it I had committed my last crime and was arrested. That was in 1983. I've never been out since.

It was never my plan to hurt anyone. I just wanted to be left alone to do what I wanted. I truly didn't see the importance of what they were trying to teach me in school, or what it would hurt to carry a gun as long as I didn't shoot anyone. I guess I couldn't have been more wrong. Wrong about needing an education and wrong about having a gun.

Now, almost 30 years later, I can't believe how blind I was to my own actions. It's like a movie in my head, all of the people trying to warn me that I was messing up. I wouldn't listen. Will you listen? If you don't, you could be me.



Crash 11 then – 21 now

(We were fighting after school)

They call me Crash. After reading this I hope it will open your eyes to the reality of doing wrong. I'm 21 now and I've been getting locked up off and on since I was 11, mostly for fighting.

I'll never forget the first time I was arrested. I was beefing with some kid in school and I called him out. We were fighting after school, down the street, and someone called the cops.

Since that time I was also locked up from the ages of 13 to 16. I got out for 10 months and ended up getting locked up again, this time for bringing a gun to school. I was 17 at the time and was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

This last time in prison was my eye opener. Since I got locked up this time I got my GED and I am taking a business class here at the prison. I have hopes of starting my own business when I get out. I think that this time I've got it right.

Note: 3 hours after this article was submitted to me Crash went to confinement for fighting. Now his stay in prison will be longer and his business class was stopped due to getting in trouble. As a result of this new development, his chances of coming back to prison are even greater. The unfortunate truth of the matter is that once you are in prison your chances of continuing the cycle of coming back are tremendous. I've been in prison for 30 years. I've seen this before. My guess is that Crash will continue to come back to prison, one commitment at a time, for the rest of his life. Be careful, or you could be him.

Joe 11 then – 65 now

(It has been a revolving door for way too long)

My name is Joe, and I have spent most of my life in and out of prison. I sometimes think about when it all started. I was only 11 or 12 back then and already getting in trouble. I was sent to reform school several times, graduating from one institution to another. By the time I was 21, I had already served time in prison. I'm much older today and still serving time. It has been a revolving door for way too long. I started out as a troubled kid, and as a result, I've lived a troubled life. How I wish I had someone to guide me when I was young. How I wish I had someone to teach me something good way back then.

I want to tell you to take advantage of all the opportunities that are available to you today, opportunities that just weren't there when I was young. I'm talking about all the programs designed to steer you in the right direction. I'm talking about all the professionals who want to help you stay out of trouble. I'm talking about all the messages from other guys like me who truly care and do not want you to travel down the same path as us, a path that can only lead to pain and suffering. Take my word for it; you do not want to come to prison today. It is truly hell on earth.

Right now, as I think about all the young people who are about to get in trouble with the law, I wish I could talk to them in order to convince them that they can change the course of their lives. But I can't. So this message will have to do. I urge you to listen intently to what everyone is trying to say to you. The people who are trying to help you really do care about you. They don't want to see you in and out of prison for the rest of your lives like me. Change the course of your lives now while you have the opportunity. While you are changing your life, reach out and help someone else to change theirs. You can help each other to get on the right path.

I wish you all the success that life has to offer. Strive to do what is right. And above all else do whatever it takes not to be me.

Brian 13 Then – 20 now

(Selling rock, snatching chains, whatever)

I grew up in the projects. We were poor and I dropped out of school in the 7th grade. I wasn't old enough to get a legal job. And I wasn't going to flip hamburgers anyway. I started hustling. Selling rock, snatching chains, whatever. There wasn't any other way to come up. I kept this up for a couple of years before I almost went in. But since I was young and it was my first offense, I got probation.

My plan was to eventually go legit with my music. I have a lot of songs on paper. Better than most of the stuff that was hitting #1. So until I could do something with that I kept doing what I had to do to get by.

I ended up with two of my own people trying to rob me. I pulled my piece on them and I guess I was squeezing the gun too tight. I was tripping. I couldn't believe they would try me. Anyway I was pointing the gun at them for about two seconds when it went off. I didn't even know what happened. It was the first and only time I ever fired a gun.

When it was all over the one left alive told the police that it was *me* robbing *them*, not the other way around. Now I'm doing life.

Since then I have taught myself to read and I've got my GED. Above all else I've seen where I went wrong. Wrong from the very start. I should have stayed in school. It was free! I should have got a job and worked as many hours as I could every week. Flipping hamburgers; mopping floors; whatever it took. Then maybe once I had gotten a car and a place of my own I could have done something with my music.

Now I work in the kitchen here at the prison, washing pots. I don't get paid. I'll probably get a better job in here soon. It's so weird. Now I dream of working for someone at minimum wage. It would be heaven compared to what my life is now. Think things through. If you don't, you could be me.

Pat 11 then – 39 now

(The first time I got high I was 11)

The first time I got high I was 11 years old. 12 when I got drunk. If the waves were decent I'd duck school and hit the beach; if not, I was looking for a new spot to skate. High every day and drunk all weekend. I just wanted to have some fun with my friends. If I wasn't working for it, the occasional car or home stereo helped pay my share.

One time me and a buddy of mine pooled our money and got an ounce. We stashed it in his car while we went to school. By second period I was ready to slide and told him so. He gave me the keys so I could get a few joints and he said, "Don't screw me over." When I got to the car I looked and looked but couldn't find the weed. The rent-a-cop in the parking lot was coming around so I started the car with the intention of taking it to my house so I could get a better look. By the time it was all over the cops were looking for me everywhere. Grand larceny (the car); reckless driving and hit and run (an accident); and driving on a restricted license. I was 15.

Fast forward - more partying: Liquor, weed, shrooms, beans, powder, acid. Not the serious stuff though: no needles, crack, meth. What do you think I am, stupid? I'm just hanging out and having fun. So what if I boost a car or hit a house - nothing serious.

Yeah - nothing serious. Until you're tripping out of your mind and hit a house that's supposed to be empty. Only it's not. You're not sure who's more freaked out, but you know you're not trying to go to prison. In the blink of an eye you make a choice.

No big deal - except it is. Because now you're fourteen years into a life sentence - no parole. Every month you get a gain time slip with a release date of 99/98/9999 - your reminder. Your reminder that these people want you to die in here. But...I only wanted to have fun. You could be me, but it's no fun.

Note: Every inmate who receives a life sentence has 99/98/9999 printed on his or her Gain Time sheets. This is a real date in the eyes of the Florida Department of Corrections.

Bama 12 then – 23 now

(I decided to join a gang)

At 12 I got arrested for breaking into houses and possession of a controlled substance. It was all fun and games until I was being placed in the Department of Juvenile Justice. I got sent away for the next 11 months for my actions.

While there I decided to join a gang. Both of my older brothers were in the gang so I wanted to be a part of it too. Now they are both dead.

When I was released I stayed out of trouble for 6 months. Then I failed my last drug test and went back to jail for 1 year. At 17 I was stuck for 14 months in the county jail for 20 different first degree felonies; 6 of them were gang related charges. I was luckily shown sympathy by the judge. I was sentenced to 12 months and released that day, time served. By my 18th birthday I continued to gang bang, no matter what anyone told me. I was a grown man. I could fend for myself. YEAH RIGHT! At 19 I was arrested along with 3 of my "gang brothers." I was the only one taken to jail. They were released as long as they "rolled" on me. I got 48 months in prison along with 3 years probation for armed robbery. Funny thing is I never committed the crime. While in prison I continued to gang bang. I have suffered the consequences of living the "gang life." I have lost my family, my freedom and my self respect due to the life I chose to live. I got all of these gang tattoos on my body now. I have in return got beat because I chose to leave that life behind and start over. I have found out the hard way that I was in the wrong the whole time.

I always had my family telling me what they thought was best for me, but to no avail. My parents were right. Now, if I can reach at least one person and send them down the right path I have finally accomplished something good in my life. I have lost everything I had because I wanted to be a "gangsta." Look at me now; broken down to a convicted felon, gang banger, with nothing to go home to. Life is too short to be screwing up and gang banging. Life may be hard for you now, but if you're not careful, you could be me.

Josh 15 then – 24 now

(I was a straight A student in school)

My letter is different from the other guys. You'll see in a minute. I came to prison at 15 for a one time stupid thing I did. I didn't know it was stupid at the time or I wouldn't have done it. Now I'm more careful. Anyway, I broke into a neighbor's house and stole some stuff, and obviously, I got caught for it later. I got sentenced to 10 years. I get out in a few months.

Because of how young I was and how young I looked, things didn't go too well for me when I got to prison. I'm writing this letter to you from protective custody. That's where they put inmates like me, the ones who can't make it in open population.

I've never had a girlfriend, but I hope to get one when I get out. The problem is, now I'm HIV positive. So I really don't know what I'm going to tell people. Not even my mother knows yet. I still can't believe how things have turned out for me. I was a straight A student in school. I would have probably gone to college. Now I'm about to get out of prison with no job skills. No GED. Nothing. I'll probably live with my mom. I don't know.

But I do know this; I wish I never would have set one foot in that house. I wish everything was different. I wish someone would have warned me, like I'm warning you. I just don't want this to happen to anyone else. I don't want you to be me, because you could be, easier than you think.



Paco 13 then – 40 now

(I was in the company of drug-dealers & murderers)

My name is Paco. I'm 40 years old. Just 5 years ago I realized I'm not getting any younger. Now I pay attention to what I'm being told, but I'm always watching for the hook. We are meant to listen to our inner-self, as well as our intuition, which tells those of us who are caught-up in the street life, how to survive. I came up in a household with grown ups who were grown in body but not in mind or spirit. I on the other hand was small in body, but great in mind and actions. But my actions were negative; they pushed me into the streets. By age 13, I was in the company of drug-dealers & murderers who took a liking to me, but they also used to tell me to go back home, go to school, always after they gave me money. But I wanted money like they had, but couldn't do the work to get it. So I went from neighborhood to neighborhood hustling and then got busted for a triple-homicide, and got sentenced to 3 natural life-sentences. Eventually the courts reversed and remanded my cases for a new trial. Then I heard that whisper called "reality." It said, "Listen to your intuition and watch for the hook." Then I finally realized what the whisper meant. The whisper was saying that we must follow the right code of conduct, mainly to love ourselves, and do not fall for the glitter and gold in life. Be steadfast in doing the right things in life by being productive people. Listen to your inner voice and watch out for the hooks in life that can misguide you and ultimately lead to your destruction. Because this life is very short; so why not live free, live good and love ourselves? If we do not, then no one will. Wake up and live, or you could be me.

