

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/a-new-pathway-of-perception>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Sometimes when I tell people that it took prison to get my life right, they look at me as if I have lost my mind. However, the truth of the matter is that prison is where I found my mind.

Twelve years ago, I was damaged. I lacked values and morals and, even more so, respect for myself or anyone that I came into contact with. I sold drugs to my own parents and robbed people for the little or nothing that they had, just because I could. I was a monster, and I was out of control.

But I am here to share with you another story, a story about overcoming obstacles and achieving redemption. The story of a new me.

When I entered the Michigan state prison system in 2003, I was in rough shape. I lacked general educational skills, and I could barely read or write. The 12-and-a-half year sentence I received at 23 might as well have been life. I could see no light at the end of the tunnel; instead, a dark gloom encompassed my entire being.

However, a day came when I woke up and realized that I was tired, alone and, most of all, in need of change. Pride blocked me at first because I had an image to protect. Still, something had to give, and what gave first was my pride.

I started to teach myself to read and write. This was a frustrating time for me, but also the beginning of something beautiful. With every word that I took in, I was driven by something inside of me that I did not realize existed. I was hungry to learn, understand, and overcome my own self-built obstacles. With each day came more momentum and more challenges to overcome. I welcomed each obstacle as a step on a journey to becoming someone different.

Then it happened: a pilot program called [Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education](#) was announced to inmates. I applied, and before I knew it I was transferred to Parnall Correctional Facility to join the 60 other students in the program. Things were coming together.

My first class was called First Year Seminar, a class designed to equip students for transition into education and life. My instructor, [Dr. Todd Butler](#), Dean of Arts and Sciences at Jackson College, proved to be one of the most intelligent individuals I have had the pleasure of knowing. When I looked at him, I could see in his eyes his sincere desire that all of his students would succeed. I could see that he wanted me to succeed. I would soon learn that there would be more like him to follow.

Regular classes began the next semester, and I was challenged beyond what I thought my capabilities could endure. Although I struggled at times and still continue to do so, I discovered that I was much more capable than I had originally thought. I made the Deans list and have continued to maintain a 3.5 GPA, but the program has taught me about more than just composition strategies, communication, geology, and psychology. It helped open my eyes to the real me.

Over these last 12 years, I have learned that fear and insecurity are most often responsible for prioritizing reputation over more important values. Appearing to be what you believe you should be in the eyes of others takes precedence over the truth of who you really are. I have learned, however, that reputation is not nearly as important as character. In fact, I have learned that if you take care of your character, your reputation will take care of itself. Getting my college education has influenced the shaping of my character as well as my mind.

I will carry what I have learned in this program with me for the rest of my life.

I will not let my prison number and my felony convictions dictate who I am. They are a relic of the past. I am my own leader, the controller of my own destiny. I am a new man, unfinished yet, but confident and sure that I will do good things in the future.

The tools that I have been equipped with are priceless. I will use them each day to better others, the world, and myself.

I will help, not hurt.

I will succeed.

Jason K. Bell was granted parole and released from prison last week. As [Vera's Fred Patrick blogged about last Friday](#), the U.S. Department of Education recently announced that it is restoring incarcerated peoples access to Pell grants, a form of federal aid to help income-eligible people attend college.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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