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### **Life's unseen turns and a child's misguided journey to self-ruin.**

My life has been a real roller coaster in terms of where I have been and where I thought I was going. I was a good student through most of my life in school. I remember and bonded with many of my teachers through the years. Then I lost my life's track. It's nobody's fault, it just happens to be the fact of the matter. My parents divorced when I was 13-years-old and I fell from the grace of being the only son, the big brother and the chosen one to an abandoned, insecure, unsafe someone on my own and no-one to trust or have as a confidante. Thrust into the world of adults, 13-year-olds are not capable of making good decisions. Nor should we expect them to.

Until then I knew that I was bound for college and going to make something of myself, and in turn make my family proud. It was all of the good schools in my hometown, the college-preparatory middle and high schools. It was my destiny to push upwards and onwards and make the name of our family something to believe in. My neighborhood (because we all come from one) was the middle class of northern San Diego County, the suburbs of Middle America. I excelled at school, I was a good athlete, and I was a popular kid in the bright sun of the southern California culture. Yes, I was even a surfer. Alone and left to my own devices, and feeling the shame of being a pawn between embittered parents, I found myself being an alcoholic easy. The "bottle" was a place to numb my mind from the shame, embarrassment, hopelessness and confusion of my less than perfect life, which I had gullibly led then.

You sit there and ask yourself how much of an alcoholic can a 13 year old be? Parents' booze cabinets are for the rookies; I had a job in a liquor store that paid me a bottle of booze and a pack of smokes daily for the simple tasks of sweeping, mopping and re-stocking the shelves in the aisles and the coolers. Living in those early 80's, when everything and everywhere was off the hook. Yeah, we're talking the real deal here. My popularity eventually went from the all-American kid to the guy who could get everyone their choice of alcohol. High school kids were lined up to buy or trade for my hard-earned bottles. The black market of a 14-year-old's empire, seemed like easy street, pffft. I sunk lower and lower as the years went by. I was a 16-year-old high school dropout before I knew it; a drug addled, alcoholic dropout. And mind you, this isn't even the tragic part of my story; there was no recovery for me, I was a lost cause. I had lost faith in everything by that point. Circling the drain of life, I hated myself; I hated everything and didn't have the sense or awareness to know it.

I bounced around for three years working odd jobs that could keep the appearances of being a regular person; it was just the "appearances," though. Nevertheless, I was in the drug culture of self-destruction, at the age of 19 I had utterly and entirely failed. The worst day of my life happened in May 1988, I was there when an associate of mine killed two men. I sobered up when I was suddenly in front of a judge for aiding and abetting two murders that happened during a robbery. The fall from grace was absolute, and there was no coming back.

Naturally, I was convicted and sent to prison. There was no denying, my worthlessness had even roped in the innocents of humanity that I so desperately wanted to belong to. I am sorry for the harm that I have caused and the repercussions that my poor decisions have triggered. I can never bring back those awful, disastrous and tragic days. I pray for the families' losses and their own healing and recovery from my callous and selfish depravity. I will never forgive myself, much less ask anyone else for it. I am heartily and absolutely apologetic with regret and remorse. I will serve my term and each day as I apologize for my pathetic life, I am obliged to be a better man. The memory of my victims will never be lost to me, and my behavior will reflect this compensation. My debt is to

society, but truly, I owe these men my life. As I endeavor to be a better man, I have learned through life and through education.

### **Meaning and direction through the education process.**

I entered school and earned my GED way back in 1990 (yes, that 1990), at Old Folsom prison (Granite High). It was a dungeon of a classroom that had manual typewriters, and gave me eerie and spooky impressions. I was 20-years-old and just like the prison counselors said, I was “at the end of the line.” I lived with the boogiemans, the monsters, the serial killers, and rapists, fundamentally the “worst of the worst.” Yet here in this “hell on earth”, you could learn if you wanted to. And here a person could achieve a small respite of humanity, a tiny glimpse of who I was or was “supposed to be.” Unsure of my abilities after the war I waged against myself with alcohol and drug abuse, I enrolled in a college class at the prison. The self-doubt was erased; I earned an A in my very first college experience! The spark of dignity, self-esteem, and confidence for who I was re-ignited there. As I said I had the aptitude to be a good student, I like the learning process, I knew that this was a direction I could grow and develop within. And so you know, I missed being me. Limiting the Pell grants happened in the 90’s. My college days were over, sort of a sad moment, but not inconceivable; I am a prisoner after all. My ability to further my comprehension of the world and how I could repay it, narrowed considerably.

Over the years, I was still involved in anything educational or self-help/self-improvement. The opportunities are very limited and the classes fill up rather quickly with guys going to the parole board. But I was always sure to sign up. Eventually, Coastline Community College offered us prisoners a chance at some classes. Of course, I signed up and have completed many of these classes. I use these classes as a rudder to right my ship through the seas of regret and remorse.

I was bestowed with the trust of speaking for my graduating class as valedictorian in 2014, what an honor! The prison rewarding and recognizing our humanity even allowed us to have our families present for the graduation ceremony, held in the visiting room. I am a son, big brother, father, and uncle; these distinctions will define me forever, especially on this day. I was able to share my familial roles with my fellow graduates, and vice versa. And while I am not proud to be in prison (in fact quite ashamed); here I stood in front of the people I love the most while they cried in happiness and pride. I spoke as a role model for my niece and nephew, for my younger sisters and as an example to everyone there that change does happen for prisoners (like all people). I spoke for the underdogs of poverty, environments and our backgrounds. I talked about our responsibility to our communities and of families, rising above the pettiness of self. I too, choked on my own tears of humility. The compassion of the audience, how they embraced my difficulty and predicament was heartfelt and genuine. Authentic and tangible proof of the healing and restoration of souls, of becoming real human beings, through education. All education is tantamount and synonymous with growth and maturity. All successful societies are endorsing the rehabilitation of the individual through education.

I now write to you enrolled in the Cal State LA, Bachelor’s program. I am once again pushing farther and higher, my life has meaning and direction. At this point, there may not be any light at the end of the tunnel, but I know who I am. I will now grow into a fully aware and sentient being who owes accountability for all of my actions. In the face of where I came from, I will make you proud of who I am now; I will not be defined by any one day. Prison is being re-defined, one yard at a time. I was lucky to be on the first yard with higher education. I mentor new inmates and now serve as a role model to them.

This happened because I was blessed to have a scholarship, to have more than one person believe in me. Dr. Bidhan Roy, Mr. Underwood, CSULA’s administration, and all the people who want to help prisoners, the

dregs of society, to be better than one day. The charitable foundation who made this possible, choosing to believe in us makes us want to excel, even more. In excelling, I feel I do become a better person, that we all become better people. We are given the tools to make amends, in some small but significant way, for the failures of youth. We move beyond ourselves. Amazing! And thankful, so very thankful to the kindness of so many people, some known, some not, but all thoughtful and compassionate members of society. You have held me up and I in turn, will hold up my end of the bargain.