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When you see an article about a twenty-something being convicted of a homicide, what is the first thing you think of? Does the word “murderer” cross your mind? Or “villain?” Do you write off this person as a waste of human life?

My name is Christopher Blackwell. I am forty-one years old and currently serving a forty-five-year prison sentence for taking another human’s life in a drug-related robbery. But I am not one-dimensional. I should not be reduced to a single noun based on something I did two decades ago, because before I was the person who took someone’s life, I was a kid who grew up in poverty, had no one to look up to aside from gang members and drug dealers, was ignored and written off by people meant to help shape me, and was abused by systems meant to rehabilitate me. Sure, I’m the villain in some stories, but that doesn’t mean I’m not the victim in others. As an adult, I have fought hard to turn myself into someone who can contribute positively to society; but as a kid, I barely had a chance. There are several incarcerated individuals inside prison walls who have faced the same odds and taken the same journey. Moving forward, I would like to see a path for youths in difficult circumstances that is easier—and more beneficial—than the one I was put on.

I was first incarcerated at the age of twelve. It started with a couple of low-level assaults, then a drug charge, and shortly after that, my first felony, which came with a fifty-two-week sentence. At the time, fifty-two weeks seemed like a lifetime. Now, however, after decades spent behind these towering walls and razor wire fences, a year seems like nothing more than a blip in time.

I will never forget the feeling of sitting in the back of that police car at age thirteen. I had just been in a violent car crash after eluding the police in a stolen car while trying to drive a stick shift for the first time. Initially, I was scared, and fighting to hold back the tears that were resting in the corners of my eyes. Handcuffed—the metal bracelets cutting into my young, thin wrists—I wiggled, looking to find a more comfortable position. I watched the cops walk around the wreckage that used to be a functioning car. I knew one thing: I was in a lot of trouble. I had stolen a car with two friends, taken the police on a thirty-minute chase, and crashed into the front of a thick concrete bank. Somehow, despite recklessly racing through residential streets and highways, no one was seriously hurt.

Less than a month later, on my fourteenth birthday, my lawyer pressured me to take a deal in which the judge gave me a fifty-two-week sentence in the juvenile system. I was sent to an institution named Echo Glenn. Previously, I had never done more than a week or two in juvenile detention.

I was scared. I was being sent to a juvenile *prison* for the first time, and I had no clue what to expect. All I could think about was having to fight everyone to stop myself from becoming a victim, and my mind was racing with all the ways that could be possible. I expected it to be no different than my neighborhood in that way, but at least at home, I had all my friends. Now, I was going to be alone.

As it turned out, all my fears about being incarcerated were wrong. Echo Glenn was not scary. It was like a co-ed summer camp with a swimming pool and special activities like photography class and woodshop. However, what was missing were classes and counseling that young justice-involved individuals need to address the behaviors that led us to being incarcerated at such a young age. Upon my release, I was no longer fearful of being incarcerated and had learned nothing about how to be a "better" kid and community member. I was taught nothing about accountability or how to be responsible for the harm I caused in my community. I needed guidance, not just a break from the reality of where I lived. I needed more of an

understanding of the harm I was causing if I was going to stop living like that, but no one on the outside or at Echo Glenn had ever bothered to invest that kind of time in me. I had no structure or direction, at least not beneficial ones.

The one positive influence in my life, my mom, was forced to work long hours to pay the bills, keep clothes on my back, and put food on the table. This left me in the company of family friends—all of whom drank and did drugs—and to roam the streets as I pleased.

I grew up in the early 1990s, and rap music was leading the way for a new style of artist who exposed the travesties of impoverished and over-policed communities. Artists like NWA were changing what it meant to be from communities like mine. No longer did we have to be ashamed; it was cool to be from a tough area and people feared you as if you wore a badge of honor for surviving such a difficult environment. Middle-class kids started emulating the way we dressed and talked. Those kids came from low-crime, comfortable neighborhoods and had no clue what the words meant or what it felt like to be shot at on their own block. At that time, my neighborhood, the Hilltop area of Tacoma, Washington, was one of the most dangerous areas in the country. Surviving it took a special set of skills, one that required the willingness to use violence, or the threat of it, to protect oneself. The music fueled us and gave us a blueprint for how to thrive within our environment. Listening to rap was one thing, but we believed we had to live it, and we did by glorifying everything they talked about doing as if it were scriptures from the Bible itself. Rap was our scripture.

After those fifty-two weeks in the juvenile prison, I had fallen quite far behind in school. Struggling to keep up, I looked for ways to escape that environment, as well. I hated feeling like the dumbest kid in the room. I started skipping school—or getting suspended and expelled from one school after another—so I could hang out with older kids in my neighborhood, most of whom were gang members, drug dealers, or both. I

had aspirations to be one of the latter. When you grow up in rough neighborhoods, it's the drug dealers who usually have time for you. Plus, I was captivated by the way they carried themselves. Everyone looked up to them and no one wanted to fuck with them. I longed for that type of respect. At least, that's what I thought was respect at the time. I later came to understand that those people were feared, not respected; true respect is earned, not taken through intimidation.

My life started to go downhill fast after my release from that juvenile prison. I began smoking weed and drinking anytime I could afford to, and even when I couldn't. This was mostly accomplished by stealing and doing other nefarious activities, like running drugs for older people in the community. It was easy to take advantage of kids like us by simply offering a little pocket cash. Everywhere you looked in my neighborhood, you could see traces of drugs—the crack epidemic was in full swing—so making a couple drops to obtain extra cash seemed like a no-brainer and hardly a big deal. This was especially true when you were striving to obtain the brand new Jordans your single parent couldn't afford, or shoes you'd later have to possibly defend with your life. If you couldn't find a way to earn them, your next best option was to take them from someone who had them.

But these activities came with a cost. The deeper I got into the criminal lifestyle, the worse I became. My principles and morals were being shaped in exceptionally dangerous ways. They were not being developed into the ways of a successful and productive member of society, but in the ways and abilities to basically survive a war zone, because that's where I lived: a war zone.

In my neighborhood, homes had plexiglass on their windows in hopes of stopping stray bullets from drive-by shootings, or random shootouts between rival gang members. Most of my friends and I had seen a dead body by the age of eleven, and everyone we knew had been shot, or at least shot at, during their teenage years. The list of traumatic experiences

continued to no real end. Trauma was all we knew; the problem was, we thought it was just everyday life.

In the eighth grade, I was done pretending I had a shot at being successful in school. Between all my trips to juvenile facilities and a general lack of motivation, I was so far behind, it didn't seem worth it. I never felt like I was receiving the support I needed from teachers, and honestly, I wouldn't have put in the effort if they tried. My home was in the streets and my mentors were the men whom I respected and looked up to: the most feared individuals in my community. I began acting out in class to divert attention from the fact I struggled to read or understand anything the teacher was talking about. I found it easier to put attention on the teacher by making fun of them—getting my classmates to laugh was my only goal. If they were laughing at the teacher, they wouldn't have time to laugh at me for being behind.

It wasn't long before my behavior had me expelled from every school in Tacoma and the surrounding areas. I was forced into special needs education, classes that only connected me to other kids who were on the same path I was on. After being kicked out of regular schools and specialized classes, I was forced into alternative schools, a last-ditch effort by my mom and probation officers. Alternative schools were horrible environments for kids. The teachers only cared about one thing—managing our behavior—and nothing more. I learned nothing and only attended the school to sell drugs and meet girls, all of whom were part of the same lifestyle as me. Many of us later reconnected in the adult prison system for our "class reunion." However, at this class reunion, we weren't wearing fancy suits and discussing our homes, jobs, and families; we were talking about the friends who lost their lives to drugs and violence and the decades in prison sentences we had received for the damage we'd caused in our communities.

When I was around fifteen years old, I was done with school completely. I walked out and never looked back. My mom tried to get me to go back

and refocus, but that simply wasn't possible. I was more than she could handle at that age. She couldn't force me to do something I refused to do.

By the age of eighteen, I had nine felonies on my record, I had been to more juvenile facilities than I could remember—each worse than that first one I experienced at twelve years old—and I had spent around four years of my youth incarcerated. Back then, I thought this was something to be proud of. I was praised by older homies in my community for "putting in work," as they called it, and for not snitching when I got caught. I was being groomed. My charges included possession of guns, robbing houses, assault, selling drugs, and on and on.

Spending so much time within juvenile facilities changed the way I saw the world and my role within it, especially when it came to authority and those in charge. The juvenile system is meant to be constructed in a way to help the youth who enter it rehabilitate by becoming productive members of society. Yet, the system I spent all those years in only worked to punish and abuse me. It stripped me of the feeling that I belonged in regular society.

We were treated like animals in a kennel—hogtied, handcuffed, strip-searched, sexually molested, and manhandled by men the size of NFL linebackers. To be fair, we were disruptive and angry. We hated authority, but we were children and should have been treated as such. These actions against us allowed for our deep-seated hate of authority figures to fester and grow like decay in a rotting tooth, solidifying the feelings we'd had and been shown our whole lives. Police beat our communities, teachers never cared about our education, and now staff in juvenile facilities took full advantage of us by abusing us as well. Trusting authority or anyone that wasn't from my community was off the table for me; they were the enemy, and I felt that deep down in my soul.

The juvenile system was a place that made me believe I had little-to-no potential and that I would never have a place in the world outside of the environment I was from: "the ghetto." I embraced that and decided I would survive and thrive by any means necessary, a dangerous way for a child to

think. When you start living to survive—as opposed to living to thrive as a productive member of society—your outlook on how you interact in society becomes very different.

And if the lack of ability to help juveniles rehabilitate wasn't damaging enough, as kids we were placed in positions to make decisions that would affect the rest of our lives. Often this happened without the oversight of a parent or guardian to protect us. Many of us were forced to make choices in courtrooms that would later have severe impacts on our lives as we inevitably ventured through the adult courts.

In Washington State, juvenile convictions are automatically used against you in adult courts, which is the case in eight other states across the United States. As a child, you don't understand what this means. I took deals for felonies countless times because I was told by my assigned lawyer that it was in my so-called "best interest." I could do a couple months with the plea deal or risk going to trial and getting a much longer sentence. With a kid, this is like asking them if they want ice cream or fish. Of course, a child will always choose ice cream. And when they offered a deal to accept a felony charge, I didn't hear anything but, "you go home faster if you sign this paper." This later showed me that the juvenile system was not there to help me change my negative and harmful behaviors but was in place to stack charges against me for when I would eventually enter the adult system.

With the scientific evidence we now have around brain science for young adults under the age of twenty-five, it is clear that children do not have the ability to understand decisions that hold such an impact on the rest of their lives. Furthermore, constitutional due process rights, such as appealing convictions and having jury trials, are withheld from youths because the juvenile system claims to focus on rehabilitation and not punishment.

These systems failed me and hundreds of thousands of individuals like me in impoverished communities around the United States. Yes, we placed ourselves in those situations by causing harm to our communities, and

accountability is important on our end as well. However, we were placed in those systems because we needed help. We came from broken homes and communities that were destroyed by drugs and violence. We didn't choose to be raised in broken communities that our government had failed, or worse, had oppressed. Our lives were thrown away before they had even begun. Yet, the system asks not for accountability for the harm we caused, but only for the responsibility to serve our decades of sentences doled out by the courts.

What was and is needed for the reversal of these broken systems is the interjection of individuals who are willing to support our youth. If we help youth build confidence and self-esteem in places like school, they will see that they can succeed in these areas, and it will become easier to function within them. If the only person who shows interest in them is a gang member or drug dealer, well, that's what they'll become. Our communities need the investment of individuals who want to watch a child reach their full potential. Kids need structure and people who will hold them accountable in a constructive way, not through punishment and placing them in a cell to be isolated from their families, communities, and peers.

Over the years, I have often tried to pinpoint the one thing that failed me—a kid too young to know right from wrong, because no one was there to teach it to me—but I now know there were many factors that led me to my current situation. First and foremost was my choice to harm others, there is no doubt about that. But I also know other factors played a role: the education system; the richest governments in the world that refused to support my single-parent household; the juvenile prison system which should be interested in rehabilitation, but is actually only interested in punishment; the failed court system; and above all, the fact that there were people involved in these systems who chose not to take an interest in my life when I was a child and in my most vulnerable phase of life.

Again, I must be accountable for my actions; that cannot be emphasized enough. But we also must remember how easily children and young adults

are influenced; this impressionability is why we need the right people influencing youth and helping shape and develop their minds into healthy people who add more to their community than they take.

We have some decisions to make as a society: Do we want a system that helps transform our culture and works to change people by understanding the harmful structures that lead them to cause harm, or do we want an abusive system that focuses on punishment and retribution, which is a system that will continue to release people worse off than when they entered it? These are our choices, and when we say we want a safer society, it shouldn't be hard to see which choice is the right one. Had I been given structure and guidance instead of just a break from my destructive and impoverished environment, the road I took as a young person may have ended up somewhere much better than the road to prison, and a life may have even been saved.