

# **Triumph!**

## **Straight-A Guide**

### **Conquering Imprisonment and Preparing Prisoners for Re-entry**

Michael G. Santos

APS Publishing  
855 Lakeville Street  
Petaluma, CA 94952



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With love, I dedicate this  
book to my sister, Julie Santos.  
Thank you for strengthening  
me through this journey.





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## FOREWORD

My name is Justin Paperny. I support the Straight-A Guide for three reasons. The first is that I used it to conquer imprisonment. The second is that I personally witnessed numerous other prisoners using the Straight-A Guide to triumph over imprisonment and transform their lives. The third reason I support the Straight-A Guide is that I am impressed with the total commitment Michael Santos makes to it as a life philosophy; he achieves enormous success despite the multiple decades he serves in prison.

Perhaps it is an understatement to write that I support the Straight-A Guide. In fact, as the executive director of the Michael G. Santos Foundation, an IRS-approved public charity, I am one of its chief advocates. I made the personal commitment to devote my career toward spreading the message because I'm convinced of its power to help others reach their highest potential.

I became familiar with the Straight-A Guide soon after I surrendered to the federal prison camp in Taft, California. I am a graduate of the University of Southern California and a

former stock broker. After more than a decade in business, a bad decision led to my 18-month term for a violation of securities laws. The conviction meant the loss of my livelihood, I knew, and I began serving my sentence with dark clouds of anxiety hanging over me. I didn't have any idea how I would support myself upon release.

During my first few days I interacted with the men around me. They came from diverse backgrounds, yet we all shared a sense of despair about what awaited us. Some were well-educated with work histories as professionals, others had never worked before. We all had felony convictions and we all understood the struggles we would face in creating stability upon release.

Soon thereafter, however, I enrolled in a class where I listened as Michael Santos described the strategy that had helped him conquer imprisonment. While serving a 45-year sentence in prisons of every security level, he educated himself, built a career, developed enormous public support, earned resources, and nurtured a loving marriage. He spoke passionately about triumphing over adversity, insisting that any man could empower himself by living a values-based, goal-oriented life.

I embraced the message. If it could help a man who had served such a lengthy time in prison, I reasoned that it could help me. Rather

than sinking into sadness over what had happened to me, I assessed my situation and began to focus on the seven attributes of the Straight-A Guide: attitude, aspiration, action, accountability, awareness, achievement, and appreciation. That shift in perspective opened numerous opportunities.

Because of the Straight-A Guide, I made outstanding use of the 18-month sentence I served. Although I had not considered myself a writer, when I walked out of prison I had my book in hand, *Lessons From Prison*. I used it to launch a national speaking and consulting career. Despite emerging into the worst economic climate of a generation, and having a felony conviction, by making a 100 percent commitment to the Straight-A Guide, I left prison strong, with values and resources that led to my triumph over prison.

The principled living patterns of the Straight-A Guide not only transformed my life, I worked with scores of other prisoners who did the same. They impressed me so much with the preparations they made for a law-abiding life upon release that I took steps to launch the Michael G. Santos Foundation. I wanted to join in introducing the program to others in prisons across America.

I speak from personal experience in urging

prisoners to rely upon the Straight-A Guide as a tool to help them achieve optimal performance while creating meaning in life. They may use it to transition from prison to success. It worked for me and I know that it can work for anyone who embraces the message with total commitment.

Justin Paperny,

June 5, 2011

Treat a man as he is,  
and that is what he remains.

Treat a man as he can be,  
and that is what he becomes.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe





## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It's 1:43 on the morning of June 5, 2011 as I begin my work. I'm still confined in Taft, California, climbing through my 8,700th consecutive day as a federal prisoner. Although I don't know how many more days, weeks, or months of imprisonment remain for me, I know the journey began in August of 1987. It has taken me through prisons of every security level, including city jails, county jails, detention centers, United States Penitentiaries, Federal Correctional Institutions, and Federal Prison Camps.

I was 23 when my judge slammed me with a 45-year sentence for convictions related to cocaine trafficking. I did not have a history of violence, weapons, or previous incarceration, but I did have an absolute determination to emerge from prison successfully.

Now I am 47 and my life philosophy, one that I have come to call the Straight-A Guide, is the reason that I stand ready for my return to society, whenever it comes.

The Straight-A Guide isn't a strategy that I

or any single person can take credit for having developed. As an avid reader, I've learned from men who lived by the same principles; some of those men lived during ancient times and some live today. Leaders from all walks of life abide by it. By striving to emulate their leadership, I have found it possible to grow in ways that few would expect from a long-term prisoner.

Any prisoner can do the same, and I have had the privilege of learning from many who have. All it takes is commitment and discipline—virtues that grow in strength as a man embraces the Straight-A Guide.

During the decades that have passed since my imprisonment began, I have earned academic credentials, built a quasi-career, saved significant financial resources, developed an extensive support network, and even nurtured a thriving marriage that began inside a prison visiting room. Those achievements did not materialize by accident.

Decisions I made as a young man led me into the tornado of imprisonment, but in accepting God's blessing and inner strength I began climbing my way out. This book profiles many men I've met who have relied upon the same strategy to climb through and conquer their own terms of confinement. Those who commit to The Straight-A Guide prepare themselves to

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triumph over their own obstacles, ensuring that they will emerge and return to society with opportunities for meaningful, contributing lives as law-abiding citizens.

Statistics show how easily men lose their way inside. Too many prisoners do. The Straight-A Guide isn't a secret recipe or magical formula for success. Rather, it's a tool that, when used, serves as a compass we can rely on to navigate our way through the dark, inevitable challenges that accompany imprisonment.

Indeed, recidivism rates in our country suggest that prisons breed continuing cycles of failure. They are like mazes into which people descend and become trapped. Many prisoners lose their sense of direction. The longer society exposes an individual to "corrections" the more susceptible that individual becomes to being sucked back in upon release.

Tragically, it isn't just the prisoner who becomes vulnerable to recidivism. With 2.3 million people confined within our country, an intergenerational pattern of recidivism has taken root. Children with one or both parents incarcerated become more likely to suffer the same fate. Families suffer and when they do, entire communities suffer.

A prison system that perpetuates failure undermines all that our country represents.

Individuals who embrace the Straight-A Guide accept that they have a responsibility to break that pattern of failure and that they must work toward success every day through the deliberate choices they make.

I am proud to join with others who embrace the Straight-A Guide. It would be easy to allow the circumstances of life to derail our progress. While family members and loved ones celebrate birthdays and holidays without us, the bleakness of imprisonment can extinguish hope. Calendar pages separating us from liberty can seem without end, burying us under a darkness that sometimes feels impossible to see our way through. In using The Straight-A Guide we empower ourselves, opening new perspectives that any individual can purposefully pursue.

The Straight-A Guide calls attention to seven attributes: Attitude, Aspiration, Action, Accountability, Awareness, Achievement, and Appreciation.

Although each attribute has its own characteristics, one attribute leads to another. They all work together in symmetry, with each being integral to the outcome.



On the surface, the attributes may seem simple. They are. Yet while struggling through the enormous sense of loss that can overwhelm any prisoner, we are sometimes blind to the simplest solutions. Rather than seeing clear paths that lead to a more fulfilling existence, external forces that seem to conspire and plot against us distract us from making progress. That's part of the vortex that we must overcome. Yet when life spins out of control it may feel impossible to find the toehold to begin the climb out. Feelings of anger and bitterness and betrayal pummel us as we sink deeper into the abyss. We miss our families, our communities, and our way of life. We resent the pervasive injustice spread throughout the system.

The Straight-A Guide illuminates an alternative view. By committing to it, we remind ourselves that although we may not have the power to control external forces such as institutions or other people, we have the power to choose how we will respond. Institutions and people may not behave in the ways that we would like or that we perceive as fair. Yet when we yield to their power or force we weaken ourselves. By training our minds to focus on what we can do rather than on what others do to us, on the other hand, we empower ourselves.

Taking the first step in the Straight-A

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Guide to self-empowerment requires an individual to check his attitude, to understand his strengths and weaknesses. Socrates, an ancient Greek philosopher, wrote about introspection, suggesting that the unexamined life wasn't worth living. Sun Tzu, an even older man of wisdom, suggested that to overcome a man must know his adversary. The more we understand ourselves and our adversaries the better we prepare ourselves to master our attitudes.





## CHAPTER TWO

### ATTITUDE

Attitude. It's a simple enough word. But how does a grown man assess his attitude within the context of imprisonment? What is his mental perception or position with regard to the predicament he endures?

As a long-term prisoner, I've listened to numerous men who served sentences in every security level, from penitentiary to prison camp. They've served sentences that varied in length from multiple-life terms to a few months. Some of the men had been in prison for decades when we spoke, while others were embarking upon their first weeks inside. Many were kind enough to share their stories with me. I've written several books that describe in detail what I learned about their adjustments inside.

By listening to the men around me, I have learned about their experiences—what brought them to prison, about their adjustments through prison, about their expectations upon release. Some of the men held advanced degrees. Others did not know how to read. Some of the men came

from exceptional wealth. Others didn't have any concept of financial stability. Some of the men had run businesses employing thousands; others had never held a legitimate job. I spoke with many men who had strong family support. Others lived without contact of any kind beyond prison boundaries.

With regard to a man's adjustment in prison, *attitude* is the most influential factor. Attitude determines whether he thrives or flounders. It doesn't matter whether the individual is a former gang member from the streets or a former CEO of a publicly traded corporation.

In interviewing men from all sectors of society, I've come to see how struggles with the criminal justice system—and prison in particular—could influence and shape a man's attitude. Whatever his background, the man who embraces and lives by what I would call an *empowering attitude* positions himself to thrive. Those who don't will continue the fall.

What does it mean to thrive in prison? What does it mean to flounder? To thrive or flounder may have different meanings, depending on an individual's values, or attitude. For some, thriving in prison means preparing in measurable ways that lead to success upon release. For others, thriving in prison means

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adjusting in ways that ease the pressures and pains of confinement.

Examples of contrasting prison adjustments might help illustrate the point. I'll begin by sharing what I learned from Redneck Rick, a man I met when I was beginning my term in a U.S. penitentiary.

\* \* \* \* \*

While I was taking my first steps of a marathon term in prison, Rick was completing his first decade. He enjoyed a solid reputation as a stand-up convict. To him, being a stand-up convict had many implications. It meant "handling his business," serving his time without concern for anything that took place beyond prison walls.

"Only way to do time is to be your own man," Redneck Rick advised me. "Forget about everything outside these walls. Ain't nothin' you can do from in here that's gonna matter anyway. Family and friends? They're gone. Forget about them. Got an ol' lady? Cut her loose 'fore she ditches you. Ain't no way she's hangin' 'round. Get y'rself a routine. Do yer thing. Handle yore business. Don't let nobody take nothin' from you."

Redneck Rick's advice seemed sensible enough by penitentiary standards. It echoed what

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I had heard from other prisoners before and what I would hear throughout my journey. With remarkable consistency, other prisoners suggested that the wise course of action was to focus on life inside prison walls and forget about everything that happened beyond prison boundaries. Such an adjustment would spare the prisoner the inevitable pain that came as a consequence of being separated from society. Attitude could allow him to shrug off concerns or disappointments from outside as he created his own society inside the penitentiary, as Redneck Rick had done.

Rick and I were assigned to adjacent cells in the same housing block. Our proximity led to our conversations. Since I was a new prisoner I listened to his experience, but in the end I concluded that neither Redneck Rick's method of adjustment nor his attitude of helpless resignation would suit me. His attitude reflected a 100 percent commitment to failure—nothing more than surviving the prison experience. What he would encounter after the prison term ended didn't concern Redneck Rick because he felt powerless to do anything about it. Instead of thinking about life beyond prison, he resigned himself to make it through one day at a time.

From Redneck Rick's perspective, he had a thriving prison routine. It began early each

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morning, when he joined four of his buddies in the chow hall for breakfast and coffee. They sat in their reserved section, each at a reserved seat that he had claimed. They would fight to protect what they perceived as their turf, regardless of the consequences. They left the chow hall for jobs in the prison factory. With Rick's longevity and top pay grade, he earned \$200 each month, enough to meet his needs. After work he returned to the housing unit. He'd purchase his mug of hooch from one of the prison hustlers and relax each night either playing poker in his cell or watching television from the space he reserved.

Rick's attitude suited his well-established routine. Without any use for self-improvement programs or deviation from the adjustment that had earned him his so-called respect inside the walls, Rick liked to say that he served his own time. Before he walked out of the penitentiary at the completion of his term, Redneck Rick suggested that I would be fine if I were to follow a similar routine. Self-reliance and a disregard for events outside of prison would be the best way to make it through a long sentence, he told me.

For a man who aspired "to make it through a long sentence," Rick's advice may have had merit. I certainly heard the same type of advice frequently. An attitude like Rick's enabled a prisoner to live stress-free, with no worries

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about the complications that would await his release. Rick supported himself with a kick-back job that provided all the income he needed to buy soda and chips, to gamble, to purchase hooch on the black market. Rick had his respect, as was evidenced by his reserved seat in the television room or chow hall. He served his sentence for today, unconcerned about tomorrow.

Within a year after his initial release, however, Rick returned to the same penitentiary housing unit with a fresh 25-year sentence. As it turned out, the attitude that Rick relied upon to make it through a long sentence didn't serve him so well in preparing for release. I asked him what happened.

"It wasn't my fault," he told me. "They done set a man up to come back."

"How so?"

I didn't understand how being released after a decade in prison could result in a man returning so quickly.

"First of all," his lip twisted into a sneer as he explained, "you go to a halfway house. Ain't got no money, no clothes, no car, so you gotta start your life there. You got the man breathin' down the back 'a yer neck hollerin' all day 'bout get a job. He ain't really care nothin' 'bout a man findin' no work. The halfway house gets 25

percent of gross pay and the man wants his cut. That's the halfway house racket right there in a nutshell. After kickin' the man his 25 percent how's a guy gonna pay his cost 'a livin' and save to get his own place? Ain't gonna happen! 'Sides that, ain't no jobs out there for anyone comin' out the pen, least not any that pay 'nough for a man to get his life together. I wasn't 'bout to be flippin' no burgers!" Redneck Rick's responses to my question revealed his attitude. The decade he had served in prison had given him a measure of self-worth. Other prisoners respected him. He had his routine, his pay grade, his reserved seat in the chow hall and television rooms. Those were some of the measurements by which Redneck Rick defined himself as a man, enabling him to reclaim a portion of his humanity or dignity that a long term in prison stripped away.

When Redneck Rick returned to society, however, the reality that no one cared about his respect or reputation in prison hit him with the force of a wrecking ball. There weren't any seats reserved for him and he wasn't entitled to a job. His tattoos told a story that may have served him well inside the prison community, but not so much outside. Rather than cope with the frustrations, he scored a pistol and robbed a bank. Upon his return, it didn't take long before Redneck Rick slipped back into the same

penitentiary routine. He even got his reserved chair back.

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Those who work in prison environments may not comprehend how the infrastructure of imprisonment dehumanizes a man over time and influences his attitude. As statistics repeatedly show, the types of attitude that prisons foster frequently lead to adjustments like Redneck Rick's. Empowered men, on the other hand, navigate their way through challenge, seeking to understand the environment and adjust with an attitude that makes the most of any situation. If we accept that those who run prisons have a specific agenda, and that their agenda does not take successful reentry for prisoners into consideration, it is easier to formulate an empowered attitude regardless of what other prisoners or staff members do.

Prison staff members see themselves as simply doing their job. Those jobs place the so-called sanctity of the institution above the needs of the human beings it confines. People become "inmates," with registration numbers replacing names and individual identities. Rule after prison rule can exterminate a man's dignity and self-worth as the months turn into years and decades. "Read your inmate handbook," the guards (who prefer to be called officers) instruct. The

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handbook is degrading and dehumanizing.

An empowered man masters his attitude in order to withstand and overcome the fusillade of rules and orders that continuously assaults his dignity and seeks to dehumanize him.

Rules determine when, what, and how much a prisoner can eat. Rules dictate when, for how long, and to what extent a prisoner can interact with his family. Rules govern where and with whom a prisoner will be locked inside small spaces. They establish when a prisoner can use the bathroom and threaten consequences for those who do not abide by them. Rules can uproot a prisoner's life in an instant, resulting in his being locked in chains and transferred across state lines without prior notice.

Prisoners learn to cope. The manner in which they adjust reflects their attitude. It is their way of reclaiming the humanity that the institution of corrections strives to extinguish by design. Some adjust in empowering ways—it's a deliberate choice. The easier, more common adjustment, however, carries a man from one minute to the next. This kind of adjustment does not bode well for the challenges that follow release.

Redneck Rick's hopeless attitude was common when I began serving my sentence and it's common now. By removing mechanisms

through which a prisoner can work toward earning freedom, the prison institution encourages apathy. During the decades I've served I have seen those kinds of attitudes time and time again in various institutions, always characterized by the familiar premise that a convict should abandon all thoughts or concerns about the world beyond prison boundaries and serve his own time inside.

A hopeless attitude leads a prisoner to focus on easing his adjustment inside. He equates his level of respect within the prison environment with the length of his sentence rather than by the accomplishments he makes. A man cannot overcome the dehumanization of imprisonment when he bases his identity on his reserved seat in a television room, his authority to change a television channel, or his ability to command a table of cards or dominos. Such an attitude may provoke some to lethal violence in order to establish, nurture, or defend a reputation in prison.

With a quarter century of imprisonment behind me, I can draw upon thousands of examples like Redneck Rick's. If failed adjustments to society upon release happened infrequently, it might be easy to dismiss Redneck Rick as a bad apple, a criminal, a man incapable of reform. Yet when we consider government

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statistics showing that 70 percent of the people exposed to prolonged time in prison revert to crime upon release, the published evidence would suggest that the \$75 billion system known as “corrections” doesn’t correct anything.

Observations along with personal experiences lead me to conclude that prison policies condition people to fail rather than encourage them to prepare for success upon release. As men living in prison, it’s incumbent upon each of us to understand the dynamics at play within the unnatural and un-American culture that confines us. It’s unnatural because it separates us from family; it is un-American because it extinguishes hope or the concept of merit and redemption in a country founded on the premise of liberty and justice for all, and the land of the free. That understanding can help shape a man’s attitude in spite of the adversity through which he must live. While in prison, we must grasp that we’re locked inside a system with billions of dollars and expenditures at stake. With so much money involved, no one should feign surprise at the prison cartels that come together in a unified effort to expand opportunities. What would serve such a syndicate’s interests more: people who emerged like Redneck Rick and the high recidivism rates from which society suffers or people who

emerged from prison with skills, resources, and values that lead to law-abiding, contributing lives? Is it in the pimp's interests for the prostitute to find a better way of life and become a responsible citizen? I think not. Neither do those who stand behind the prison system want prisons to correct anything.

Those who design prison systems consider their own self-interests. Since I'm convinced that a man equips himself to master his attitude by understanding the broader implications of his environment (or his adversary, as Sun Tzu would say), prisoners should think about the nature and self-interest of the prison industrial complex. The decision makers behind it seem to follow the same pattern as the pimp, or any other purveyor of vice.

I have spent more of my life in prison than I have spent in society as I write this book. Decades have enslaved me in the interest of justice. Naturally, I have made a study of slavery with hopes that knowledge of history would help me conquer imprisonment.

My research led to biographies of Frederick Douglas. I also read about the descendants of slaves, such as Richard Wright. That literature described how those in power discouraged education or enlightenment of the oppressed. In order to maintain their social

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hierarchy, they prohibited slaves from learning to read or write. It's an attitude of oppression that can be traced back for thousands of years—the powerful have sought to preserve their institutions by relying upon darkness and subterfuge rather than light.

Similarly, those behind the current state of prisons understand that if they were to promote family and community ties, development of education and vocational skills, and support values-based decisions, they would prepare more people for success. Yet, what would happen to the billions in revenues if people emerged from prison as law-abiding citizens?

To counter such a troubling possibility, prison profiteers take action. They begin by dehumanizing the people inside. Rather than allowing guards and low-level administrators to identify with the men as fathers, sons, husbands, or children of God, prison policies reduce the men to the more clinical and degrading label of "inmate." Administrators publish public-policy statements about corrections. Then they establish and carry out policies and a culture that undermines the likelihood of redemption, making adjustments like Redneck Rick's the norm. Prison policies obstruct family and community ties. They hinder access to academic credentials or vocational skills. They discourage

values-based thinking through a central control mechanism that governs through the threat of punishment rather than the promise of incentives.

When we consider these realities, it becomes clear that Redneck Rick did exactly what the system conditioned him to do. In fact, had he emerged from prison with skills, resources, and a values system that led to success, those who buy into the myth of corrections would have wondered, cynically, what happened? Society expects prisons to perpetuate failure. I point out such observations for a deliberate purpose: rather than malign the system of corrections or the people who devote careers to it, I strive to enlighten those imprisoned within it.

In sharing what I have learned, experienced, and observed, I offer data other prisoners may consider. Some may accept my assessments as truth while others may reject them. Yet, I am convinced that as a man understands the nature of his adversity more completely, the more capably and effectively he can master his attitude in ways that will allow him to triumph over struggle.

Redneck Rick's prison adjustment did not reflect an understanding of his adverse environment. He may have understood that he was in prison and that he had to make it through

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one day into the next, but he failed to understand the essence of imprisonment. What influence would prison have over him as the weeks turned into months, the months into years, the years into decades? Prison guards stated their mission every day when they said that preserving the security of the institution was their top priority. To preserve the institution, they participated in an infrastructure with policies and procedures designed to dehumanize and degrade men into inmates. Each individual could choose how he responded, but the choices came with implications and ramifications. They all began with a man's attitude.

By allowing the culture of imprisonment to shape his attitude, a man misses an opportunity to empower himself. Any time he suspends thought about the outside world, focusing on his life inside rather than the challenges that await his release, the culture of imprisonment prevails. The culture of imprisonment expects hopeless attitudes and it is designed specifically to respond to them. Prisoners who adjust with that attitude may experience temporary control over a television room or dominance as a master of dominoes and table games, but as Redneck Rick discovered, that kind of attitude didn't inspire many options that would help him triumph over the challenges

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awaiting release.

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Walt Jones was a prisoner from whom I had the privilege of learning. Whereas I met Redneck Rick early in my prison term, I met Walt Jones much later, when I had already served 20 years. In Walt I saw an attitude that was the complete opposite of Redneck Rick. Walt worked hard every day with a 100-percent commitment to preparing himself to overcome the enormous challenges that he expected to encounter when his prison term concluded. As we talked, Walt confided that he didn't enter the prison system with such an empowering attitude. He attributed his growth to lessons he learned from Johnny X, another prisoner he knew who was serving a life term.

Walt told me that he grew up in a large housing project in Watts, California. He began selling drugs before reaching his teens, and as a big, tough kid, street gangs actively recruited him. Although his high school issued him a diploma, Walt never learned how to read. He considered himself street smart rather than book smart. From his perspective, he didn't need to read. All he needed was a pistol and connection in the drug game. After marrying, Walt expected to support his young family by living as a hustler, true to the game.

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Life didn't work out as Walt had expected. The feds busted some of his homies. Walt said that he had grown up with the mind set of being ready to kill or die for his homies. They may have packed guns and talked a big game, yet when Walt's homies faced the prospect of decades in prison, they quickly accepted the prosecutor's offer to lower their own exposure to imprisonment by cooperating in ways that led to convictions for Walt and his wife.

After the convictions, Walt received a sentence of 20 years. His wife received a sentence that would keep her locked up for 10 years. Their imprisonment came with the complication that they would have to leave their two children with relatives. Walt said that he walked into the high-security prison angry, determined to run the prison just as he ran the streets.

Walt's attitude dictated his actions during his initial adjustment to prison. It didn't take long before he had knives and a dope connection. He told me that he spent the first years of his sentence hustling, living in prison just as he lived on the streets. It wasn't until guards locked him in a cell with Johnny X that Walt began to see a better way.

Johnny X had been in prison for longer than 10 years. Whereas Walt was serving 20 years, Johnny X didn't have a release date. Rather

than harboring anger or resentment, Johnny X had a purpose in life, and that purpose was to spread knowledge rather than hatred. He urged Walt to join him, to put down the hustling game so Walt could educate himself and live as a man rather than as a fool. While locked in that cell with Johnny X, Walt began to listen.

Had Johnny X not been serving a life sentence, with 10 years of prison behind him, Walt said that he may not have listened. But the street credibility gave Johnny X authority and respect. Instead of using it to hustle Walt, or pressuring or influencing Walt to put in work for him, Johnny X suggested that Walt use his time to educate himself and start living like a man, like someone who could take care of his family, who could stand with dignity and honor. An empowered man didn't depend on homies and didn't subject himself to the indignities of being locked in a cell, as if he were an animal. Instead, a man contributed to the making of better lives, always living for something bigger than himself.

Under Johnny X's tutoring, Walt's eyes began to open. While Walt had been willing to sacrifice his life for the homies, those same homies had served Walt and his wife up to prosecutors. During those first years that Walt was locked in the pen, his homies hadn't sent him a single dollar, nor had they taken the time to

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check in on his elderly parents who took on the burden of caring for Walt's children. Walt had many years of prison ahead of him, but listening to Johnny X had changed his attitude. Instead of continuing his life as a hustler, Walt made the decision to start educating himself, preparing to live as a man, a leader who could show others how to overcome struggle.

This new, empowered attitude guided all of Walt's future decisions. It also made a monumental difference in the way that he advanced through not only the remainder of his prison term, but in his life upon release. Walt put down his hustling game for good, picking up books instead. He read one book after another, educating himself into maturity and as a world-class communicator. He also studied, becoming a certified personal trainer, earning credentials that would enable him to walk out of prison in the worst job market in history to find gainful employment.

Besides educating himself, Walt worked with his wife. She was locked up in a prison thousands of miles away from Walt, but through letters they discussed the importance of making positive changes. Walt's wife encouraged him, agreeing that both of them needed to prepare for a more sustainable life than living on the margins as hustlers. They were the parents of two children

and when they walked out of prison they needed to have skills that would translate into responsible lives.

Despite being confined in separate prisons, both Walt and his wife made a joint commitment to seize every opportunity to educate themselves. Rather than waiting for laws to change that would offer more good time, or waiting for the prison system to start encouraging them with incentives, both Walt and his wife relied upon strength from within. Their commitment to return to society as responsible citizens drove their attitudes. Besides that 100 percent commitment, they served the remainder of their time inside educating themselves—not for the value of certificates or to appease prison staff. They didn't have any delusions that such a commitment would advance their release dates. They were preparing themselves for better lives when their prison terms expired. All of their decisions inside began with that attitude and reflected their 100 percent commitment.

When I met Walt, I could see how his attitude differed from other prisoners who had served lengthy sentences. His laser focus on preparing for release meant that he had to structure his time. Instead of wasting hours on table games or television, he spent his days studying, either working toward developing his

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*Walt Jones and his family.*

communication skills and broadening his knowledge or working toward advancing his certified fitness training credentials. Walt's wife had already been released from prison. She had secured a steady job and even managed to qualify for a mortgage that would allow her to purchase a home. Walt lived as a leader inside, practicing his faith in the Nation of Islam with a 100-percent commitment to walk out of prison strong, as an honorable man who could stand on his own feet, living as a role model for his family and community.

Walt's preparations have served him well. Whereas Redneck Rick's attitude led him to focus on easing his way through prison, forgetting about the outside world, Walt matured into a man with an attitude of success. He abandoned the ways of the penitentiary, dropping the role of a hustler to embrace responsibility. He taught himself to read, then advanced his communication skills in ways that would help him become a teacher, a leader of men.

Instead of walking out of prison to meet disaster, Walt emerged to career opportunities and stability. He contributed to his family with his earnings as a personal fitness trainer and he contributed to his community with the outstanding speaking skills that he developed. His progress did not materialize by accident.

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Although he may not have known it as the Straight-A Guide, Walt lived as the personification of it, embodying an attitude that reflected his 100-percent commitment to success. He attributes that attitude to the mentoring he received from Johnny X and the encouragement he received from his wife. Together, they created opportunities that led to the stability they now enjoy in society.

I've known thousands of prisoners who admitted to beginning their terms with less than empowering attitudes. As long as they carried anger and bitterness, there was little possibility for growth. In Walt Jones' case a long-term prisoner helped him see a better way. Charlie Day, another prisoner, told me a similar story.

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Charlie described a childhood without much in the way of positive influences. After his father went to prison for selling heroin, his mother tried to sustain the family through selling drugs. She wasn't able to provide him with a sense of stability. His mother went through a series of marriages and bad relationships, evictions, and other troubles that rendered her incapable of providing normalcy or even regular meals for Charlie. By the time Charlie was 12 years old he had begun stealing weed from his mother and selling it at school.

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While in high school, Charlie said that his girlfriend persuaded him to join Upward Bound, a development program for troubled kids. Although he considered the program as a positive influence, Charlie said that the street life still attracted him and he never made a full commitment to changing. Soon after he turned 18, Charlie's 17-year-old girlfriend gave birth to their daughter, Anissa. Being a father inspired him to lead the kind of productive life that the Upward Bound program promoted. For a while he considered a career in the military as an option to prepare for better opportunities. A failed drug test, however, suspended his eligibility and he drifted back to selling drugs as a way of life.

Without much in the way of formal education or appreciation for society's values, Charlie only qualified for entry-level jobs that didn't pay enough to sustain his young family. As both of his parents had done before him, Charlie gave up on the idea of legitimate employment, choosing to sell drugs instead. Despite his wanting to provide a better life for his daughter, Charlie lacked the strength of commitment to give a 100 percent effort. Before long, Charlie followed in his father's footsteps, shrugging off an 18-month prison term that came as a consequence of his relationships with other drug dealers.



While in custody on that first conviction of his, Charlie said that he ran with the homies, made new connections, and put schemes in place to expand his drug sales upon release. He considered himself a drug dealer, he said, and despite being locked up at a young age, he convinced himself that he was very good at what he did. While serving his first stint in the criminal justice system, Charlie continued to hustle. It ended with him being even more immersed, trafficking in drugs and guns to make his way through life.

Within a few years of his release from that first exposure to prison, Charlie found himself back in custody. The new bust exposed him to a lengthy prison term that exceeded 10 years, but it didn't daunt him. He described being locked in the detention center as another version of being on the streets that – to Charlie – felt like home. He missed his daughter, but a clique of homies serving time with Charlie eased him right into the mix, hustling drugs, hooch, and anything else that would move through the underground economy.

Charlie was in his mid-20s, taking what he considered the inevitable first steps through prison for which life had conditioned him. Although he would have preferred a different course, while waiting for the consequences of his

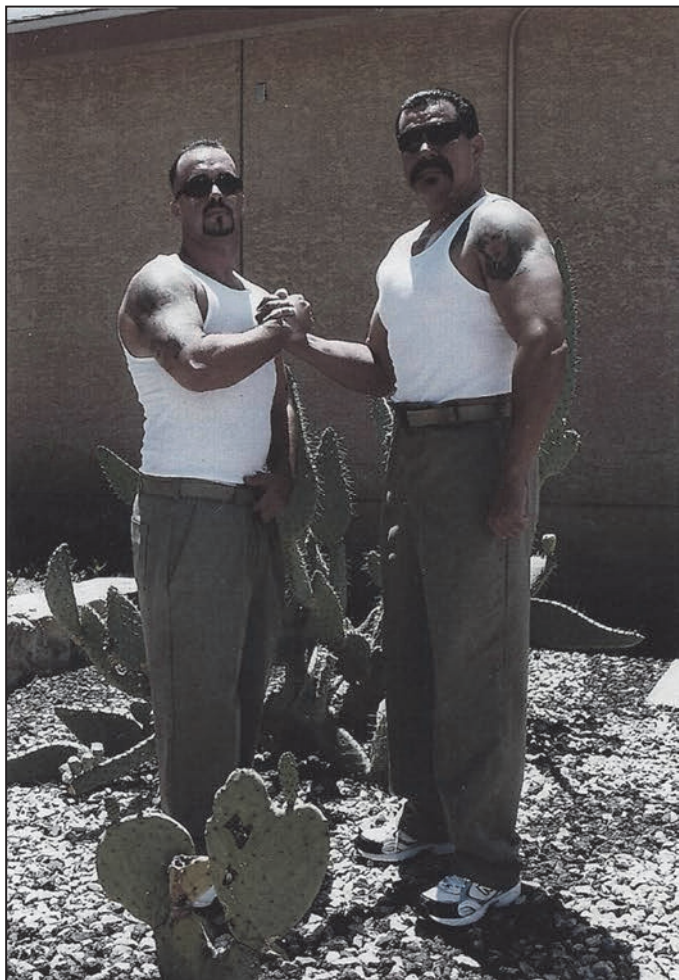
second offense to play out, Charlie felt as though he had to live up to the image that defined him; his homies expected it. He saw himself as a hardcore hustler, with no other options. When the judge ordered him to serve 13 years, he had no intention of changing his life.

After two years of selling drugs and establishing himself within a prison gang, just as had happened with Walt, Charlie found a mentor inside. Charlie's mentor, Big Mike, had a high level of street credibility, and since he had served enough time in prison, when Big Mike talked, Charlie listened. He asked Charlie what he valued in life and without hesitation, Charlie answered that his daughter mattered more to him than anything else.

"If she matters to you so much," Big Mike asked, "then why are you wasting your life in here acting like a fool, selling drugs and running with guys who expect you to put the homies first, no matter what?"

Charlie didn't have a quick answer. For the first time he began to see that what he said was most important—his daughter—didn't match up with his daily actions. Mike became a trusted mentor to Charlie, pulling him away from the gang by introducing him to Bible study. Rather than dwelling on the decisions that Charlie had been making in the past, his mentor

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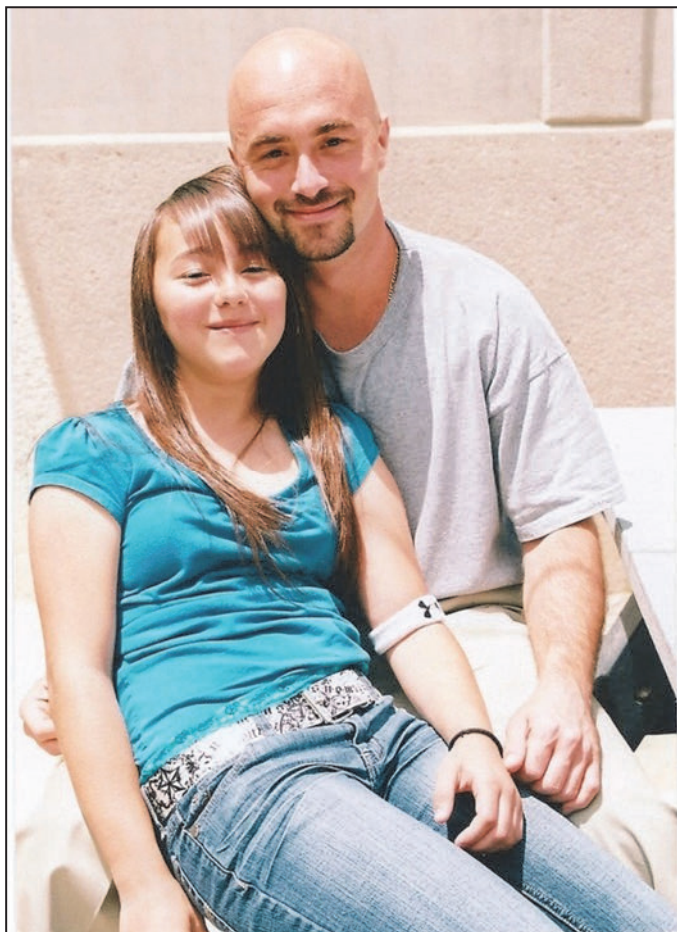
*Charlie Day with Big Mike*

pushed him to project where such decisions would take him in the future. Where would they lead his daughter?

If Charlie wanted to live as a man, Mike suggested, he should reject the pattern of his father—the very pattern that had burdened Charlie with a 13-year prison term, and robbed Anissa of her father’s presence during her crucial childhood years. That realization led Charlie to begin living a values-based life. He understood that there wasn’t anything he could do about his 13-year prison sentence, but that didn’t mean he had to live in accordance with the anti-social values that drove so many others in the prison culture.

Charlie found strength in reading the Bible. It was through such study while locked inside a cell that he pledged to live as a better father to his daughter, despite the many years that would keep him separated from her. When the homies confronted Charlie with questions about changes in his behavior and challenged him on where he stood, without hesitating, Charlie identified himself as a Christian and said that for the remainder of his life he was going to live for the glory of God. His actions would become the example Charlie set for his daughter. Had Charlie committed to this kind of 100 percent attitude earlier, he wouldn’t have

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*Charlie Day with his daughter*

failed a drug test and derailed his plans for a military career.

Both Walt and Charlie found mentors who showed them a better way. Through changes in their attitudes, they were able to shift their focus and triumph over the environment of confinement. Instead of focusing on making it through their prison terms, they began to focus on the people they loved and the community to which they wanted to return. That fundamental shift in attitude distinguished both Walt and Charlie from Redneck Rick.

Charlie Day not only distanced himself from people stuck in the criminal mentality of gangs and corruption, he surrounded himself with other prisoners committed to living values-based lives, with dignity and self-respect. Their words and actions reflected attitudes of 100 percent commitment to self-improvement. He found another role model in Severin Stone, a white collar offender whose background differed from Charlie's. Despite their different backgrounds, Charlie and Severin worked out an arrangement to become cellmates so that each could encourage the other. They provide further evidence to my earlier observation that nothing—not background, privilege, or prior education level—influences adjustment through prison and preparations for success upon release as much as

attitude.

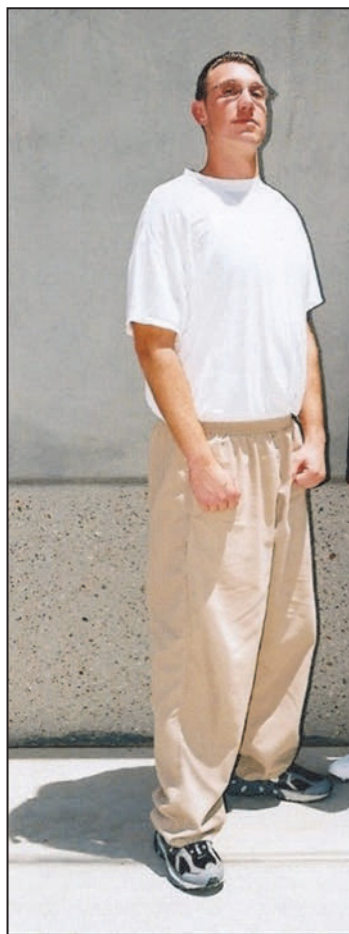
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Severin Stone understood how easily a bad attitude could expose him to decisions that led to a spiraling, downward path. He had been reared in stability, the privileged child of prosperous parents, both professionals.

He graduated from McClatchey High School in Sacramento with hopes of pursuing a career as an architect. A bad decision to drive drunk led to a DUI conviction that resulted in loss of his driver's license.

Without a valid driver's license, Severin didn't have transportation to and from college. Because he lacked the 100 percent commitment to getting his education, rather than taking public transportation he found it easier to quit school, entering the job market while suspending his dream of a career as an architect.

Instead of finishing college, Severin found work in telemarketing, where he excelled in selling debt-consolidation products. Others who worked in that industry noticed Severin's persuasive telephone presentations and they enticed him to join a swindle they operated in Costa Rica. Without thoughts about anything other than building upon his income, Severin packed his belongings, said good-bye to his family, and



*Severin Stone*



emigrated to Central America in order to join a scheme that would bamboozle gullible American citizens into sending money.

Despite the lies Severin told in order to deceive people into sending money that kept the fraud alive, he convinced himself that he was a successful businessman. If people were not so greedy, he rationalized, they would not be vulnerable to his pitch. That attitude blinded Severin to the crimes in which he actively participated.

Law enforcement, however, saw things differently. Federal officers wanted to bust Severin and so invested considerable resources with hopes that by arresting him they would prevent others from losing money in the scam. Officers in Costa Rica nabbed Severin at gunpoint, took him into custody, and locked him in a jail cell while authorities prepared his extradition to the United States. Although he didn't realize it as jailers processed him into the Costa Rican prison system, Severin said that within days he recognized that his arrest had been a blessing. It changed his attitude and his life.

As Severin lay on a steel rack feeling sorry for himself because of the troubles that had befallen him, another prisoner invited him to attend church services. Despite an initial

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reluctance, Severin agreed. Fellowship with others and Biblical teachings gave him a different perspective. Rather than pitying himself over the consequences that were about to follow, for the first time Severin began to comprehend how his choices had contributed to misery for others, including people he loved and people whose identity he did not know. His arrest humiliated his family and the crimes he had committed victimized many. The healing could not begin until he acknowledged that truth.

Prior to leaving his family in Sacramento, Severin's supportive parents had urged him to reconsider. He was in his early 20s, reckless, and irresponsible. Despite a solid middle-class upbringing, Severin had a history of substance abuse and his parents worried about his reasons for moving to Costa Rica. He lied, misleading them into believing that he was pursuing a career in an online casino venture.

Besides disappointing his family, Severin acknowledged that his actions had defrauded an untold number of individuals from across the United States. Individually those victims had all been fleeced out of thousands of dollars that they could not afford to lose. While sitting in a Costa Rican jail, Severin felt shame and humiliation as he began to face the truth of his crimes. During those first few days in custody, Severin shifted

his attitude, making a 100 percent commitment to move forward living as a force for good, serving the will of God rather than allowing greed or self-pity to guide his decisions.

On February 13, 2008, authorities extradited Severin from Costa Rica to the Mecklenberg County Jail in North Carolina. By mid-July, 2009, he was taking his first steps inside a California federal prison. Severin received a 90-month prison sentence, coupled with a restitution order of \$5 million. He had just turned 30, but his positive attitude empowered Severin to contemplate what steps he could take toward accomplishments rather than dwell on the numerous years he would have to serve in prison or the multi-million dollar restitution that would hinder his future.

Instead of allowing the punishment to weigh him down, Severin began serving his sentence with the absolute commitment to clearly define his goals.

He understood that a positive attitude must guide him, as his attitude was the only force powerful enough to take him off target. Regardless of the actions that led him to prison or the length of his sentence, Severin embraced the reality that he could always work toward self-improvement. He intended to begin by pursuing academic credentials.

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Men like Walt Jones, Charlie Day, and Severin Stone impressed me with their positive attitudes. Each of them served a lengthy sentence that would separate them from family and community for many years. Yet rather than yielding to negative, external forces, each tapped into strength from within themselves. As empowered men they chose to work toward what they could become rather than allowing the culture of imprisonment to dehumanize them or attack their dignity. With empowered attitudes, they rejected the mantra that Redneck Rick and other prisoners clung to about immersing oneself in the prison environment while forgetting about the world beyond prison boundaries.

Yet it wasn't only former gang bangers, street hustlers, and financial swindlers who needed a positive attitude to overcome imprisonment. During the decades that I've served I've interacted with hundreds of college-educated, professional men who made defeatist choices in prison. Instead of conquering adversity, they sunk into depression, waiting, hoping, clinging to fantasies that legislative changes or judicial actions would free them from injustice. Their sense of entitlement brought delusions that their previous status should preclude them from having to serve time

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alongside “common criminals.”

Inmates who defined themselves by what they once were, what they once had, or where they once lived, frequently succumbed to self-pity. Rather than empowering themselves with inner resolve to change their circumstances, they lived with the inmate mentality, continuing to fall into downward spirals as they waited for circumstances to change.

I have known many inmates who once led distinguished careers as lawyers, accountants, and other white-collar professions. Yet in prison these once prominent business leaders acted like castrated, anxiety-crippled, hopeless inmates who complained endlessly about the unfairness of their circumstances.

Other professionals, however, walked into prison empowered, rejecting the pathetic label of inmate through their attitudes. Since I had been in prison all of my adult life, their inner-strength inspired me and I strove to emulate their leadership. Empowered men understood that continuous change accompanied life’s journey. In order to master it, they adjusted, carving out their identities through their responses to adversity. Neither exaggerated pride nor debilitating humiliation impaired them. Instead of offering buzzwords about overcoming struggle, they lived with a 100 percent commitment to their

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positive, inspiring attitudes that harmonized with the choices they made every day.

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Mike McCready walked into prison with a 108-month sentence. Despite his notable career as a highly compensated sales executive from Beverly Hills, he understood that his past would not dictate his future and that his conviction would require changes that he would have to embrace. Acknowledging that bad decisions had derailed his life, causing him not only to lose all of his prior earnings but also his reputation, Mike accepted his imprisonment, seeing it as an opportunity to build a new future. That acceptance gave him the toehold he needed to begin the climb away from despair and self-pity.

Despite being in his late 40s, Mike partnered his positive attitude with a personal commitment to learn new skills during the time he served. The prison environment complicated his journey, but those changes didn't faze him. When diagnosed with a painful hernia that prison administrators refused to treat, for example, Mike sucked it up, adjusting his routine in order to minimize his discomfort. Similarly, when administrators unexpectedly uprooted his life with news of his transfer to a prison more than a thousand miles away from his family, Mike collected his thoughts, then invested

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*Mike McCready*

himself in the change, anticipating opportunities that he knew he could create anywhere. He lived by the motto that when one door closed, another door opened.

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Justin Paperny, my friend and partner, inspired me as I saw that same positive attitude upon his adjustment to prison. Justin was a graduate of USC and had built a career as a stock broker at such notable firms as Merrill Lynch, Bear Stearns, and UBS. An indiscretion led to his criminal and civil convictions for violating securities laws.

At 34, Justin surrendered to serve an 18-month sentence in federal prison. Although he understood the consequences of his judicial problems, including hard costs in excess of a million dollars and the loss of his livelihood in addition to the loss of his freedom, Justin did not harbor resentment or whine about unfairness within the system.

With news reports indicating that he would return to society during the worst job market and economic crisis of his lifetime, Justin couldn't afford to waste time with television and table games. Every day, he woke early to make progress toward his preparations for the challenges he expected to encounter upon release.





*Justin Paperny at Taft Camp*

Many people *talked* about the importance of a will to succeed, yet they did nothing more than feed their fantasies by flipping through pages of glossy magazines, dreaming of expensive cars and luxury homes. Those who truly earned their way in society, however, understood that a will to prepare was essential for success. The man who prepared himself didn't define himself by possessions or titles. Rather, he understood that his real value came through will and inner resolve.

The prepared man always made sure that—even if everything were taken away from him—he could recreate it. Justin personified that attitude. It was consistent with what I learned from the business leaders I met inside prison boundaries, including my friend Lee Nobmann, the founder and CEO of Golden State Lumber, one of California's largest privately held companies.

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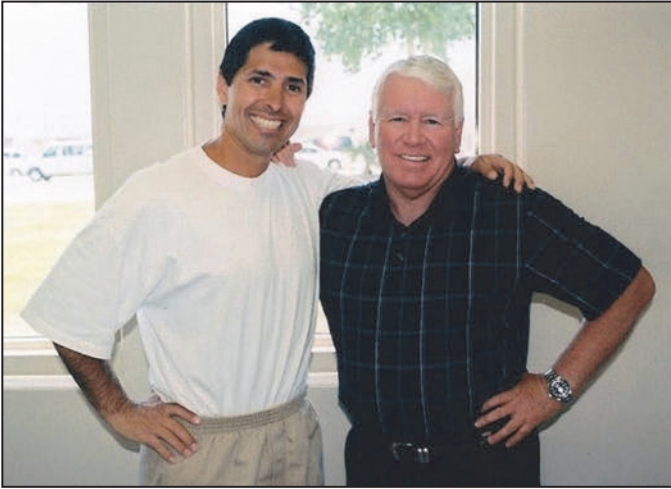
Lee Nobmann walked into federal prison carrying a 16-month sentence for a tax-related offense. His businesses employed several hundred people, generating hundreds of millions in revenues each year. Despite being a man of enormous personal wealth and success, Lee did not allow the squalor or conditions of federal prison to bring him down. He shrugged off the

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absence of privacy and found humor in the everyday indignities of prison. To him, prison was a life experience, and he approached it with an attitude of making people's lives better.

"Look, I know exactly why I'm here," Lee told me. "I'm here because I enjoy living on the edge, pushing the envelope. I played it a little loose, taking some expense deductions that I shouldn't have. I got caught. There isn't any sense complaining about the consequences. I'd like to do what I can to open opportunities that will improve the prospects for the men around here who are worthy."

Lee lived as the antithesis of an inmate, refusing to whine about a ridiculous infrastructure that did not offer incentives or encourage success. Rather than allowing prison to shape his life, he assessed his environment and within days he committed to a strategy that would carry him through with honor and dignity. Lee's strategy was consistent with the preparations that he had made throughout his business career. He personified success. Since preparations he had made in his past assured prosperity for Lee and his family under any conditions, he entered prison with a commitment to work toward improving the lives of others, showing them how to create their own success.



*Michael Santos with Lee Nobmann*

Jau-Yang Ho was another chief executive officer I met in prison who showed me that the importance of placing an emphasis on a positive attitude and living a values-based life extended far beyond boundaries of imprisonment—even beyond the borders of the United States. He built his career through merit, always assessing his environment, then moving forward with a 100 percent commitment to building a foundation that would deliver success.

After graduating with a degree in chemical engineering from Taiwan's Chen Kung University, Jau-Yang served two years in the Taiwan military. Then he began his career in Taiwan's Chi-Mei Corporation, one of the world's largest producers of plastics. Despite beginning as an entry-level engineer, through discipline, hard work, and a 100 percent commitment to invest himself fully, Jau-Yang rose to become the chief executive, presiding over several thousand employees and several billion dollars in annual revenues.

Although his actions did not violate the laws of Taiwan, (where Jau-Yang lived), U.S. authorities believed that some of his corporation's business practices violated Sherman antitrust laws. As a man of honor, Jau-Yang agreed to serve a 12-month sentence in a U.S. federal prison. He impressed me with his

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*Michael Santos with Jau-Yang Ho*

positive attitude and strength of character. Rather than fighting the prison system and the ways it demeaned people's lives, Jau-Yang always carried himself with dignity, showing kindness and courtesy to everyone he met.

Men like Lee Nobmann and Jau-Yang Ho did not struggle with anxieties during their imprisonment because they understood exactly why they served time, and they had clarity with regard to the lives they would lead upon release. Their sense of stability meant that Lee and Jau-Yang avoided the instability and uncertainty that characterized the lives of inmates who lived from one day to the next, willfully disregarding what they would encounter upon release.

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My friend Greg Reyes further validated the CEO-method of serving time, one that began with an empowering attitude that led to deliberate decisions in accordance with a principled plan.

Despite being one of America's wealthiest individuals, Greg Reyes voluntarily surrendered to serve an 18-month sentence for his controversial conviction related to his leadership at Brocade Communications, a publicly traded technology company. Greg's case attracted national attention because he was the only CEO

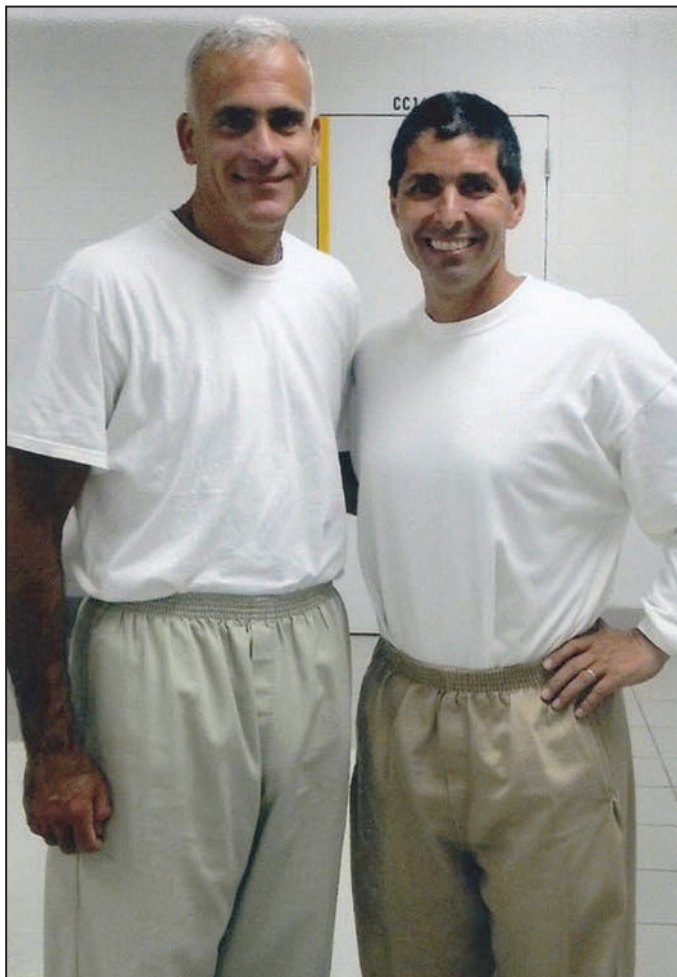
servicing time for the widespread practice of backdating stock options to employees. After the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed his first conviction because of lies prosecutors knowingly told the jury, prosecutors lied again in order to try him a second time. While spending millions to continue the fight for his innocence through the appeals court, Greg made the strategic decision to serve his sentence rather than remain free on bond pending the outcome of his second appeal.

Men like Greg do not ignore adversity or cower in the face of it. They make deliberate choices, facing struggle with courage, pulling strength from within to forge a desired outcome. No man wants to serve a prison term, but those who triumph over prison do so because of empowering attitudes. They reject the directionless path of continued failure and hopelessness. Instead of making excuses they make choices, fully understanding that pursuit of any intention begins with a positive attitude that success is a result of commitment rather than random chance.

While serving a prison term that had roots in political calculations rather than criminal intent, Greg endured a continuing series of challenges that would have devastated a weaker man. People he considered as close

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*Michael Santos with Greg Reyes*

friends betrayed him; his family was torn apart; the SEC launched an offensive to extort him out of an additional \$10 million of his after-tax income. Greg served a sentence not because he knowingly committed a criminal act, but because he signed financial statements that others prepared. Nevertheless, Greg climbed through each day with a steady resolve, fully embracing the concept and attitude that as a man of strength, he had to expect adversity as a constant on the journey of life.

Like Lee Nobmann and Jau-Yang Ho, Greg had lived his entire adult life in a deliberate way, focused and wholly committed to success as he defined it. These men did not have to contemplate preparations for a new career or worry about financial challenges. Yet personal wealth did not immunize them from adversity. In prison, they, too, had to endure the indignities and dehumanizing tendencies of the system. Each day brought new struggles that came with separation from loved ones, strip searches, lack of privacy, daily infringements on their human and civil rights. As they had done throughout their lives, Greg, Lee, and Jau-Yang relied upon positive, empowering attitudes, strength of character, discipline, humility, and a commitment to helping those around them reach their highest potential.

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In listening to both the experiences and expectations of hundreds of men from all walks of life, I learned a great deal about what it takes to triumph over adversity, especially when that adversity manifested itself through the context of a prison term, long or short. More than anything else, I came to conclude that triumph began with an empowering attitude. Without it, men deteriorated into inmates, allowing the prison system to dehumanize and overcome them with its message of “you’ve got nothin’ comin’.” They acted accordingly.

Men who triumph over imprisonment refuse to allow the prison machine to crush their will. External influences cannot suppress their will to triumph, to live every day as empowered men.

As Socrates wrote thousands of years ago, to make life worth living a man had to understand himself, his strengths and weaknesses, then act accordingly. Sun Tzu’s even more ancient writings advised that triumph came to the man who understood his adversaries. The ancient wisdom could help a man shape his attitude, establishing his code of personal values. By making decisions in accordance with those values, understanding how to adjust and correct course with every new challenge, he empowered

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himself.

Inmates who succumbed to the misconception that they should forget about the outside world and adjust in ways that eased their time inside set themselves up for repeated cycles of failure. Their adversary—the prison industrial complex—was exquisite in its design to handle adjustments like Redneck Rick's. As high recidivism rates showed, prison conditioned men to become inmates through systematic dehumanization and removing mechanisms through which individuals could work toward earning incremental increases in freedom.

It is possible to create meaning in life—in spite of adversity—by making values-based decisions and understanding that it is a man's response to struggle that defines him. An empowered attitude made all the difference for men like Walt Jones, Charlie Day, and Severin Stone.

Regardless of what decisions a man made in his past, at any time he could tap into the power within him to embrace a positive, empowering attitude. That first attribute of the Straight-A Guide led to the second: clearly defined *aspiration* to make principled, values-based decisions.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ASPIRATION

Some individuals serve their sentences with resources and stability in place that will ease their transition into society upon release. We may consider those men the fortunate few. According to my research, recidivism rates suggest that while serving lengthy sentences, most prisoners lose whatever resources or stability existed for them prior to confinement.

Those of us who live on the inside of prison boundaries don't need to rely upon abstract statistics to draw the conclusion that transitioning into society after a prison term presents obstacles. But we ignore the struggles awaiting our release to our detriment. When we serve our sentences with a 100 percent commitment to emerging successfully, we consider the reality and the totality of our circumstances. Rather than allowing the dehumanizing system of imprisonment to crush our spirit, those of us on the Straight-A Guide make an accurate assessment of our strengths and weaknesses then create realistic aspirations.

An aspiration isn't a childish wish, at least not as the Straight-A Guide defines it. Those on the Straight-A Guide don't waste time fantasizing over cars and houses that they will never know how to afford; they are not susceptible to get-rich-quick schemes, filled with elusive dreams about the magnificent income streams that will flow to them because of superficial lessons they learned about candle stick charting of financial markets or no-money down real estate from some prison charlatan.

Instead of fantasy, those on the Straight-A Guide lead principled, deliberate, values-based lives. They contemplate their environment, ascertain how they can make the most of the blessings around them, and they crystalize a vision that synchronizes with their values. To the extent that they exercise discipline, they can triumph over imprisonment to convert their vision—or aspiration—into an achievement.

The prison design extinguishes hope at every turn, making it necessary for prisoners to introspect and muster willpower to feed their aspirations. Those who don't visualize success become more susceptible to continuing the failure that prisons perpetuate. Without hope, the people confined inside prisons become indifferent or even resistant to the hard and consistent work necessary to overcome the dehumanization.

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Rather than contemplating the challenges awaiting them and creating a plan to navigate their way through the months, years, and decades ahead, too many people in prison give up. They may utter the platitudes about wanting to emerge strong, but without crisp, clear aspirations, reality hits hard, shattering their naïve fantasies and happy talk.

Through earlier writings I've introduced readers to numerous prisoners with whom I served time. Many of those men rejected the principles of the Straight-A Guide. They found more comfort embracing the great prison myth: regardless of what a man does inside, nothing matters. It's a myth that the culture of confinement spreads with its *you've got nothin' comin'* mantra, and a myth too many inmates accept as truth. Those who accept such a hopeless position do not burden themselves with aspirations on how they will emerge. They're content with fantasies, striving to ease their time rather than conquering imprisonment.

In *Earning Freedom*, for example, I introduced readers to Windward, one of my first cellmates in the penitentiary. He had served a lengthy term once. Upon his release from that first sentence, Windward told me, he concluded that reverting to drug smuggling was the only option available. The prison record, he said, had

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cut off all viable options to build a career.

Windward understood the hardship that would await his release. At the time that guards assigned him to my cell, he was in the beginning phase of a 20-year sentence. All Windward wanted was a mug of hooch and a bag of weed, anything that would take the edge off. That pattern of behavior had carried Windward through his first prison term, Windward told me, and he argued passionately that it would be the only sensible strategy to lead him through a second lengthy term.

“There ain’t no sense spendin’ all your time readin’ and workin’ through school.” Windward used to indulge me with his questionable wisdom. “Truth is, ain’t no one gonna care ’bout any little certificates you get in here. When you get out, everyone’s gonna know y’all done served a long stretch. Might as well enjoy it.”

At least Windward didn’t delude himself. He didn’t have any aspirations to live a law-abiding life upon release and he acted accordingly. Life for him would resemble a cycle of crime, prison, crime, prison until the end. Windward was living “true to the game,” as hustlers liked to say.

In a twisted way, prisoners who share Windward’s attitude reveal a 100 percent attitude

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of their own. Instead of working hard to prepare for a successful return to society, they aspire to live as super-convicts. Establishing themselves as ranking gang leaders and building a prison reputation becomes extremely important to them. Since their prison reputation becomes their way of restoring their humanity that the system of confinement crushes, all of their thoughts and actions synchronize with their aspirations of living as “stand-up convicts.”

Such prisoners commit to their course wholeheartedly. They would not hesitate to put a knife into someone as a response to the slightest sign of perceived “disrespect.” I know prisoners who have gutted other prisoners over incidents like table games, or perceived encroachment on space within the prison that they wanted to defend as their territory. They live fully aware that their activities don’t have any relationship to success upon release. But they refuse to think about release. They’re so wrapped up in the prison myth that they invest themselves fully, with a 100 percent commitment and attitude to establish or defend their prison reputations. It’s how they define themselves, mouthing their readiness to serve a lifetime locked down in a supermax prison cell. When regret or remorse comes, it’s too late.

Those men who live in accordance with

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the Straight-A Guide, on the other hand, reject the prison myth. They don't define themselves by the perceptions of others in prison. Instead, they recognize prison as a twisted, dehumanizing environment that they must triumph over. Rather than whining about the lack of emphasis on rehabilitation programs, those on the Straight-A Guide expect that they will encounter resistance and cynicism from the culture of corrections; the system withholds encouragement or incentives as men empower themselves, advancing efforts to prepare for law-abiding lives upon release.

A man climbing through the bleakness of a lengthy prison sentence does not blind himself to the reality that surrounds him. Platitudes may abound about it being a "system of corrections," but policies and procedures undermine such slogans. A man on the Straight-A Guide works toward his aspirations with his 100 percent commitment, fully aware that the system of corrections perpetuates failure, locking a man in iron chains and dropping him into a viper pit, mocking and tormenting him as he struggles to climb out.

Despite continuous resistance from the system of corrections, those on the Straight-A Guide rely upon their inner resolve to triumph. They willingly endure hardship, paying any price to ensure that they emerge from the pit of

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confinement strong, with skills, values, and resources that will enable them to succeed upon release. Rather than pursuing the questionable value of a prison reputation, men on the Straight-A Guide aspire to live as productive, contributing members of society. Instead of succumbing to the nefarious influences of corrections, they depend upon their attitude and 100 percent commitment to such an aspiration.

In *Prison! My 8,344<sup>th</sup> Day*, I wrote about Paul Wright, a prisoner who inspired me along my lengthy journey.

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Paul served his long sentence within the confines of the Washington state prison system. Rather than serving time as one of the countless inmates who complained about the injustices of America's prison system, Paul lived as a man who charted his own course. He wholly invested himself in the aspiration that he could contribute toward positive reforms, regardless of how the system of corrections endeavored to suppress his efforts.

Paul's aspirations led to his role as a founder of what has grown into the award-winning publication *Prison Legal News*. Paul did not have a word processor or any of the tools associated with the publishing industry. Neither

did he have experience. Rather than encouragement from the system, he met repeated violations of his human and civil rights, enduring numerous transfers and lockdowns in the hole. Nevertheless, by relying upon the will that Paul mustered from within, he fed his aspiration.

Every day Paul scoured law books and wrote commentary on judicial decisions that had an influence on the lives of prisoners across America. With his antiquated typewriter and access to a copy machine, he devoted himself to the cause of bringing attention to America's wretched human warehouse system. His aspiration from within prison walls led to Paul's building *Prison Legal News* into a monthly publication with thousands of subscribers and a website that receives tens of thousands of visitors each week.



Paul may have been shackled in chains as he hobbled into prison boundaries without resources and with many years to serve. Yet because of his 100 percent commitment that constituted his attitude and his aspiration, he emerged strong with values, skills, and resources in place to triumph. Those in corrections pulled their hair out in frustration, wondering how Paul Wright could have succeeded despite policies and procedures they had in place to crush the human spirit while preserving the security of the institution.

*Prison Legal News* has gained numerous judicial victories that improve the lives of all prisoners. It has created employment for many while generating revenues measured in the millions of dollars. Paul began it all while enduring the iron boot of corrections pressing down upon his neck, rejecting completely the prison myth that conspired to dehumanize him into an inmate.

Paul's aspirations to build *Prison Legal News* into an influential newspaper sustained him through longer than 15 years in prison. He did not require certificates from the prison machine, any type of brownie points from administrators, or a reputation on a prison yard. Paul lived as a man, deriving his meaning through the enormous contributions he made by investing

thousands of hours, year after year, toward an ongoing fight for justice and helping all of society better understand the struggle through which millions of prisoners live.

From what I know about Paul Wright, he presents an excellent example of someone who lived the Straight-A Guide message for many years, from the earliest days of his imprisonment until his release. He may not have heard of the Straight-A Guide, but his accomplishments are self-evident, driven by an attitude that included a 100 percent commitment to his aspiration. When he emerged from prison, he had all the resources in place that would ease his transition from prison to law-abiding citizen—*notwithstanding* the years he served in corrections.

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Not all prisoners focus on positive aspirations from the start. The stereotype or preconceived images of prison overwhelms many. During a man's first days inside, he may feel as if he has to prove himself or make a name. Those who work in corrections will not help or offer much in the way of hope. Rather, through standards, policies, and procedures they will replace his name with a number then strip him of his identity, thinking nothing of it as they order him to strip naked for an inspection, issuing him clothing, bedding, and assigning him to quarters

where the individual must fend for himself.

My friend David Muniz told me about the perceptions that guided his adjustment through his first several years of imprisonment.

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Although David hadn't been to prison before, television, movies, and stories that he had heard from others influenced David's perceptions about what to expect from prison. Rather than contemplating how he could use a Straight-A Guide or seeing any purpose in aspirations for how he wanted to emerge, David told me that he began his adjustment with an attitude of making a name for himself within the community of the confined.

David began serving his sentence when he was 25 years old. Although he hadn't been arrested before, he described having been immersed in crime since early childhood, with numerous family members deeply involved in drug trafficking. At the age when other young children said they wanted to grow up to become doctors, athletes, or firefighters, David proudly said he wanted to smuggle drugs across the border.

David quit school before finishing ninth grade. He began both using and selling drugs. When he moved out of state to expand his

enterprise, his girlfriend quit school to join him. Together they had two children and David sustained his young family completely through drug trafficking. His early imprisonment brought an immediate end to the family's income.

Like many young prisoners, David lost all hope for a better life when prison gates slammed and locked him inside. Being in his mid-20s, he could not contemplate the toll that serving a 13-year sentence would have on his life. His family struggled outside but David considered himself powerless to help. All he could think about was stopping the prison walls from closing in on him.

Realities of everyday monotony in prison blinded David from seeing any possibility to change the direction of his life. Without an aspiration, he passed his days in boredom. Television shows became his new narcotic. He longed for mail. As more time passed between his receipt of letters from home, David bonded with those he perceived as "his people" to defend what they considered their space.

David began serving his sentence like many others, determined to earn respect within the prison community. Although he loved his family, David told me that his commitment to his prison reputation drove all of his decisions. While living for the moment, he didn't have any concern for consequences that could follow his

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actions.

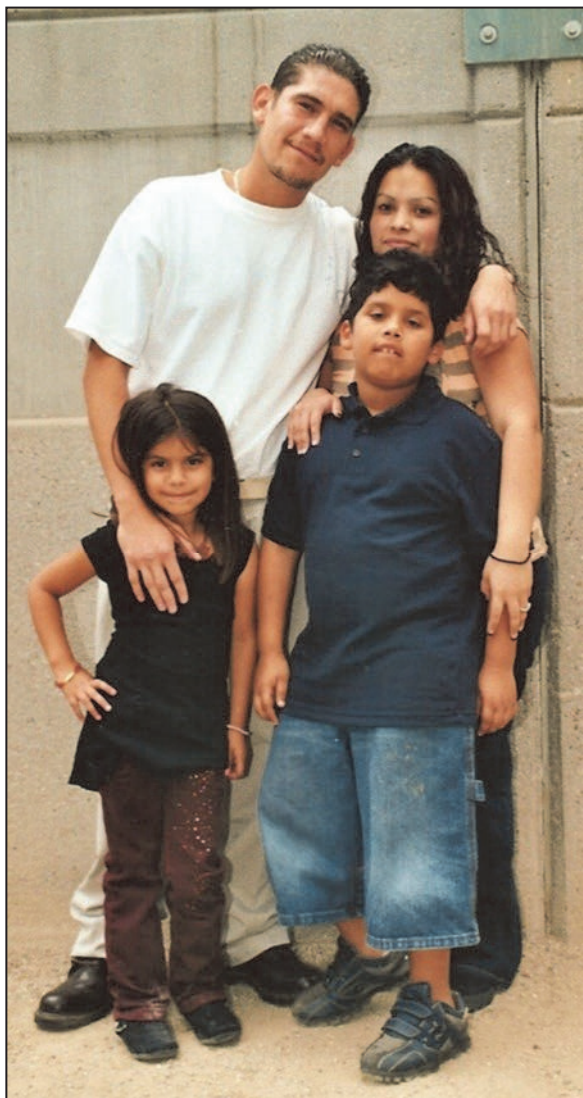
Without hope, David lacked direction. Nothing seemed to matter but the turning of calendar pages and more than 120 would have to turn before he could begin to see hope for release. Prison staff members abused their discretion, even to the extent of interfering with his family. They refused to grant David permission to marry Gabriella, his girlfriend, despite her insistence on keeping the young family together.

When David learned that the U.S. Supreme Court had recognized the constitutional right for prisoners to marry, his vision and attitude began to change. By challenging the prison's abuse of discretion, David finally received permission to marry and that gave him new hope.

Although mechanisms did not exist for David to advance his release date, as a husband to Gabriela he began to recognize his responsibility to his family with more clarity. Together they had two children, Brandon and Prisilla, and David wanted to provide his family with leadership, with a better life. In marrying David, Gabriella had made a commitment to stand by his side, essentially serving the sentence with him.

David's aspiration became to return home to her as a better man, educated, with values,

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*David Muniz and his family*

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skills, and resources that would allow him to provide for his family.

Such an aspiration led David to enroll in school. He understood that he could create more opportunities if he were to educate himself. Whereas he had served his first three years wasting time with table games, television, and other time-wasting activities, once he married Gabriella in a prison visiting room, David made the personal commitment to advance his life—even if he lived locked in prison.

David saw himself walking out of prison as a better man, the best husband and father he could become. That aspiration changed his values. He had to think about how his decisions in prison could influence the family he loved. That attitude shift meant that he had to abandon the absurdity of living for a prison reputation. Instead, he would live for his family, making a 100 percent commitment to live in pursuit of his aspiration.

Although David didn't have any way to influence his release date, he could make choices that would influence opportunities that would open for him when he returned to society. He began living the Straight-A Guide, first earning his GED, then studying toward his college degree.

David even influenced Gabriella to return to school, helping her to embrace the unified

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*David Muniz and his wife*

vision that they could make a reality through 100 percent commitment and discipline. David's aspiration brings meaning, purpose, and direction in his life.

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Billy Sigler told me that, like David, he lost several early years of his sentence to the pernicious influences of the prison system. Billy was 15 the first time authorities locked him up. While serving those six months in a juvenile facility, he passed his GED but what he really learned was how to expand his network of criminal associates.

With his troubled background of foster homes and disappointments, Billy gravitated to the streets when he completed his juvenile sentence. He then began a long crime spree of robberies, drug dealing, fencing stolen goods, and any other activities that would sustain his growing family.

Billy returned to prison in his early 30s. A lengthy sentence would keep Billy locked inside prison cages for longer than a decade. He said that he wanted to learn skills that would help him walk out with more opportunities, but he fell in with a crowd that discouraged the commitment necessary to triumph over prison. Instead of focusing on the challenges that would



*Billy Zigler*

await his release, Billy settled into a day-to-day routine that included hanging out on the weight pile, watching television, passing time with his buddies in any way that would ease the monotony. It didn't take long before the lack of focus led to one week turning into the next without a single meaningful accomplishment that would contribute to the man Billy said that he wanted to become when he emerged from prison.

When I began talking with Billy about how the Straight-A Guide could help him as it helped me, he started describing the same kinds of excuses that I've heard from thousands of other prisoners. "Well you know what it's like up in the higher-security joints," Billy told me. "There's always some kind of drama unfolding. It wasn't long before I was a shot caller on the yard for the white guys, and that interfered with my ability to participate with any kind of total commitment to school and other programs."

Billy may have begun his prison term with intentions of developing skills and resources that would help him transition to success upon release, but an aspiration requires much more than an intention. It requires the right attitude and a 100 percent commitment to convert the aspiration into a reality. Without such a commitment, the infrastructure, or cycle of failure that prison cultures so expertly perpetuate, suck a

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guy in.

Billy fell into the vortex, surrendering the first eight years of his prison sentence to idleness. He sat through a few courses that other prisoners taught on the stock market and real estate investments. But when I pressed Billy on how much he learned through those courses, he responded with a lot of buzz words about easy returns measured in the double and triple digits.

Billy is a good, kind-hearted man whom I'm proud to call my friend. Yet like many men who live in prison without hope, promises of easy riches could entice him. Our prison system abounds with financial charlatans and con men who feed their egos by hypnotizing others with promises of easy riches from their so-called systems.

While inside an audience of felons, any fool can portray himself as a financial wizard. We live amidst scores of prisoners who struggle through GED math and English classes, but fancy themselves brilliant investors because they track pricing trends on graph paper. Unfortunately, recidivism rates show the difficulties people face when trying to establish themselves after years in prison, glittering dollar signs in their eyes notwithstanding.

Those who aspire to triumph over the enormous challenges that await release

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understand that slippery fantasies weaken a man's prospects for success. Prison environments may condition inmates for failure with their absurd policies that eliminate mechanism for individuals to work toward earning freedom, but men who choose to empower themselves take deliberate action. They create strength by looking within. Then they commit the discipline necessary to work toward clearly defined aspirations they can achieve.

Kevin was another prisoner who served longer than 12 years, his final two in a cell adjacent to mine. Like Billy, Kevin had sat through several courses in prison that deluded the inmate participants into believing how easily they could ring the bell of financial success by simply following the system of some silver-tongued con man who drugged the group with fantasies.

Upon Kevin's release, however, he had to accept that cracking the code to easy riches wasn't quite the same in the real world as it seemed on a prison chalk board or graph paper. All the dreams died when Kevin had to start paying for his own chili con carne. Kevin's job as a laborer failed to bring the capital he needed to implement his system, and so he succumbed to temptations for a quick hit. Word came back to us in prison that the authorities busted Kevin within

four months of his release, exposing him to decades more in prison. At least he would get his free rations of chili con carne again.

My friend Billy Sigler and I discussed the unfortunate turn of events for Kevin. Like every other prisoner Billy and I knew, Kevin had approached the end of his previous sentence with unbridled optimism for his future, pledging that he would never return to prison. In all the years I'd served, I told Billy, I'd never met a man who said he was going to return. Those who walked out pursuing fantasies, however, struck me as being the least likely to emerge with the strength of commitment necessary to triumph.

After going over the Straight-A Guide at length, Billy expressed anxieties, saying how he felt lost. He acknowledged that he hadn't made the best use of his early years in prison. With news of Kevin shaking his level of consciousness about the challenges ahead, Billy asked for guidance on steps he could take during his final 18 months of imprisonment to prepare for the challenges awaiting him.

"How old are you now?" I asked Billy.

"I'm 41."

"How do you envision sustaining yourself 10 years from now, when you'll be 51?"

"I'd like to own between 30 and 40 houses

that I could rent out.”

“Could we define becoming a landlord as one of your aspirations?” I asked.

“I think I’d like that” Billy said.

“A lot of people would like to live off rents flowing in from between 30 and 40 houses,” I pointed out. “Just to make sure we’re talking about an aspiration rather than nurturing a fantasy, tell me about the level of commitment you’re making.”

“There ain’t nothin’ I can do while I’m in here,” Billy shrugged his shoulders. “I read several books, took a few courses.”

“So if you can’t spot many opportunities to begin sowing seeds for your future while you’re in here, what makes you think that you’ll be able to spot opportunities to build a real estate empire when you’re home?”

“When I’m home I’ll be able to read the papers, scan the Web looking for deals.”

“Won’t all of your competitors have access to those same resources?” I asked.

Billy responded to my question with a stare, so I continued. “Aren’t there some activities to which you could devote yourself while you’re here that might educate you more on career aspirations?”

“Like what? There aren’t any more courses

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I can take.”

When I asked Billy about his math skills he waived away my question with his hand, telling me that he had passed his GED decades ago.

“If I were to ask you some questions related to business math, what level of confidence would you have in your ability to resolve the problems?”

Billy shrugged again, saying he might need to brush up on his skills.

“How about your writing skills?” I continued questioning Billy on his level of preparedness to launch a real estate empire.

“What do writing skills have to do with real estate?” He asked.

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “If you plan on building a real estate empire, it would seem that you would have to communicate your vision to lenders, investors, and numerous others. Wouldn’t writing skills help?”

“I suppose,” Billy acknowledged.

“What level of understanding do you have with regard to contract law, or landlord-tenant law?” My probe continued.

“I’d need a lawyer to help me with that.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “I’m not clear on that score. What I am clear on, however, is

that you've just identified the study of math, English, and business law as three disciplines you could immerse yourself in over the remainder of your sentence. To the extent that you master them, you further your aspiration, advancing it from fantasy. The commitment would take you one step closer toward becoming the next Donald Trump, and one step further away from the disaster that Kevin and so many other dreamers experienced when they returned to society."

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Through our aspirations, we should envision much more than the careers we want to sustain us. If we aspire to triumph over the dehumanizing prison machine, then our aspirations should expand to include visions of how we see ourselves maturing on every level. In bringing more completeness to our aspirations, we abandon lives of randomness or chance. We reject the inmate credo that we're in prison and thus can't do anything positive to influence our future. Through our aspirations we don't only see where we are but we also bring more clarity to how we will emerge.

Our aspirations should synchronize with the values by which we profess to live. To the extent that they do, we incorporate our values into our Straight-A Guide, providing a principled basis from which we can root all of our decisions.

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Securing a career or a steady income is not enough to ensure that we succeed upon release. In the previous chapter I introduced Lee Nobmann, who became my friend while he served his 16-month sentence for a tax-related offense. Lee told me a story about Red, a prisoner he hired, who made this point crystal clear.

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Lee was the founder and CEO of a large company that employed several hundred people. He served his sentence with an aspiration of helping as many people in prison as he could, and one of the ways that Lee could help was in providing others with career opportunities. If a prisoner expressed an interest in working hard, Lee willingly made room in his business for the man to begin his return to society with stability. The jobs Lee offered through his company were not minimum-wage type. They provided solid income levels, sufficient to support a family, to purchase a home, to provide stability with full medical benefits and opportunities for as much upward mobility as a man's qualifications warranted.

Red (not to be confused with Redneck Rick) was at the tail end of a lengthy sentence. He was in his mid-40s and had more than 16 years of prison behind him. Red was assigned to a labor crew in the prison and because we all lived in

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close quarters, Lee observed that Red had a solid work ethic. Red was alert and ready for work every day at the crack of dawn, virtues that recommended him as a good candidate for employment in Lee's eyes. When Red asked Lee for a job, Lee hired him on the spot

Walking out of prison with a steady job in place provided a man with a huge head start, especially after more than 16 years of imprisonment. Red didn't have to waste time responding to humiliating questions prospective employers would ask about his nonexistent work history or criminal background. As soon as the halfway house cleared Red for work, he reported for duty, earning a solid wage of \$20 per hour with full benefits.

Lee hired more than a dozen people whom he had met in prison. Some of them worked out, others did not. In Red, Lee perceived a disciplined worker, a man who could advance as far as ambition would carry him. That's why Lee felt so shocked and disappointed when he received a phone call from Red's daughter.

Red had been working in Lee's company for a year when Red's daughter surprised Lee with her phone call. "Can you help my dad," the young woman asked after identifying herself to Lee.

"What is it that he needs?"

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Lee wasn't accustomed to receiving interventions for assistance from an employee's child.

"He's in jail," the young woman told Lee. "He was arrested last night for armed robbery."

Lee later learned that Red had joined with an acquaintance from his prison years. They robbed another drug dealer at gun point. Lee shook his head in disgust when telling me the story, totally in disbelief that Red would throw away his life so easily. Lee told Red's daughter that her dad had received all the help he was going to get.

"Why do you suppose that Red would have participated in a robbery scheme when he was earning a good living?" Lee asked me. "If he needed to borrow some money, all he had to do was call and I would've helped him out in a heartbeat."

In responding to Lee's question, I gave him my theory on the wicked influences a lengthy prison term has on a man's values. As men live separated from society for years, or decades, some adjust to the ways of the prison. They see themselves as being totally at one with their "road dogs," their "homies," or the others with whom they identify as "their people." Many individuals in prison lack a strong set of personal values, rendering themselves vulnerable to

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falling under the influence of what's known as a "shot caller." A kind of group-think takes hold, where an individual defines himself by his prison reputation. The more an inmate commits himself to the absurdity of prison culture, the more he sets himself up for continuing cycles of failure upon release, as Red discovered.

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A man who embraces the Straight-A Guide and incorporates value categories by which he commits to living protects himself against the bad influences of the prison machine. Such an individual does not allow the environment or the perceptions of others to define him. Instead, he defines himself through the deliberate choices that he makes.

When a man takes the time to identify the values by which he wants to live, he gives himself the power to synchronize his aspirations with those values on numerous levels. The aspirations provide a clear vision of his balanced life. By making decisions in accordance with his carefully considered values, the man follows a road map that will lead him to advance all aspirations to achievements, or realities rather than fantasies.

My friend Lee may have been able to give a guy like Red a good job, but only Red could

choose the values by which he wanted to live. Without solid values to guide his decisions, other people could easily influence him. They only had to use the buzz words of prison—or of any 12-year-old boy: *Come on, homie! Are you scared?* Red likely yielded to such pressure, showing that he valued how his homeboy perceived him more than he valued his relationship with his daughter, or his liberty.

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As I wrote in *Earning Freedom and Prison! My 8,344th Day*, I rely upon value categories to guide my aspirations. Each year I assess those value categories and make adjustments to ensure all of my aspirations harmonize with them. Together, they guide my decisions. Those value categories in 2011 include my 100 percent commitment to: 1) discipline, 2) fitness, 3) Godliness, 4) industriousness, 5) integrity, 6) marriage, and 7) my support network.

With those clearly defined value categories, I can check my aspirations. Do they harmonize with my values? Do all of my aspirations show that I am disciplined, physically fit, close to God, industrious, authentic, the best husband I can be, and proving worthy of the network that supports and sponsors me?

Those aspirations motivate and empower

me each day. I know exactly how I want to emerge, and by making values-based decisions, I know that I advance the efforts. All that I must do is take *action*, the third attribute of the Straight-A Guide.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### ACTION

Those of us who embrace the Straight-A-Guide rely upon our aspirations. They provide us with clear depictions of who or what we strive to become. While encountering week after week, month after month, and year after year of imprisonment, some of us need those aspirations for empowerment and self-direction. Without them, we become more susceptible to dehumanizing tendencies of the prison machine that strives to reduce men to inmates. Indeed, by extinguishing each prisoner's identity, hope, and sense of efficacy, the infrastructure of confinement conditions men to lose their way. As an antidote to the high recidivism rates that prisons perpetuate, the Straight-A-Guide keeps success-oriented prisoners moving in the right direction, indifferent to meaningless certificates while continuously advancing toward preparations to emerge as successful, law-abiding citizens.

Any prisoner can say that he wants to succeed upon release. In fact, basically every prisoner I meet makes the same claim. I've never

known a prisoner who said that he wanted to continue failing, living without liberty, separated from the people he loves and the people who love him. Yet statistics show without ambiguity that the longer society exposes a man to corrections, the more likely that man will devolve into an inmate, dehumanized by the continuous abuses of his human rights.

Without the aspirations that America's prison system is designed to crush, and without an attitude measured by a daily, 100 percent commitment, any prisoner can lose his way. It becomes as if he is a man lost at sea, without the sight of land. One day he floats along in one direction, and the next he floats in another, depending on how the wind blows. External conditions rather than inner resolve lead him from one day to the next. To break the pattern and find direction, he should rely upon positive aspirations and the right attitude. Besides those essential components of the Straight-A-Guide, however, a man needs to take action.

The incremental action steps that a man takes distinguish him from the inmates who narcotize themselves with fantasy against the pains of confinement. Buying the myth that they simply should serve time in prison and forget about the outside world, inmates strive to impress others with descriptions of the

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possessions they used to have or delude themselves with dreams of the magnificent moguls they will become upon release.

Men who embrace the Straight-A-Guide, on the other hand, take accurate and sobering assessments of where they stand. With aspirations to motivate them and a 100 percent commitment they then take deliberate, incremental action steps to succeed. By considering where they are, then contemplating where they want to go, those on the Straight-A Guide know exactly what they must do each day.

High recidivism rates make it difficult to predict which prisoners will succeed upon release. The 8,700 days I've served so far, however, give me some insight into the types of inmates who are least likely to overcome the enormous obstacles that come with returning to society in triumph after prolonged imprisonment. It won't be those who wasted years in front of television monitors, playing table games, or fantasizing over pictures in glossy magazines. The men who re-enter society in triumph renew their 100 percent commitment each day, clearly envisioning their aspirations. Rather than dreaming of relief from legislators or the judicial system, they prepare themselves mentally for the long climb. Then they put one foot in front of the other, moving in a deliberate, straight line toward

success. It doesn't matter where or when they begin, only that they initiate the climb by taking deliberate actions.

My friend Thomas Ross provides an excellent example of a man who, after years of being stuck in anticipation, waiting for relief from outside forces, learned to liberate himself through the actions he took. Thomas credits his wife, Angela, for inspiring the change in his attitude, aspirations, and action steps.

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Thomas grew up in a gang and crime-infested neighborhood of the San Francisco Bay area. To get away, Thomas signed up with the military after high school. As a soldier he both disciplined and educated himself, developing credentials. Upon his honorable discharge, Thomas joined a pharmaceutical company to work in its hazardous waste removal department. While he was in his early 30s, however, complications at work led to Thomas being prosecuted, convicted, and wrongfully sentenced to 20 years in prison. He began serving his lengthy sentence in 1991, passing through a decade before he would take the action steps necessary for his sentence to serve him.

Thomas had a loving and supportive wife in Angela; together they were blessed with two



children. Serving a 20-year sentence seemed incomprehensible to Thomas, as he felt victimized by both prosecutorial misconduct and a deep injustice that led to his being railroaded into a conviction without legal representation. Anger drove him through the first years as he waited for a judicial decision that would vindicate him. When it didn't come, Thomas went into a mental tailspin, unable to muster the strength necessary to accept a sobering assessment of his predicament. Thomas relied upon empty promises from post-conviction lawyers to carry him through the first decade while his wife, Angela, repeatedly demonstrated her unconditional love.

Prison families now pack our nation's prison system. Walls do not only close in on the men behind them. Wives and children also suffer through the indignities as well. Imprisonment emasculated Thomas with its policies and procedures that blocked him from being able to provide financial support. Every day brought a new slam to his dignity as he had to contend with arbitrary rules dictating how long he could talk on the phone with family, when he could visit with his wife and children, how much affection he could show.

Thomas may have wanted to give up on the family but Angela refused to let him. She may

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have been outside, but she lived in accordance with the principles of the Straight-A-Guide. Her attitude demonstrated a 100 percent commitment to her aspiration, which she clearly defined as keeping her family together. To that end Angela took action, setting the example for leadership in personifying strength from within, regardless of external forces. Whereas Thomas wanted to give up and serve the prison term alone, waiting for lawyers to bring relief, Angela uprooted her family, leaving her support network and moving to the community where Thomas was incarcerated in order to visit regularly, regardless of what courts decided.

Like many long-term prisoners, Thomas clung to hopes through his first decade that judicial relief would come. Post-conviction lawyers led him to believe that the courts were overburdened but that a favorable ruling would free him soon. While Angela worked hard to sustain her family, visiting Thomas with the children at every opportunity, he pumped out his frustrations on the weight pile, exercising for two hours each day in a futile effort to reclaim a sense of humanity that the prison system systematically extinguished.

With 10 years of prison behind him, Thomas came to a new realization. In waiting for the judicial system to reverse his conviction,

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*Thomas Ross with his family*

Thomas had relinquished the ability to strengthen himself from within. Rather than shaking off the loss and moving on, empowering himself with clear steps toward what he could become, Thomas missed opportunities. His wait for relief from lawyers, courts, or acts of congress had been like a dead weight that anchored and precluded him from rising to his highest potential. His wife's leadership finally inspired Thomas to cut those chains and rise toward becoming the best man that he could become, regardless of what happened in the courts.

Thomas said that his awakening came while he participated in a Bible study course. The Book of Judges exposed him to the story of Deborah, a female prophet who stood by her man, encouraging him to rise and lead. While reading the story, Thomas said that his appreciation for his wife deepened. In Angela he had his own pillar of strength, a wife who would stand by his side regardless of the struggle he faced. For Angela, Thomas realized he had an obligation to stand and prove worthy.

Reading that Biblical story of Deborah brought a change in Thomas' attitude. The anger over what had happened to him evaporated. Replacing it was an attitude to grow through the remaining years he had to serve, regardless of how many more years of prison could come.

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Rather than serving time, the time began to serve Thomas as he clarified his aspiration: to emerge from prison as the best husband, the best father, and the best citizen that he could become. Thomas said that his 100 percent commitment to that aspiration led to his new incremental action plan.

Living as the best husband, father, and citizen that he could become, Thomas said, meant that he had to stop clinging to hopes that some external force would advance his release date. Instead of fantasizing about when he would get out, Thomas said he put a plan together that would ensure he made the most prudent use of his time remaining. Each day Thomas recommitted to incremental action steps that would ensure when he returned to society, he would walk out in a stronger position than when he walked in. He made the effort as a tribute to his wife, Angela.

To that end, Thomas enrolled in an academic program that would lead to his earning an undergraduate degree in ministry. He already had a vocation, with his credential and work history in the removal of hazardous waste. His action step in pursuing the ministry degree, Thomas said, wasn't so much to earn a living. Rather, he pursued the knowledge he acquired through the course in order to enhance his

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leadership skills. Those skills would further his aspiration of emerging as the best husband, father, and citizen he could become.

Enrolling in the ministry program represented Thomas' first step. He then adjusted his daily schedule to accommodate the daily progress he intended to make. Thomas woke to begin his studies at 2:00 each morning. He prayed, thanking God for the many blessings that came to his family, then he began working through his lessons. Those daily action steps helped Thomas develop skills in researching, writing, and critical thinking. Through his directed and purposeful Biblical readings, Thomas said that he learned how to cut free from that edge-of-the-seat waiting for judicial or legislative changes that may or may not influence his release date. By working with deliberate action steps to prove worthy of the love he received from his wife and children, Thomas turned his focus more to what he could do, away from the pains that came with dwelling on what had been done to him.

Following his early morning commitment to lesson plans and prayer, Thomas continued his disciplined approach through each day. When the housing unit doors opened at 6:00, he carried his gym bag out to the track to begin his two-hour fitness routine. He then reported to his

assigned work detail as a clerk in the facilities department, improving his typing and management skills through his assigned responsibilities. Whenever time allowed during the work day, Thomas turned his attention back to his academic preparations.

The self-imposed structure kept Thomas focused on the action steps he could take to grow into the man he wanted to be when he emerged.

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Prison environments have a troubling tendency to destroy a man's will, as the system relies upon policies and procedures that serve to discourage or demoralize rather than motivate or inspire. Yet as Thomas discovered, he alone could adjust his attitude and aspirations. With daily action steps, he could transcend the prison experience by preparing himself to leave stronger, wiser, happier, living for his family rather than suspending his thoughts while waiting for decisions from external forces.

In listening to hundreds of prisoners who served sentences that varied in length from a few months to multiple decades, and while serving multiple decades myself, I've come to accept that our adjustment patterns evolve as we move through different phases of our confinement.

Anxieties frequently consume us during

the first and last phases of our time inside, but for different reasons. As we move into the initial phase, worries of how we'll make it through and what more we will lose interfere with our sense of strength. During the final phase, different kinds of worries over how we will overcome the challenges awaiting our release can torment us. The sooner we begin taking action steps with deliberate purpose, leading to clearly defined aspirations, the more effective we become at lessening those assaults on our inner peace at any phase of our prison adjustments.

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Julius Liege is another friend of mine from prison. He had grown up in the heart of inner city Oakland, with gunshots and street-level drug trafficking only a few steps away from his door. By the time he reached his early teens, Julius had stepped into the same role as the hustlers he admired, packing guns and selling drugs. Rival drug dealers shot him, ending dreams Julius once had of building a career around his athletic talents. Instead, he immersed himself full-time into the street life. While still in the game, he got married and together with his wife, fathered three beautiful daughters.

The story Julius tells matches that of thousands who serve time in America's prison system. He grew up in the midst of bad

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influences, believing that the best way to generate money for the clothes, cars, and women he wanted was through drug dealing. What distinguishes Julius from many people who serve lengthy sentences in prison is the attitude, aspirations, and actions that define his adjustment.

“My eyes opened as soon as the feds took me into custody,” Julius explained, “I knew that I was looking at several years in prison and I just snapped into realizing that I had to use the time to prepare for a better life when I walked out. I didn’t want my little girls growing up without me in their lives and I didn’t want to lose my wife or disappoint my family further. I had to use my time in ways that would make a difference in my life, then I had to use what I learned to make a difference in the lives of other people. That’s what leadership was about and I wanted others to see me as a leader. I intended to earn that distinction.”

The chaotic existence that Julius had been living prior to his arrest had caused his weight to balloon up beyond 300 pounds. He pledged to his wife and family that while he served his sentence he would discipline himself, taking actions that would demonstrate his commitment to emerge as a better man, a man to be respected rather than a thug to be feared.



*Julius Liege*

Julius had a clearly defined aspiration, with a 100 percent commitment to working himself into a tiptop physical shape, then educating himself, then applying his education to help others. To that end, he began exercising and dieting the day guards processed him into federal prison. When he arrived, Julius was carrying so much weight that he couldn't find the stamina to walk a full lap around the track without stopping to sit for a rest. He kept at it, however, taking action day after day.

Julius devoted between three and four hours to his fitness routine every day, seven days each week. Little by little, deliberate action steps resulted in his sweating the pounds off. By the time Julius completed his first year in prison, he had not only dropped more than 100 pounds of fat, he had increased his strength, his endurance level, and his self-confidence, enhancing his quality of life.

By taking the action steps to complete the clearly identifiable goal of becoming physically fit, Julius embarked upon the next phase of his plan: to educate himself. He took action, enrolling in an independent study program through a local college. He took action, disciplining himself with a schedule that enabled him to complete his assignments. He took action, working around the impediments and frustrations of imprisonment,



*Julius Liege*

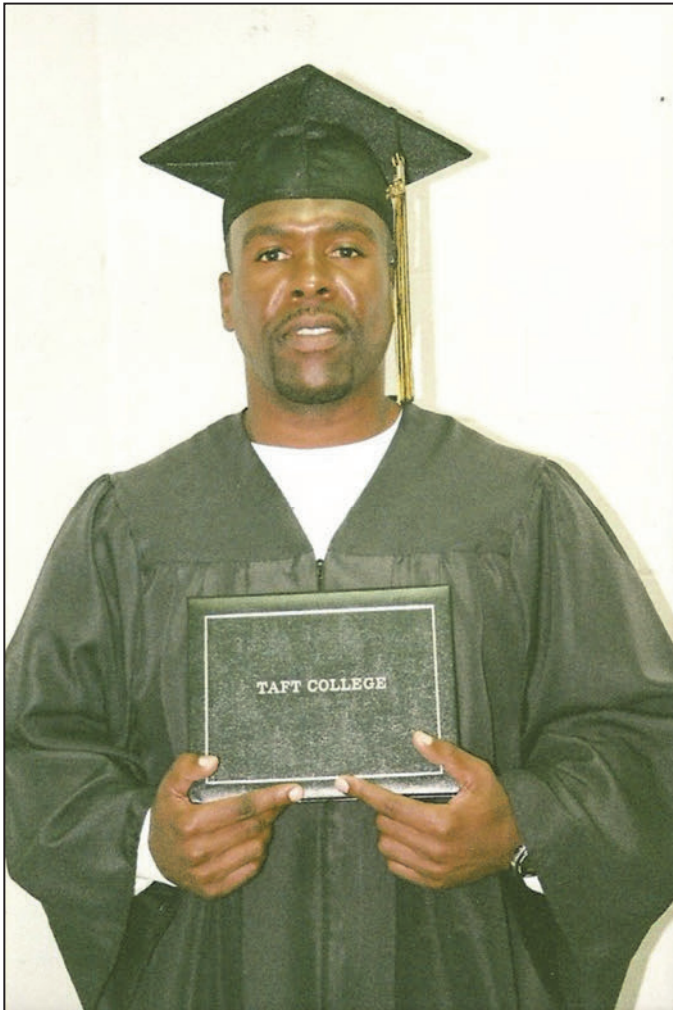
making daily progress toward his aspiration of earning a college degree.

By the time Julius advanced into his third year of his 10-year sentence, the actions he had taken distinguished him as a different man from the one whom the feds had busted. He did not take action for the purpose of advancing his release date or to appease prison staff; Julius was a man who worked to empower himself, not an inmate. As such, he said that his only motivation was to earn respect from his family and to ensure that opportunities would open for him to lead his community upon release. When the Taft Community College awarded Julius his degree, he stood ready to take action steps that would advance his goal.

“We have a problem in the inner city,” Julius observed. “Too many American kids grow up without positive role models. We grow up admiring the big ballers, never giving any thought to our communities. I’m going to make a difference in my community when I finish the sentence. I can show kids that regardless of what bad influences are around them, they can prepare themselves for leadership rather than troubles with the law. All it takes is commitment, discipline, and vision for a better life.”

With his college degree in hand, and his impressive commitment to physical fitness, Julius

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*Julius Liege*

took a leadership position in participating as a mentor for at-risk-youth. He began to write daily entries to complete the Straight-A-Guide workbook, documenting his own journey from inner-city youth, to drug dealer, to federal prisoner, to community leader. Those action steps, he said, would serve multiple purposes.

Julius envisions a time when he can walk out of prison and sit across from a skeptical probation officer. That probation officer will consult a file that includes the government's version of events that led Julius to prison; those documents may not show any of the progress that Julius had made to prepare for a law-abiding, contributing life upon release. By using the website at Straight-A-Guide.com, he works daily to build his own profile, documenting the sustained efforts he makes to transform his life.

Julius responds to each question in the Straight-A-Guide workbook, showing others how he thinks and the values by which he lives. Through the massive investment of time to document his growth and maturity, Julius expects to bolster the chance of persuading his probation officer to consider him as a disciplined man of action. The record that he devotes himself to documenting will also serve him well in showing others how to transform their own lives while simultaneously opening opportunities for

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Julius to find community sponsorship that will sustain his efforts. Julius understands that meaningful growth does not materialize by accident. Instead, he adheres to attributes of the Straight-A-Guide, beginning with attitude, aspiration, and action.

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I do not know another prisoner who exemplifies the Straight-A-Guide (and taking action in particular) better than my friend Seth Ferranti.

Some prisoners may work as hard as Seth, but during the 24 years that I've served so far, I've never known another who has worked harder. Seth relies on his 100 percent commitment, his attitude, and his aspirations to guide his sustained actions that transcend the prison experience.

Seth doesn't have a history of violence or previous incarceration, yet his judge slammed him with a sentence of 304 months. Seth was 22 years old at the time, and a term in excess of 25 years seemed incomprehensible to him. Nevertheless, in 1993 US Marshals locked Seth in chains, then shuffled him out to one of the so-called federal correctional institutions more than a thousand miles away from his family.

Society shouldn't make any pretense about



“corrections” when it buries nonviolent young men under the weight of prison terms measured in multiple decades. As all prisoners soon discovered upon being locked inside the barbed wire bureaucracy, Seth quickly surmised that administrators didn’t care about his troubles. They concerned themselves with protecting the security of the institution rather than encouraging prisoners to prepare for law-abiding lives upon release. Instead of assistance, Seth came to expect obstacles and interference from those who represented the prison machine.

Seth’s sobering assessment of the environment in which he was caged convinced him that he would need to look within to find his strength and motivation. His parents loved and supported him, inspiring Seth to mature through his sentence with a 100 percent commitment to distinguishing himself in a positive way. Although he couldn’t contemplate what it would mean to serve 25 years, Seth understood that by educating himself, he could prepare to seize opportunities as they opened. If they didn’t open, Seth’s educated mind would help him create opportunities on his own.

While in prison, Seth didn’t have the means to pay for the educational courses that he wanted to complete. Administrative policies blocked Seth from earning an income and his



*Seth Ferranti*

conviction for drug trafficking rendered him ineligible for federal grants to pay for his education. Seth had the right attitude, however, with his 100 percent commitment to use his time wisely. Since he couldn't comprehend the decades that would separate him from release, he aspired to build skills and internal resources. His attitude and aspiration guided his action.

Seth wrote out a lengthy proposal to his parents. He took the time to explain his predicament and vision. There wasn't anything he could do about the 25-year prison term and he didn't want to waste energy hoping for external forces to change his fate. In the first action step of writing the proposal, Seth asked his parents to make an investment in him. If they could afford to pay for his education expenses, he pledged to work exceptionally hard to earn his college degree, acquiring a credential that would enhance meaning in his life and prepare him for opportunities ahead.

"What would you have done if your parents had declined to pay for your education?" I asked Seth.

"I would have written letters to others in search of financial sponsorship," Seth didn't hesitate to answer. "Prison was kind of a fight for my life. Although it humiliated me to be a man in my early 20s reaching out in destitution, I had to

do whatever I could because I refused to allow the prison system to break my will. I was determined to find a way.”

Seth’s parents respected his attitude, aspiration, and the affirmative action step he took in writing the proposal. Although paying tuition bills, costs of books, and ancillary expenses for college would require financial sacrifice of thousands each year, they believed in Seth. To the extent that he would work in constructive ways, they agreed to help.

Prison staff erected one obstacle after another, all under the ridiculous guise of protecting security of the institution. Valuing order more than justice, they repeatedly violated Seth’s human rights and trampled upon his civil rights in the name of corrections. Staff blocked books and resource material from coming in through the mail. They interfered with his ability to take exams. Still, Seth persevered.

Instead of making excuses or whining, Seth took action, fighting the system of corrections through its administrative remedy system. Guards locked him in the hole. With his pencil, he wrote to his state senator requesting an official inquiry as to why the prison system would block his efforts to gain an education. When Seth didn’t receive a response, he wrote to his parents, asking them to contact their

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congressional representative for assistance. All of those action steps helped Seth triumph over the hurdles that the prison system erected time after time.

Seth's action steps paid off. In 1999 Pennsylvania State University awarded him an associate's degree. He continued. In 2005, the University of Iowa awarded Seth his bachelor's degree. He continued. In 2010, California State University at Dominguez Hills awarded Seth his master's degree.

Earning each of those valuable credentials required thousands of incremental action steps and a sustained, 100 percent commitment from Seth. His efforts began with that first proposal letter for funding that he wrote to his parents. They continued with his research of which universities would accommodate the unique circumstances of educating a prisoner.

Seth had to climb through boisterous conditions, riots, transfers, repeated trips to the hole, demoralizing and dehumanizing practices that are endemic throughout America's wretched system of corrections. In the end, however, Seth persevered; earning credentials that surpassed those of the guards who patronized him.

Yet earning academic credentials represented only one phase of Seth's commitment to triumph over the prison system. While guard

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*Seth Ferranti*

enforced policies and procedures that seemed exquisitely designed to extinguish the human spirit, transforming men into inmates without them even noticing, Seth relied upon his mind and his heart to overcome. He made an exhaustive study of all rules, and in so doing, he devised a strategy to distinguish himself as an empowered man who created meaning in his life.

Seth nurtured his relationship with Diane, a young woman who had been his girlfriend prior to his confinement. Despite the transparent efforts prison officials made to isolate prisoners from community support, Seth wrote regularly to Diane, expressing how her love inspired him to continue working to distinguish himself in positive ways. With constant attention and refusal to give up or believe that he was simply serving time, Seth and Diane committed to building a life together and were married in a prison visiting room.

Together, Seth and Diane took incremental action steps that would launch his writing career and support their young family. He never bought in to the ridiculous myth that the best way to serve time would be to forget about the world beyond prison fences while focusing on time inside. That myth served inmates, but it didn't serve men who were committed to the principles of the Straight-A Guide. Men who take action

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*Seth and Diane Ferranti*



refuse to surrender their will to the perpetuating cycle of failure that America's prison system has become.

With Diane's commitment, Seth launched his website, *Gorillaconvict.com*, in 2005. He built a career by reaching out to hundreds of magazine editors, offering to write articles that would provide readers insight into the growing subculture that our country locked inside prison cages. As a result of the incremental action steps Seth took to educate himself and develop writing skills, he created his own opportunities with nothing more than a Bic pen, blank pages of paper, and an irrepressible human spirit.

Through his writing, Seth built an audience that exposed his work to millions of people. He gave a voice to people America's prison system schemed to silence. The incremental action steps of developing writing skills led Seth to additional incremental action steps of developing interviewing skills. After collecting hundreds of stories, earning himself the moniker "Soul Man," Seth worked with Diane to establish *Gorilla Convict Publications* in 2004. Since then, he has brought six books to market, demonstrating his commitment to contributing to society in meaningful, positive ways, overcoming the prison system's effort "to correct" him.

During the 18 years that Seth has served so far, his incremental action steps have led him to achieve more measureable success than many people beyond prison boundaries ever achieve. He has educated himself. He has built and nurtured a thriving marriage. He has become a taxpayer. Through his writing, he has connected with millions of people, inspiring others to achieve their highest potential.

Seth refused to define himself by questionable inmate values such as a reserved seat in a television room or a prison reputation. Instead, Seth cultivated an attitude that was consistent with true success. He exemplified a self-evident commitment to achieving goals despite harassment and interference from an unforgiving infrastructure that repeatedly locked him in the hole or uprooted his life with transfers to higher security prisons across state lines.

Seth aspired to prepare himself for the enormous challenges that accompanied a 25-year prison term. Then he took incremental action steps that would allow him to create fulfillment and meaning as a man, contributing to his family and society. He embodied the Straight-A-Guide, inspiring and impressing millions as he continued his climb through the injustice of a lengthy prison term.

Seth walked into a prison during his early

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20s, and the lengthy sentence he served would require him to live in chains until his mid-40s. He liberated himself through his attitude, aspirations, and action steps, and created a fulfilling life out of sheer will. Any prisoner could do it so long as the prisoner refused to devolve into an inmate and conditioned himself to muster strength from within. I've learned from many who have.

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Whereas Seth Ferranti is a long-term prisoner who uses the Straight-A Guide to achieve his highest potential, David is another friend of mine who employs the same strategy while serving a relatively brief sentence.

David is in his late 40s, a married father of two young girls and prior to his confinement he led a distinguished career as a lawyer. The 30-month sentence David serves does not reflect the full weight of his sanction, however, as the criminal conviction renders him ineligible to continue his profession as an attorney. When David concludes his sentence, he could emerge without a livelihood to sustain his family, magnifying the severe consequences of his punishment. That possibility doesn't trouble David, however, because he is a man who takes action.

Many white-collar offenders have a hard time picking their lives up after fighting the department of justice. They are often left broken down and unable to come to terms with the changed circumstances of their lives, clinging to recollections of the status they once held as professionals, businessmen, leaders in their communities. Whereas they once controlled millions of dollars, now they take orders from prison guards, bending over to spread their butt cheeks on command.

Those who continue striving to stand on legs that have long since been pulled out from under them reveal themselves as being worthy of pity. They puff themselves up, living as caricatures of self-importance, waiting for relief from external forces while time slips away. In their pathetic efforts to convince other prisoners that they are not criminals, they miss opportunities to adjust their attitudes, to contemplate new aspirations, and most importantly, to take incremental action steps. Rather than adjusting in such a foolish way, my friend David followed the principles of the Straight-A-Guide.

David assessed the reality of his predicament. Since his criminal conviction would prohibit him from practicing law, he understood that he would have to make adjustments. David

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began serving his sentence with a 100 percent commitment to use the time in ways that would prepare him for a new career upon release. That attitude led to David's new aspiration.

"Since my wife is a professional," David told me, "I'm fortunate in that I can walk out of here as a stay-at-home dad. But I still have to lead a useful existence. I thought about educating myself on financial trading techniques, but concluded that speculating would be a foolish strategy to prepare for stability. Instead, I decided to learn everything I could about Web design and Internet businesses."

Prisoners in the federal system are prohibited from accessing the Internet. Nevertheless, many inmates fantasize about the ingenious ways that they will mine money over the Web. But they're only deluding themselves. David, on the other hand, reveals himself as a man with clearly defined aspirations. Despite the challenges, he aspires to use his sentence to learn everything he can about designing websites, maintaining them, optimizing them, and building businesses around them. Such aspirations have led to his taking incremental action steps.

Every day, David reserves several hours for study time. With a yellow highlighter in hand and a notebook by his side, David works his way through the heavy books that he purchases. Each

of those technical books serves a purpose – not to pass time or entertain, but to educate. Some of the books describe intricacies of Web design, some teach computer coding or languages, some discuss business strategy for the Web. David acknowledges that the books provide a theoretical rather than an experiential knowledge, but they serve the useful, deliberate purpose of helping him learn as much as possible about operating an Internet-based business. The daily, incremental action steps that he takes advance his aspiration and prepare him in meaningful ways for continued success upon release. David’s aspiration and incremental action steps keep him on the Straight-A-Guide, distinguishing him as a man who empowers himself from an inmate who feeds delusions with fantasy and happy talk.

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Those who use the Straight-A-Guide in their commitment to emerge successfully from prison further their 100 percent commitment with accountability tools, ensuring that they advance in accordance with their principled, deliberate plans. With their personally designed accountability logs, they not only know where they’re going, they know exactly where they’re supposed to be at any given moment. Accountability represents an integral component of their strategy, keeping them intellectually

honest and representing the fourth attribute of the Straight-A-Guide.





## CHAPTER FIVE

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Attitude, aspiration, and action—the first three attributes of the Straight-A Guide—represent the core of the strategy to prepare for success upon release as law-abiding citizens. The fourth attribute, however, accountability has an inherent value. It is a gauge, an invaluable tool that those of us who adhere to the Straight-A Guide consult daily to stay on course. We must create our own accountability logs to assess our progress and to ensure that our attitude, aspirations, and incremental actions remain in harmony with the values by which we profess to live.

Those of us who rely upon the Straight-A Guide understand that we will encounter resistance and complications from many prison guards throughout our journey. Our accountability logs keep us grounded and on course. They bolster our attitudes while guards recite by rote the mantra of preserving the security of the institution as they trample upon our basic human rights to prepare for law-abiding, contributing, meaningful lives. When they do, our

accountability logs help us correct course. We use them to make necessary adjustments, navigating our way around obstacles like trips to the hole or transfers across state lines. Those are the kinds of frustrations we expect from a prison system with a stated mission of preserving itself rather than encouraging people to emerge as productive citizens.

In creating our personal accountability logs, we who ascribe to the Straight-A Guide first consider our values. What are we striving to become? In what areas do we aspire to become the best in the world? How could we define success in each of those areas? To answer such questions, we first articulate our values, then clearly define specific goals within each value category. In so doing, we can engineer a principled course or recipe, fully expecting that to the extent we abide by it, we succeed. Our values and goals lead to our individual accountability logs.

The accountability logs that one prisoner relies upon may differ from the accountability logs of others. Indeed, one prisoner may define success differently from another. Accountability logs simply keep us honest, helping us to gauge whether we make progress at an acceptable rate. The more closely we track our progress toward success in each individual value category, the

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more we enhance our prospects to engineer success. Rather than leaving the possibility of our success to chance, or luck, we use our accountability logs to gauge progress along the deliberate course we design to succeed in each value category of our lives.

Those who participate in the Straight-A Guide program may turn to the value categories, goals, and accountability logs that guide me through my 24th year as an example. The value categories by which I profess to live and urge the world to hold me accountable are published in chapter two of the workbook. They include:

- 1) discipline,
- 2) fitness,
- 3) Godliness,
- 4) industriousness
- 5) integrity,
- 6) marriage,
- 7) network, or relationships.

I make a 100 percent commitment to achieve clearly defined goals within each of those value categories. The accountability logs I design help me stay on course. Without them, I could easily lose my way, looking to blame external forces for my own failure to execute. With my commitment to the Straight-A Guide, however, I

refuse to make excuses or allow external forces to crush my spirit. Instead, I assess where I am daily with my accountability logs, renewing my attitude, aspirations, and incremental action steps, ensuring that I remain on a principled, well-engineered course to succeed as I define it.

Whereas the value categories from which I base all of my decisions and invite others to hold me accountable include my commitment to discipline, fitness, God, industriousness, integrity, marriage, and the support network I build, other prisoners set their own value categories. My value categories and the choices I make define who I am as a man. I can expect to succeed and empower myself to the extent that I live by my values. To the extent that I don't, I can expect to fail. It's that simple. Accountability logs keep me on this principled course, preparing for triumph.

In order to assess whether I am succeeding with regard to my commitment to each value category, I must clearly define goals within each. What does it mean to be a man of discipline? How can I gauge my commitment to fitness? In what ways do I strengthen my relationship with God? By what standards am I industrious? Are all of my thoughts, words, and actions integral with the values by which I profess to live? How do I nurture and prove worthy of my support

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network?

My accountability logs provide answers to each of those questions. They have guided my climb through 24 continuous years of imprisonment so far, ensuring that I will emerge in a position of strength, with skills, resources, and a support network to assist my transition into society. Any prisoner who follows the seven attributes of the Straight-A Guide can expect similar success.

Each individual on the Straight-A Guide must question and evaluate his progress regularly. What value categories does he establish to define himself? What specific goals within each value category does he aspire to achieve? What timeline does he establish to reach each incremental goal? How does he gauge progress along that timeline? If he continues along at the current pace, can he project success? Will his plan facilitate success upon release as he defines it? Accountability logs provide the data we need to assess progress and to determine whether we're on a principled course. Will that course lead to success?

Every successful venture relies upon accountability logs of some sort to encourage excellence. Those who follow the stock market, for example, know that publicly-traded companies publish quarterly reports. Quite

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simply, each quarterly report represents the company's accountability logs. Is the company executing well, succeeding in accordance with the carefully designed and articulated plan?

Similarly, those who follow sports rely upon accountability logs. They look to statistics in order to assess individual athletes and entire teams, comparing and contrasting precise performance details. In government, politicians consult poll numbers as their accountability logs to assess whether constituents approve of the representation they're providing. Employers use evaluations as accountability logs to rate and rank employee performance. Even students turn to grade reports as their accountability logs. Anyone in pursuit of excellence or optimal performance, in any facet of life, consults accountability logs to measure performance.

Prisons, on the other hand, being failure factories as distinguished from success incubators, do not make any effort to encourage those inside cages to pursue excellence. The prison machine has a different design: to churn out compliant, servile inmates who say "Yes, Mr. Boss man, thank you, sir," to every handout. Indeed, a model inmate knows how to kowtow in gratitude whenever a functionary of the machine grants him a so-called privilege, like a phone call home or a visit with family.

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Like Pavlovian dogs that slobber in anticipation with the ringing of a dinner bell, model inmates become conditioned to volunteer for every idiotic program that results in a certificate. The certificate does not have any relationship to preparing for success upon release, but it furthers the illusion that some correcting takes place for both the inmate and guard.

Sadly, as inmates slowly come to learn, certificates do not merit much worth during the farcical team-review meetings. They may show that the inmate participates in prison programs, but they do not entitle him to an advanced release date, more access to visiting or telephone, or even an extra bowl of cereal. But guards may refer to him on occasion as a “good inmate,” patronizing the prisoners with comments like, “You don't look like you belong here.” For the inmate, that becomes all the praise in the world and, pathetically, he becomes eager to share the assessment with others.

Men who empower themselves with the Straight-A Guide, on the other hand, are indifferent to assessments by the prison machine. They outright reject the absurdity of a system that wastes its resources to post signs about preparing inmates for successful reentry, but then implements policies that hinder meaningful

preparation for release. Men who ascribe to the Straight-A Guide understand that numerous demoralizing mechanisms within the system exist to sanction behavior that doesn't comply with prison rules. Yet not a single mechanism exists to incentivize excellence. Accordingly, those on the Straight-A Guide chart their own course, turning to their own assessment logs to gauge their progress in pursuit of excellence.

Seth Ferranti, for example, a friend I introduced in the previous chapter, may have served 18 years, but he refused to degrade himself as an inmate. Instead of pursuing meaningless certificates that would appease the prison machine, he contemplated incremental steps he could take to emerge as a successful, law-abiding citizen. Then he held himself accountable, powering through the relentless interference from prison functionaries, whether they wore gray uniforms or polyester combos.

When guards locked Seth in the hole to block his access to college, he looked at his accountability logs to renew his commitment. They energized him with validation, showing how much progress he had made toward the goals within each value category that defined him. Step by step, Seth could work toward earning university degrees, toward building positive relationships, toward establishing a career,



toward nurturing a marriage, and toward earning financial resources. He dismissed the accolades and patronizing insults from the prison machine, seeing both as instruments that furthered the gross injustice of his imprisonment.

Unlike inmates, empowered men refuse to feign respect for their executioners, or for a system with an intrinsic design to extinguish a man's dignity while masquerading as corrections. Men, rather than inmates, rely upon empowering strategies articulated in the Straight-A Guide to define themselves and prepare for success upon release. They begin with the right attitude, manifesting their 100 percent commitment. Their aspirations clearly define success. They take incremental action steps in deliberate pursuit of each individual goal. And with their accountability logs they gauge their progress, making adjustments whenever necessary.

My friend Michael Cade, a prisoner who recently signed up to participate in the Straight-A Guide, told me how he had been using a kind of accountability log in one area of his life. It has helped him. By taking a more deliberate approach to empower himself through the remaining years he was scheduled to serve, Michael acknowledge that he could enhance prospects for success in other areas. Accountability logs would help.



*Michael Cade*

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Michael grew up in a crime and drug infested neighborhood of East Palo Alto, in the San Francisco Bay area. By the time he was in his early teens, he had fallen under the influence of the streets. Michael quit school after struggling to complete the 10th grade, foregoing possibilities to leverage off of his considerable athletic talents to run with the street hustlers who impressed him with their flash.

Those bad decisions led Michael into the web of the criminal justice system repeatedly, beginning when he was 18. Like a fly trying to escape from a spider web, he couldn't free himself. Then, a federal judge imposed a lengthy sentence and Michael hobbled in chains and shackles into a federal prison compound in Victorville, California. Michael was in his mid-20s by then, still strung out on the drugs that had been ravaging his life. He had never held a legitimate job and the values by which he lived were those that governed the streets.

Like many prisoners who come from a life of hustling on the streets, Michael was bigger than life in many ways. He spoke with a loud, booming voice. He was quick to engage in combat, be it verbal or physical. He resented every aspect of imprisonment. Through his first several years inside, Michael affiliated himself

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with those who lived by the moniker “thug-for-life,” exemplified by the numerous tattoos he had inked on his arms and torso. Other prisoners knew him by his street name, Rogue.

Michael told me that despite the lengthy sentence he served, and the indisputable challenges that would confront him upon release, the only goal that carried him through the first years of his sentence was to improve his physical fitness. To exercise, he devoted himself fully. Other than fitness training and sports, he simply aspired to pass time as quickly and easily as possible. Michael's attitude reflected his 100 percent commitment to such an aspiration, and he took incremental action steps to make such a vision a reality. In a contorted approximation of the Straight-A Guide, Michael even had his own version of an accountability log.

Since physical fitness and passing time represented Michael's highest priority, he held himself strictly accountable to those value categories. That meant a disciplined commitment to his exercise routine. He worked himself into a master of pull-ups, bar dips, pushups, and abdominal routines. He worked his shoulders, his chest, his legs, and his back in a carefully considered workout schedule requiring two hours each day. Michael devoted another several hours each week to playing basketball, softball,

or flag football, depending on the season.

With regard to fitness, Michael's accountability logs kept him on a disciplined schedule. He knew exactly what routine to follow each day, envisioning which body part he would exercise, clearly defining the number of sets and reps for each. The results showed with the impressive physique he built.

Likewise, Michael followed the same disciplined schedule with regard to passing time. He knew exactly when to sit in his reserved chair to keep up with the Kardashian's. He knew each cast member of MTV's *Jersey Shore* and *The Real World* by name.

When VH1 began broadcasting *Mob Wives*, Michael was on it. He never missed an episode of *106th and Park* to keep up with his videos. The only time he took a break from television was to demonstrate his exceptional skills at table games like cards or dominoes. Prison could be fun, and glossy paged magazines like *Maxim* or *Curves* were always around to feed fantasies of the excitement he could pursue upon release.

Those engineers behind the failure factory of prison rewarded adjustments like the one that guided Michael through his first several years in prison. The system encouraged him with incentives, offering prizes to those who excelled at wasting their lives away with games. While

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administrators locked men in chains and uprooted their lives with transfers across state lines if they pursued academic excellence or published literature, the system offered “goody bags” to inmates who won at Bingo, to those who won in spades tournaments or tug-of-war contests. It offered popcorn and sodas to inmates who blindly but obediently adhered to protocols of the failure factory. Such adjustments kept the prison system growing by ensuring that inmates returned to society without skills or resources to succeed.

When I asked Michael what he wanted to do with his life upon release, he said that all he had ever done was sell dope.

“In what ways is the routine you're on today preparing you for anything different when you get out?” I asked.

Michael shrugged. “I never gave much thought to what I'm going to do when I get out. I still got years to serve. Thinking about the streets would only make things harder when I got to live in here.”

We were running laps beside each other around a dirt track while we spoke. I continued to inquire about Michael's plans for the future.

“So what do you do all day?”

“Mostly work out,” he said, “then I kick

back with my partners. There ain't nothing else to do."

When I asked for more clarification, Michael gave me details about his workouts and the television shows that filled his time.

"I haven't seen the NBA doing much recruiting from prison yards. But I guess that could change. What do you think your chances are of becoming a baller," I asked.

He laughed. "I just turned 30. It's too late for a career in sports."

"It's too bad. You put a lot of time into sports. It would be nice if you could find someone to pay you for all of that exercise. You're pretty strong on the pull-up bar. Is there someone who might pay you for pull-ups when you get out?"

"Man, I work out for me, to stay in shape."

"That's good, because other than my friend Walt Jones, I don't know anyone who has left prison to make a living from exercise. Do you think all of the time you're devoting to television and table games might qualify you for a job in the entertainment industry?"

"Like what? All I'm trying to do is pass time in here, to make it through these years."

"Was that the same way you passed time during the earlier sentences you served, before

the feds nailed you on this case?"

"Pretty much. Ain't nothing else to do in the joint but kick it with the homies."

"And how did that adjustment technique work for you when you got out on earlier cases?"

"It didn't," Michael acknowledged. "Couldn't find no job. Went straight back to hustling dope 'till I got busted again."

"Do you think things might work out differently when you get released next time?" I asked.

"I'm scheduled to serve three or four more years. Who knows what I'm going to face the next time I get out," Michael said in resignation.

"Well," I suggested, "maybe if you gave some thought to what you'd like to do with your life, and you applied yourself with the same 100 percent commitment that you devote to your fitness, you could prepare for a new career, one that would bring you a feeling of success or fulfillment while allowing you to earn a good living."

"Like what? All I know is hustling."

"Would you say that's a strength or a weakness?" I asked.

"It's a weakness, man. I don't know no other way to make a living."



“How many people would you estimate have that same problem?”

“Millions, including everyone I know.”

“And do the people you know listen to you?”

“I guess. We're all from the same background.”

“So why don't you use the remaining three to four years of your sentence to prepare yourself in ways that will show other hustlers how to prepare for law-abiding lives?”

Michael looked at me with skepticism, squinting. “Ain't no hustler going to pay me for that.”

“The hustlers in society might not pay you, but if you're effective, if you could become the best in the world at what you do, then you could earn a great living while simultaneously building pride by helping others in your community.”

“How would I get paid?”

“That would depend on how hard you worked, how effective you became at helping others mature from thugs and hustlers into productive citizens,” I told him. “If you became as good at teaching others to transform their lives as you are at sports and physical fitness, then you could create your own business, supporting

yourself by selling your teaching services to agencies that operate institutions like jails, prisons, group homes, halfway houses, centers for substance abuse treatment, and other places that have budgets to assist offenders or at-risk populations. If you use the remaining years of your sentence to train yourself and you become the best in the world at delivering your positive message, then you could sell your services to broadcast networks like CNN, MTV, or the A&E Network. You would have sponsors who would support your work because you add value to society."

Hope replaced Michael's skepticism as a new aspiration began to form. "Do you think I could do that?"

"I know that you could achieve anything you set your mind to achieving," I encouraged him. "All it takes is the right attitude, meaning a 100 percent commitment. You have to nurture your aspiration. Picture yourself on that television screen, as if you're the popular pastor, T.D. Jakes. See yourself as a great communicator, or leader, as if you're Nelson Mandela. Then you have to take incremental action steps that will lead you from where you are right now, in a direct line, to the man you want to become. You will need to create accountability logs to measure your progress. It's all part of the Straight-A

Guide, a recipe for success that other prisoners and I follow.”

Later, after concluding my run with Michael, we sat together at a table and I gave him the details of how to enroll in the self-directed program of the Straight-A Guide that the Michael G. Santos Foundation makes available to any prisoner, provided sponsorship resources are available. He sent an “invite” from the e-mail system available at his prison to [enroll@straight-a-guide.com](mailto:enroll@straight-a-guide.com), and within a week Michael received copies of the literature that he could use as a template in his efforts to strengthen his preparations for his return to society.

“Read the literature,” I mentored Michael. “It will provide insight to strategies that any prisoner can follow to triumph over the injustices of America’s prison system. It isn’t a secret, but it’s a message that the prison system tries to suppress. This system is designed to violate people’s basic human rights and civil liberties every day. As men spend years locked inside, the system conditions them to believe that they can’t succeed. In fact, the system discourages men from trying, beating down their dignity, ripping apart their identities, convincing inmates that they don’t have anything coming other than the childish handouts given to those inmates who comply with the continuous dehumanization.

The Straight-A Guide reminds men how to navigate through the failure factory and prepare for success.”

As we continued our discussion, I explained to Michael that in addition to the books he would receive showing how numerous prisoners opened opportunities by following the principles of the Straight-A Guide, the self-paced learning system also included an interactive workbook with more than 200 questions.

“Respond to those questions at your own pace,” I advised. “But give considerable thought before writing your response to each question. Your responses become a part of your accountability log, showing others your commitment, your disciplined, deliberate approach to preparing for success upon release.”

“Will I get a certificate for completing the course,” Michael asked.

“Why would you care about a certificate?” I was taken aback by Michael's question, as he didn't strike me as the kind of guy who would care about certificates.

“Because my case manager and unit team keep hounding me about whether I've earned any certificates.”

“And what good has a certificate ever done for you?” I shook my head and shrugged.

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"I don't know," Michael laughed. "I worked my way down from high security to a camp. The certificates may have showed that I was programming."

"Programming!" The term disgusted me. "I don't even think that's a verb in the real world. It's an inmate term. What certificates have you earned?"

"I've got a grip of certificates," Michael said. "I've got certificates for completion of hobby craft courses, for janitorial courses, for the walking class."

"What good are any of those certificates other than to appease the institution? They may satisfy the prison machine, but they won't play any role in preparing you to overcome the challenges you're going to face upon release. And don't believe that inmate talk about working your way down from the penitentiary to the camp because of programming or certificates."

"What do you mean?" Michael asked. "I started in the pen, now I'm in the camp."

"But you didn't *work your way down*," I pointed out. "The only reason staff transferred you to camp was because enough calendar pages turned without your receiving any disciplinary infractions. The decision to transfer you didn't have anything to do with work you completed."

This system doesn't factor in any meaningful work a man does to prepare for success upon release. All it cares about is the passing of time."

"So you're saying I won't get any certificates for completing the course?" Michael laughed.

"You're not an inmate, Michael You're a man! Instead of focusing on certificates that don't have any meaning, focus on developing skills, resources, and a verifiable track record that shows your commitment to emerge from prison strong, the best in the world at whatever you aspire to become. That is what the Straight-A Guide teaches. It isn't a program for inmates. It's a strategy for men. Use it as a part of your accountability log, showing the world the value you bring to the table in a transparent, open-book type way. That way you return to society in a position of strength, with indisputable evidence of your transformation well-documented, your dignity intact."

"Well, how am I going to get paid?" Michael asked. "How will all the work I'm going to do in this course translate into a job when I get out?"

I explained to Michael that his potential for an income would depend on how well he prepared. "The books show you the strategy that other prisoners and I used to triumph over the prison system, to succeed in spite of corrections."

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*Michael Santos with Michael Cade*

It's your responsibility to implement the strategy. How badly do you want success?"

"I want it," Michael asserted.

"To the extent that you implement the strategy, the more opportunities you open. If you can evaluate where you are right now, and you can envision where you want to be when you begin building your business, then you can chart a clear course. You can take all of the incremental action steps, holding yourself accountable for the progress you make day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year.

In order to succeed, envision your potential market now. What market are you aspiring to satisfy? The better you understand your market, the better you can prepare yourself. To answer your question, the market will determine how you get paid and how much you're worth."

"But what would my market be?" Michael asked.

"That's up to you. What is your aspiration?"

"I thought you said I was going to show other hustlers how to prepare for success."

"Okay," I agreed. "So who would pay you to offer such a service?"

"I don't know."

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“Well let's figure it out. If you want businesses or other organizations to sponsor you, you've got to persuade them of the value your services offer. Think of writing a job description. The sponsors represent your market because they're the ones writing you a check. How would you persuade them that you're the best in the world at preparing offenders or at-risk youth for law-abiding lives?”

“I guess I would have to prepare myself first.”

“So what does that mean? If you were prepared, what would be different in your life from today? What would it take for your sponsors to see you as the best in the world at what you want to do?”

“I'm not sure.” Michael answered honestly.

“Well that's the question that the Straight-A Guide will help you answer. And as you work through the course, you will document your progress, building your accountability logs as you go. If you apply yourself to the course with the same 100 percent commitment you make to exercise, you will have the answers to your questions. More than that, you will have indisputable skills that your market will value. By articulating your attitude, aspirations, and the action steps you take, opportunities will open.

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Others will see exactly how you transformed your life, step by step. When you can communicate that strategy to others effectively, that will be when sponsors or your market pays you. It will be when your vision of becoming the T.D. Jakes of personal transformation becomes a reality.”

“I’m going to do it,” Michael said.

I reached over to shake his hand, assuring him that I knew he could. Then I urged him to hold himself accountable. Once the foundation sent him the books for the Straight-A Guide learning system, I suggested that he establish a personal timeline to read through each book and complete each of the ten lessons in the first workbook. By writing out his values and goals, Michael could invite the world to hold him accountable, as others could follow his progress through the profile he built on the foundation’s website at [www.Straight-A-Guide.com](http://www.Straight-A-Guide.com). To the extent that Michael lived in accordance with his accountability logs, Michael would join others who espouse the principles of the Straight-A Guide in creating a broader awareness, the fifth attribute of the Straight-A Guide.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### AWARENESS

Our accountability logs serve the primary purpose of measuring our progress. By consulting them daily, those of us who use the principles of the Straight-A Guide always know whether we're living in accordance with our professed values and we also know the progress we're making toward achieving the goals we aspire to achieve within each value category.

The accountability logs enable us to stay true to the principled course we set to succeed, or to reach our intended aspiration. We may think of the logs as maps. When consulting a map, we can see exactly which roads will lead us from one point to another. We can approximate how long it should take for us to reach every point along the way. When road blocks or other obstacles interfere with our progress, we consult our maps to make adjustments and correct course.

We use our accountability logs like maps to success. They become indispensable tools we use in our preparations for our return to society. As long as we continue to follow the course that

we design, we proceed toward our success without any doubt that we will triumph over the adversity of imprisonment, beating the beast that locks so many in perpetuating cycles of failure.

Those logs open our senses, increasing our awareness, the fifth attribute of the Straight-A Guide. Living in prison for sustained lengths of time, month after month, or year after year, requires that we sharpen our awareness. If we do not, the infrastructure of imprisonment dulls our senses. Too many men become plagued with the delusion that there isn't any meaningful way that they can maximize their time, using every day to prepare for success upon release. Without a clearly defined, deliberate path, inmates sink into boredom, a morass of lethargy that threatens to swallow them, exacerbating their troubles.

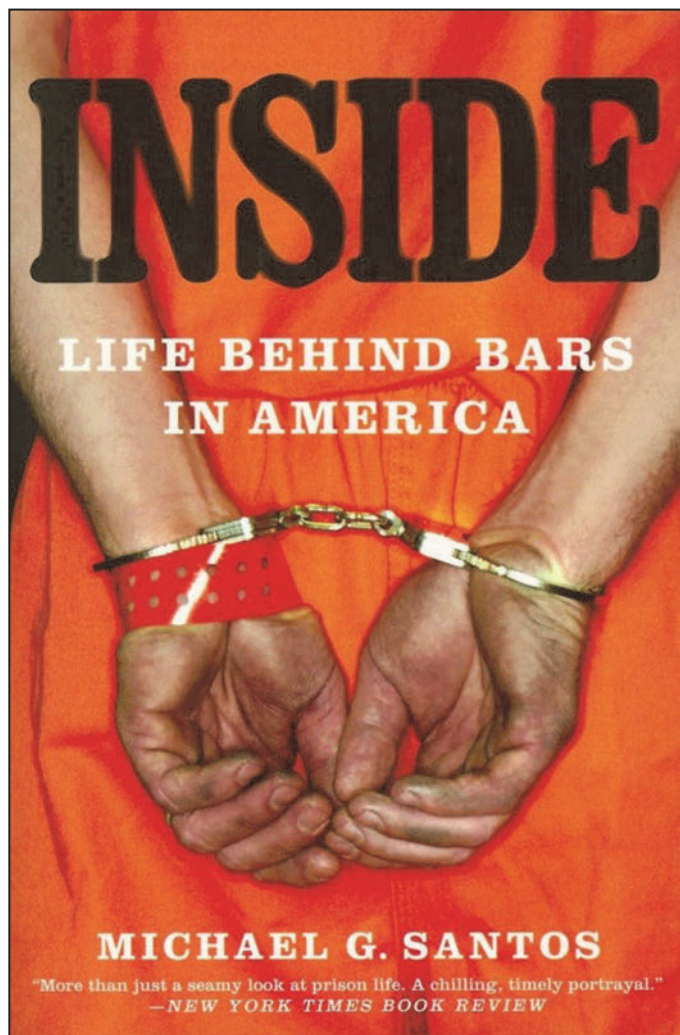
Men who serve time without a clear purpose can devolve into sniveling inmates, always waiting for some external force to change circumstances in their lives rather than taking deliberate actions to make their own changes. They whine about what others have done to them rather than seizing initiatives to advance agendas that they set. In efforts to relieve their boredom, inmates sleep too much, they watch too much television, they play too many table games. Some reminisce about the great lives they used to live, or they become tools of the prison machine,

pursuing certificates that don't serve any purpose other than to further the farce of corrections.

Other prisoners without a sharp awareness of imprisonment sometimes cope in ways that may amplify their troubles. Without clearly defined values and goals to guide their decisions, they lack purpose. To cope, some engage in behavior without careful consideration of consequences that easily can lead to a single cell for life in a supermax prison like Florence ADX or California's notorious SHU in Pelican Bay. Some cope in ways that don't have any relationship to their potential for success upon release, like wasting time or energy on a snitch hunt. Who cares? A man who devotes his attention to empowering himself shouldn't care about weak-minded individuals around him. He should strengthen himself.

In my earlier book, *Inside: Life Behind Bars in America*, I introduced readers to men with whom I was acquainted in higher security. Several served sentences of life as a consequence of decisions they made in prison. Each would have preferred to have made better decisions earlier. The men described being sucked into the wicked culture of the failure factory, and from listening to them I surmised that they were neither cognizant nor aware of the consequences that would follow their actions. As a result, they

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waited out the remainder of their lives in sterile cells.

In contrast, men on the Straight-A Guide sharpen their awareness every day. They fully understand the design and nature of the prison machine. With its clear and unmistakable quest to extinguish hope and dehumanize, the system has an inherent design to break each prisoner's spirit. Rather than encouraging the men inside cages to work toward emerging as successful, law-abiding citizens, it seeks to preserve itself, to grow. The prison machine's growth comes through a culture and infrastructure that result in behavior most likely to keep people in. America's prison system aspires to a policy like the Eagles sang about in *Hotel California*, where a man can check out anytime he wants, but he can never leave.

Those on the Straight-A Guide, however, have cracked the code of corrections. With their positive attitude and 100 percent commitment to succeed upon release, such men set their own aspirations and restore their dignity with the incremental action steps they take. Their accountability logs help them gauge their daily progress with a clear understanding that they define themselves through their values and by the choices they make.

By sharpening their awareness, men on the Straight-A Guide make better choices. As Sun

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Tzu advised in his timeless book on military philosophy, *The Art of War*, those committed to conquering the obstacles awaiting their release carefully select which battles to fight and cunningly avoid others in their determination to win the war. The diabolical culture of corrections, they know, relies upon subterfuge and subtle tactics Niccolo Machiavelli described in *The Prince* rather than the enlightened wisdom of Jesus Christ.

Men on the Straight-A Guide understand that the system of corrections has its reasons for limiting prisoner access to telephones and visits. It has its reasons for violating human rights like freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Violating those hallmarks of democracy doesn't have anything to do with preparing men's return to society as successful, law-abiding citizens. The reasons behind such violations are rooted in a quest to build a bigger prison bureaucracy. That bigger bureaucracy brings bigger budgets to feed the beast. Those bigger budgets translate into more prisons, more overtime wages for prison functionaries, and more dues to unions that represent those beholden to the prison machine. A broader awareness of the charade behind corrections empowers those on the Straight-A Guide to prepare themselves for success upon release as law-abiding citizens; they succeed in

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spite of the system designed to perpetuate failure under the guise of corrections.

My friend Severin Stone, whom I introduced in chapter two, demonstrates his awareness of the prison machine with his highly disciplined schedule inside. He understands how easily a man could drift into boredom and lose his way. Such awareness opens his eyes to opportunities that he seizes. Those opportunities facilitate the incremental action steps he takes to reach his aspirations. If he didn't hold himself strictly accountable, 100 percent committed to reaching his clearly defined goals within a specific timeline, Severin may have meandered through his lengthy sentence. His awareness enabled him to embrace strategies to maximize progress while simultaneously minimizing exposure to the landmines that derail progress for many who don't embrace the principles of the Straight-A Guide.

Severin acknowledges that in order to reach all of his goals, he must renew his commitment every day. That level of discipline compels him to begin his work day before three each morning, while most other prisoners sleep soundly, comfortably numb to the perils of long-term imprisonment.

"The only thing that has the power to take me off target is me," Severin said. "I know that in

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order to achieve all the goals I've set before I get out, I've got to account for every hour of every day, minimizing my exposure to disruptions or to anything that might take me off track."

Upon walking onto the prison's compound, Severin's first action steps led him to the education department. He inquired about opportunities to earn a college degree. Within a few hours, he filled out the paperwork to enroll. Later, Severin signed up for a second college program to earn a degree in ministry. With discipline and total commitment, Severin set the clearly defined goal of earning three separate college degrees during his first three years of imprisonment. It wouldn't happen by accident, but by sharpening his awareness of every opportunity, Severin could keep himself on track. Those degrees, he knew, would facilitate his prospects for success upon release.

An awareness of opportunities enabled Severin to position himself for success. He not only structured his free time, but he actively pursued job opportunities that would contribute to the development of skills and center his life on the values by which he aspired to live.

The success that followed Severin's commitment became self-evident, as he earned his first college degree within one year of his arrival in prison. Accountability logs convinced

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*Severin with his parents*

him that he remained on track to earn two additional degrees over the following two years. His personal commitment to live a Christian life, with God as his center, led to his pursuing a prison job that exposed him to all prisoners who arrived at his institution.

“I know the anxiety that can plague a man as he begins his term in a new prison,” Severin explained. “I consider it my Christian duty to offer insights and strategies that new prisoners may consider to help them pass time productively. We can embrace opportunities if we grow through our sentences as if we're soldiers in military service, preparing for the battles ahead. I strive to live as an example, preparing myself physically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. To do that, I rely upon God to guide me, keeping myself aware of how I must carefully move through every day. It's why I avoid television, why I'm in bed before 9:00 each evening, why I start each day early.”

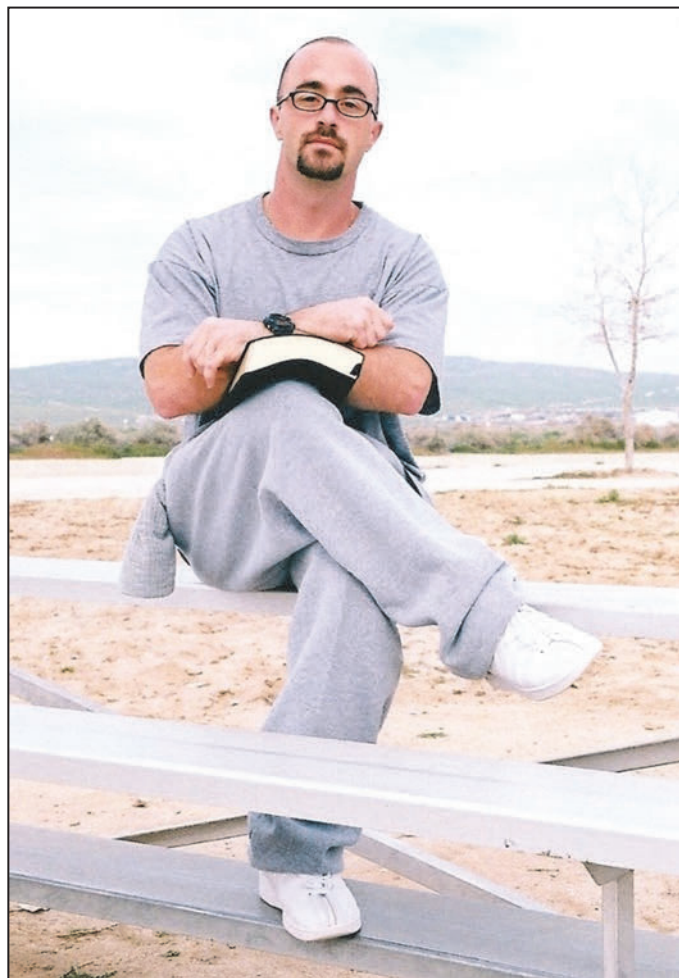
Charlie Day, another friend I introduced in chapter two, provides an additional example of a man who kept himself aware of the perils in confinement. He began serving his term with an attitude of living in accordance with the same values that guided his behavior on the streets. Yet once his mentor, Mike Montoya, inspired him to change, Charlie separated himself from anyone

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who wasn't wholly committed to abiding by a principled, values-driven life. His increasing awareness opened his mind to opportunities that would help him mature as a man, preparing him to emerge from prison with skills and resources that would lead to success.

Charlie enrolled in a college program, then he applied himself with the aspiration of earning his first college degree. He wanted to serve as a role model for his daughter, Anissa. For his wife, Melanie, Charlie wanted to demonstrate his love by showing her that he could mature as a man through prison and return home with promise, capable of bringing stability to his family. To achieve his aspirations, Charlie said, he kept himself aware of anything that could threaten his progress, disciplining himself through every day to minimize exposure to potential disruptions.

Mikhail Kosachevich, a 31-year-old white-collar offender became a friend of mine when he surrendered to serve a 33-month sentence for charges related to a mortgage business he once owned. Mikhail was well educated and experienced as a small businessman, but his troubles with the criminal justice system shook up his life. It wasn't prison itself that worried him, as he was more concerned with the distinct possibility of losing his family while he endured the stressful separation. I spoke with Mikhail



*Charlie Day*

about the Straight-A Guide, describing how I had used it as a strategy to climb through multiple decades in prison, sharing with him the details of how it opened opportunities. I suggested that by embracing the strategic principles, he could work his way through the struggles that came as ancillary consequences of confinement.

With his primary concern being to help his family, Mikhail assessed his environment. The prison infrastructure prohibited him opportunities to earn a meaningful income. Although guards required that he work a full-time job in food services, the \$20 income he received wouldn't even pay for his personal hygiene needs; contributing to the needs of his family through those earnings wasn't an option.

Mikhail said he enjoyed drawing when he was in high school. He hadn't drawn anything during the 13 years since he graduated, but in his effort to cope with the stress of confinement, Mikhail resumed his drawing. The action plan eased his anxieties and through the many hours that he devoted to his craft he refined his skill as an artist.

I admired Mikhail's adjustment. Rather than whining about the injustices of his imprisonment, he took the right attitude: embracing a strategy to cope. All he needed was a chair, a writing surface, and pencils or pens.

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When inmates had reserved or used tables to play cards or other games, Mikhail didn't complain that he didn't have a table. He rested cardboard across his lap and he used that as his writing surface.

Mikhail's awareness of his environment enabled him to use his time productively. As other prisoners became aware of his exceptional artistic talents, Mikhail discovered that he could open opportunities to contribute to his family as well. Prison rules prohibited inmates from running businesses or for one inmate to give something of value to another inmate. Mikhail, however, didn't consider himself an inmate. He was a man with a wife and a child, a man who refused to surrender the human dignity of his highest values.

When other prisoners asked Mikhail to draw portraits, he saw an opportunity to lead a productive, meaningful life. To draw a portrait would require anywhere from 10 to 50 hours, but Mikhail boosted his self-esteem by providing a service that other prisoners valued. The mutually agreed upon exchange allowed those men who relied upon Mikhail's talents to surprise their family members with hand-drawn portraits of exceptional quality. Those family members then expressed their gratitude by making a contribution to Mikhail's family, easing the

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financial burden that accompanied imprisonment. When Mikhail wasn't drawing portraits that other prisoners would send to their loved ones, he used his time to draw artwork for an inventory collection he builds with hopes of selling upon his release.

Mikhail's productive adjustment showed that the fifth attribute of the Straight-A Guide, awareness, had a double benefit. Those who commit themselves fully to their aspirations, taking incremental action steps and holding themselves accountable, do more than open an awareness to seize opportunities. They also create awareness in others. When others become aware of a man's 100 percent commitment to triumph over the dehumanization of imprisonment, their awareness opens collaboration opportunities. That awareness sometimes encourages others to develop a vested interest in helping those on the Straight-A Guide to succeed, as my friend Kenny Lumpkin discovered.

Kenny Lumpkin was a long-term prisoner, having been incarcerated since 1995. He had grown up under the burden of poverty, in a single-family home, from a crime and gang infested area of Los Angeles. Those influences while growing up pushed Kenny into decisions that trapped him inside the web of imprisonment. Despite the lengthy sentence that

Kenny served, he refused to burden himself with feelings of anger or animosity. Kenny was aware that millions of other young people were reared in the same type of inner-city difficulties that influenced the kinds of bad decisions that he made. Those decisions, he understood, led too many young people to either prison or the cemetery.

In an effort to contribute, Kenny took an active role in organizing a group of like-minded prisoners to work at presenting positive messages for at-risk youth. He wrote skits that would dramatize the consequences of criminal decisions, then recruited others who would join him in role playing parts. He coached other prisoners on how to deliver powerful personal testimonials about the ways criminal decisions can derail young lives, showing them how to conclude each speech with a positive message on the importance of making good decisions, pursuing education and roles as contributing members of society. Kenny then coordinated with prison staff to organize field trips where a staff sponsor would drive Kenny and his group from prison to schools and other centers for at-risk adolescents so the men could deliver their positive presentations.

Kenny's 100 percent commitment to leading a life of relevance while serving a lengthy

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*Michael Santos with Kenny Lumpkin*

sentence opened his eyes to ways that he could contribute to society. That self-directed approach opened awareness in others who were so impressed with Kenny's measurable efforts to redeem himself that they made an active investment in his life. Indeed, when lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union learned of Kenny's selfless contributions to work toward educating at-risk youth, they determined that he had proven himself worthy of having earned freedom.

Lawyers from the ACLU then took matters into their own hands. Since Kenny's long-term imprisonment had rendered him indigent, the ACLU worked on his behalf, free of charge, to persuade a top-tier law firm to represent Kenny in a formal petition for clemency. Those lawyers generously invested hundreds of hours with a market value in the tens of thousands of dollars in an effort to persuade President Obama to commute Kenny's sentence. Had Kenny not been living in accordance with the principles of the Straight-A Guide, those lawyers never would have been aware of Kenny Lumpkin. His efforts to contribute in meaningful, positive ways to society, however, made others aware of him. That awareness inspired a group of elite lawyers to invest their time working on Kenny's behalf with hopes of advancing his release date.

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Similar to Kenny's adjustment, my friend Nate Peterson's adjustment personifies the Straight-A Guide. He shows how the right attitude, aspiration, action plan, and personal accountability logs lead to an awareness that not only opens further opportunities for meaningful growth, but inspires others to join his support network. Indeed, Nate's adherence to the principles of the Straight-A Guide opened awareness in others who play active roles in furthering or advancing his success. His story shows how a man can create success out of what others see as hopelessness.

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Authorities arrested Nate for violating copyright laws when he was 26. Like many people in prison, Nate's background lacked stability. In his early teens, family members introduced him to drugs. A penchant for partying led Nate to quit school at 14, before he completed the ninth grade. He began to rear himself with a series of entry-level jobs. Despite his lack of formal education, Nate had been blessed with a gift for resolving math and logic equations; he relied upon those talents to create opportunities. After immersing himself in the software business, however, complications with copyright laws led to his sentence of 87 months.

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As a man in his mid-20s, Nate walked into

prison without a plan. He resented the system for forcing him to attend GED classes, but upon receiving the coursework Nate quickly surmised that he could rely upon his gift for logic to pass the GED exam, which he did at the first opportunity. Sensing that working to advance his education might prove useful in filling his time, Nate enrolled in college courses through independent study. He completed 16 credits before a lack of financial resources required Nate to suspend his formal education.

Nate devoted the following two years of his confinement to spiritual development. Rather than contemplating the challenges that he would face in overcoming obstacles awaiting his release, Nate lived as the antithesis of a man on the Straight-A Guide during those early years. Expecting to confront the complications of life as they came, confident that he would find his way, Nate turned his attention to spiritual development. He pursued the peace, balance, and wisdom of Eastern enlightenment. Exhaling the pressures of confinement through his daily practice of Siddha yoga and meditation, Nate expected to live for the moment rather than for an abstract future.

Four years into his sentence, however, Nate's roommate, Chris, introduced him to the excitement of financial markets. The dazzling,

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continuous flow of information caught Nate's attention. In the numbers he began to see patterns, inspiring his passion to analyze, to apply his gifts of math and logic in an all-consuming effort to understand the forces that cause markets to move. Nate shifted his pursuit of Nirvana for the more pragmatic and potentially remunerative pursuit of skills at technical, quantitative analysis. In that pursuit, he adhered to the principles articulated in the Straight-A Guide.

“When Chris started teaching me about commodities and currency trading,” Nate said, “the entire concept was new to me. He was using graph paper to chart price fluctuations from one trading day to the next, attempting to interpret and predict trends or movements. The more I learned from him, the more intrigued I became. I may not have known anything about commodities or financial markets before, but I loved working with numbers and figuring out complex equations. Wanting to understand more, I began applying myself fully.”

Nate found a new purpose and his attitude reflected his absolute commitment to learn more. By learning more, Nate could build a career around his knowledge, and he aspired to educate himself about every quantifiable variable that contributed to the market fluctuations. He took

incremental action steps, devoting between 10 and 12 hours, seven days each week, to absorb more information. He held himself accountable, reading scores of books on technical analysis, currency trading, and computer automated trading systems. He read financial newspapers, trade magazines, and devoted seven hours each day studying real-time price changes that streamed across the CNBC television screen. Nate's insatiable quest for knowledge opened his awareness of other prisoners who shared his obsession with financial markets and he devoted time to learning from them.

What Nate loved about his ever-expanding knowledge that came with his aspiration to learn was that he continuously applied his mathematical genius, his creativity while tweaking formulas and writing algorithms. In working through the data he painstakingly collected each day, Nate identified flaws in trading systems, then worked tirelessly to refine those systems. He aspired to build his own proprietary trading system that would respond dynamically to changing market conditions with automated buy-sell orders. He held himself accountable by comparing the financial performance to his system with the performance of market averages.

Nate's impressive work ethic brought him

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to the attention of my friend Greg Reyes, whom I introduced in chapter two. Being a man of means who had an indisputable track record for assessing performance, Greg admired Nate's commitment. The more familiar Greg became with Nate's investment of time and energy in building an automated trading platform over the previous two years, the more inclined Greg felt to help Nate succeed.

"What would it take for you to transition from writing theoretical models on paper to creating a system that automates actual trades," Greg asked Nate.

Nate explained that he would need capital to purchase a computer, software, and to hire an assistant who would work to input the code and programs he wrote.

"How would you feel about my investing the capital necessary to start the venture?" Greg asked. "That way you could test your theories, determining whether you can truly beat the index averages with real trades."

"Are you serious?" The offer shocked Nate, as Greg wasn't a neophyte, but one of Silicon Valley's most highly respected and experienced businessmen. "Building the model would require an investment in the tens of thousands before we could make the first trade."

“Do you stand behind your theories?”

Nate smiled, nodded, affirming that he did.

“Can you set up the system and run it from here, despite all of the limitations?” Nate said he could hire his brother and coordinate everything through him.

“Then let's do it,” Greg said. “We'll see whether your models perform as effectively as you say. If you can deliver the returns that your models suggest, I'll set you up as a full partner in business. What do you say to that?”

“I'm in.” Nate shook Greg's hand enthusiastically on the deal.

To truly ring the bell of success, Nate's model will have to crush the market averages. But in creating awareness in Greg, he has put himself in the game. That, in and of itself, should inspire and persuade others in prison to embrace the principles of the Straight-A-Guide. Nate personifies the maxim that the harder a man works, the luckier he gets.

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A man like Greg Reyes doesn't invest in a prisoner because he aspires to make a return on his money. In Nate, Greg recognized someone who worked hard to triumph over the adversity of confinement. Nate didn't set out to create

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*Greg Reyes, Michael Santos, Nate Peterson*

awareness in Greg, or anyone else. Yet awareness in others is an ancillary benefit of the Straight-A-Guide, flowing to those who work hard, deliberately pursuing clearly defined goals. If Nate had not been refining his models for 18 months, and if he had not been able to articulate his aspiration, he would not have been in a position to receive Greg's sponsorship.

Greg's sponsorship ensued because Nate's attitude—his 100 percent commitment to improving his skill set—kept him working. He aspired to understand financial markets. He took daily, incremental action steps to increase that understanding from the superficial level of recording data points on a chart to the more sophisticated and creative work to design algorithms and automated trading systems. He held himself accountable, understanding that performance would not be measured by the amount of work he did, but by demonstrating that he could outperform market indices consistently. And it made Greg aware that Nate was worthy of sponsorship.

Nate Peterson's story illustrates how a prisoner's values and goals may shift during a term in confinement. He passed his first year in an education program that resulted in his earning his GED and 16 college credits. When financial limitations suspended his pursuit of a college

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degree, Nate immersed himself in Siddha yoga, pursuing balance and tranquility. When his roommate, Chris, introduced Nate to financial markets he discovered a new purpose, an activity that would allow him to build upon his math and logic skills, measuring progress in clearly defined ways.

Regardless of whether Nate's goals included pursuit of educational credentials, spiritual development, or preparations for release, adherence to the Straight-A-Guide could lead Nate to success as he defined it. He had only to pursue his purpose, or passion, with the right attitude of 100 percent commitment, with clear aspirations that defined success. He had to take incremental action steps and use accountability logs to assess performance. In so doing, Nate would open an awareness that boosted performance and simultaneously opened an awareness in others who would facilitate his success.

Men like Nate and the other extraordinary men I profile in this book do not triumph over the demoralizing atmosphere of confinement by accident. Rather, their deliberate actions keep them climbing, moving forward with purpose. They do not devolve into inmates, in pursuit of meaningless certificates; they do not seek validation from the failure factory or any of the

functionaries that strive to maintain the status quo of corrections, preserving the security of the institution. Doing so would keep them on the Straight-F Guide, facilitating further cycles of failure and keeping the prison system growing.

Overcoming imprisonment requires focus and self-direction. As Nate demonstrates, it requires setting goals and working toward them. He told me that he doesn't understand other prisoners who express desires to succeed, but then waste hours each day reading paperback novels, watching reality TV, or playing table games.

Those who participate in the Straight-A Guide create measurable value through the decisions they make. Once they sign up in the program and begin documenting their journey through the Straight-A Guide workbook, building personal profiles on the [www.Straight-A-Guide.com](http://www.Straight-A-Guide.com) website, they enhance opportunities to create awareness in others. In so doing, they can build support that may assist their pursuit of achievement, which is the sixth attribute of the Straight-A Guide.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### ACHIEVEMENT

In my book *Earning Freedom*, I show how living in accordance with the Straight-A Guide distinguishes my journey from other long-term prisoners. I'll leave it for others to determine whether the journey inspires, but there shouldn't be any question about its sustained deliberateness. The decision to educate myself, contribute to society, and build a supportive network that would prepare my transition into society began a quarter century ago, while I was still locked in the Pierce County Jail.

My 100 percent commitment to prepare for the challenges that would await my release defined my attitude and inspired my aspiration. Accountability logs I created helped to ensure the incremental action steps synchronized with the values by which I professed to live. Through such commitment, I became aware of opportunities I could seize or create, and others became aware of me, helping me along the way.

Any prisoner could use the same principles of the Straight-A Guide to lead a

deliberate adjustment through prison. Instead of lamenting over today's struggle, a man must look ahead and work toward what he aspires to become. By celebrating every achievement along the way, an individual replenishes his energy. Achievement represents the sixth attribute of the Straight-A Guide because achievement inevitably follows those who focus on attitude, aspiration, action, accountability, and awareness. We celebrate every achievement, no matter how small, because we understand progress in life's journey doesn't advance without rough spots and temporary setbacks.

I've heard it said that an overnight success is 20 years in the making. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, a man should expect to invest his blood, his sweat, and his tears in his pursuit of success. Those on the Straight-A Guide embrace the reality that they will endure many kicks in the teeth along the way, especially if they launch the journey to transform their lives from the depths of a jail or prison. But they persevere, fighting on and climbing through darkness, taking nothing for granted, expecting obstacles and interference rather than encouragement along the way. By celebrating each incremental achievement, they empower themselves through struggle.

Early in this book I wrote about Redneck Rick, Windward, and Red, other prisoners with

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whom I interacted along the journey. In other books I wrote, readers became familiar with hundreds of people in prison who rejected the principles of the Straight-A Guide, accepting the myth that the best strategy for adjusting through prison eradicated all thought of release or the world beyond the walls, fences, and boundaries. They chose to immerse themselves in the society of felons, accepting that regardless of what efforts they made, prisoners didn't have anything coming.

Redneck Rick, Windward, and Red received exactly what they expected. They enjoyed their reserved seats in television rooms and their reputations as stand-up convicts but upon their return to society they faced repeated disappointment and failure. Their decisions led to additional terms in prison, which was the intended design of corrections. Ironically, Redneck Rick, Windward, and Red played their own role in preserving the security of the institution; they kept the prison system growing.

America's prison system is designed to deal with both inmates and convicts. Its intended objectives trap them in the web, cycling them through failure, breaking apart their families and separating the prisoners from society, moving them from one security level to another, even releasing them so long as they've been properly

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conditioned to keep coming back.

The system is not so well designed to accommodate men who reject the dehumanizing machine, embracing the empowering principles of the Straight-A Guide instead. Such men advance from positions of strength, knowing exactly where they're going. They refuse to live as inmates or convicts, playing the losing game of corrections, pursuing certificates or validations from within the machine.

Rather, empowered men set their own course, living in accordance with clearly defined values, the personification of integrity, celebrating each achievement along the way. Instead of defining themselves by the system of failure that holds them or the decisions of their past, those on the Straight-A Guide forge ahead, continuously striving to pursue meaning leading lives of relevance, aspiring to optimal performance in every value category that defines their lives.

Men who commit to the Straight-A Guide understand that regardless of what decisions they have made in the past, at any time they can correct course. Men like Walt Jones, Charlie Day, and Michael Cade spoke about how they entered the prison system without expectations of living any differently from the way he lived on the street. The men ran with hustlers, participated in

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gangs while living for the moment. And yet each man made a change, definitively breaking from his reckless past. To sustain their commitment, they celebrated each achievement along the way.

Walt Jones taught himself to read in prison. He celebrated that achievement with a new self-perception, and then built upon it. Walt began to read about leadership, celebrating his newly found knowledge with his growing confidence.

He began leading others by teaching lessons from the Nation of Islam, helping others empower themselves. He expanded his growing skill set by enrolling in courses that would lead to his earning credentials as a professional, certified fitness trainer. Instead of living for what people in prison thought of him, Walt kept his focus on his commitment to family and preparations he made for a successful life upon release. When he emerged from prison after 15 years, he walked out to a supportive network, a steady income from his job as a fitness trainer, and additional income opportunities from his growing speaking and teaching career. None of that success would have ensued had Walt not taken and celebrated each incremental action step.

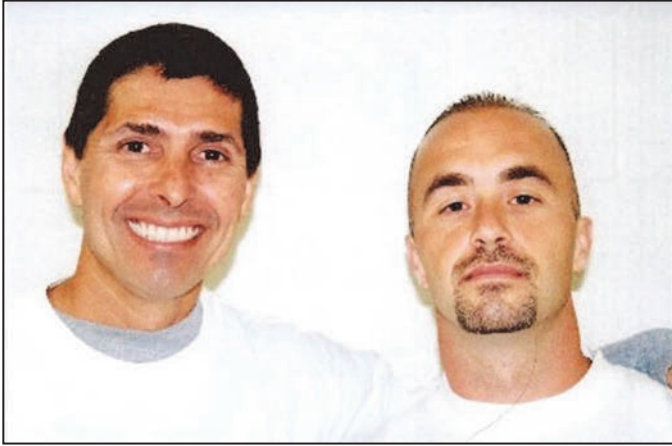
Charlie Day made a definitive break from his prison gang, an incremental achievement that opened the way for numerous others. By focusing



*Walt Jones*

on preparing himself for a better future, Charlie set himself on a course that would lead to a college degree. That meaningful achievement would not materialize for years. In the interim Charlie could celebrate each achievement along the way. Those achievements began with the reading of his first lesson plan. Then the completion of his first assignment brought another achievement. It led to completing the one after, and then the assignment after that. Each achievement merited celebration because through his accountability logs, Charlie could see how he advanced closer to his goal. Once Charlie had his college degree in hand, he would have a credential that no one could take away. Such a meaningful achievement may not advance his release date or boost his reputation with the homies, but it would move him closer to success upon release.

Michael Cade may have quit school after the ninth grade, and he may have served the first several years of his prison term in anger at the system that held him. But then he embraced the principles of the Straight-A Guide, committing himself to strategic preparations for success upon release. He celebrated the achievement of earning His GED. He celebrated the growing insight that came with each hour he devoted to working through the Straight-A Guide workbook. A



*Michael Santos with Charlie Day*

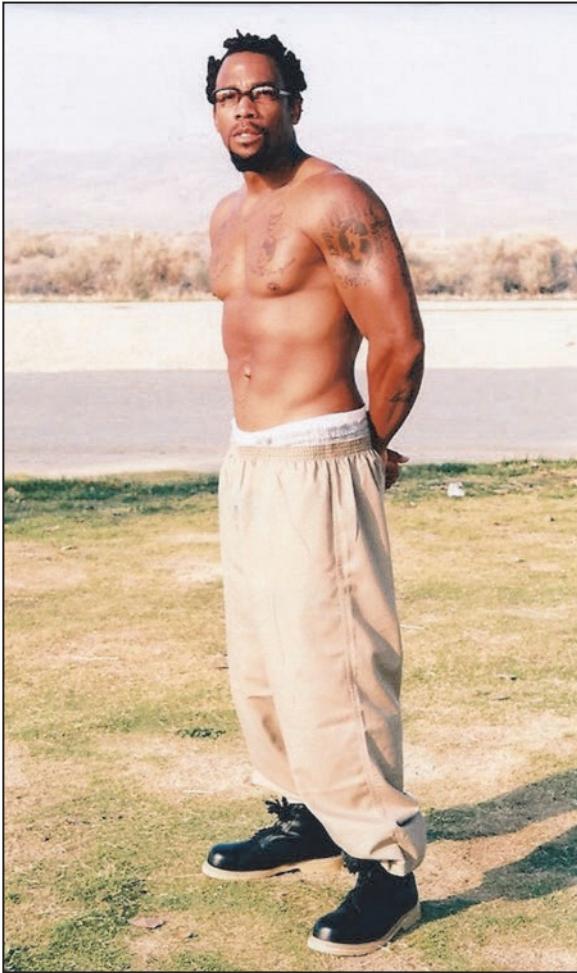
measurable achievement from his work manifested itself with the documentation of his life, helping him understand the decisions that led to his imprisonment along with the decisions that would lead to his success upon release.

My friend Billy Sigler didn't embrace the principles of the Straight-A Guide until he was in his ninth year of imprisonment. Billy had strength of character that would not permit his past decisions to interfere with a new commitment to apply himself fully. He could celebrate the achievement of building his profile on the Straight-A-Guide.com website. Billy's family encouraged him, telling him how reading about his deliberate steps to prepare for release inspired them.

Billy used his Web profile as a personal marketing tool as well. He wrote letters to prospective employers and invited them to read the responses he gave to the questions in the Straight-A Guide workbook. Billy made those proactive efforts as an offer of validation for his commitment to live as a productive employee, aspiring to land a job that would await his release.

Any inmate can fake his way through the failure factory of corrections. He can proceed through the motions as one calendar page turns into the next, participating in a program here or

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*Michael Cade*



there to receive his “atta boy” or goody bag. A man on the Straight-A Guide, however, expects discouragement and resistance from the system, including all of those with an interest in preserving it. That way they're never disappointed. Such men rely upon their incremental achievements to motivate and keep them advancing toward preparations for success upon release, corrections notwithstanding.

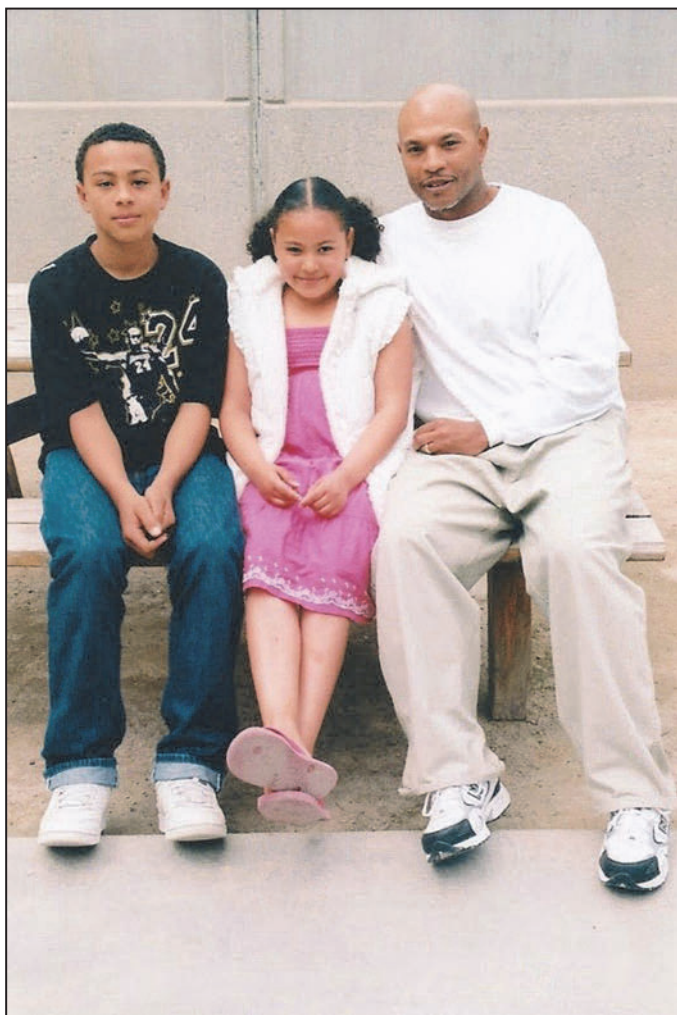
By building his personal profile on the Straight-A-Guide.com website, Thomas Ross celebrates achievement that frequently comes to him in unexpected ways. He says that by publishing his responses to the workbook questions, his children develop a growing appreciation for the struggles he must overcome as he takes incremental steps to achieve each goal. If it were not for the record he was building by writing his story, the people Thomas loves would not understand the total commitment behind every one of those achievements; they would not understand all of the challenges that come with imprisonment and that Thomas endures every day. Through his commitment to the Straight-A Guide, Thomas celebrates the achievement of nurturing closer ties with his family and community.

Men on the Straight-A Guide celebrate achievements that others in society mistakenly

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*Michael Santos with Billy Sigler*



*Thomas Ross with his children*

believe are beyond the realm of possibility for prisoners. My friend Seth Ferranti, for example, celebrates numerous achievements in spite of the 18 years

that he has served so far. He earned three college degrees, including a master of arts from California State University at Dominguez Hills. He built a publishing company. He married the love of his life. He is the personification of success, the real deal, a Straight-A guy. Seth has achieved more from within prison boundaries than many of those devoted to the system that ostensibly tries to correct him.

Despite his serving a lengthy prison sentence, Paul Wright provides yet another example of how man can sustain his pursuit of success by celebrating incremental achievements. Paul built *Prison Legal News*, as I described in an earlier chapter, into a publication and website that has generated millions of dollars of revenues while contributing to the improvement of every prisoner's life who chooses to learn from Paul's achievement. While Paul made his 100 percent commitment to advance his aspiration into an achievement, prison guards abused their power repeatedly. Citing the need to protect the security of the institution, the guards disregarded the First Amendment rights vested in Paul as an American citizen and as a human being. They locked him in

segregation, confiscated his property, and transferred him from one prison to another. Despite those repeated violations by the system of corrections, Paul could celebrate his incremental achievements along the way to sustain his resolve while climbing through adversity.

I am especially impressed with David Muniz, the young man who has been assigned to the prison rack beneath the metal slab on which I've slept for the past several years. David walked into prison without much of an education and without expectations that he could use the time to his advantage. He had longer than a decade to serve, and anyone could lose his way with that much exposure to the demoralizing influences of corrections.

Prison functionaries trampled upon David's constitutional right to marry, telling him that he had too much time to serve. After I described how following the Straight-A Guide helped me triumph over all of the indignities of confinement, David embraced them fully, relying upon them to make values-based decisions. He strengthened himself in ways that allowed him to overcome, to make the time serve him, celebrating each achievement along the way.

With his positive attitude, David envisioned the way that he wanted to emerge

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from prison. With his aspiration of building the best life possible for his two young children, David used the law library to ascertain his constitutional rights and then he challenged the prison system from a principled position. He celebrated the achievement of beating the system when he married Gabriella in the prison's visiting room.

As a man who pulled his strength from within, distinguished from an inmate who adjusted in stereotypical patterns that led to further failures, David contemplated ways that he could contribute to his family. He aspired to live as a role model for his children and as a source of strength for his wife. For David, that meant disassociating himself from prison influences that could lead him to further troubles. He remained polite and cordial with everyone, but he established disciplined schedule that limited his exposure to people and activities that threatened his progress. David could celebrate that incremental action step, as it was an achievement in and of itself.

David's disciplined approach to climbing through struggle led to starting his day at 3:00 a.m. He studied every day, followed a disciplined exercise routine, grew closer to God through his Biblical readings, and supported himself in honorable ways through services he could offer

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*Michael Santos with David Muniz*

to others. By working through the Straight-A Guide workbook, David built a profile that described how influences of his past led to his imprisonment. Through that same profile, he showed how his disciplined adjustment led to numerous achievements in prison, preparing him for success upon release. When that day came, David expected to celebrate the achievement of a less burdensome time on supervised release because of the deliberate preparations he made through his years in confinement. David didn't simply say his family was his priority, through the achievements he worked toward, he showed his commitment to proving worthy of the love and support he received.

When we live in accordance with the Straight-A Guide, we set our own aspirations. By pursuing them with deliberate, incremental action steps, and holding ourselves accountable, we prepare for each of our achievements, nurturing them along the way. In so doing, we fortify our spirits, endowing us with new strengths to defend against any external force that tries to derail our success.

Rather than leaving our lives to chance, or living in accordance with the expectations of external forces, those of us on the Straight-A Guide establish the value categories by which we want to live. We set the terms by which others

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*Michael and Carole Santos*

define us. In my case, those value categories include a commitment to discipline, fitness, Godliness, industriousness, integrity, marriage, and nurturing my support network. My sense of achievement ensues because of the daily, personal commitment I make to living in accordance with the clearly defined goals I set within each value category.

Any prisoner can create the same fulfillment in his life. Doing so only requires that he reject the dehumanizing machine that categorizes him as either inmate or convict. Instead, he lives as a man, defining his own success by his responses to the struggles around him. To the extent that he fully involves his mind, his will, and his heart in every detail of his life, he achieves. For each achievement along the journey, he has cause to celebrate, but also to show appreciation for the blessings he has received along the way. Indeed, appreciation represents the seventh and final attribute of the Straight-A Guide.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### APPRECIATION

Friedrich Nietzsche, a celebrated German philosopher wrote about man's need to find his strength from within. To self-actualize, man had to begin by evaluating the atmospherics surrounding him, then pick himself up and navigate his way through struggle to grow into the man he aspired to become.

According to Nietzsche, the self-actualized man took deliberate action steps rather than made excuses. I've found strength, truth, and inspiration in Nietzsche's quote:

*That which doesn't kill me  
makes me stronger*

When men embrace the principles of the Straight-A Guide, they strengthen themselves. Rather than devolving into pathetic inmates who allow present circumstances to suck their lives into a vortex of perpetual failure, they rise to begin the climb out. They apply themselves fully, with positive attitudes and a 100 percent commitment to strategic, incremental actions steps.

Those action steps lead to aspirations. When men hold themselves accountable, awareness follows, guiding them toward achieving all that they intended. These empowering responses to struggle not only make a man stronger, they bring numerous blessings along the way. By showing appreciation for each achievement, men following the Straight-A Guide attract more blessings into their lives.

Prison hasn't killed me. It has tested my will power and through those tests I've grown stronger. I appreciate privileges I have had to learn and grow through many rich relationships that have opened. Those relationships bring relevance as I strive to climb through prison and weave my way into the fabric of society. My relationships convince me that every individual has a role to play in the making of a better world. As we work to fulfill those roles, we create new opportunities, reaping new blessings that we can appreciate during every stage of the journey, even in times of struggle.

In *Earning Freedom, Prison! My 8,344th Day*, and other books, I showed how the journey serves a purpose. It doesn't advance my cause to question the justice or injustice of imprisonment. Instead, I find meaning in the ways that working to conquer adversity opens opportunities to collaborate with others. Collectively, we live the

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strategies that every individual can employ to reach his highest potential through the decisions he makes. Regardless of what challenges we face, we can appreciate opportunities to grow stronger if we control our attitudes, aspirations, and incremental action steps.

Every prisoner with whom I have served time has given me opportunities to learn and grow. Even prisoners like Redneck Rick, Windward, and Red helped me to appreciate the magnitude of continuing struggle I could expect if I did not pursue a strategic adjustment.

Men like Walt Jones, Severin Stone, Charlie Day, Michel Cade, and my friend Billy Sigler reinforce my belief that, regardless of bad decisions I made in the past, with better decisions I can begin work at any time to improve my life.

Men like David Muniz, Thomas Ross, and Julius Liege remind me to appreciate the value of family, showing the importance of working to prove worthy of love I receive from so many.

Kenny Lumpkin, Seth Ferranti, and Nathan Peterson prove that by working hard, I can increase an awareness that inspires others to believe in me. I appreciate the many people who have.

Through collaborations I make with friends like Justin Paperny, I appreciate

opportunities to refute the ridiculous myths perpetuated by the prison machine. Together we offer incontrovertible proof that men who follow the Straight-A Guide do, indeed, have something coming. By working to create and seize opportunities, men who use the Straight-A Guide can prepare themselves to emerge from prison with values, skills, resources, and support to live as contributing, law-abiding citizens. Assistance flows to those who live in accordance with all seven attributes of the Straight-A Guide, and it will flow unexpectedly, as it continues to flow to me from men like Lino Munoz.

I neither knew Lino Munoz nor did I make overt efforts to seek support from him. He surrendered to the Taft Federal Prison Camp in early 2011 to serve six months. Lino hadn't had any previous experience with the criminal justice system. His background combined personal struggle and self-reliance, however, and it led him to identify with efforts Justin and I were making to inspire prisoners to help themselves.

When Lino read components of the Straight-A Guide learning system that suggested strategies for prisoners to consider preparing for law-abiding lives, he approached me with a generous offer to contribute.

Justin and I recognize that America's prison system not only strips prisoners of hope,

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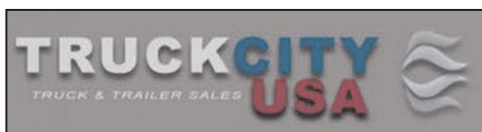


*Michael Santos with Lino Munoz*

but also resources. They cannot afford to cover costs of the learning modules we produce any more than fifth graders can cover the costs of books they need to become productive citizens. We rely upon financial sponsors who enable us to develop and distribute our modules free of charge to the prisoners who want them. Justin and I appreciate men like Lino Munoz who reach out with offers to sponsor our work.

When Lino expressed his interest in sponsoring the project, he and I sat to talk. He told me about the challenges he faced while growing up in the Central Valley of California. Accepting that school would never come easily to him, Lino quit before finishing the ninth grade, committing himself to learning a trade instead. He applied himself wholeheartedly, signing up as an apprentice in a diesel mechanic shop. By Lino's early teens, he developed competence as a journeyman diesel mechanic.

Through a combination of Lino's hard work ethic, frugality, and business savvy, Lino created new opportunities that enriched his life. He invested in real estate and business eventually





launching Truck City USA, a dealership to serve California's trucking industry. Despite his financial success, Lino made a decision he regrets that ensnared him into the criminal justice system, requiring that he serve six months in Taft's federal prison. I asked what prompted his offer to sponsor the Straight-A Guide.

“During my first weeks in Taft I spoke with dozens of guys who've told me the sad stories of their lives. They told me that they were going home without work experience or skills, and yet prison didn't offer them much of anything to prepare. My roommate, Julius Liege, told me about his participation in the Straight-A Guide and how he was using it to teach others. Then I read one of the books. Reading the stories made me feel like I was reading the strategy that I followed since I was 14. That strategy led me out of poverty and I could see how prisoners who followed it would prepare themselves for success upon release. As a business owner, I wanted to sponsor those kinds of programs that would help more people create opportunities for themselves. I liked the idea of investing in society by investing to help people in need.”

I am grateful for Lino's support because it contributes to the pool of resources necessary to spread the message of the Straight-A Guide. We all may be prisoners who live trapped inside a

culture that perpetuates failure, but we're also men who can empower ourselves. Through our own efforts, we can live as a part of the broader society, preparing ourselves for meaningful, contributing lives. By adhering to the Straight-A Guide, blessings will flow to us unexpectedly, advancing our efforts. The more gratitude and appreciation we show, experience convinces me, the more good will facilitates our journey.

Each of my previous books described the countless blessings that have come my way during the decades I've served. I described those blessings with hopes that they may inspire other prisoners to follow the principles of the Straight-A Guide. Despite what others would have prisoners believe about their not having anything coming, experiences I wrote about should further the indisputable truism that the harder a man works, the luckier he becomes.

I appreciate Lino Munoz's sponsorship. He represents the most recent of countless blessings that advance these efforts to show others how to triumph over imprisonment. The sponsorship pages in my books thank numerous others to whom I am indebted for contributions they've made to the Michael G. Santos Foundation. We work together to help prisoners emerge as law-abiding citizens, developing values, skills, and resources that contribute to our enlightened

society. I am grateful for the trust they've placed in this work, and I'll live the rest of my life striving to prove worthy of their support.

May other prisoners find hope in the message.