

“Paws For Life Program: Hope Resurrected”

Thirty-three years ago, I was nineteen and on my way to prison. Like most young men, I thought I was cool and tough. I thought it was cool to be the “bad boy” and now I was facing Life Without the Possibility of Parole in prison. I could not even begin to comprehend what that really meant. A million questions whirled around in my head; how could I do that much time? How could I understand what that really meant? The one undeniable fact raging through my mind was that I would be spending the *rest of my life* in prison. I can look back now and admit I was terrified.

At 19, I looked like a fourteen-year-old kid. I remember those first nights in prison, afraid in ways I never knew before. A knife clutched tightly in my hand, afraid to be holding it and terrified of not having it near my side. My world changed and nobody cared if I used to be a “tuff guy” on the streets or if I impressed girls. The inmates did not know anything about me and the correctional staff thought of me as another nonperson to look down on and hate. I remember realizing that no one would know if I was hurt or killed. I would just be another statistic, easily forgotten by the world.

Time crawls in prison while the world continues its dizzying spin. At 29 years old, with ten long years behind me, I was still afraid but learned how to “live” in prison (more like “live with” prison). The dramatic politics in prison are like nothing a person from the outside can understand. There are so many rules, spoken and implicit, that one must follow in order to survive. Do not eat with anyone outside of your race; do not play sports with anyone outside of your race; do not go into areas that belong to other races because it may start a riot; do not talk to a correctional officer for too long without someone else there because people may think you are a snitch. The list goes on and on—I had to learn innumerable strange things in order to keep breathing, so many bizarre things I wish I could forget. When I look in the mirror now I see, with great sadness, how much prison has changed me. Gone is that lost and scared nineteen-year-old boy.

In those days it seemed I was slowly losing touch with my humanity. When violence erupted, I looked on with little, if any, emotion. I still cared but learned to show no concern. Displaying compassion is the same as displaying weakness and that invites trouble. Prison is all about keeping up a “front” or wearing a mask. The problem with that is the longer you put up a front or wear a mask, the more you become who you are pretending to be. As the years passed, I slowly lost contact with anyone that knew the real me. Friends and family stopped writing, due to either lack of interest or fear of what I was becoming. Only my little sister stayed by my side. She is the only one who can see past my façade, able to see her desperate and helpless older brother, wanting to be loved and remembered.

Twenty years go by and I am thirty-nine years old. There is a deep weariness in my bones. The politics, drama, and violence have worn me away until I can hardly recognize the face staring back at me in the mirror. I reflect back on my crime and wonder why...I wonder about my family and where they have gone, what they have become. Have my mother, father, and step-mom forgiven me for all of my bad decisions? My letters have only been met with silence and indifference so I will never know. The only one constant in my life is my little sister, the saint. My sister welcomes me into her life each day and shares the lives of her amazing sons with me. Being a part of my nephews’ lives helps me stay grounded in a detached world, and allows me to keep a small spark of humanity alive within me. When I am not writing my sister and nephews, I try to stay busy by working. I make draperies for hotels, casinos, and other places in the Prison Industries. For the very first time in my life, I have a real job, making an honest living. I started sweeping floors and slowly worked my way through each position, and tried my hardest to do the very best job that I could. It felt great when I was recognized for my hard work ethic and for the very first time I felt pride in what I was doing. I soon made my way to the lead clerk position; there I was in charge of supplies and payroll for a shop doing hundreds of thousands of dollars in business. I felt like a man for the first time in my life.

Forty-nine years old and the weariness is etched on my face like exhausted knife marks on dry, peeling tree bark; my soul cries out silent, screaming for something I cannot find. I suffer from serious bouts of depression and I wonder why I am still trying to continue. I was nineteen-years-old when I was thrown away to decay in prison, and here I sit, still withering, wondering if I will ever get a chance at the freedom that my spirit craves. I watch TV and see thousands of people being released from prison, only to come right back again. I see a society refusing to

acknowledge statistics showing that men who have spent more than twenty years in prison for murder have less than a .1% chance of ever committing another crime. Men, who are under the age of twenty-five when their crime was committed, are even less likely to return. People often ask me, “How do you do it?” “How do you stand being locked up for so long?” “How do you smile and laugh?” “How do you keep going?” My response is, “What do you expect me to do, kill myself? Give up? Die from the guilt that runs through my soul’s veins every second for the damage I have done?” I will never quit on life.

It is 2014 and there is a great new program called Paws For Life in the building where I live. We had been cleaning and painting, getting ready for the dogs to come into the building. After many 14-hour days working non-stop it is time for the dogs to arrive. It has been more than thirty years—three long decades—since I have interacted with a dog. I watched from the sidelines as the dogs came into the building to meet their new trainers. I am fascinated, and though I am only a person who cleans and helps and not in the program, a joyful feeling sprouts deep within the shadowy, poisoned depths of my heart—hope blooms.

I watch the dogs for weeks, amazed at how cool this program is becoming. It is taking days for this to settle into my head. I am still in prison but we have dogs here! How can a person explain what it is like after all this time to be around a dog...I have petted and played a little with the dogs but they are still getting used to their surroundings and hundreds of people staring at them in wonder, joy, and confusion. A friend of mine assigned to a dog I was cautiously petting told me, “Jack, just sit down and pet her. She won’t hurt you!” I sat on the floor, a smile spreading across my face as the dog, Shelby, climbed into my lap and began licking my face. The world stopped, my heart began beating faster and the years melted off my face, faded like empty smoke, and I was a child again. I could feel tears on my face and I didn’t care who noticed them. For so long I was lost, repressed, infected by hate and division, but with that special moment, when my heart opened wide blazing with vibrant energy, I felt what it was like to be human—to live again. I was holding a dog! I knew right then that I would do whatever it took to stay close to these amazing animals and this great program. I felt restored; my hope was resurrected.

It would be another year before I finally became a member of the Paws For Life program, though living in the building with them allowed me to remain close to the dogs and their trainers. I loved being able to help and spend time with the pups. There were a few special ones that captured my heart from the first time I saw them. I would work 12 – 14 hours, seven days a week, for 12 bucks a month and was happy to do it. I was finally working for the dog program, on my way to becoming a member and trainer. I could not think of anything in prison that could make me happier, or feel more alive.

I will always remember the first dog assigned to me. Her name was Lucy and she was amazing. Lucy had been dropped off at Karma Rescue, the magnificent organization that makes this program possible, just a few hours prior to being brought here to us. She had been with a couple since she was a puppy, but they had a child and could not take care of her anymore. She came here suffering from intense separation anxiety, crying for hours for her former family. Many people asked me how I could put up with all the noise and I would smile and reply, “I empathize—I know exactly how she feels.” Some understood what I meant, others did not, but either way it was the truth. It is how I felt when I first came to prison; it is how I feel about so many things from my past.

I remember those first few days clearly. I would walk Lucy around the yard to help her acclimate to the new surroundings. Sometimes I would bring her to my cell, lay out a blanket on my bed for her, and coax her onto it. Usually, she would sit or lay by the door and whine, but little by little, I would persuade her to join me. I decided to take baby steps with her. I would sit away from her and allow her to become accustomed to me. Even though she would watch me very carefully, she eventually let me come closer. She was on medication for the anxiety but she was still traumatized. Every day she would lay a bit closer to me, periodically allowing me to lay a hand on her and gently pet her. As time went by, she would let me pet her more. She was never aggressive but she would move if she felt uncomfortable. I wanted to hug her and pet her but that was not what she needed or wanted. What she required was for someone to be patient and just be there for her. I deeply identified with her.

Within a few weeks, for better or worse, Lucy had attached herself to me as much as she had her previous family. I admit I knew the transferred attachment was unhealthy, but I also loved being loved so unconditionally. Some of my fellow trainers would tease me about how stuck on me she was, and displayed concerns not just for me, but for Lucy. She would have to leave me once training was over and she was adopted. It would be difficult for us both. Each time I would look at her, I knew it but I always asked myself, “What else can I do but keep loving her?” It was not as if I could start being mean to her so she would not love me.

I spent many hours with Lucy. We trained, hung out together, and I loved Lucy as much as she obsessively loved me. She was smart and learned everything that I asked of her in no time. When training, if I asked her to do things more than once, her intelligent eyes would direct a humorous glance at me, as if she raised an eyebrow

saying, “Excuse me?” I would catch myself talking to her; just rambling on about whatever was on my mind while we walked or relaxed in the cell. It was as if Lucy enjoyed our conversations, as if she understood. It was like she knew when I was saying something important because her cute little head would turn to the side and I could not help but smile and wonder if she really knew what I was saying! As the weeks went by, Lucy stole a piece of my heart and soul. She reminded me that it was okay to feel, and to love. I forgot about being in prison and stopped caring about the front I had put on for so many years. I was just a man that loved an amazing dog that loved me back. I was normal and I found that not only was I saving Lucy from being sent to a shelter, she was saving me from my own corrosive discontent. Lucy loved me and changed my life forever. She reminded me with a lick to the face that I have changed and I could do something positive with my life. I could help her and other dogs like her.

I knew coming into the Paws For Life program, I would be helping save dogs. What I did not realize is that the dogs would be saving us as well. I remember Alex, an amazing and kind woman from Karma Rescue, talking to me for the first time. She walks up to Lucy and me, and asks how Lucy is as she kneels and starts petting Lucy. I watch her, answer all of her questions, and smile inwardly at how comfortable she is with Lucy. It is clear that she knows all about her and it felt wonderful to know that other people cared for Lucy as much as I did. I knew then that I was a part of something important. I was helping people like Alex save animals. Like most of the guys, I just wanted to be around the dogs, but this new insight deepened my appreciation. I was helping save the lives of dogs.

A nice woman who works at the prison soon adopted Lucy. She loves and adores Lucy, just as we thought and hoped. Now Lucy is obsessed with her new family. I have heard a few stories about her that affected me deeply. I am proud of her and the life she has now. I am so glad that they are both very happy and that I helped make this possible.

Paws For Life has changed my life, it has changed who I am inside. No longer do I write or call my sister and complain about prison, correctional officers, or the legal system. I write, call, and tell them about the puppies! My sister can see the changes in me. She is always quick to ask about how things are going with our pups. She understands how great this program is for me and all included. She is amazed with how I sound and act, because I feel more alive than I have in years. Her wife, Brooke, is also quick to ask about the dogs, happy and amused with my love and obsession for the dogs we are entrusted with. Jessie, a great woman that I am proud to call Mom, who has given her love to me as her own son, has told me how much I have changed and how much happier I am since the dogs have come into my life. Laura, her daughter and my new sister, is always asking me about the dogs. Sometimes we forget to talk about ourselves because we are so engrossed in what is going on with Paws For Life. I know that I am blessed and I will never forget how lucky I truly am.

We get many different dogs brought in for us to instruct. They are trained, kept healthy, happy, and each one carries a piece of our hearts with them when they leave. Thanks to Karma Rescue, they will never be hurt again; they will never be killed. Instead, they will live out the rest of their lives cared for and loved. That is all that anyone could wish for them.

I am fifty-two years old now. I came to prison thirty-three years ago. I was a kid, I was lost and afraid—no, I was terrified and facing Life Without the Possibility of Parole. I am starting to see what that means. I should have given up, I should be full of hate and anger—that would have been easier. I am not. I know how to love again. I know how to feel again. I know what it feels like to be a part of something larger than myself. I know how to love the dog that I have been blessed with by Karma Rescue to train and it has changed me forever. Lewis Carroll insisted that all we do that is right in our lives, we do for others. I am living a renewed life, one of service, joy, and compassion. My fears, my doubts, the negativity that once consumed my spirit, no longer haunts the shadowed corners of my dreams as they once did. Jubilant displays of absolute love and devotion by these incredible dogs are all I see. I am revived by the grace of their hairy innocence and the elegance of their slobbering love.
Paws Up!