

I'm free, but not for the last 24 years.

Going to prison at age 18 with a life sentence was a fear-filled experience. I was scared. I didn't know exactly who I was, where I fit in, what my identity would become, or whom I could trust. I asked God on numerous occasions to just end it all. I didn't belong there. Prison was not my home. But for 24 years prison was in fact, home. I fought with my mind on how to survive, heal, and hope for freedom and a dream of redemption.

On December 23, 2022, I was paroled from a life sentence and granted a second chance.

It has now been nearly four months since my release and once again I have entered a whole new world that is fear-filled, scary, and I still don't know who I am, where I fit in, what my identity will be, what I will become in life, and whom I can trust. I've asked God numerous times to show me the way. In my first few days in freedom I once again felt that I didn't belong here in society. It was strange to be in the presence of my family, to hug them, to have everyone staring at me. Everything was so new to me. I couldn't focus my eyes to even read a menu because there were just so many choices. Life had so many colors that it was blinding and gave me a headache and I felt panic. People either treated me like a human being with courtesy or they just didn't even care and saw right through me. I had this internal dialogue within my mind that everyone knew I was in prison and they could sense it, smell it, and fear it. I'm still indecisive when ordering my food because I need help. I don't know how to take agency and control over the freedom of choice that I now have. This is the new normal and it's still strange to wear real clothes other than prison blues. There's so much more that I've deleted in writing this there's just no way you'll read it all.

Adapting hasn't been as easy as the dreams I filled my mind with while incarcerated. And the biggest disappointment has been the lack of meaningful resources to assist those like myself that are reentering society. I still struggle with feeling alone, like no one understands, and isolation. But with the help of family and friends and those who have lived this same experience I am doing better and breaking out of these sabotaging ideations and believing in myself and journey.

One of those bright spots of support has been the West Coast Reentry Initiative. For years I have known of this little yet powerful lady named **[redacted for anonymity]** through transcribing braille for the past 15 years. While incarcerated she said to write to her, fill out some paperwork and the WCRI would assist me when in society with a computer, monitor, printer, Braille 2000 and Corel Draw software. I took the chance and did as she asked. I received a letter of confirmation a few months later and then it was just a matter of being paroled.

For the last couple of months, I have put the equipment provided and granted to me to use. Braille transcription has been my sole means of employment thus far as a subcontractor through a Braille Agency. I have applied for several other employment opportunities only to find myself turned away due to my criminal past as a teenager. Without this assistance I'd be lost, and I am so grateful for their support and willingness to help and to have corresponded with me those years ago when the hope of freedom was but a dream.

So, I write this in appreciation and recognition to honor, respect, and thank those individuals with the WCRI for their vision, goals, and fulfilled promises. Thank you.