

My story is similar to that of much other youth who have gotten into serious trouble. Throughout my early childhood, I saw my alcoholic father physically abuse my mother. My mother, siblings, and I were sometimes so afraid that we hid in my bedroom, barricaded the door with furniture, and prayed he would never return. I remember one particularly harrowing evening when my mother attempted to escape with the children. He appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, knocked my mother to the ground, then grabbed her hair and dragged her through the mud. When she finally broke free, we drove to the police station, where she filed a restraining order against him. The incident left me shaken to my core.

Even after my mother moved us to a new neighborhood, with a new house and a new school, my father showed up drunk late at night, creating lots of noise. The neighbors sometimes came out of their homes to watch, and neighborhood kids mocked me at school.

By the time I was in sixth grade, though, I had begun to use academics as an escape from my world. That all changed when we moved again. At the new school, other kids said I spoke up too often in class and studied too much. To be more like the people around me, I stopped studying and even failed in 9th grade. I also became an active gang member. I saw it as a way to end the loneliness.

I developed a practice of ending each school day at lunchtime. Before long, I began transporting and selling marijuana.

My mother learned I wasn't going to class when my high school mailed a letter home during my senior year, informing her that I had missed so many days of school that I would need to attend summer school to graduate.

That led us to that day in 1994, when marijuana, alcohol, and the impulsivity of a child with a still-developing brain led me to take part in an unthinkable crime. A few days before my arrest, I had been making plans for college, where I hoped to study child development and become a social worker. But I first needed to earn another credit to get out of high school and had asked the younger brother of a fellow gang member to consider enrolling with me.

Once he agreed, we sat around smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. He suggested we act out a scene from a movie. We planned to go to a convenience store, taking along two guns -- one of which was non-functioning and the other which supposedly had no bullets -- to frighten the store employee and anyone who walked up. We'd grab more beer and run.

I agreed to stand watch as he went inside for what seemed like forever. Then I heard gunfire, and he ran out. I went into the store and found Mr. Cantrell lying on the floor unresponsive. I ran, and we were arrested a few hours later.

I accepted two 25yr terms served consecutively to avoid a life sentence. My co-defendant wasn't as fortunate. He took a life sentence plus 25yrs to avoid life without parole.

The prison wasn't a place exceptionally friendly to a young man coming of age — one who had zero involvement with any section of the justice system. I witnessed and experienced things that no child should ever experience — forced to grow up fast; it was tough to focus on doing the right thing,

honoring the memory of the life lost, and becoming a better person while living in fear and uncertainty. But, like many other children, I did it scars and all. I denounced my gang membership, earned my GED, became a licensed barber, and studied psychology and child development. These classes helped me to understand the impact of the trauma that I and others had experienced and enabled me to counsel others in denouncing their gang memberships.

Also, I completed anger management counseling and joined the group Parents in Prison, which helped men focus on the needs of their children. I was not a parent, so I spent the next year thinking about my needs as a child and how those needs could be addressed for children in situations similar to what I had experienced.

After years of minimal contact with people from outside, I attended Kairos Christian ministry conferences as they visited the prison. For the first time in my adult life, I was in the company of other adults, not incarcerated. They treated me like I mattered. It was here that the love for social work began to take root. Programs like this help me began to heal the wound that was left when I made the terrible decision that cost a family a loved one and ripped me away from society. I learned to be a citizen, how to indeed be a neighbor. I attended their conference for three consecutive years.

Seven years into my sentence, I met the parole board for the first time.

On my third visit to the parole board – and after I had served 10yrs, the board of paroles granted my release.

I worked in a barbershop for several years. I began volunteering in a local school, working with children who were disruptive in the classroom, teaching them conflict resolution skills, and helping them access other services they needed. A mentor asked me to do this work as an AmeriCorps volunteer with the Community Health Corps in Nashville, then as a full-time employee of a local clinic chain. We worked with the Metro school system and were able to introduce and later implement the idea of placing full-service clinics inside of low-performing middle and high schools. These clinics would serve as hubs that addressed the issues of teen pregnancy and gang violence. Years later, I was hired to direct a YMCA of Middle Tennessee outreach program that provided services to 25-30 students each year who faced issues similar to what I experienced as a middle school student.

My original 25-year sentence expired on March 3, 2016. I had no infractions during my 12 years of parole. A year later, I joined the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, where we work to replace life-without-parole and other extreme penalties for children with age-appropriate accountability that accounts for children's experiences and unique capacity for change.

I can never repay what I took, and with that in mind, I consciously decided to spend my life working to help children avoid the mistakes that I made. I also want to help create a justice system that holds children accountable in age-appropriate ways, accounts for their exposure to trauma, and prepares them for reintegration into society. I've dedicated every day of my free life to demonstrating that I am worthy of this second chance. I've tried to make sure fewer families suffer the loss that the Cantrell family suffered. I've poured myself into the lives and homes of many.

I am not unique. Along the way, I also helped found the Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network (ICAN), a national network comprised of and led by individuals who went to prison as children for severe crimes. All of our members were charged with homicide-related crimes and faced life without parole as a child. Of the 600 plus children that were released after serving decades of life sentences, 140 of those men and women have joined ICAN and are active in their communities. The recidivism rate among this population is less than 1%

I want to think that the living example that I have set is why our US Supreme Court has made multiple rulings that limit the imposition of life sentences for children. Examples like mine should be demonstrative of the fact that decades of incarceration for children is unnecessary in most cases. Children change, and like myself, can become contributors to their community post-incarceration. We are not monsters. Yes, we made critical errors in judgment as adolescents, but we are all more than the worst thing we have ever done. We need an opportunity to prove it.

Thank you

Eric Alexander

[\(He, Him\)](#)

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