

CHRIS MOORE
WORDS UNCAGED
(BIOGRAPHY)

“Biography of a Transformation”

By
Chris Moore

Allen Burnett never saw it coming. The large, muscular convict, bent on settling a score on the prison grounds, suddenly appeared out of Allen’s periphery and was now standing in front of him like a towering skyscraper. In one swift motion, the humongous prisoner thrust a splayed hand that stopped and lay suspended only inches in front of Allen’s face.

“Thanks for putting me in your creative writing class,” the giant boomed, “You helped me rebuild the relationship with my daughter.”

Allen shook the giant’s hand, smiled and instead of taking the credit, he gave it to the one person who he believed had made it all happen: God.

It is moments like this that Allen Burnett quietly savors – small, heartfelt and life-altering moments that manifest themselves in the life of others and in himself.

At 43, Allen is serving his 25th year of a life sentence without the possibility of parole and as disheartening as that sounds, consider this: he has never known freedom as an adult. As a man who is now in his mid-forties, he stands in stark contrast to his former adolescent self. The long carceral journey from boyhood to adulthood has transformed him in profound and fundamental ways. No longer is he that misguided teenage gang member who once sought glory at any cost. Now, he dedicates his life to making amends.

Today, Allen relentlessly occupies his time with classes, redefining who he is and helping others do the same. Occasionally, he takes the time to poke fun at himself by telling people that he has been raised between eight maximum security prisons. Yet, behind his jokes lies a serious man driven by the strength of his mother, who worked tirelessly as a representative of the United Auto Workers of America. Her undying determination to fight for meaningful change and to unite those impacted by it invariably rubbed off on her son, who uses that same indelible force to bring about change in himself and in others.

But the road to change has not always been a graceful path. In 2012, Allen was adversely transferred to a drug-infested and notoriously violent prison yard. It was there that a seismic shift took place inside of him and where the spirit of genuine transformation found him crouched on his knees in fervent prayer.

Allen had broken the rules and although it was his first violation in twelve long years, it was not enough to stop the chain of events that would reshape his life. Not only had he broken rules, he had done so while housed on ‘A’ yard.

‘A’ yard was heaven and lacked the racial violence of other yards. It is known statewide as the Progressive Programming Facility (PPF) and offers a plethora of self-help programs, including the venerable Men For Honor (MFH) program that has helped rebuild thousands of fractured lives.

Allen had fallen from this heaven and faced being thrown into the carceral lake of fire. But fate would not have him tossed into the molten rock of prison condemnation. Instead, God had other plans. A high ranking administrator intervened on his behalf and eight months later, Allen returned to ‘A’ yard carrying with him a new found purpose – a purpose driven by the written words of Henry David Thoreau 172 years earlier. These were divinely inspired words that originated in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts in 1845, transcending time and travelling through the civil war, the reconstruction period, two world wars, the civil rights movement, America’s first black president, past the razor-wire fence of a maximum security prison in a California desert, and landing squarely into the waning heart of Allen Burnett.

He recalls, with vivid clarity, the very words that made the far journey into his soul: “Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour... It is something to be able to paint a particular picture or to carve a statue, and so do make a few objects beautiful, but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do.”

These are not the kind of words a typical prisoner might remember, much less use as a source of

inspiration, but Allen is not your typical convict. Since that fateful day he has used these words, the moral drive from his mother and his own desire for change to become a beacon of hope.

Soon after returning to 'A' yard, Allen worked diligently to become an integral and invaluable part of the rehabilitative programs. He worked tirelessly as an assistant and began forming new partnerships to start other self-help classes. He united people in ways never before seen – people from different races, cultures, and classes. Eventually he would become the chairman, inspiring and developing the Men For Honor logo. Soon, everyone on the yard was looking to be part of programs like New Beginnings, Partnership for Re-Entry Program (PREP), Prisoners 4 Youth, and others.

As a former gang member, Allen is particularly attentive to the needs of young gang members, encouraging them to attend classes like Criminals and Gang members Anonymous (CGA), a program that seeks to address and change the same kind of criminal and gang thinking that led him to prison. It is no wonder that Allen, while participating in a world renowned behavioral program called Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), gave himself the name of "Attentive Allen", a required name that is meant to affirm a positive quality that someone sees in themselves.

Yet, for all of the change that Allen has effected in himself and in others since his teenage years, he will never see freedom. No matter that he was an immature adolescent, a boy by some measures, when he committed his crime. His sentence cruelly demands that he suffers life-long imprisonment until death itself decrees that his punishment is complete. That is the cruelty in all of this: that his fate remains forever sealed and uncertain at the same time.

A close friend of Allen shares his own views on Allen's Plight: "It's like encaging a naughty puppy for the rest of his natural dog life. And when you see him, years later at the local pound, full grown with eyes subdued by life-long punishment, he still licks your hand through the wire mesh. That is a dog that is ready for a home."

Allen's story isn't the only one like it inside prison. There are thousands of men who have found themselves in the same hopeless position – locked away in an unforgiving system of punishment. In many ways the system is seen as more unforgiving and cruel than the people that it incarcerates. In large part it ignores the human condition, makes light of human potential, and views with suspect, genuine transformation. All that seems to matter is the ever constant application of suffering. The boundaries of who is worse, the system or the offender is forever blurred. This cannot be good for justice or society.