

Backstory

Where I grew up, education was not a thing. But going to prison when you're young, that was seen as positive. It supposedly built your character and gave you street cred. You could say you went somewhere dangerous and made it out in one piece. No one was expected to finish high school in my neighborhood.

I graduated into 'thuggin' life at a young age. They'd say you've "jumped off the porch." It's like a badge of honor: You start smoking weed, skipping school, stealing cars and breaking into houses.

At 13, I was hanging out with 16–19-year-old guys. I'd sneak out of the house and be out all day and night. My mom worked two jobs so she couldn't keep track of me. She thought I was at school during the day, but I was really running the streets.

In 10th grade, I was involved in an armed robbery. In fact, I wouldn't have even finished that school year if I hadn't gotten arrested for the robbery because I was forced to finish 10th grade as part of my sentence. I couldn't drop out. But two months after I completed my sentence, I was back on the streets.

I remember one night we were driving around in two stolen cars and smoking weed. It got to be about 2 or 3 am and I wanted to go home so I could go to school the next day. I knew if I missed school one more time, they would call my mom.

So, I told these older guys I needed to head home to go to school and, instead of understanding (my situation) or encouraging me to do the right thing, they said, "Why are you even going to school? All that stuff you learn won't help you. It won't make you any money and it doesn't apply to real life."

That's the way it was in my neighborhood. People were seen as having either street smarts or book smarts. You couldn't have both. You had one or the other, and no one from the streets wanted to classify themselves as book smart. Those guys were considered 'clowns.' That's the polite way to say it. I look back now, and I see how messed up that was. Most of those guys didn't even know how it felt to accomplish something in life.

Today, only a handful of the guys I grew up with are not involved in criminal activities or incarcerated. I keep in touch with those guys. I think they are probably doing ok now because of what happened to me. It scared them when they saw me get 38 years for a robbery.

Most of us growing up never thought that going to prison for a very long time would ever happen to us. We knew we'd go to prison. That was a guarantee, but we didn't expect to be sentenced for a very long time.

Earning a GED

So, I learned late in life how important school is. I only thought about getting my GED after I ended up in prison. At first, I just wanted to avoid food service (prison job assignment). I didn't want to work in the kitchen, so I signed up for education. Prior to entering the education program here, my academic skills were very poor. My TABE scores were so low, I was ashamed.

After a while, I did get more involved in my education but what really motivated me was when others in my class got their GEDs. They went on and graduated and I was still in class. I felt left behind. It was a wake-up call for me. I had to ask myself, "What have I ever completed in my life?" I came up blank. That's when I got serious, studied hard and finally earned my GED.

Now I *have* accomplished something. I'm 36 years old and this is the first thing I've done. The first thing I've really completed. It (GED) was not easy to get but (the reward is) so worth it.

My favorite subject was math at first but after learning so much about history I want to learn more in that area. I learned many other things while studying for my GED. Just learning to get up in the morning prepares you for your future. But I'd have to say the most important thing I've learned is *how to listen*. I've improved my listening skills. I can now hold an intelligent conversation with anyone.

Looking ahead

I just signed up for a faith-based program (in this prison) and I'm waiting on that. One of my plans upon release is to find a job after my 3rd day outside. I can now check the box on the job application where it asks, 'Do you have a high school diploma.' Yes, I do!

