

**Fourteen to Forty:  
Creating Something Out of Nothing\***  
*Jeremiah Bourgeois*

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No one who knew me during my first decade of life would have ever imagined that one day I would be in prison. I was a parochial school student, as well as a ballet and tap dancer. I starred in a toothpaste commercial, dancing in a tuxedo and singing about a scholarship being awarded by *Crest*. It seemed obvious to everyone that I had a bright future ahead of me. Nobody foresaw that my life would unravel over the next four years.

The abuse that I endured during my formative years derailed everything that my mother had envisioned for me. I dropped out of middle school and ran away from home. By the age of thirteen, I was living on my own alone on the streets. Just one year later, I shot two men in anger, killing one and wounding the other. All of this transpired from 1988 to 1992. I ended up being one of the youngest people in the United States to face a Life Without Parole sentence and have been confined ever since.

Months after I was arrested, a juvenile court judge decided that I should be tried as an adult due to the seriousness of my crimes. This did not make sense to me given that I was only fourteen. I believed that being confined in a juvenile detention facility until I was twenty-one was the worst thing, legally, that could happen to me. I was just as perplexed when my lawyer explained that the murder charge was being raised. I thought First-degree Murder was the most serious crime that a person could be charged with until my lawyer explained the legal implications of “aggravated circumstances”, which was a capital offense.

I slept for a week after I came to understand the ramifications that I would face if convicted of Aggravated First-degree Murder. Following my conviction a year later, I became the second youngest person in Washington State to be sentenced to Life Without Parole (also see Bourgeois, 2020).

While awaiting sentencing, I came to realize how perilous the years ahead would be when I was knocked unconscious by another prisoner simply for being the wrong race in the wrong place. The assault occurred right in front of jail guards, which was just as shocking to me as the unprovoked attack. As a result of this traumatic experience, I suffered a broken nose, concussion and abrasions. Jail guards eventually intervened before stomps and kicks resulted in more permanent injuries.

I was fifteen years old when this incident took place. It taught me a valuable lesson. The reality was that I was on my own. I could not depend on anyone to

protect me and if I did not protect myself by any means necessary, I would be preyed upon by others willing to engage extortion, sexual violence and other assorted troubling behaviour awaiting me in the penitentiary.

If I doubted this brutal realization, it was further emphasized shortly after I arrived at Clallam Bay Corrections Center, one of the two high-security prisons in Washington State. In the receiving unit, a teenager that I had befriended (“Scott”) was raped. Determined not to suffer a similar fate, I geared myself psychologically for the battles to come and overcame my trepidation. I went to war in order to establish my reputation. As I explained in a blog post about my life during this period:

The next seven years of my life were defined by violence. I spent five of those years in segregation for being violent. Administrators probably thought it was all senseless violence. Yet Scott’s experience showed me that being violent made perfect sense (Bourgeois, 2014).

After my ninth year of imprisonment and fifth year in toto of solitary confinement, two events occurred in the Intensive Management Unit that changed the direction of my life. The first revolved around a prisoner who had succeeded in overturning his sentence. He did it on his own, without any assistance from an attorney, by filing *pro se petitions* after losing his direct appeal. I was amazed at what he had accomplished. However, when I expressed my admiration to him, he said, “If I can do this, there’s no reason you couldn’t do it as smart as you are”. His words took me by surprise. Over the next several days, I reflected on what he told me. Suddenly, I came to see the unrealized potential that was within me. Prison did not make everything I could envision impossible to achieve. It only limited my possibilities.

The second event occurred a few months later when a prisoner died by suicide. He lived in the cell that was next to mine. He and I had grown close in a few short weeks due to our similar circumstances. He too had been incarcerated for crimes that he committed when he was a juvenile. He too was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison. Now he was dead because he had grown hopeless. Everything worthwhile was unattainable, he believed. There was nothing that he could envision that made life worth living (also see Hartman, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2002).

These two events became conflated in my mind and had a profound impact on me. I concluded that hopelessness was far more dangerous than any of the

physical threats that I faced in prison. The new reality of my situation was this – in order for me to endure, I had to find a way to thrive despite being confined. Ultimately, I decided to try and become better educated than my keepers and to learn the skills necessary to hold them accountable. Being at a disadvantage due to my ignorance was no longer acceptable.

I decided to study the law. With such knowledge, I could not only help myself, but others confined with me. Knowing the law was also essential in order for me to hold my keepers accountable. Unfortunately, Washington State had long ago eliminated higher education programs from the Department of Corrections. All that remained were General Education Diplomas and vocational programs such as “Roofing & Siding”. The same type of tough-on-crime rhetoric that had resulted in me being tried as an adult and sentenced to Life Without Parole had also led Congress to prohibit prisoners from receiving Pell Grants, thereby making a college degree beyond the means of the overwhelming majority of prisoners (also see Utheim, 2016).

Furthermore, many prison administrators hamstring efforts to obtain college degrees because they believe that it is easier to manage prisoners who are ignorant. Education behind bars is thus seen as dangerous. Consequently, there are policies and practices that prevent lifers (who will have to be managed indefinitely) from pursuing higher education. Oftentimes, administrators only approve distance learning programs for those who are eligible for release.

I had to overcome all of these barriers if I wanted to obtain a college education. Although prison administrators spent years refusing to allow me to enroll in a distance-learning program, I wrote to colleges to have outdated textbooks donated to me and studied the material independently. When I was not given enough time to conduct legal research, I obtained a job in the law library and studied caselaw while performing my duties.

Aside from the difficulties posed by prison administrators, I also had to keep from being deterred by the negativity that surrounded me. While some other prisoners spent money from their family members and friends on drugs and gambling, I used the \$100 a month available to me to take a few correspondence courses yearly. Despite prisoners making jokes when they saw me studying, I refused to let their mockery extinguish my hopes and dreams.

In the end, I found a way to thrive in spite of my circumstances. The education I obtained transformed me. As I explained in the *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*:

The value of philosophy, law, and history impressed itself on my life when I was drowning in the prison subculture, surrounded by nothing but bars and facing nothing but time. I had spent almost a decade doing little more than fighting prisoners and assaulting guards, until I somehow found the strength to turn my anger into something positive. Now I write term papers and legal briefs that benefit both me and others confined with me. My transformation has affected not only those who knew me when I was a menace, but also those who are just starting to serve their sentences. They see me as a role model and see what can be accomplished in spite of one's circumstances. No longer confined to an existence that the prison subculture glorifies, my intellect rather than ruthlessness is the basis for self-respect. This is the essence of rehabilitation (Bourgeois, 2013, p. 154).

I am now a senior at Adams State University, earning an interdisciplinary degree in legal studies and criminology and maintaining a 3.85 GPA. Over the years, I have spoken to legislators and dignitaries about the need for sentencing reform. I have worked with the University Beyond Bars, a non-profit that provides educational opportunities to prisoners at Washington State Reformatory. I have critiqued the criminal justice system in academic journals, editorials and in online publications. I am also currently a columnist for *The Crime Report*.

In 2019, I earned my bachelor's degree and got the opportunity to be set free. Having spent most of my teenage years and all of my adulthood confined, adjusting to society is not easy (also see Visher and Travis, 2003). Nevertheless, I am convinced that accomplishing what I have under these circumstances has prepared me to overcome whatever obstacles lie ahead of me.

Of course, I wish that I could reverse the choices I made that led me to prison, but that is impossible. The only power that I have is to continue living a life of dignity and become a contributing member of society.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Jeremiah Bourgeois* is a journalist, legal scholar, formerly incarcerated person and matriculating law student. In 1992, at age 14, he became one of the youngest children in the United States to receive a mandatory sentence of life without the possibility of parole and the second youngest person to receive this sentence in the history of the State of Washington. Following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Miller v. Alabama* (2012) – in which the Court declared that imposing mandatory sentences of life without parole on juveniles violates the constitutional prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment – Jeremiah was re-sentenced to an indeterminate term of twenty-five years to life, which made him eligible for parole. While imprisoned, Jeremiah committed himself to higher education, notwithstanding his initial sentence that meant he would die behind bars. Through independent means, he earned a bachelor's degree in legal studies and criminology, graduating magna cum laude. He also utilized his education to tutor prisoners working to earn their GEDs and became an advisor to the University Beyond Bars, a non-profit that enables prisoners to obtain a college education at Washington State Reformatory. In 2019, his legal commentary critiquing the parole board's practices resulted in a hearing in the Washington State Senate. Before being freed, the Washington State Court of Appeals adopted his legal analysis in a landmark decision that ended the unlawful confinement

of prisoners. Jeremiah has committed himself to highlighting injustice. He uses his writing and his voice to advocate for those that he left behind in prison. Upon graduating from Gonzaga University School of Law in 2022, he will use his law degree to help those he left behind in prison.