

DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

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My first offence was a robbery on a shop in York in 1983 when I was 20 years-old where I threatened a shop-keeper with a seven inch dagger. Then shortly after, while on bail, myself and another lad called John committed another robbery in Darlington. This time someone was hurt resulting in a second charge of 'wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm' after someone was stabbed - not by me - but with my knife. Even though it wasn't me who actually made the blow, the knife belonged to me and was in my possession just before it happened resulting in a serious crime being committed.

January 19, 1984, I was in the dock at Teesside Crown Court for sentencing with my co-accused John standing before Judge Angus Stroyne. There was no jury trial because we were pleading guilty. I was sentenced to thirty months youth custody and John got six years imprisonment. We were both then sent to Durham Prison.

After ten months in this notorious establishment, my parole answer arrived. The term 'Jam Roll' is English prison slang for parole where prisoners are released into the community to serve the remainder of their sentence. One day while lying on my bed, a sheet of paper suddenly slid underneath my door which I recognised by the logo at the top of the page as being from the Home Office. I knew it was my parole answer, so bracing myself for bad news, I anxiously read down the page until I saw the words: 'A panel of the parole board considered your case on 19 August 1984 and found you suitable for release on parole licence from 4 September 1984'.

Being released is an amazing experience, but my euphoria was short lived as once again I became restless and bored with everything in my life. I was continually drifting, unsure what to do with my life. I was drinking too much and being erratic. My parole licence was supposed to last for ten months. Unfortunately, my probation officer was concerned about myself and the safety of others, so he contacted the Home Office. After only six months, the Home Office recalled me back to prison to serve another four months.

The next time I used a knife on someone was ten years later when I left someone bleeding to death in the middle of a pub. Even now I can't comprehend what planet I was on at that time and still find it difficult to talk about. But though I had always been in possession of knives - it was that last incident when reality hit me like a sledgehammer of just how serious things had become. I realized that this man could have died. How many lives could that have ruined? What a thoughtless act!

This message was rammed home even further by the life-sentence prisoners I spent most of my prison time with. Most of them had committed the exact same act of mindless violence as I had, but they had not been so lucky. I was released after two-and-a-half-years, whereas most of them had already spent an average of fifteen years inside. They all had the same thing in common in that as well as ruining their own lives; many other lives had also been ruined forever. Some had missed out on their children growing up and their marriages had ended.

Before this sentence, I was still struggling with alcohol and life in general - going through some difficult times. I had made friends with a couple in Boosbeck, East Cleveland called Brian and his girlfriend Dawn. She had taken a shine to me and would make advances towards me when Brian wasn't looking. Naturally, I was flattered by the attention, but wasn't sure what to do. I was really uncomfortable about the whole thing. One night she had fallen out with Brian and so approached me as a seemingly single person. We spent the night together, but it transpired that she had done this simply to repay him after their bust-up. I was a marked man now. Things escalated when one night Brian threatened me, so while strung out on *Seroxat* anti-depressants and alcohol - as well as being paranoid and angry, something inside of me just snapped. I remember feeling that there was no other way out of this situation, but to confront this using violence. I had never had such strong feelings of hopelessness before. In my mind, there just seemed to be no other way.

One night, I decided to go and find Brian at the pub where I knew he would be. I also remember feeling an incredibly deep sadness that I wouldn't be seeing my mother and uncle for a while as I went and got two knives from the kitchen draw. I headed into the small village

of Boosbeck and walked into Brian's local pub, *The Station Hotel*, which was very busy, yet we both immediately made eye contact as soon I walked in.

I shouted at him while pulling out both knives from my waist-band. Then while thrusting one blade into his chest, I stuck the other in his liver and then into his stomach. He somehow managed to pick up a small table and throw it at me but it didn't hit me. Several of the tavern regulars grabbed me trying to prise my fingers open from the vice-like grip I had on both knives while Brian lay on the floor behind me bleeding heavily.

Years later, the landlady at the time told me she and some others had dragged him through the back and used tee-shirts and whatever they could to try and stop the bleeding. I hadn't a care in the world that night. As the other customers wrestled to get the knives from me, I eventually opened my hands to their relief, and they took the knives and put them behind the bar. I was resisting letting them have the knives in case one of them decided to use them on me. Not one of them tried to assault me in any way. But the thing that seems so bizarre to me, now, is that straight after stabbing Brian, I went back to the bar and after handing over the knives, carried on drinking my pint of lager as though nothing had happened. I even asked someone for a cigarette which I lit up and slowly puffed away on.

I then engaged some of the customers in ordinary conversation. Something inside of me was relieved, yet very very disturbed. What had possessed me to do this? Why didn't I just stay away from these places and let the dust settle? Was I secretly provoking the situation? Or was I an innocent caught up in it all?

Six months later on 15 December 1995, the day of sentencing had arrived. I wanted to take every opportunity to save myself from a lengthy stretch, so one day, I took advice from a fellow prisoner who suggested I write a letter to the judge to offer my own mitigating circumstances. Using my best hand writing, I filled two sides of A4 paper explaining in depth, how I had allowed myself to get caught up in a bad situation and how I had allowed my emotions to get the better of me.

I explained how I intended to use my time in prison to educate myself as a way of opening doors to a better future. Just before sentence was passed, the usher passed my letter to the judge and as he respectfully read every word to himself, the courtroom fell silent. After reading it, he looked across to me and told me to stand up. He then said these words, most of which are verbatim. But because of it being so long ago, some are words 'to the effect' of his summing up:

You have explained to me your actions today better than anyone else has been able to in this court. You said, you allowed your emotions to get the better of you and that is what you did. I commend you on your attempt to educate yourself while being on remand and with the sentence I hand out today, you can use that time to study. I sentence you to five years.

As my sentence was passed, I felt as though the judge's words were very sincere. I now set my sights on achieving great things in the world of academia. I later learned that the judge was about to give me a much longer sentence had it not been for that letter. And it was then I really learned the power of the written word.

The Positive Influence of Convicts

The lifers in Acklington Prison helped me a lot by showing me where I could end up if I didn't get a grip. One of them joked one day that I had a big 'L' learner sign on my back ready to follow in their footsteps. But the very thought of it was just chilling. They saw me as someone who was heading the same way and needed to learn from their mistakes. Their calming influence rubbed off on me. A few were published authors and Open University graduates. Some were incredibly creative and I often used to wonder what could have become of them had these talents been channelled early in their lives.

It was their influence that made me decide to start freelance writing for magazines, which I did from my cell using an old typewriter. I also enquired about studying through an Open University course. I enrolled on a Social Sciences foundation course. Surprisingly I was granted parole on February 1998 and six months later, took up my place at Northumbria University where I spent the first two years studying for a degree in criminology. I never

imagined fourteen years later, my autobiography would be sitting in their library for other students to read. And as a result of the education I received in prison, in 2001, I graduated from Teesside University with a bachelor's degree in criminology. Then two years later, I gained a master's degree in Social Research Methods.

PhD Student

Now fourteen years since leaving prison, I'm a PhD student researching desistance and education, a published author and visiting lecturer. My Uncle Donald's passion for learning was infectious as it always had been when he first tried to help me study for a GCSE in law back in 1987. Indeed, other things have led me on to my path of learning. For example, there was the Durham prison officer, Mr. Coates who had put me on education classes in 1984, after I was sent back to my cell for refusing to sew mailbags, which led to my first ever qualification. Then there was the inspiring autobiography of a bank robber, turned journalist and postgraduate, John McVicar.

My mother who had attended college for years studying music, encouraged me to continue my studies I'd started in Durham prison, which made me take up a psychology 'O' level course at *Redcar College* in 1985. Then there were the lifers I had spent so much time with in prison who had a massive influence on me and my journey into prison education and writing.

But once I had reached university, it was ultimately Donald's influence, passion for learning, his endless knowledge, support and encouragement that drove me on to complete my degrees. I had finally discovered my route to desistance – not only from crime – but also from depression and alcoholism which were ultimately at the root of my criminal activity.