

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT: A PROBATION OFFICERS JOURNEY

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My story begins with my father, a Caribbean migrant who came to Britain the 1950's, he became a British soldier and later an engineer. My father was known as a man not to mess around with, and taught me at a young age to 'take no shit' and hit back as hard as possible. Growing up, my two older brothers and I generally had a lack of discipline outside of the home and were probably seen locally as a law unto ourselves. I had no problem with lying, fighting or stealing, and had a persuasion towards setting fire to things. I recall a number of fights at school, including once where I fought off two older boys with a broken bottle when I was about aged ten, and how my father was far from angry when he found out what I had done. We mainly lived in various parts of London mainly, in locations neither affluent nor impoverished. Due to our family moving around I attended three different schools prior to the age of 11, which I think affected my social skills and ability to form relationships.

By the time I reached secondary school I had an emerging problem with anger and a growing disrespect for authority. The bullies avoided me because of this, my "mad dad" and my then role model of an oldest brother, a high school drop-out and a suspected drug dealer, who was fast on his way to a lifelong addiction with crack-cocaine. My life was still relatively normal, but slowly the importance of gaining an education tended to come in the way of mixing with friends who were generally involved in truancy, stealing, vandalism or drugs. We hung around on some of the most notorious housing estates on our side of London, where good was bad and bad was good. By the time I left school I had graduated in urban survival and was loosely affiliated to various groups of individuals, what probably could be described as gangs. Unfortunately, the writing was on the wall, and in the early 1990's at age 16, I was convicted for Grievous Bodily Harm with Intent and sent to prison, a significant occurrence in early my life. The offence was an avoidable and regrettable attack on another man, co-ordinated and led by my oldest brother who subsequently went on the run for many years to avoid prosecution. Up until the point of sentence I never actually realised how serious my offending had been, or how serious the consequences could be.

I recall my first journey to a Young Offenders Institution in the police 'sweat box', I was tearful and worried about what would happen to me in prison. Three weeks later I was back at Court and although I hoped and prayed that I would not return to prison, I was sentenced to twelve months custody. This time I had a different feeling on the way to prison. I was officially a criminal and would just have to get on with it. There was no possibility for rehabilitation in placing me in such an environment, and although prison was a punishment it didn't reduce or increase my propensity for criminality either. However, I did find quite a few of the prison officers helpful and generally inclined to have a chat and a laugh, particularly those that worked in the gym and encouraged good physical health. I met a lot of people I knew from the streets, including an older friend who worked in the prison grounds and helped me to start a business selling cigarettes and tobacco to prisoners on my wing. This created problems in itself and due to being involved in the bullying of those that couldn't pay their debts, I was punished with a period in segregation and then moved to another prison. I kept my head down this time around and I spent a lot of my time working in the kitchen, reading and reflecting on my life and the avoidable events that had preceded my current situation. All I really learnt from the whole experience was that I could hold my own in the harshest of environments I'd probably ever live in, where I made friends amongst murderers, robbers, drug smugglers, gang members and terrorists, to name a few. From what I witnessed, this was not the same experience for all prisoners, as there were those that were intimidated, abused and beaten due having physical or mental weakness, for falling foul of certain individuals that were better avoided, or for being 'grasses' or suspected sex offenders.

After being released I was very bitter that I had destroyed my life chances and found myself far behind my friends of a similar age. I attended two or three appointments with the local Youth Offending Team (YOT) which ensured I had accommodation and secured me a place on a vocational course which I soon dropped out of, but they offered little in terms of support, guidance or encouraging ambition. The next few years were a blur and I became increasingly confident in my belief that I had no future. Looking back, I was living on the fringe of society, and in large cities like London this is where the various fraternities and underworlds fester and collide. I still counted drop-outs, thieves, fraudsters, drug users, drug dealers and other drop-outs amongst my friends, and I was still loosely affiliated to

various gangs, all of whom which I socialised with on a regular basis, although I rarely engaged in offending behaviour. It's not surprising that being stopped and searched by the police was a regular occurrence, usually with a degree of intimidation or roughing-up thrown in for good measure, and occasionally arrested and later released without charge. Although I was not happy with my life I had no inclination to change as I honestly did not believe I could, mainly because I felt I was nothing more than an ex-prisoner with a few meaningless qualifications. There were times I believed that I could do better and make something of my life. I just didn't know how I was going to do it or who could help me. I doubt anyone really chooses to live that way, and in my case I felt I was a victim of circumstance with the belief I had no power to change my situation and so I just sat back and got on with it.

So what changed me? When I was in my late teens I was the victim of a stabbing and that started the ball of change rolling. My attacker was a man who retaliated with a knife after I stopped him from accosting and abusing a woman, which was a situation I came across by chance on my way home one evening. As I lay in the hospital bed I wondered what people would have said about me if the knife had been a few fatal millimetres in the other direction. My wanting those close to me to be able to genuinely say good things about me is what prompted my change. I started by cutting off nearly everyone I knew and every place I visited. It wasn't easy and I constantly questioned if I was doing the right thing, but I knew it was necessary to become a better person and find a purpose in life. Thankfully I had a few people that helped me keep focused, some which I am still in contact with today. This included a childhood friend who knocked at my door one day after over five years living abroad; an old school classmate who by chance happened to be on my university course; a neighbour that had such a positive perspective on life, despite his influential reputation and connection to the Jamaican underworld; and a former prisoner who was on his way to becoming a successful businessman and community leader; and most importantly my father, who became a steadfast source of support and I learned to listen to his advice.

On trying to find employment I found it wasn't as hard as I thought, and while I put myself through college, I held down jobs ranging from cleaning to local factories. In the mid 1990's I entered University and I had a firm belief that this opportunity would open up my future. At some point during this period I decided I wanted to help people to stop offending and to

improve their life chances and quality of life, because I knew it was possible. Along with my own progress, I kept in mind the stories of my first YOT Officer and my first University lecturer who had both previously been in prison; which was proof that I could achieve something too. I graduated with my first degree in the late 1990's which was my first real achievement, and other educational achievements followed. However, it was not plain sailing and I recall my upset when a social services agency retracted a job offer because of my criminal record and on another occasion after being rejected for a social work course, and also following the hundreds of job applications that just seemed to disappear after posting. I didn't give up hope and after my mother found an advert for a charity in need of volunteers, I began mentoring youths and providing resettlement support to prisoners. This led to employment as a hostel support worker with another agency and in the early 2000's I joined the probation service and trained as a probation officer, which is where I've been ever since.

Like many, I have travelled a long, lonely and difficult journey, and at times I feel I am still held accountable for my past that took place a lifetime ago. I think I'd like to become a teacher, social worker or lecturer in criminal justice, and although I don't know whether my criminal record will allow it, these are still further goals I will pursue. Professionally and personally, I have found there are factors preventing the way forward in terms of the successful rehabilitation of offenders, including the labels of 'ex-offender' and 'ex-prisoner' that discriminates and precludes many from prominent positions, and cruelly follows even the most reformed of citizens to their graves. I accept this reality and although I do not know where my future will lead, I am just happy to have come this far. I have never referred to myself as an 'ex-offender' as the negative connotations are too damaging and it is not how I view myself. I have generally hidden my past from my friends, colleagues and all that I meet, as I don't want to be pitied, vilified or treated with contempt for something I did as a child, over 20 years ago. As with many others, I was only an offender only at the point of committing the offending act, and thereafter I stepped through the gate of rehabilitation and change that was open to me. Unfortunately, not everybody will agree with this, but I know that my journey is the proof that past behaviour is not always the best predictor of future behaviour. I believe that successful rehabilitation requires more focus on positive accounts from those that have turned their lives around, alongside their assistance in

devising strategies for change, because how else are rehabilitation workers, justice professionals and academics to understand how people that do wrong do right. I believe that alongside the professional knowledge base, it is important for criminal justice workers to understand the reality of the lived experiences that offenders go through and what it's like to live on the other side of the probation desk or prison door.

It is only because of making the decision to change many years ago that I can now be proud of the achievements I have made. This includes the qualifications I thought I'd never have, BA (Hons) Sociology, BA (Hons) Criminal Justice, and MA Criminology. I have been a mentor, a resettlement worker, a hostel support worker, and with probation I am qualified and an experienced probation officer, I've trained probation staff and I've managed probation teams. I believe I have been successful and committed in working with offenders as a result of my training, knowledge and experience, but also due to my experiences in being in the system and then stepping far away from it. On becoming a probation officer a very elderly and dear family friend took me aside and told me to never be ashamed of my past as it is a part of my identity, and to be proud of the progress I have made and the person I have become. I wholly regret many of the decisions I made in my teenage years, but I learned a long time ago that I cannot turn back time and so must keep looking forward rather than back. Now in my late thirties, and a husband and a father, I look at my children as the fruits of my progress and I am thankful I can be a positive and law-abiding role model to them too.