

## Who Are My Friends?

Looking back at my life, I have had to reflect on who my friends truly were. Not knowing any better when I was younger, I called everyone I was cool with or hung out with my friend. This was and still is a term that is loosely thrown around by many people which sometimes has no substance when used. Not knowing that the friends I choose would have a major impact in my future. I chose friends that did not mean well. This happened due to my shortsightedness and trying to satiate the need for immediate gratification, seeking fun and acceptance.

Whether we know it not, friends have the ability to influence us, be it positive or negative. This shapes our personality and character in many ways. I am ultimately responsible for all of my decisions I made that landed me in prison. As a youngster, I identified and was drawn to individuals who were negative, I began to value friends more than developing moral character and did bad things to please those friends. It mattered little how my family felt due to the actions I was taking. My negative character began to develop and those friends became my number one priority. My family became less important to me at the time, even though my mom was the one who supported me, put a roof over my head, provided me with food, clothing, and everything. My friends encouraged my bad behavior and I became accepted by them more and more. When I carried weapons, they praised me. When I went to juvenile hall and C.Y.A., it was cool to them. They never told me I should not be doing the things I was doing, or that I could get into more trouble if I kept it up.

When I went to juvenile hall and C.Y.A., those friends never asked my mom how I was doing. I never heard from them while serving that time! Nevertheless, I still blindly called them my friends. Who was the person always in my corner when times got rough? My mom! Family was the only true 'friends' I had that cared for me and visited me.

Those friends had much influence over how I thought and acted. My opinions and values were the product of this influence, and unbeknownst to me at the time, I extended this negative influence to more people than I could imagine. I thought I had control over my life but this was not the reality. We were living for the bad, trying to please each other. So goes the circle of vice that we created for ourselves. My concept of fun was a selfish self-centered way of thinking. We started stealing candy bars from stores, and gradually progressed to shoplifting larger stuff like CD's, clothes, committing burglaries and robberies, carrying guns and just not respecting authority. This became an addicting to the point I was numb and blind to the emotional stress and pain I was inflicting on others.

I can truly say prison saved me. It has been a life changing experience. I have had many years to think about my life and what a friend means to me and re-evaluate the people I considered my friends. Through spiritual introspection, I realized that the people I called my friends were only my friends based on the commonality of a destructive lifestyle. Looking at it as a whole, my life had no guidelines which caused me to be drawn to others who had the same mentality as I did for many years. I ended up in prison with a sentence I deserved due to my bad decisions and poor associations.

I have many years to reflect on my own flaws that led to my negative character, and how I got to that point. What I look for in a friend is qualities I strive to possess within myself. My view of a

friend is a person who has constantly displayed positive moral character traits, has consideration and respect for life and the lives of others, and who has values. I understand the power of influences that peer pressure has so I stay constantly on guard to protect my character from being corrupted by negative influences. In moving forward, I am going to look for people who has similar interests, a good character, and personality traits like myself. My mom taught me better for many years, but I failed to listen to her good advice. Today, I see what she meant when she told me “those are not your friends.”

My vision of a friend would also be people who would have my best interests at heart, trustworthy, and responsible, caring and thoughtful. A friend would not encourage me to use drugs or alcohol, or commit a crime. If my friends do not accentuate the positive in every way, I will distance myself from that environment because I do not condone negative behavior. A friend should also be a person that could be a role model who can influence your thoughts, feelings, and actions in a positive way, and lift you up when you are down, and set a good example in general. These are the values and standards I hold that cannot be compromised.