

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## The Light at the End of the Tunnel



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I was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison when I was 13 years old.

I had already spent time in the juvenile detention center on seven different occasions. Yet at such a young age, I didn't fully understand the ramifications of what had occurred; nor did I understand how so many lives -- including my own -- would be devastated because of my actions. I did not think the victim would die and I was not the actual killer, so I never imagined that I would face a long prison term. Only when I was transferred to adult court and spoke to my defense lawyer did I understand that I would likely spend decades in prison. I eventually plead guilty in order to avoid the 40-year sentence the state sought.

Because I was so focused on the daily routine of survival in an aggressive environment, I didn't have many opportunities to reflect upon my life or even imagine a better future. It wasn't until I was 18 and in solitary confinement at Pontiac Correctional Center in Illinois that I realized how destructive and wrong I had been. I thought about all the people I had hurt; I thought about his family and the pain I had caused them and most of all I wished I had the power to go back in time and save his life. Overwhelmed with remorse and regret, and with my growing sense of disillusionment with the gang life in which I was involved, I began to think about the root causes of my childhood decisions.

I realize that I -- like so many misled youth -- had been perfectly socialized into being a gang member. My childhood traumas of living in poverty, having a mother diagnosed with mental illness, living in fear of an abusive step-father, and being placed in and out of foster care made me ripe for the occasions of impulsive and destructive behavior -- especially gang involvement which gave me the sense of having a new family.

This week we mark the one-year anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Miller v. Alabama* that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for youth are unconstitutional due to the categorical differences between children and adults. Youth must be held accountable when they cause harm to others, and especially when a life is taken.

Yet, I believe that as a society, we also have an obligation to seek the most humane and rehabilitative approach possible when sentencing kids, for even the most serious offenses. Brain science tells us that children are **developmentally different** from adults and have a unique capacity for change.

I am proof that this is true. As I matured, I started to make better decisions. Just like many prisoners, all I wanted was to someday live a normal life. I also imagined that someday I would be able to help prevent others from making the same mistakes that I once made. By leaving the gang and surrounding myself with positive and supportive people I slowly began to recreate myself. With good behavior, I was transferred to a medium security prison. Within a few years, I had several significant educational accomplishments and had earned a bachelor's degree in social science with a 4.0 GPA and was inducted into an honor society for outstanding scholarship. I geared my educational studies in the direction of someday being able to work with at-risk youth.

I was released from prison in 2002, after serving 13 years in the Illinois Department of Corrections. Soon after my release I re-enrolled into Roosevelt University, where I received my undergraduate degree, and earned a Master of Arts in Counseling and Human Services. During that time, I also worked as an outreach worker for an anti-violence organization. In the past decade, I've worked and volunteered in various roles designed to keep youth out of trouble. Currently, I work as a clinical field interviewer for an ambitious government-funded study that looks at the mental health needs and outcomes of individuals who were formerly incarcerated as youth and is intended to help guide future public policy decisions and interventions for at-risk youth.

My life course is a testament of the human potential for positive change, and I am in no way an exception. I personally know many individuals who have gone through similar experiences and are now living positive and productive lives. But honestly, I don't know what I would have felt if I hadn't seen that light at the end of the tunnel. It must feel like a never-ending nightmare to reach mid-life and realize that you are serving a prison sentence that will never end because of something you did as a kid. I imagine it's almost like serving time for someone who long faded away as a result of the years of punishment and a growing sense maturity.

As policymakers consider how they will move forward in revising their youth sentencing schemes, I urge them to consider developing new policies that provide opportunities for young people to demonstrate that they have changed and are ready to join me and others like me in making the world a better place. We all have the capacity to change. We just need a chance.

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