

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dispatches-from-t-r-u-e/my-old-friends>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

This post was written by Michael, a mentor in the T.R.U.E. unit at Cheshire Correctional Institution. T.R.U.E unit mentors are people serving life without parole sentences at the Connecticut Department of Corrections. Through a competitive application process, 10 mentors were selected to live and work on the unit with the young adults. Mentors received training through Connecticut Department of Correction, Vera, and the Motivating Individual Leadership for Public Advancement (MILPA) collective over the course of eight weeks to prepare for this unique and trailblazing role.

Twenty four years ago, I was a 15-year-old kid, immature, and I definitely knew what was best.

I had never been in trouble with the law. I was a boy scout and an altar boy. My plan was to become either a surgeon or a biomedical researcher. But everything changed the day I was arrested for murder, two months after my fifteenth birthday. I was sent to juvenile detention in Hartford Connecticut and spent the next 20 months there. I was transferred to the adult court after my sixteenth birthday and sent to the dorms in the county jail with grown men. This was at a time when the gang problem in the Connecticut Department of Corrections was at its worst. The Corrigan-Radgowski Correctional Center (Corrigan) opened up a few months later as the new county jail and I was transferred there. Four months later, I was sentenced to 60 years. I was 17.

After sentencing, I was transferred again to Walker Reception and Special Management Unit for assessment before another transfer to the youth prison, Manson Youth Institute. I spent three years there before I aged out and went back to an adult prison, Cheshire Correctional Institute (CI). After a couple years passed, the prison system in Connecticut had gotten so overcrowded that they started shipping hundreds of inmates out of state to a level six prison in Virginia (Cheshire CI is a level four). I spent six months there before returning back to Cheshire, where I've been for the last 17 years.

As a shy and cautious kid, I tried over the years to keep to myself. I learned that the more people you associated yourself with, the greater potential there was for problems. I always had the hope that something or someone would come along and I would be able to get the chance to get out of prison before I finished my 60-year sentence. So, I retreated into books, waiting. First, I just read whatever; then, I thought that if I was going to get out soon, I had better learn the things that I needed to become the doctor I wanted to become. But as the years went by and I went through the curriculum, I found myself still in prison, waiting. Studying medicine got me interested in other things and I moved on to anthropology, then math, then business, computers, graphic arts, psychology, and philosophy. Bottom to top, I stayed in those books, focused on freedom and what I would need to know to take advantage of the dwindling opportunities as the decades passed by.

The books would pile up so much that I would send home a banker box full of books every few months to keep within the confines of my property allotment of six cubic feet. My parents dutifully packed them in the storage area of their home, waiting for our reunion. I spent so much time in those books they became my closest friends. Their attention consumed my time and I was grateful for it. The years blurred into a series of topics, ideas, possibilities, new worlds, and different perspectives. It was always a tough choice on which books to send home and which ones to keep. I'm always finding myself in a situation where I wish I still had a certain book.

About three months ago, I was privileged enough to be chosen as a mentor for a pilot program called the T.R.U.E. Program. In the T.R.U.E. unit, there are different areas designated for specific purposes. Using empty cells, we created a barbershop, study room, computer room, self-expression room, The Spot, and a library. The library had no books and it was revealed to us that we could have books donated to the library to fill it up. I talked to my parents and told them they could bring my old books back. My father went into the storage area and started going through all the boxes and repacking them to fit the maximum number of books in a minimum amount of space. It totaled 15 heavy boxes. Two by two my parents started bringing back my old books to be cataloged and placed in the library for the community.

I remember the first two boxes that I was given to put on the shelves. Some of those books I hadn't seen in over 20 years. I sat there flipping through the pages, seeing some faded highlighted passages that were still visible. It brought back memories of different facilities and housing units, different phases of my life. I put them all on the shelves and sat back and thought how nice it was to see my old friends. How grateful they'll be to meet my new friends in the T.R.U.E. Program.

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