

NATHAN THOMAS: WINNIPEG, MANITOBA, CANADA

My name is Nathan Thomas. I am thirty two years of age and was born and raised in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. In my early teen years, at the age of eleven, I started a life of crime and the joining of gangs. It was here that I searched for my belonging, that fatherly figure, respect, love, care, compassion, that eager to be noticed. My childhood was spent with my grandmother who to this day taught me a lot. It was her love and respect that remains today, that has made me into the man I am today. My grandmother was a beautiful and caring woman who ran her own store and always talked about success, my future, and that someday I would make something of me. I carried that for years, at times it was lost. When I was eleven years old, she passed away tragically, during the worst possible time, Christmas. It was devastating for me and my dear sister. I was forced to move back with my mother to the city of Winnipeg. My birth mother at a young age had me and my sister; she couldn't take care of us so that is the reason we were forced to move to our reservation, Norway house, to live with our grandma. The move back was a big change for my sister and I, we had become so accustomed to our surroundings in Norway house. Particularly, the change in atmosphere and the new parents. I call them new parents because I carried a lot of hate for my mother for abandoning us. She had no clue the inner rage and sadness we carried. We came back to Winnipeg with all that frustration, rage, hate, confusion, sadness, anger, and we took it out on her and our stepfather. He was no help; he was an alcoholic with a chip on his shoulder. His idea of love was to make us put boxing gloves on and box with him; he always had to prove something to us. That played a major role in my leaving the house and searching the streets of Winnipeg for a home; I found that with gangs and living an unhealthy life.

At the age of twelve I was arrested for the first time. I was charged with numerous auto theft offenses. Twenty one to be exact. It was my first charge and I remember to this day, I was set up by my own mother. She called me to come home and when I got home there were two detectives waiting for me because the night before I was involved in a high speed chase for which one of my friends was caught and he ratted me out. It was the excitement, the respect I got the next few days afterwards from friends that I felt loved, cared for, and respected. They would say Nate show me how to steal cars, crazy guy, a lot of things that

made me feel good about what I was doing. Little did I know that it was to just manipulate me into doing a lot more crime, because it was the older guys making these comments. At the age of 15, I was introduced to cocaine. It was the first time we started to work in drug dens or shooting galleries. The things I have witnessed and done in these places haunt me till this day. Now, I would not like to go into great detail but these houses were horrific, my own people selling their souls, their bodies for that next high. I was taking away children's food and diapers and their parents with the evil we were selling. From the age of fifteen to twenty six I sold drugs. I was an independent drug dealer and I was good at it. Me and my friends made a lot of money – like, I mean, a lot. By the time I was 21 I had already owned three to four cars, I had apartments and people on the road twenty four hours a day driving and selling our evil. It was at that age that I started to see the greed, envy, jealousy, the evil in what I was doing. I've lost many friends to murder; to friends doing life, to a lot doing really stiff penitentiary sentences. It was the loss of my best friend; he was shot seven times and set up by one of our so called friends. The whole cause of that – money; he is gone today because of our greed, our drive to want to be the biggest drug dealer on the block. From all the money that exchanged my hands to this day I have nothing to show for it but heartache and regret. Me, the man I am today, is a true believer in that everything happens for a reason; there is a reason I went through all that I did. I've been involved in a lot of things that I am not proud of but that have shaped me into who I am today. I've been to the penitentiary, I've seen it all, and I have done it all. It is my mistakes that I vowed to never make again, I set goals for myself, plans, and today I am achieving those goals through education, self-motivation, using the skills I always had and turning them into something positive. Taking my passion and pursuing the professional culinary arts field has led to my goals and dreams. I have found something I love and am extremely good at. I've been told by many instructors I am a natural in the kitchen. It feels good to hear compliments like 'Nathan you should open an aboriginal restaurant, set yourself apart from others and do what you love and have a passion for'. So it is the reason I am enrolled in business administration and to date being here I have won numerous awards - bursary awards - that are able to help me in my financial state. People always ask me why I am enrolled in business. I say, "well how am I supposed to own and run my own business if I don't have the experience"; that being said I have a lot of experience. I have run businesses since I was 16. Just not legal.

How I got out of that lifestyle

- I set goals for myself
- I had to lose and turn my back on any friends I had as a child
- Took what I saw and did and forgave myself
- Attended A.A
- FOUND MY CULTURE AND ROLE AS A YOUNG ABORIGINAL MAN
- Self-respect
- I forgave my mother and all those who hurt me
- Followed my dreams of cooking and obtained a two year diploma in culinary arts
- I am currently enrolled in a two year business program at red river to soon open up Winnipeg's first aboriginal restaurant

The main reason today that I am alive and here is mainly because of realizing and knowing that the life of crime gets you nowhere but a prison sentence or death. My culture also saved my life; I am a sun dancer who now lives a holistic lifestyle drug free, alcohol free. I will tell you a story of my first sun dance. I was told by a mentor of mine that we would be going to a camp for the day. When we got to the grounds it was a sight, an experience, the sound of the drum, that feeling of love that I have been searching for my whole life. I cannot really to this day describe what I felt being witness and first time experience of what our people have been doing for hundreds of years. It was phenomenal. That weekend truly was the start of a new life, and to this day I thank the man that brought me to that sun dance. For the first time in my life I felt home, it was home to me. My wife who always stood by my side through thick and thin are major reasons as well why I'm writing this. She is a real inspiration to our family; she really is a blessing to me and our family. I love her so much and am so grateful for her love and care for me, and the believing in me. Everyone no matter what, where you're from has the potential to get out. A majority of us have a CHOICE, IT ALL COMES DOWN TO CHOICE. I DON'T CARE WHO YOU ARE, OR WHAT YOU HAVE DONE, we all have a choice. We can choose to either continue that life or we can get out. Believe me the hardest thing I ever had to do was give up my friends who I have known all my life but I

chose that for myself and my family. And it has been the best thing I ever could have done for my children, because I have broken that circle of pain, it stops with me.

Also there needs to be more support for gang members getting out of prison, there needs to be an exit strategy. I always talk about an AA for gangs, call it gangs anonymous. Gang members I know have thought about it one way or another of how to get out. Is this life for me? Am I doing the right thing? We all have natural talents, we are all here for a reason, and they just need direction. I believe that some sort of program like gangs anonymous that is partly done with the help of ex-gang members can be a true help to those who want out. We understand all that they are going through. Not just gang members but society as a whole, individuals living unhealthily and in the life of crime. Everything is about routine, they just need to be shown that there is different routine, that they are believed in and they can be trusted. I am a young aboriginal man who really wants to help and there are many of us that will help one another in the ability of helping others just like us.