

## FROM JUVENILE TO JAILHOUSE LAWYER

S. M. STEELE<sup>∞</sup>

I was kidnapped by the prison system at sixteen years old. It swallowed me whole like a hungry man eating a twinkie. The system tossed me into a cell and forced me to fend for myself. I had no help or guidance, and no one seemed to care. And the people who knew me best had no clue what to do.

Sentenced to an unforeseeable future, I started my thirty years to life wondering how I could give those years back and reclaim my innocence. I was oblivious toward how I would make that possible. But a few older prisoners gave me some advice. I'd find my freedom, one day, somewhere inside a law book.

I took their advice for a while and scheduled my time around attending the law library. During these early years, I had no access to legal search engines like Lexis Nexus or Westlaw. I literally had to open a law book and read cases until I found a case that matched. Of course, this hard labor didn't last long. Reading law books at sixteen years old was like trying to speak fluent Spanish with a severed tongue.

But I tried. For weeks, I went to the law library and asked for the same books. Sometimes I read the same cases until the legal principles became clear enough for me to understand. Even if the case I read didn't apply to me, I would read it for context. Most of the cases I read centered around ineffective assistance of counsel because I knew my lawyer had failed me. One day, during trial, I caught him snoring.

I had been failed. The courts had failed me, my lawyer had failed me, and I had failed me. At some point, as the years passed, I became overwhelmed. I needed an outlet to ease my frustrations so I turned to prison life, doing prison things, and leaving the idea of freedom behind me.

I found myself fighting and gang-banging to pass time. I made it my new life. Every hour of my day went to someone else's problems. It felt like the easiest thing for me to do than face my own. Little did I know, I had quit on myself. I had drowned inside my pitiful existence, normalizing my negative behaviors.

This troubled mind of mine led me to years of going in and out of solitary confinement. I sat in cells twenty-three hours a day, sometimes twenty-four hours, counting the bricks on the wall. It took several stints inside maximum security prisons for me to finally wake up.

---

<sup>∞</sup> S. M. Steele studies law, fights for juvenile rights, and serves as a personal development coach for incarcerated people. He is currently working on publishing plain language legal booklets for prisoners. He is currently incarcerated in Marion, Ohio.

One year, while sitting in a cell at the Ohio State Penitentiary, I started reading law books again. I was twenty-five years old. With nothing else to do, I studied, and studied, and studied. And over time the law became my favorite thing to read.

At some point, I developed a desire to discover how I could wield its power. Things I read started to make sense to me. Complex concepts like due process and fundamental rights, ideas packed with vagueness and subjectivity, pushed thoughts into my conscious mind and made me more aware of my current condition.

Suddenly, I understood what the older prisoners meant when they told me my freedom was in a law book. The law had me bound, stuck inside a prison cell; therefore, the law could unbind me, if I learned to apply it well. All I needed to do was focus, I believed, and everything would take care of itself.

Inspired by this realization, I dug deeper into the law and stumbled upon my calling. Analyzing my own situation, I convinced myself I needed to save juveniles from being unfairly punished by the law. I believed every child charged with a crime suffered from a form of state-induced child abuse. I had found my purpose.

Today, I still fight for my freedom, but in my spare time, I help the youth, younger prisoners like I once was, find their purpose and fight for meaning in their life. I teach them law, and the meaning of it. Becoming a jailhouse lawyer allows me to give back and eventually make substantial change. I have faith one day that change will come.