

CONVICTION

Life Lessons From My Time Behind Bars

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Enter Alcohol and Drugs

After I had been in Seward for at least a year, I had come to terms with the reality that I was going to be there for the long haul. Now a true resident, I left the protective comfort of my social isolation to engage a group of guys to make my time a little bit easier. One irony of prison is that we end up there, oftentimes, because of a failure to keep good company. Once inside, however, “choosing good friends” is hard to practice. I wouldn’t consider most of the people I associated with in prison to be “friends.” They may have been acquaintances or even allies, but few crossed the line where they became my “friend.”

We played cards, ran the track, worked out, and most of the men engaged in every possible illegal activity. They would buy and sell drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes, tattoo one another (Mom, don’t worry I didn’t get any!), played adult video games, watched porn, made and kept shanks, extorted and blackmailed other inmates, etc. The list of shenanigans is endless. Prison could be endless. It wasn’t rehabilitative for most. For the majority of inmates, it was an endless wait and huge waste of life. I decided after observing others wither into becoming more crooked, sad people, that I would not use or sell drugs, and I would quit smoking. I would come out a better man than I went in.

One day, a few of the guys I ran around with made an impressive five-gallon batch of “Pruno.” It’s one of those semi-genius prison inventions that is born of “necessity.”

For many of the guys, booze was a “necessity,” but for most, it was a diversion— a semi-risky activity both in its making and its consumption, but it was fun. A long time ago, prisons realized that without proper vitamins prisoners would get scurvy. So as bad as the fruit was...think sloppy fruit cocktail, we had just enough to squeeze juice, which could be kept in a paper cup under someone’s cot until someone else had the opportunity to melt down candy corn in the microwave for sugar. An inmate who worked in the kitchen would manage to smuggle a little bit of yeast, and three days later there you go, jailhouse brew, aka Pruno!

I saw it all over the place. I was intrigued, and kept my mouth shut, even hiding it on occasion so the guys wouldn’t get busted, but I didn’t drink it once. I was thinking of my mom and my family and how I could earn their trust back, how I could get myself out of prison and redeem my life.

Shank

Almost everyone in prison partied, drank, and used drugs. There were fights every day, but one day stands out in my memory as the most frightening.

I was playing Xbox in my cell (one of the few luxuries I was afforded based on my tenure and decent behavior) when Ryan came in with his necklace in one hand and holding his chest with the other. His shirt and face were wet with fresh blood. I fought back the urge to say "I told you to stop drinking, dumbass!" I expected he had either just recovered from a bloody nose or he had given one to someone else who had, in turn, bled all over his shirt. Except for the blood, he looked steady, but he then said three words that would haunt me forever:

"I got stabbed."

He pulled his hand away from his bloodied tee shirt, revealing a hole that wasn't the shape or size I had expected for the amount of blood. He lifted his shirt and, in disbelief, I observed a hole in his chest.

"What happened?!"

"For no reason, he just started attacking me, ripping off my necklace, and then he stabbed me."

I was surprised he was able to say that much, given the amount of pain he must have been in.

Ryan, the victim in this case, was one of the best fraudsters in the country. He forged checks and bankrupted people. Con man. Made millions. Wanted by the FBI. He would send inmates bath salt, a pseudonym for psychoactive designer drugs. He robbed post offices. He would borrow phones to make personal calls and by the time he returned the phone to the willing lender, he would have emptied his/her bank accounts.

Ryan's crimes were white-collar and he was less violent than most. However, in the adjacent block there was a hitman named Aaron, infamous for stabbing people, and now, thanks to our proximity, Ryan had paid a high price for living in a really rough "neighborhood."

After the stabbing and his rehabilitation, Ryan said he was done drinking and was not going to hang out with the party crew anymore. Not even a week later, he was into the same stuff. To the best of my knowledge, today he is still in Hudson Colorado Correctional Facility; likely shooting up drugs, with the FBI breathing down his neck to investigate the fraud and scandals that continued long after he was caught. Sadly, he has little respect for his kids or life. Clearly, sometimes a wake-up call just isn't enough. God save him.