

MY “TWENTY-TWOS”: MENTORING THE YOUNG MEN EMERGING COMMUNITY

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In this article, Colie Levar Long describes his life in prison during the COVID-19 pandemic, his burgeoning friendship with a young incarcerated person and his path to becoming a mentor for incarcerated youth. Drawing from history, social science research, and his personal experience, Long condemns the structural racism embedded in the criminal punishment system, and highlights the importance of rehabilitation and second chances.

As an incarcerated man who has spent over twenty-five years in prison, my irregular journey as a Young Men Emerging (YME) mentor started like any other day: waking up at 4:45 a.m., offering my morning prayer, banging out hundreds of push-ups, and most crucial of all, downing a cup of steaming hot coffee. Due to the global pandemic and its attendant COVID-19 protocols, I was locked down for twenty-three hours a day, prison officials having decided that solitary confinement was the best policy to ensure social distancing within this carceral space. So, for one hour a day, I was permitted to be outside my cell, usually submerged in the sight and sounds of men lost in the mind-numbing maelstrom of monotony: clamoring over the telephone, sharing and hearing the prison gossip of who’s snitching or not, and the occasional voiced concern about a loved one out there in the “free-world.” Usually, but not today. On this day, a sudden hush enveloped my housing unit. It could mean only one thing: new arrivals!

From my view on the top tier of my unit, I could easily see the new inmates entering the unit. All ten carried in their unwashed arms the scant belongings of personal hygiene kits, clean underclothes, and linen bedrolls. Seeing new faces coming into this carceral space had become quite a rarity because of Coronavirus quarantine restrictions. However, new people also bring a much-needed distraction for people already infected by the plague of despair. Unfortunately, it’s quite common for a person in prison to distract themselves from their miserable existence by focusing on the misery of other prisoners. As I watched the newly arrived residents search for a familiar face or find their way, an extremely disconcerting sight caught my gaze: other youth offenders on my unit greeting a young arrival.

The kid’s name was Lil’ Yo—well, that’s what all his little buddies called him—and immediately his presence snagged my attention. The kid had a big personality despite his diminutive stature. Though only four foot nine and weighing no more than a hundred and ten pounds, his voice was tall and heavy with the exuberance of youth. He had presence. I swear to God, this boy hit the ground running inside our

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little world of confinement. Other young guys in the unit knew of him in the streets, so Lil' Yo quickly acclimated to the noxious culture of prison life. The strong preying on the weak, not caring about the life of your fellow man, lost hope for a better future: he seemed to fit right in. That did not sit well with my soul.

Days went by and I tried to mind my business, yet the sight of this eighteen-year-old kid kept on tugging at my heartstrings. Maybe because I was the same age when I first entered the prison system. Maybe because, as a forty-three-year-old man, Lil' Yo could easily have been my son had I had an opportunity to father a child out there in society. More likely it was simply how young and small he looked inside these walls, amongst these fully grown men. I remember thinking to myself: "How can someone who barely meets the height requirement for certain rides at an amusement park be legally housed in the predatory environment of a correctional facility with fully developed adults?"

So I started speaking to him whenever our rec periods coincided, and quickly grasped how sharp he was. Intuitive, extremely perceptive, and endowed with a huge character inside his little body, Lil' Yo had the heart of a lion. But it was a heart scarred from early childhood trauma, I soon realized.

Lil' Yo was definitely a handful, and oddly enough, he seemed to take a liking to me for cussing him out for being a "dumb little you-know-what!" He quickly realized he could get a rise out of me by glorifying his past delinquent behavior, so he tried to impress me with his war stories. Honestly, for someone so young to have seen so much hurt, pain, and bloodshed already, I was impressed that he hadn't lost his mind out there in the world. However, any positive acknowledgment of his acts of survival in the streets Yo would have understood as validation for his criminal behavior, so I learned to be careful with my responses. Our verbal exchanges chastened me. Increasingly, I felt a sense of responsibility for Yo's plight.

One day Lil' Yo and I got into a heated argument over his lifestyle choices, and I ended up demanding that he tell me something he's good at besides breaking the law. The way he looked me in the eyes and told me, "I ain't good at nothing!" stabbed me in the heart. I walked back to my cell, locked the door, and cried so deeply I had to bite my towel so no one else would overhear my torment. I hated the so-called free world for neglecting that boy. What kind of a society is it that allows a beautiful, smart kid like Yo to conclude by the age of eighteen that he's not good at anything productive? The silent scream of my guilt echoed inside my head. I wondered: What can I do to correct the thinking errors that I, as well as my generation, perpetrated in the early 1990s during the so-called War on Drugs.

It broke my heart that Lil' Yo joined a prison population that's overwhelmingly filled with young, Black, and poorly educated men from the District of Columbia. The District's Department of Corrections (DOC) currently houses 1,038 people at the Central Detention Facility and 423 at the Correctional Treatment Facility.¹ Of all the incarcerated men, a whopping 82.8 percent are Black, 9.4 percent are White,

¹ DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, DOC POPULATION STATISTICS: AVERAGE DAILY POPULATION FOR OCTOBER 2016 THROUGH JUNE 2021, at 2 (2021), <https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/DOC%20Population%20Statistics%20%20Average%20Daily%20Population%20for%20October%202016%20through%20June%202021.pdf> [https://perma.cc/Q5BU-U2Q8].

6.3 percent are Hispanic, and 1.6 percent are either Asian, Native Americans, or of an undisclosed race.² Of the DOC population, the vast majority (at 41 percent) is aged between 21 and 30.³ Youth under 21 (like Lil’ Yo) are 5.4 percent of the incarcerated population.⁴ The striking racial disparity at the DOC doesn’t mirror the DC demography. As the 2020 DC census shows, Black or African American people represent 47 percent of the DC population but make up 86 percent of the people arrested, 90 percent of the people jailed, and 95 percent of the people in prison.⁵

Once known as “Chocolate City” for its overwhelming African American population (70 percent in the 1970s), in the past 50 years DC’s demography has changed rapidly under the pressure of rampant gentrification that always pushes away Black, Brown, and poor communities.⁶ Yet the two predominantly Black wards (7 and 8) are the neighborhoods with over 50 percent of the youths arrested in the District.⁷ Overall, DC is one of the most heavily policed cities in the United States, with police interactions disproportionately occurring in (you guessed it!) Wards 7 and 8 and with African American boys arrested at a rate of 133.9 per 1,000 youth—83 times greater than white boys and white girls.⁸ Of the approximately 11,600 stops conducted by the Maryland Police Department (MPD) from July 22 to August 18, 2019, African Americans accounted for 70 percent of persons stopped.⁹ The trends are similar nationally.¹⁰

Yet, noting the heavy policing and racial disparities in arrests is not meant to diminish our responsibility for our wrong choices and mistakes. Indeed, as individuals we are responsible for our decisions and actions. But doesn’t the responsibility lie elsewhere too? Various scholars have shown a clear connection between mass incarceration and the structural racism that shapes the violent social dynamics that have debilitated our families, communities, and mental health.¹¹

² DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, DC DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS FACTS AND FIGURES: JUNE 2021, at 12 (2021), <https://doc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doc/publication/attachments/DC%20Department%20of%20Corrections%20Facts%20and%20Figures%20June%202021.pdf> [https://perma.cc/Z6MY-5SXQ].

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ COUNCIL FOR COURT EXCELLENCE, D.C.’S JUSTICE SYSTEMS OVERVIEW 2020, at 2 (2020), http://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/publications/DCs_Justice_Systems_Overview_2020.pdf [https://perma.cc/39H5-LV3W].

⁶ David Rusk, *Goodbye to Chocolate City*, DC POLICY CENTER (July 20, 2017), <https://www.depolicycenter.org/publications/goodbye-to-chocolate-city/> [https://perma.cc/K9XN-PGF9].

⁷ PUBLIC WELFARE FOUNDATION, D.C.’S JUSTICE SYSTEMS: AN OVERVIEW, at 33 (2019), https://www.publicwelfare.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PWF_DCs-Justice-Systems-Overview.pdf [https://perma.cc/X7W7-QBFV].

⁸ *Id.*, at 33.

⁹ *Id.*, at 10.

¹⁰ Wendy Sawyer, *Visualizing the racial disparities in mass incarceration*, PRISON POLICY INITIATIVE (July 27, 2020), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/07/27/disparities/> [https://perma.cc/65PQ-H7WB] (showing Black people are disproportionately impacted at every stage of the criminal process, from police stops to incarceration).

¹¹ See generally MICHELLE ALEXANDER, *THE NEW JIM CROW. MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLORBLINDNESS* (2010); James Forman Jr., *Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the new Jim Crow*, 87 N.Y.U. L. REV. 21 (2012); Vetta Thompson Sanders, *Racism: Perceptions of Distress*

Indeed, with our backgrounds, the threat of violence is routine within our households. Those backgrounds include our unstable families, often sabotaged by poor wages and education; alcoholism and drug abuse; dysfunctional parenting; child maltreatment, neglect, or physical violence and corporal punishment. Scholars identify various causes for the dysfunctionality of our families. For instance, in his seminal work *The Negro Family in the United States*, Franklin Frazier studied the consequences of white racism, slavery, and Jim Crow on Black families.¹² Building on his work, other studies likewise showed that even well-intentioned parents, oppressed by intergenerational traumas caused by slavery, poverty, physical violence, and abuse, can fail to meet their children's emotional needs, or worse, perpetuate the psychological and physical violence they themselves experienced as children.¹³

I can personally attest to the devastating effect of being raised in a dysfunctional and abusive family. My home was a silent war zone. When I say that as a little boy I walked on pins and needles around my father, I mean that almost literally. A simple accident of spilling juice on the carpet could prompt my dad to assault me. Every day was a nightmare. Though we had the (false) trappings of financial security, I inherited the emotional deprivation of moral impoverishment. Daily I walked this tightrope of terror, and tried to avoid the trip-wires that would trigger my father's violent temper.

I recall one Sunday when I was eleven, coming home from church. For some reason, my mother and father had had a little disagreement amongst themselves. Sitting in the backseat of my father's Oldsmobile, I was acutely aware of the tension between my parents. Having so often witnessed the turbulent exchange of inflammatory words from my parents' "grown-folks" conversations, I had become pretty much inured to their miasmatic cloud of spousal abuse.

Not so on this day. I can still picture the moment when I stepped out the rear passenger seat of my father's car, closed the door, and walked behind my mother as she rummaged inside her purse in search of her keys. I walked onto our front porch, my hands inside the pockets of my church trousers, waiting for my mom to unlock our front door. I heard my father's footsteps behind me, but was at that moment completely oblivious to the affront my existence was to him. Looking off towards the evening sky, my jaw was angled perfectly for the right-hook that smashed into the side of my face. It took me a few seconds to regain my bearings, but I still didn't realize that I was on the ground until I looked up to see my father standing over me, his hand clenched into a fist.

The once handsome and regal countenance of his face was contorted into a mask of unbridled rage. "Nigger, if you ever slam my car door again, I'll kill you!" he

Among African Americans, 38 CMTY. MENTAL HEALTH J. 111 (2002); James Jackson, Tony N. Brown, David R. Williams, Myriam Torres, Sherrill L. Sellers, and Kendrick Brown, *Racism and the physical and mental health status of African Americans: a thirteen year national panel study*, 6 ETHNICITY & DISEASE 132 (1996).

¹² FRANKLIN E. FRAZIER, *THE NEGRO FAMILY IN THE UNITED STATES* (1939).

¹³ See, e.g., Dorthie Cross, Alexander L. Vance, Ye Ji Kim, Andrew L. Ruchard, Nathan Fox, Tanja Jovanovic & Bekh Bradley, *Trauma Exposure, PTSD, and Parenting in a Community Sample of Low-Income, Predominantly African-American Mothers and Children*, 10 PSYCH. TRAUMA: THEORY, RSCH., PRAC. & POL'Y 327 (2018).

promised, standing before me as a conqueror over the vanquished. All I could do was cower before this menacing paternal presence that was supposed to be my source of protection. Fear can bring out the worst in a man. Imagine the monster it can create inside a little boy. Hatred. Resentment. Rage. All these destructive emotions found nourishment in my heart that Sunday evening. No amount of tears could have softened the concrete glare in my father's eyes, and the look of his disgust was just as devastating to me as the blow to my face that felled me.

Everything changed for me in that moment. The powerlessness I felt began to feed an appetite for destruction. The betrayal of parental trust became the noxious fuel for my desire to burn away the stench of my family legacy. Later on that night, I literally thought of setting fire to my parents' house while they were asleep. My father, mother, sister, and everybody who lived in that godforsaken house could've burned that night. Because in my mind that house was never my home. Instead, I ran.

The first time I ran away, I was fourteen. I'd sneak over to the house of a friend. His mother was on drugs all the time and didn't know who was there. If it got bad there, we'd move on, my friend and I together. We used to sleep on the football field at Cardoza High School, or sometimes in the bleachers. And this particular routine continued until I reached the age of sixteen. By then, I was in the streets full time.

The era and place in which I grew up was extremely violent. The Black working class was undergoing a radical economic transformation. Illicit industries such as the volatile crack cocaine trade became lifelines in an era of high unemployment.¹⁴ In the 1980s and 90s, the inner cities of the Nation's Capital were being ravaged by the effects of crack cocaine.¹⁵ Both the Bush and Clinton administrations pursued "tough on crime" agendas, leading to skyrocketing numbers of incarcerations.¹⁶ Young boys who had once been football teammates at local rec centers were now killing each other in neighborhood beefs, mostly over drug related issues. Even large numbers of older women in the community, the former caretakers of the youth, were themselves now either crackheads selling their bodies to buy drugs from the young men they used to babysit, or too afraid to come out of their houses because of all the shootings. That was the mentality in my neighborhood. The only means of making money was to sell drugs – and to do that *you had to be tough*. It was this mindset that started me doing all the things that led to me being locked up for murder ... and a "LIFE without parole" sentence.

Several scholars have studied the correlation between child maltreatment and criminal behavior.¹⁷ I recognize it in my experience and the stories of my mentees.

¹⁴ See UNITED STATES SENTENCING COMMISSION, COCAINE AND FEDERAL SENTENCING POLICY 105-6 (1995).

¹⁵ See Aidan Lewis & Bill McKenna, *Washington DC from Murder Capital to Boomtown*, BBC NEWS (Aug. 6, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28605215> [<https://perma.cc/M3D6-9TNS>]; *Addiction Battled Ambition For Reporter Caught in D.C.'s Crack Epidemic*, NPR.ORG (July 3, 2014), <https://www.npr.org/2014/07/03/327824529/addiction-battled-ambition-for-reporter-caught-in-d-c-s-crack-epidemic> [<https://perma.cc/TGM5-A5DQ>].

¹⁶ MARC HOWARD, UNUSUALLY CRUEL: PRISONS, PUNISHMENT, AND THE REAL AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM 58 (2017).

¹⁷ See generally Reginald Leamon Robinson, *Dark Secrets: Obedience Training, Rigid Physical Violence, Black Parenting, and Reassessing the Origins of Instability in the Black Family through a*

Indeed, we are emblematic examples of traumatized and enraged black boys who adopted aggressive, antisocial and criminal behavior as a consequence of a deprived and brutalized childhood in socially abandoned neighborhoods.

Tragically for us, violence is the culture in prison too. At eighteen years old, I was immersed in a maximum-security setting, where stabbings, rapes, and gang fights were common. My teachers and mentors were wolves and gorillas, and I emulated these guys until I was no longer my true self. It's a common saying in prison that only the strong survive. We don't mean strong like in the number of burpees you can do or how many people you can fight off. We're referring to the mental fortitude and resilience you need so that the prison walls don't break you. A lot of times when you're in that cell, the only companion you have is yourself. Yet more often than not, incarcerated people also have many demons they carry within themselves.

Finding myself in solitary confinement for 27 months, I made a promise to myself: *I can't let these people or these walls break me*. So, one day, when the book cart came around, I helped myself. That was the moment I met the mentors who changed my life: Marcus Aurelius, Nelson Mandela, Maxine Greene, Dr. Viktor E. Frankl, and Prophet Muhammad. When I got out of solitary, I sought to further my education by enrolling in community college, attended rational behavior therapy (RBT) groups, and began my life-exploration as a mentor. With a new understanding of myself and my journey, I started to share some of the things I learned with others in desperate need of finding their own spark for living a positive and productive life – inside and outside of these prison walls.

With time, I gained a reputation for being a “stand-up man” amongst the “Good Men” serving life in prison. With time, many young guys gravitated toward me, seeking advice on how to adapt to this carceral environment. Then in March 2021, my informal mentorship led to an official role—as mentor at the Young Men Emerging Unit (YME). I had been selected to be a lead mentor for the YME project! This specialized mentoring program and community inside the DC jail supports the growth and transformation of emerging adults, and challenges the typical institutionalized and punitive prison culture.¹⁸ Through the collaborative efforts of specially trained mentors, correctional staff, and program analysts, the YME provides a unique space for mentees to further their education, improve their individual and social skills, and work on their physical and mental health. The ultimate goal is both to prepare young emerging adults for their return to the

Re-Reading of Fox Butterfield's All God's Children, 55 *How. L.J.* 393 (2011); Kenneth A. Dodge, Vonnie C. McLoyd & Jennifer E. Lansford, *The Cultural Context of Physical Disciplining*, in *AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY LIFE: ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY* 245-63 (2005); Robert Hampton & Richard Gelles, *A Profile of Violence Toward Black Children*, in *BLACK FAMILY VIOLENCE: CURRENT RESEARCH AND THEORY* 21-34 (1991).

¹⁸ Joel Castón & Micheal Woody, *A DC Jail Unit Challenges the 'Warehouse' Approach to Corrections*, *THE CRIME REPORT* (June 11, 2019), <https://thecrimereport.org/2019/06/11/a-dc-jail-unit-challenges-the-warehouse-approach-to-corrections/> [<https://perma.cc/NC3W-LREW>]; MICHAEL WOODY, TYRONE WALKER & JOEL CASTÓN *DC'S YOUNG MEN EMERGING UNIT: A STORY OF REFORM AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FRONT LINES* (Justice Policy Institute 2020), https://justicepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Young_Men_Emerging_Unit_2020.pdf [<https://perma.cc/83UZ-KB75>].

community and to support the transition of those either awaiting placement in prison (vs. awaiting release to the community) or court orders requiring them to serve a term of imprisonment in the Bureau of Prisons.

The term “emerging adults” (18 to 25 years old) aptly describes the critical developmental period at which individuals are transitioning from childhood to adulthood.¹⁹ Emerging adults make up only 5.5 percent of DC’s total population but are the majority of the DC DOC population.²⁰ Indeed, despite a recent decrease, the arrest rate of emerging adults in DC continues to be alarming.²¹ Unfortunately for decades the response has been more incarceration and increasingly severe sentences.²² Research findings on brain development have led advocates to urge those meting out punishment to consider different responses for justice-involved emerging adults.²³ For researchers have found that eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old adults are more like younger adolescents than older adults in their impulsivity under conditions of emotional arousal. They have found that emerging adults possess youth-like characteristics of heightened impulsivity, greater risk-taking, and impaired judgment compared to fully matured adults.

For instance, Elizabeth S. Scott, Richard J. Bonnie, and Laurence Steinberg argued that, “The possibility that much risky behavior, including involvement in criminal activity, is a product of psychological and social immaturity raises the question of whether the presumption of reduced culpability and greater potential for reform should be applied to young adult offenders as well as juveniles.”²⁴ Based on the growing understanding of children’s brains, in June 2012 the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles convicted of murder cannot be subject to a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.²⁵ And in 2016, the District of Columbia passed a related law, the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), that allows people who were under eighteen when convicted who have

¹⁹ Alexandra O. Cohen, Kaitlyn Breiner, Laurence Steinberg, Richard J. Bonnie, Elizabeth S. Scott, Kim Taylor-Thompson, Marc D. Rudolph, Jason Chein, Jennifer A. Richeson, Aaron S. Heller, Melanie R. Silverman, Danielle V. Dellarco, Damien A. Fair, Adriana Galván, & B. J. Casey, *When Is an Adolescent an Adult? Assessing Cognitive Control in Emotional and Nonemotional Contexts*. 27 PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE 549, 559-60 (2016).

²⁰ Joel Castón & Tyrone Walker, *D.C.’s Promising Initiative for Young Incarcerated People*, WASH. POST (Nov. 13, 2020, 9:00 AM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/local-opinions/dcs-promising-initiative-for-young-incarcerated-people/2020/11/12/aa06caaa-22a7-11eb-8672-c281c7a2c96e_story.html [https://perma.cc/2ZUG-XH4F].

²¹ *Id.*

²² See EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE, *Excessive Punishment* (last visited Nov. 12, 2021), <https://eji.org/issues/excessive-punishment/> [https://perma.cc/7W9J-G5TG]; Nazgol Ghandnoosh, *A Second Look at Injustice: Ending Mass Incarceration and Tackling its Racial Disparities Require Taking a Second Look at Long Sentences*, THE SENTENCING PROJECT (May 12, 2021), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/a-second-look-at-injustice/> [https://perma.cc/99EB-48CP].

²³ See Josh Rovner, *Juvenile Life Without Parole: An Overview*, THE SENTENCING PROJECT (May 24, 2021), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/juvenile-life-without-parole/> [https://perma.cc/B86V-EZN2].

²⁴ Elizabeth S. Scott, Richard J. Bonnie & Laurence Steinberg, *Young Adulthood as a Transitional Legal Category: Science, Social Change, and Justice Policy*, 85 FORDHAM L. REV. 641, 642 (2016).

²⁵ See *Miller v. Alabama*, 567 U.S. 460, 471 (2012).

already served at least twenty years in prison to have their sentences reconsidered.²⁶ This year, a new law, known as IRAA 3.0, decreased from twenty to fifteen the requirement of years served before being eligible to petition the court.²⁷

The IRAA 3.0 will give me the opportunity to submit my appeal for an early release. But before that moment, I want to honor my role as a mentor at the YME and give my young mentees the guidance, care, and support they probably never had in their home and neighborhood lives. Indeed, data suggests that compared to white youths, Black boys lack meaningful connections with caring, non-parental adults.²⁸ Several studies show that mentoring relationships have a significant impact on youths' attitude, motivation, personal strength, academic outcomes, relational skills, and health.²⁹

At the YME community, this mentoring includes various roles and duties—and not only to mentees. Mentors are a liaison between the DOC executive team and the mentees, and assure that the YME doesn't follow a punitive model of corrections. Indeed, YME differs from existing policies in other units at the DC Jail. For example, the system includes both informal and formal interventions, which are determined by the mentors and staff. Mentees might have an informal conversation with one or more of the mentors, who will discuss the problem in a staff meeting. Or they could receive a formal “pull-up” or admonition which is recorded in a mentee's file as an infraction. After three “pull-up” citations, mentees can be formally removed from the unit. Other rules address mentors' language and daily life. For example, we call ourselves a community instead of unit, use the word mentee instead of inmate, and team members instead of correctional officers. As staff and residents, we also have the option to wear non-prison uniforms, which, as our founding mentors argued: “serves as a visual sign of the commitment to change the traditional punitive and demeaning indicators of ‘otherness’ that are counter-productive to growth and rehabilitation.”³⁰

All YME staff must participate in five days of training that covers various topics, including an overview of adolescent development, group communication, and counseling. Mentors are also trained as “Credible Messengers,” an initiative of the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (the District's juvenile justice agency), that connects all young people in the care and custody of DYRS to healthy homes and supportive communities, and that provides preventative supports to all

²⁶ 63 D.C. Reg. 15312, 15319-23 (Dec. 16, 2016) (effective Apr. 4, 2017).

²⁷ 68 D.C. Reg. 1034, 1035 (Jan. 22, 2021) (effective Apr. 27, 2021)

²⁸ MENTOR & MY BROTHER'S KEEPER ALLIANCE, GUIDE TO MENTORING BOYS AND YOUNG MEN OF COLOR, <https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Guide-to-Mentoring-BYMOC.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/F3AW-KH24>]. See also KRISTEN LEWIS & SARAH BURD-SHARPS, ZEROING IN ON PLACE AND RACE (2015), <http://ssrc-static.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MOA-Zeroing-In-Final.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/9T3F-LH3M>].

²⁹ See David L. DuBois, Nelson Portillo, Jean E. Rhodes, Naida Silverthorn & Jeffrey C. Valentine, *How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence*, 12 PSYCH. SCI. IN THE PUB. INT. 27 (2011); Lillian Eby, Tammy D. Allen, Sarah C. Evans, Thomas Ng & David L. DuBois, *Does mentoring matter? A multidisciplinary meta-analysis comparing mentored and non-mentored individuals*, 72 J. VOCATIONAL BEHAV. 254, 263 (2008).

³⁰ WOODY, WALKER & CASTÓN, *supra* note 18, at 8.

youth in Washington D.C.³¹ Credible messengers are neighborhood leaders and experienced youth advocates whose role is to mentor youth and transform individual and social attitudes and behaviors around various forms of street violence.³² This training includes lessons on self-care, problem solving, community building, and establishing good relationships with the mentees. The YME mentors also facilitate the tasks of various organizations working at the DC DOC, including groups working on books, writing, and creativity (Free Minds Book Club), meditation and mindfulness (Insight on the Inside), academic education (Inside Out), and re-entry support (The HOPE Foundation).

One strength of the mentors is that their credibility with the young adult population allows them to reach the mentees in a way that corrections staff never could. My life experience of growing up in prison for over twenty-five years allows me to share in their suffering of missing a loved one, feeling irrelevant to the outside world, or simply being treated like an animal. Yet my commitment to maintaining my humanity despite living in one of the most inhumane places on earth for over a quarter-century also gives me the incredible opportunity to model an inner strength that my mentees possess within themselves as well – even if still dormant and in need of awakening.

This is why it was so important that when I was accepted the role of a YME mentor and moved to the community, one of the first actions I took was to pull a few strings to get Lil' Yo accepted into the YME unit. Once he finally became a mentee of mine, I immediately went to work on his self-defeating attitudes, and challenged him to recognize the strength and greatness he possesses as a strong, young Black man. I admit that sometimes his disrespectful language elevated my blood pressure, but in the same breath he could make me laugh with an off-handed comment that had nothing to do with the subject at hand. One time I even had to call one of my mentors for advice when this little boy tested me to my limits in an argument about his criminal thinking errors. My mentor helped me regain my equilibrium by getting me to recall what *I* was like when I was an eighteen-year-old kid. That helped me find a better way of communicating my concerns to Lil' Yo.

Amazingly, after a few hard weeks of positive encouragement, I started catching glimpses of the budding charismatic motivational speaker he now aspires to be. I feel unbridled joy when I see a mentee who once thought that they were not good at anything realize they are great at so many things. I cannot overstate the redemptive value in believing in others. One of my mentees shared with me that no one out there in society had ever told him that they were proud of him. (Surely *that* is the true crime.) Though still an incarcerated person myself, I feel incredibly proud to be in the company of these young men who, despite their broken dreams, are finding the courage to dream new and brighter dreams.

Being a mentor at the YME is extremely demanding, but I took it upon myself to embrace the challenge and bring out the best in these young men. So now at 7:30 a.m., from Monday through Friday, I start my day with a thirty-minute meditation session with my mentees, in which we listen to classical music while practicing

³¹ See DEP'T OF YOUTH REHAB. SERVICES, *Credible Messengers Initiative*, <https://dyrs.dc.gov/page/credible-messenger-initiative> [<https://perma.cc/7RGA-9C25>].

³² *Id.*

mindful awareness techniques. Next from approximately 9 to 10 a.m., I help facilitate our YME Community Conversation group, in which the mentors and mentees sit in a circle to discuss a broad range of subjects from ancient philosophy to current stock trading trends. My role in these meeting is largely to act as a cheerleader/coach for the mentees, showering them with praises for good actions and reprimanding them for reprehensible behavior. I also lead the Community Fitness session, in which I implement my “*Strong mind – Strong body*” philosophy by administering hardcore-style workouts that not only build up their muscles but their character as well. Self-care and self-love are the first steps toward change and transformation, as I know from experience.

But not only do I help the mentees with philosophical questions of morality and whatnot, I also give them more practical help. Take, for instance, a time when I helped one of my mentees to understand the gravity of crime for which he had been charged. Because he was inclined to plead guilty to the charges against him, I advised and helped him write a letter to the victims of the crime he had committed. I felt it was important to show him that taking responsibility for his actions was the first step in administering Restorative Justice,³³ and the only true way to start atoning for his past behavior. He followed my advice, and four months later, I felt a sense of pride when the judge sentenced him to the lowest amount of time in his sentencing guideline –specifically because he wrote and apologized to the victims of his crime.

My best intentions of being a good mentor to my mentees rely not only on my training, but on the teaching of my journey and lived experience. Surprisingly, it was after watching the Disney Pixar animated movie *Soul* that I became aware of my own approach to being a great mentor.³⁴

The movie *Soul* was not only incredibly entertaining to watch, it also resonated deeply with my work as a mentor. I saw myself reflected in the struggle of the main character, Joe Gardener, the mentor of Soul number 22. Joe suffers an untimely accident, and his soul ascends to the Afterlife. In a desperate attempt to escape the “conveyor belt” to heaven, Joe finds himself in a realm where unborn souls wait to “find their spark” before they can descend to earth and be born. Eventually Joe’s spirit-self winds up becoming a mentor for Soul # 22, and is tasked with the duty of helping 22 find its spark for living a happy and productive life down on earth.³⁵

I experienced my “Ah-ha” moment when Joe learns that, “Your purpose is not what you do but what you enjoy doing.”³⁶ All these years I’d spent inside these prison walls, I’d tried to be the best version of myself while serving a life sentence and I found that the “best version” of myself could only be discovered by living a life of service for others. And I enjoy doing just that. I love mentoring these young men who are suffering from the wrong choices I’ve also made in the past. I feel it’s my duty to help them find meaning and transformation in their suffering.

³³ Restorative Justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior. See, e.g., COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS JUSTICE CENTER, *Using Trauma-Informed Restorative Justice with Youth* (2021).

³⁴ SOUL (Walt Disney Pictures 2020).

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

I understand that for the mistakes I made as an eighteen-year-old kid, I owe a debt that can never be repaid. This is why the YME mentors who were here before me, and I too, are pledging to spend the rest of our lives fighting the self-hating, criminal mentality that laid the foundation for the intergenerational incarceration that has plagued our community. The YME is an extraordinary step in that direction. In the past four years, we have mentored tens of incarcerated young adults, giving them direction, strength, hope, and new dreams. In his Foreword to the latest YME report, Marc Schindler, executive director of the Justice Police Institute, wrote:

Around the time the YME was being launched, some have said by "divine intervention," there was a group of individuals who were returned to the DC Jail from the FBOP for resentencing hearings. All of these individuals had served more than 20 years in prison for crimes committed when they were children or young adults. Six of these men – Joel Castón, Charles Fantroy, Halim Flowers, Momolu Stewart, Tyrone Walker, and Michael Woody – all in their late 30s to early 40s, were selected as the original mentors for the YME. I met these six impressive men soon after the YME opened, and I had the honor and privilege of getting to know and work with them over the past two years. I watched as they worked in partnership with DOC leadership and staff, pouring their hearts and souls into developing the unit, and mentoring the young men in their care with a passion and commitment unmatched by any program staff I have seen in my 30-plus years in the field.³⁷

Today, those YME mentors are free citizens, thanks to the IRAA law that granted them an early release. Many of them are now mentoring youths in our neighborhoods,³⁸ while some are violence interrupters,³⁹ active members of criminal justice organizations, and accomplished artists.⁴⁰ These *redeemed citizens* are also continuing their social justice advocacy by mentoring guys such as myself, by giving me guidance about my work with my mentees and preparing me for the day I will eventually return to society as a free citizen. For now, I oftentimes live vicariously

³⁷Marc Schindler, *Foreword*, in WOODY, WALKER & CASTÓN, *supra* note 18, at 1.

³⁸See MORE THAN OUR CRIMES, *Every Day, Every Hour, Offers the Opportunity to Make a Decision* (Jul. 16, 2020), <https://morethanourcrimes.medium.com/every-day-every-hour-offers-the-opportunity-to-make-a-decision-aea4610b7704> [<https://perma.cc/SS3A-84JN>]; Pam Bailey, *Freedom After 30 years: First Impressions and Reflections*, MORE THAN OUR CRIMES (Dec. 22, 2020), <https://morethanourcrimes.medium.com/freedom-after-30-years-first-impressions-and-reflections-1ff5702264b6> [<https://perma.cc/89AU-26B7>]; MORE THAN OUR CRIMES, *Do You Believe in Second Chances?* (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://morethanourcrimes.medium.com/do-you-believe-in-second-chances-fcbe9bc66c9d> [<https://perma.cc/4R7H-LX7R>].

³⁹See MORE THAN OUR CRIMES, *James Dunn: Denied Parole, Now a 'Violence Interruptor'* (Oct. 25, 2020), <https://morethanourcrimes.org/2020/10/james-dunn-denied-parole-now-a-violence-interruptor/> [<https://perma.cc/L36C-PRLX>].

⁴⁰See MORE THAN OUR CRIMES, *When you're in a Hole, Stop Digging* (May 29, 2020), <https://morethanourcrimes.medium.com/when-youre-in-a-hole-stop-digging-4b4e4c063029> [<https://perma.cc/52CC-BJNA>]; Tyrone Walker, *How I 'Jump-Started' My Life After Prison* (Apr. 30, 2019) <https://thecrimereport.org/2019/04/30/519479/> [<https://perma.cc/UD7K-QGBL>].

through the lives of these men who once served LIFE sentences as youth offenders. I grew up in prison with these former YME mentors and every day they show me that we never stop being mentors and mentees!

Even if my journey as a mentor is an irregular one, my story as a YME mentor is not peculiar in any sense. It is a tragic yet common tale of a misguided soul who ruined himself as a teenager but now seeks to redeem himself as a man of morals and principles. My story is a self-narrative written in the blood of lost innocence – punctuated by the tears of a grieving mother. But most importantly, my story is a story that needs to be shared with the world to help prevent another wayward soul from needing a “second look” in the first place.