

## Personal Healing

My journey to prison began with the loss of my father when I was nine years old. I was in Germany where my dad was stationed. I was heartbroken and felt as if my whole world was caving in. I was sad but looking forward to going to Alabama to stay with my Grandma and my favorite Grandpa. But as my mom and I were getting the tickets and travel plans together, my Grandpa died also, both of the men I loved were gone within two weeks of each other; I was devastated. I was not aware of this at the time, but I blamed God for taking them and became angry at the world. As I grew up, I had this underlying anger that affected my decisions. When I turned 18, I joined the Army so I could take out my anger on someone, i.e. combat. I served in Bosnia and while most men found the atrocities saddening, I enjoyed my combat experience as it allowed me to vent this stored up anger. After returning from the Army, I joined up with a group of men, some old Army brothers and we committed acts of violence, culminating in a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole (LWOP).

The first step of my healing began in county jail. I picked up a Bible and began reading it. I eventually came to believe it and started living according to its principles. This literally changed my attitude and persona instantly, although I still had work to do. My faith started me feeling again, not anger but mercy and love. I actually cared for people again. I started taking self-help classes and putting into practice critical thinking, as well as positive coping mechanisms. All of this was helpful, but the unconditional love of my dog caused the deepest change in me.

I joined Paws For Life, a unique dog training program set up here on the Progressive Programming Facility, approximately three years ago. When I joined I was assigned a cute little boxer named Kellie. She had been abused and was scared. She would not respond to anything or anyone. The first week of my training was sitting on the floor and allowing her to stand around me. On the fourth day, we had a breakthrough. Kellie looked at me, and trusted me enough to curl up in my lap and sleep. This feeling of warmth spread over me, like a warm blanket or a hug from another person, and brought me to tears. This was the first time I had cried in a very long time. To be loved enough by this gentle creature really touched me to the inner-most part of my soul. She trusted this stranger enough to just lie there and sleep in my lap. I felt like a normal person, I was not angry, I felt love, true love. Her healing started that day, and so did mine. I had a responsibility, a little life to take care of that would one day find a forever home. This type of unconditional love taught me how to truly love again. To not just grow in my array of coping mechanisms, but to truly live a consistent transformed life. The trust and love the dogs give continue to teach me how to give the same unconditional love and respect to my fellow men in the program as well as humanity. Kellie's love and trust helped me to understand the unconditional love that I should have for those around me. I am proud of the growth the program has produced in me thus far, and I will continue to grow. They have taught me how to give back to the community, to make amends, to finally be the person I should have been all along.

Just like the dogs, who were condemned to death in the shelter, were rescued by us. They rescued me. They saved me, gave me a purpose again. I am human again. While I cannot change my past, and am very sorry for it, I will continue to seek ways to help others, to give back to a society I took so much from.