

Most of my life I grew up in the system, from foster homes, placements, and juvenile halls, to prison. If I wasn't in the system, I spent my time in the streets. I felt that the streets offered everything I didn't have: a family, a house, and an opportunity.

I was born in Gardena, California to an 18 year old father and a 17 year old mother. We were constantly on the move. By the time I was six years old, we lived in a number of gang-controlled communities in west LA, South Central, and Watts.

In 1997, my mother passed away at the age of 27 from AIDS, a virus she contracted after the cape. Before her death, I watched her slowly fall apart; she struggled to eat and got skinnier and skinnier. Regardless, she managed to try and give me the best life a single mother could provide. I loved my mom with all my heart and losing her was the greatest pain I've ever experienced. For the next two years, I was bounced around to different group homes in San Bernardino County. During that time, I had to fight and defend myself every time the moment arose. Eventually, one of my great aunts won custody over me from my father, who was released from prison around that time. That day my aunt gained legal guardianship and my father looked me in the eyes and said, "you aren't my son."

My aunt offered a life that any kid would want, but the time I spent living with her was plagued with trouble, from not doing chores to me fighting in school. I was filled with anger and confusion. Over the year, I was removed from her twice and sent back to the group home. The continuous cycle of being passed between different guardians was traumatic. It had me wondering, "What did I do? What's wrong with me? Why doesn't anyone want me? How does no one love or care about me?" I tried to be a kid without fear or abandonment. I was forced to grow up quickly, so I hardened myself.

By 2002, I moved to my last group home in the Altadena/Pasadena area. Seeing what happened to my mother made it easy for me to get involved with the gangs there. My hatred was deep and everything I held back over the years started to rise to the surface. I believed my peers in the streets were my family. Trying to gain respect and a name for myself caused me to be in and out of juvenile hall. As my reputation grew, so did the trouble and my crises. Eventually, it led me to receiving a life sentence at the age of 17. The severity of the sentence didn't register until I got to prison and witnessed the strife of this environment. Men are basically buried alive

here. During my stay at Pelican Bay State Prison, I encountered my dad whom I hadn't seen in twelve years. Every day I'd lament over the wrongs I've committed. I'm reminded constantly every time that I wake up that I'm paying for them with my life.

I've changed my ways and wanted to convey to others what I've neglected. Appreciate freedom, and please realize how one split-second act can ruin your life. In every moment, you have the ability to become great. Do not hold hate in your heart. If you ever feel down in the dumps, remember that you matter. Value your life!