

The Door

I'm 17 years old and two years into a life sentence. My "Cellie" (cellmate) and I are eating my last meal as a Juvenile in the Minors Unit at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Tucson Arizona. In a couple of hours at the stroke of midnight, I will be removed from my cell and escorted through the security door that separates the boys from the men. I'm not sure what to expect only that I am now 18 and considered an adult and now I have to learn how to survive as a fish in a sea full of sharks.

11:50 p.m. we hear the C.O.'s keys in the door, I stand up, give my cellmate a half hug chest bump and say, "see you around, and walk out." I am removed from my cell and told to sit in the day room while we wait for the transfer orders to come through the radio. I'm scared to death but I can't show it. Fear is a sign of weakness and the last thing I need to be seen as is weak. 11:58 p.m. the order comes and I grab a laundry cart containing my belongings and head for the doors. The first door pops open and I push my laundry cart into the Sally Port, the door slams behind me and now only one door remains between me and my fate. One door is about to change my entire life. No Happy birthday song, no congratulations you are now an adult, no fanfare what-so-ever. Just me and the unknown. This could be my last night on earth for all I know. The second door pops open, I take a deep breath and push my life through the door.

It's May but the night air is cool, there isn't a cloud in the sky and I look up and see the stars. I haven't seen the stars in years. The guards aren't saying a word and all I can hear are the wheels of the laundry cart rolling across the walkway. I think the guards are quiet because they don't know what awaits me either. My new "Cellie" could be just some guy doing time for drugs or breaking and entering or he could be a sexual predator. It's 1990 and we haven't heard of P.R.E.A. (the Prison Rape Elimination Act) in Arizona yet so the guards are just trying to pretend that it's business as usual which means that my fate isn't any of their business until it becomes a problem, for them.

I get to the door of my "new home" and the guard unlocks the door. I see a man sit up in his bunk with an angry look on his face. He probably didn't know he was getting a "Cellie" in the middle of the night. He's older than me, maybe in his 40's with long salt and pepper hair. He's about my size but skinnier than I am. I think I can take him if I have to. I unload my property from the laundry cart and walk in the cell, the door closes and locks behind me. We stare at each other for a second and I say, "My name is Manny." He looks back at me and says, "They call me Flaco (Skinny), you want a cigarette?" "Nah man, I'm okay." I replied. He kind of chuckles a little bit and says, "Don't worry man it's just a smoke." I take the cigarette and light it up never taking my eyes off of Flaco, then he asks, "So what are you in for?" We spend the next few hours asking each other questions and trying to get a feel for our situation.

See, I could be some angry kid with issues wanting my reputation to proceed me so Flaco has to keep an eye on me before I use him as an example to the rest of the men on why I shouldn't be messed with and I have to make sure that Flaco isn't going to try and rape me or play the, "I gave you a cigarette now you give me something before I sell you on the yard" game. It takes a few hours but we are comfortable enough with each other for now to call it a night and get some sleep. Flaco ended up just being a guy who didn't want any trouble where he slept and so was I so the time we bunked together wasn't so bad, we just tried to make the best of it and do our time.

That wasn't the first Traumatic experience I had while I was in prison nor would it be the last. There was the everyday "Watch your back at ALL times" trauma, and the exhausting mind games other prisoners and guards try to play that you have to stay on top of and keep your wits about you so you don't get caught owing someone something. On top of that was the knowledge that not everyone serving time was completely sane. Some of these guys really belonged in a mental facility not in a prison and you really needed to keep your eyes on them because they could just "flip out" for no good

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reason. Then there's the depression, the loneliness and never really being able to be comfortable and relax. Add to that the stabbings, the killings, and people who would just drop dead from heart attacks, it's a lot to have to absorb and deal with.

Louis L Reed, CADAC, CAC in his Huffington post article; Prison Traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD Remixed. Said, "*When you've lived an experience you can become the experience you've lived.*" I didn't realize how true that was until I was released. I went into prison as a 15 year old boy and I was released as a 35 year old man. I didn't sleep a full night in my first two weeks of freedom. Every snap, crackle and pop of the house resting and adjusting to the outside evening temperature had me wide awake, inspecting every room, looking out every window with a flash light making sure there wasn't anyone outside. My family and friends tried to feed me all these foods I hadn't tasted in years and they all loaded my plate as if I were a football linebacker. I couldn't eat that much because 20 years of prison trays trained me to eat small meals and eat them fast.

I have a hard time in crowds, especially if someone accidentally bumps me from behind. In restaurants I am most comfortable if I can sit with my back to a wall. Until just recently I have carried a knife with me everywhere I've gone just in case I have to defend myself. I say until just recently because I got involved in a situation that caused me to actually pull my knife from its sheath and my body just snapped into survival mode. If it wasn't for my ex-wife I would be sitting in prison right now with a new Murder charge. The knowledge of what I almost did that night has made me too scared to carry a knife – my 20 years of survival training makes me untrustworthy with any weapon and I refuse to allow myself to be in any type of situation like that again. I hated every second of prison and do not want to go back. I wouldn't wish prison on an enemy. So I have to manage my freedom constantly. It's not easy because more often than not I have to be more civil than civilians and that can get exhausting at times. I'm a plague to most civilians, a criminal that can't be trusted, a monster forever feared without a second thought. That is a hard load to bear sometimes.

I just recently put up a post on my Facebook page speaking about P.T.S.D. and how former system involved people (what you call an ex-con) can have it too. Someone I know from prison who is also now trying to manage his freedom responded with, "I still have prison nightmares at least twice a week." It makes me wonder how many other formerly system involved people are struggling with the aftermath of prison trauma. How many others have been released from prison only to be re-arrested because something or someone triggered a P.T.S.D. episode and they didn't know how to handle it? How many other system involved people struggle with depression because even though they want to be productive members of society they can't because every time they place a check mark in a little box that asks, "Have you ever been convicted of a crime?" they are automatically dismissed as an untrustworthy criminal? How many formerly incarcerated people are out there self-medicating because they aren't even aware of the trauma all they know is that they feel like they don't fit in and there is no one to talk about it with. Their family can't understand, society doesn't understand.

I thank God for my ex-wife. I put her through so much stress and pain because I have a hard time living in a civilian world with a tainted prison mentality. I remember telling my step-daughter before I was released, "don't sneak up behind me, don't jump on my back, don't try to tickle me, you might scare me and I will end up hurting you by accident." She's my step-daughter by the way, but in my family we don't believe in "steps" or "halves" so she's my daughter.

One day she opened the door to leave our hallway bathroom just as I was passing through the hall. I startled her and she screamed, I turned, swung and by the grace of God was able to pull my punch

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before knocking her out. All because of 20 years of prison survival training. She cried, I cried, we hugged and I told her how sorry I was and that she shouldn't have snuck up behind me. Through sobs she said, "I didn't I just opened the door!"

And my ex-wife, wow. The woman who held me as when I cried out of frustration. The woman who put up with my Bruce Banner / Incredible Hulk explosive emotional changes for the littlest things. The woman who watched me stumble all over the house in a drunken rage, cussing her out until I finally pour myself into bed and pass out. Why? Because she did something to offend me? No, because alcohol helps me sleep without being paranoid over every sound but too much alcohol helps loosen prison memories that are hard to live with and I end up screaming at recollections of the past.

Why am I sharing this with you? Because the system is broken and a broken system does nothing but break people and if we don't do something to change that it's going to get worse! Formerly incarcerated people are beginning to outnumber the civilians and you are not ready for that. How do we fix the system? You don't! Demolish it and start fresh, think outside the box. Listen to the formerly incarcerated and the system involved and hear their messages of how the system is flawed. I for one can tell you that you DO NOT take a 15 year old emotionally unstable child and throw him into an emotionally unstable warzone with grown men for 20 years where the Trauma is even worse, where life and death are an everyday reality that has to be focused on at all times in order to survive and just expect him to reenter a society that sees him as nothing more than a pseudo-citizen and expect everything to be okay. Think about that for a minute? Does that even make sense to you? –Manny Mejias (2016)

Link to Huffington post article; Prison Traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD Remixed.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/prison-traumatic-stress-disorder-pstd-remixed_us_57bc44e1e4b07d22cc399a2a