

## Mis-Education

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**A**ccused of murder at age 23; arrested at 24; convicted at 25; exonerated at 26; re-imprisoned at 27; and sentenced to twenty-two years to life at age 28. How does this reality impact one's education?

Growing up I enjoyed going to school. The teachers always told me I was smart and I loved the colourful stickers they put on my papers when I scored high grades. My favourite subject was math because from a young age I was great with numbers. I would help my brother who was in the sixth grade with his math homework. I was also good in science. I loved learning how different elements combined to create compounds. Overall, school came easy to me and I passed all my classes without trying too hard.

Unfortunately, local gangsters decked out in large gold chains, rings and earrings, neon, velour sweat suits and spotless white sneakers, would stand on the corner early in the morning and tease the boys and girls who went to school. They called us nerds, dweebs and geeks, and somewhere along the way I decided school was not for me.

Growing up the youngest of five boys, I learned to fight to survive early in life. I was smart enough to know that if I wanted the wealth and respect that others had, I needed to do what they did. Because I was good with my hands, I passed all initiations and easily transitioned into the underworld, mingling with gangsters just as easily as I did with "nerds". It was not long before I was fluent in street life. My block was my university, but I did not have to wake up early in the morning or travel miles to get to class. I witnessed and committed my fair share of high crimes and misdemeanours, including stealing cars, snatching necklaces off people's necks, and assaulting people. I quickly climbed the social ladder from small time petty criminal to drug lord.

I applied my math skills to make lucrative drug deals. I used my penchant for science to take four ounces of cocaine, one ounce of baking soda, and random elements like 7-up or yeast and turn it into eight ounces of crack-cocaine. I became a transportation expert, expanding my trade beyond Brooklyn and into other states. If the street was my university, firearms were my major. In lieu of traditional course credits, I amassed street credibility. In place of academic fame, I achieved hood notoriety. Instead of a degree, I earned Original Gangster status. The local youth followed me faithfully, marching to my tune of destruction as though I was the Pied Piper.

In 1995, Yoley, a girl I had been seeing, asked me, "Why do you waste your life selling drugs? You can do so much more. You should go

to college or something, anything, but get out these streets”. I told her that selling drugs was all I knew. By then I had convinced myself that I could only thrive amongst drug dealers, gangsters and thieves. I told her that I was comfortable in dark, smoke-filled basements-turned-gambling spots, where everyone was drunk and armed, but in an elevator filled with people in business suits, I sweated profusely. “I couldn’t relate to them”, I told her. She told me that she could not “wait around for me to grow up because she had plans for her life”. I never saw her again, but her cousin told me that she went on to Columbia University, earned a Master’s degree and later served in the Air Force.

By 1996, I was the undisputed drug boss of my neighbourhood. By 1997, I faced life in prison on a murder charge that began as an argument over a bicycle. Although I was perhaps a menace to society, I was convicted and sentenced to twenty-two years to life for a crime I did not commit. Today, eighteen years into my sentence, most of my childhood friends are dead, serving lengthy prison sentences or have been deported.

## **PRISON AS EDUCATION**

I entered Gladiator School, otherwise known as the New York State Department of Corrections (DOC) with a General Equivalency Diploma and an attitude. My first counsellor informed me that I would need to study a vocational trade, undergo alcohol and substance abuse treatment, and “aggression replacement” training. I kindly informed him that upon my release I would be returning to the jungle of Brooklyn so if the DOC was sincere about preparing me for re-entry, I would prefer karate classes or hand-to-hand combat. He laughed, while I did not.

Within ninety days of reaching Gladiator School, I found myself in Sing Sing’s Special Housing Unit (SHU), a fancy name for solitary confinement or what we call “the box”, accused of assaulting three prison guards. I wore my anger like a vest. In hindsight, although I did not commit the act that led to my imprisonment, I confess to deserving a state sponsored vacation from society. At the time, however, I believed that I did not belong in prison and so I acted against the authorities.

The SHU gave me time to see life differently. In the box, I witnessed prisoners toss bodily fluids onto other prisoners and prison guards. I heard men howl into the night, arguing with their demons. Some of the

men expressed their anger by stuffing their towels down their toilets and repeatedly flushing until filth-infested water crept into everyone's cell. One man would give newcomers hand-rolled cigarettes stuffed with feces, which they did not realize until it was too late. I saw prison guards beat men until they begged for their lives and then charge the beaten men with assault. Some men entered the SHU with mental health issues that were made worse by the inhumane conditions, including routine threats and physical assaults by staff, denial of toilet paper and meals, and sleep deprivation due to the constant screaming throughout the night. Men came into the SHU mentally sound and eventually broke down, refusing to bathe, eat or shave until they were barely recognizable. Witnessing the deterioration and degradation of human beings told me I had to be serious about retaining my dignity, sanity, and humanity because individuals lost themselves in this environment. I would like to say that my initial trip to the SHU woke me up, but in truth it took several visits before I realized that if I wanted different results, I had to behave differently.

When I was released from the SHU, I was sent half-a-day away from my family to Clinton Correctional Facility near the Canadian border. There, guards politely cautioned me that if I assaulted one of their officers it would be the "worst day of my life". I had heard the rumours about the brutality of Clinton guards, so I did not take the threat lightly. I also knew that Clinton was said to house the "worst of the worst" so I exercised religiously, gaining thirty pounds of muscle, and practiced yoga and martial arts in order to better defend myself. I also dedicated as much time as I could to learning about the law. I spent years pursuing unsuccessful legal appeals, all of which were denied with boilerplate language. I initially believed that once I proved to the higher courts that I was innocent, they would recognize the travesty of justice and order me released. After the denials piled up, I slowly realized that I would do my twenty-two years in prison as release from the penal system was not forthcoming and no one would come to my rescue.

## **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN PRISON**

I decided to enrol in several vocational and therapeutic programs that were available at Clinton. I earned a Mechanic Assistant Certificate in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Repair. This helped to shake me free of my prior belief that my destiny was a life of crime. Earning that first

certificate gave me the confidence that I could practice a legal trade upon my release. I then studied French, buying audiotapes and books to become conversant. Soon I could speak the language of love and people commented that I sounded like I was from France. This spurred me to keep at it until I became fluent. I went on to complete a course on HIV/AIDS and became a Peer Educator; something I initially saw as another job-skill, but which I quickly learned was a way to mobilize important life-changing information. I took pride in whatever form of work I was doing, which led to new opportunities. For example, after diplomatically handling a disagreement with a correctional officer about how to buff floors properly, I was assigned to the facility industry program where I learned to operate various sewing machines. While I do not envision working in the garment industry, the dedication and hard work ethic I developed has come in handy throughout my incarceration. Although the \$50 I earned every two weeks was not great by societal standards, it was top prison pay.

Learning became an exciting means of escaping the everyday of prison life. While at work or in class, I did not feel the loneliness or despair that normally accompanies prison time. I used my afternoons to complete Aggression Replacement Training (ART) and when an opening arose to facilitate the program, my counsellor offered me the job on a volunteer basis. I continued to work in the garment industry program and the prison would allow us to work to our heart's content, although it would not pay us for more than one job. I used the educational program as an escape and encouraged others to think before they reacted. Somewhere along the line I bought into the non-violent conflict resolution strategies. I realized this one-day when someone stepped on my boots without my reacting. Previously, I would have addressed him. But that day, I told myself that footwear was not anything to get worked up about, and he probably did not even realize he had stepped on me as prisoners' minds are often consumed with everyday struggles and concerns of survival.

I then filled a vacancy in the Inmate Liaison Committee (ILC) to represent the prisoner population at meetings with the facility administration. Meeting with executives from the prison administration to express population concerns improved my communication skills, as I had to adjust my words and their delivery in order to be taken seriously. I still had concerns about my "image", but this time it served a positive end. My weekdays consisted of meeting with other ILC representatives on Tuesday and Thursday

mornings; facilitating ART every afternoon; and working in the industry every evening. During the weekends, I completed a Basic Legal Research course, an eye-opening experience that showed me that law is not an exact science, but is rather a matter of opinions and arguments. I also taught HIV/AIDS 101 classes because staying physically busy kept me mentally out of prison. With my days filled, some of the other prisoners thought I was a fool for working as hard as I did. A fellow prisoner once asked me if I felt like a slave toiling away for \$12 every two weeks. I told him I did not work for the money, I worked because I needed to stay busy so that I would not have time to feel sorry for myself and to avoid getting angry.

In 2004, I was granted a request to be transferred back to Sing Sing Correctional Facility so I could enrol in college. My counsellor supported the transfer request, possibly because I had worked for him on a volunteer basis. Nevertheless, his endorsement taught me the importance of relationships. I kept busy at Sing Sing, facilitating ART part-time while working as a paralegal in the Law Library. I joined the Prisoners for AIDS Counselling and Education (PACE) program and facilitated classes during the evenings. I felt empowered sharing life-saving information with fellow prisoners, especially when they expressed their appreciation of the easy-to-understand manner in which I delivered it. I also completed the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), and began facilitating AVP classes in English and Spanish. Staying active in AVP reinforced the non-violent conflict resolution information I had already learned and I truly embraced a non-violent way of thinking. I was already smart enough to avoid situations, but AVP helped me resolve unavoidable situations non-violently.

In 2005, I was accepted into the Certificate in Ministry and Human Services Program (CMP); a one-year pre-college level program aimed at learning to be of service to others. At the time, college students would ask me to edit their papers, which furthered my desire to pursue higher education. Watching men with sizable street reputations take school seriously helped support my view on education. Hearing gangsters discuss psychology and sociology left me wanting to be part of those discussions. I completed various Osborne Association programs, including Basic Parenting, Men's Health, Breaking Barriers, and Healthy Marriages. I learned the importance of active listening, being involved in my children's lives, and "responding" instead of "reacting" to situations. I joined the Rehabilitation Through the Arts Program (RTA), which promotes self-awareness and self-reflection

through theatre, visual arts, and dancing. Portraying different characters on stage in a maximum-security prison helped me lower the masks and shields I had unconsciously developed over the years. I was slowly peeling away the defence mechanisms that had led to my criminal lifestyle. I was becoming the man Yoley believed I could be – the man my mother had raised me to be.

## **ATTAINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN PRISON**

In 2007, I enrolled in Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, which afforded incarcerated individuals the opportunity to earn college degrees. I took every class seriously, participated in class discussions and always turned in my work on time. I drank up the experience and always wanted more. When I was not in class or doing my schoolwork, I tutored fellow classmates and pre-college students. Some individuals tried to tell me I was wasting my time in school and jokingly call me a nerd, but I would quickly respond, “Call me nerd. Call me geek. But sooner or later you’re gonna call me sir, and then boss, and one day you’ll be calling me collect”.<sup>1</sup> Then I would continue on my way to school while others laughed.

My professors were impressed by my ability to communicate and get my point across in class. Some even suggested I pursue a career in public speaking upon my release. My academic advisor appreciated the way I carried myself in school and how I would help my classmates. Two years into my college experience, I was selected to participate in a debate involving incarcerated and non-incarcerated college students. This opportunity reinforced to me that I was capable and it was possible to live a different life on the outside.

I eventually earned Associate and Bachelor degrees, graduating *summa cum laude*. However, my favourite Hudson Link moment was seeing how my graduation brought a little bit of healing to my fractured family. My mother’s face beamed with pride when I finally gave her the one thing she always wanted; to see her baby earn a college degree. My wife and children cheered me on, and it was a small step toward showing her that she had not made a mistake in standing by me during my incarceration. My brother and nephews smiled, and it felt good showing them that I could be a positive role model, especially since I was the first man in my family to earn a college degree.

My professors and classmates often told me I should be a motivational speaker and they elected me to host the first ever TEDx event in a New York State prison with the theme of healthy communities. On the night of the event, the room was full with prisoners, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, prison administrators, actors, community activists, writers, formerly incarcerated people, and others. While I stared out at the audience, I remembered my conversation with Yoley when I told her that being in an elevator around these types of people made me sweat. I smiled, because the same types of people that once made me nervous now surrounded me, yet I felt like I belonged. That event cemented my reconnection with my community and society at large. Days later I awoke to a surprise – my picture above an article in the *New York Times* detailing the TEDx Sing Sing event.

Hudson Link also chose me as one of three men to be featured in a PBS film on higher education in prison entitled *First Degree*. The documentary shares the all too common story of how community youth waste their intelligence and talents to chase the smoke and mirrors of street life. However, *First Degree* has a positive ending – the film depicts how I went back to school, earned several college degrees, and learned to put my natural talents to constructive use.

Through Hudson Link and other organizations, I developed many constructive relationships that will help me stay focused when I am finally back on the other side of these prison walls. I now have friends who encourage me to be who I want to be. I have since earned a Master's degree in Professional Studies with a focus on Urban Ministry, from the New York Theological Seminary. Aside from the degree, going to school helped me to develop more positive relationships with different people that will help me to remain "me".

## CONCLUSION

Today, I continue to volunteer in the Hudson Link office, helping to coordinate classes and organize graduations. All of these educational opportunities changed my world. I no longer desire to be a criminal and I have more options to succeed legally than I did eighteen years ago. Instead of being a drug dealer, I can apply my math skills toward accounting. As opposed to mixing illicit substances, I can employ my love for elements to becoming a chemist. Most importantly, I am a credible messenger for

the youth that come through the rehabilitation and educational programs. Similar to how other brothers impacted me when I was young, now when the youth see me, a known gangster, pursuing higher learning, it tells them that it is cool to go to school. I am still a leader, only now I choose to lead in the right direction. Education taught me that everyone has talent, but utilizing and maximizing that talent is not easy or common. Education taught me to use the gifts I used for crime and to now support and bring people together, whether by participating in debates, tutoring students, emceeding TEDx events, or moderating conferences between clergy members and lawmakers.

By choosing the street life, I was mis-educated and almost missed out on a very different and more positive life. Education helped me see life and myself differently, which changed my behaviour for the better. I stopped seeing myself as a victim, and now understand that my actions and choices are the reasons why I have spent so much of my life in prison. Although I am not guilty of the crime for which I am in prison, I am far from innocent and have much atoning to do. Today, I wish I could show Yoley how I am moving forward as an asset to my community, instead of the liability I chose to be so many years ago. Is it ironic that I lost myself in the streets only to find my sense of self in prison? I once read in a fortune cookie, "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action". Thanks to the educational opportunities I have had, I now understand that jewel.

If education can change my outlook and enable me to positively influence others, one can only wonder how educating larger segments of the prison population could reduce crime and recidivism. More than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States (see [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)) and 95 percent of them will be released one day (see [www.nationalreentryresourcecentre.org/facts](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecentre.org/facts)). These individuals can either return as assets or liabilities depending on their incarceration experience. Statistics show that those who receive higher education in prison recidivate at much lower rates than those who do not. Nationally, approximately 67.8 percent of people released from prison are rearrested within three years (Durose et al., 2014). New York state's recidivism rate is 42 percent; 34 percent of released prisoners are returned to prison for parole violations and 9 percent are rearrested for new offences (DOCCS, 2016). However, over sixteen years only 2 percent of Hudson Link's graduates have returned to prison (see [www.hudsonlink.org](http://www.hudsonlink.org)).



In my experience, public safety and security was obtained by affording me the opportunity to pursue higher education. Education showed me how to apply my intellect legally and positively. As Daniel Rose, speaker at the 2015 New York Theological Seminary's commencement ceremony at Sing Sing stated: "Education does not cost, it pays". That statement was proven true at Sing Sing on 18 August 2016 at a Strategic Partners Workshop where I was one of twenty-one incarcerated alumni and students that collaborated with educational program administrators to take on President Obama's higher education initiatives. This included re-instating federal Pell grants for incarcerated individuals, and creating "the best-educated workforce and the highest proportion of college graduates in the world – incarcerated and non-incarcerated alike – by 2020" (The White House, 2016). These initiatives support the view that investing in education has the potential to realize the concept of "paying it forward".

In closing, I would like to say that I am so enamoured with education that I currently participate in, a graduate level pilot course entitled the "Construction of Alterity in European Thought". While I will not receive credits for the course, I want to remain busy and academically active. Today, I am happily married to my soul mate. I left junior high-school knowing how to hide razors in my mouth. I left high school with a felony record. But I will leave prison with three college degrees. Is it ironic that I lost myself in the streets, but found my Self in prison?

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> New York state prisoners can only make collect phone calls.

## REFERENCES

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A product of Brooklyn, New York, *Jermaine Archer* is his mother's seventh child. He served approximately 18 years of a 22 years to life sentence for a murder he insists he did not commit. The Kings County District Attorney's Office Conviction Review Unit is currently reviewing his case and he is hopeful that he will be exonerated in the near future. He has spent his time inside as productively as possible, earning three college degrees and performing in theatrical dramas before community guests. He can be reached at:

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