

# Walk In Those Shoes

Winter 2025 Newsletter – ISSUE 14



## Life and Times of an Incarcerated Platypus

By José Rodriguez-Basquez

Being awkward is hard; being awkward while being held at knifepoint by a deranged fellow in a prison cell is cruelty. My name is José, and this is my story of choosing, for better or worse, to remain my persistently joyful and strange self while living in a place tailor-made to destroy human individuality.

I should probably try to explain myself *without* sounding quite so awkward. That's hard for me. I was 20 years old when I came to prison in 2014, and I had all the adult life experience of a kid who stayed with his mom after high school and dedicated his life to Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, nerd friends, and the internet. Behind the willful smokescreen I choked myself in was a man rotting from lack of purpose, stuck in a moral miasma which devalued values to such an extent, I sold my own soul to become a prisoner both in real life and in myself.

Moments after failing everyone I've ever loved by destroying the life of another, I came to a county-jail holding cell and sat under the weight of all the evil I'd done that led me there. Everyone I met afterwards told me the only way to survive was to stop being so different, get hard, embrace the criminal mindset and change. When I instead found Jesus, I found a person who made sense of what I had felt was a senseless existence. He made meaning out of my floating, awkward self and forged my brokenness into something I liked. I made a commitment when He found me, an awkward one from an awkward guy - "*I will follow the dictates of God as **myself**.*"

What that meant to my 20-year-old self and still means now at 31 is simple - I will remain my genuine awkwardly strange but *earnestly-seeking-Jesus* self no matter what. There can be no compromise, no matter how bad or weird it gets.

It got weird quick.

## Summer Writing Contest Results

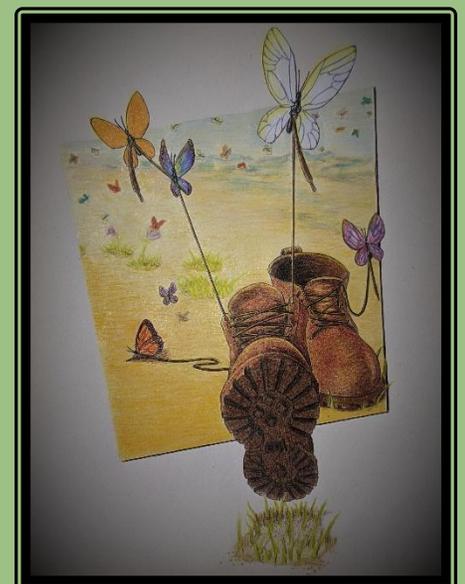
1<sup>st</sup> PLACE – José Rodriguez-Basquez

2<sup>nd</sup> PLACE – Jon Adams

3<sup>rd</sup> PLACE – James Jaynes

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P.O. Box 70092  
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Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

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My commitment to being me while incarcerated, refusing to bend to prison culture, landed me in a lot of strange places. One was the very back of a 40-man, double-storied dorm at my first real prison, known as *The Tank*. Its reputation as a battleground tested my resolve every single day. I was 21 and had survived *Gladiator School*, where they send people under 20 to process. I survived thanks to making people laugh and befriending the guy in charge because he liked poetry. That kept me barely safe for a month.

As I roamed Pasquotank, I realized I was a millennial nerdy do-gooder in a sea of closed-custody guys who had lived the *war-at-any-time* lifestyle for decades. No matter the social context, I literally did not fit in. Like at all. I'd hated that about myself my whole life. I'm a socially awkward kid from a Honduran family who grew up in the sticks of North Carolina. Literally, nothing ever makes sense around me. Yet finally, in a place which would never accept me, I found I could accept myself. That became the thing which kept me sane and helped me feel like I was who God wanted me to be. I was *where* He wanted me to be.

After weeks of being made fun of for being soft, seeing my Bible stomped on the floor, and suffering from knowing nothing of how to relate, people started accepting me for me. People came to me for prayer or to talk to someone who wouldn't judge them for living lies to make it. It turned out most people didn't *want* to be hard to survive. My newfound friends liked that I didn't change, that I could be me all the time. I had thought living the life of a social platypus was a curse, incapable of fitting in anywhere. The funny thing about platypi is that they might not look like they belong, with a beaver tail, a duck bill, and webbed feet, but when they close their eyes, their bill magnetically guides them through whatever environment to find home, and they use their tails and feet to make a harsh Australian wilderness into a comfy den by the lake or Dr. Pepper commercials. Before I was cussed out for refusing to steal from my kitchen job, but over time, people I didn't even know would say, "*That's Preacherman. He doesn't do that kind of stuff.*" My community bought into me, and it was incredible.

Then I got ambushed. More specifically, I was invited to hang out with a friend I talked religion with all the time. When I walked into his room, he locked the door behind me, wrestled me to the floor, and held to my eye what looked like Excalibur. His room lights were blacked-out, we were two floors away from help, and who was going to come help a guy like me?

Not knowing what to do in this situation, I went to the only place I felt had protected me before - my genuine awkward Christian self. "God have mercy on this man!" I shouted. My captor jerked my body down, but I kept praying, "God forgive this man!" My brain was stuck on making sure I'd finish life as me, on my terms, nobody else's but the one person who wanted me for *me*. I was on the floor, sweat pouring off me, and my eyes were wide open, but I didn't look at my attacker or Excalibur. I looked through my fears to the ceiling, and I shouted, "I forgive this man!"

Then, the most awkward thing in the world happened. My ex-friend went completely still. He had been known for mental health breakdowns and violence against anyone, but right then, he looked at me eye-to-eye and said, "I just heard a voice in my head telling me to let you go." And he did.

He put Excalibur away and after taking my Sony radio, let me go. That wasn't the most shocking thing though. More shocking were his associates who took me to his room later and demanded he give my radio back without me even asking. It got *really* weird when he later offered the radio back to avoid the massive backlash of a community outraged their spiritual leader had been robbed. But the most awkwardly wonderful thing of all was the support and encouragement I got from a people-group that normally turns its back on things that aren't their business and made it their rallying cry.

I went from guy-who-got-robbed to local mascot/Jesus freak, and that, somehow, somehow, made a big difference. After that, when people went to fight each other and I tried to de-escalate, they actually listened to what I had to say. People flushed their stuff and moved on. To this day, I still live life on God's terms as a socially awkward platypus. And when I keep my eyes closed and ask Him to guide me, I still wind up exactly where I'm supposed to be, with a duck bill and a smile.

## INCREDIBLE CONFESSIONS - *Jon Adams*

Sitting at the stainless-steel desk, my hand quaked, and tears dropped onto the blank paper. I grasped the cheap pen as the humming nightlight glowed faintly on the dreary, cinderblock walls. The dayroom was noisy - cell doors slamming, showers spraying, card players arguing, and officers announcing canteen - but my cell was *quiet*, the chaos fading subtly like the silence of a daydream.

The scene felt familiar. My mind flashed to four years prior. I was fifteen, scrawny, high, stubborn, hungover, scared, heartbroken, and sitting in an interrogation room even more cramped than my current prison cell. Homicide detectives relentlessly questioned me for hours, asking, begging, finally demanding the truth, a truth I refused to provide because I was too selfish to be honest, courageous, and accountable - to be *authentic*.

Cornered and drained of lies, I finally gave the detectives their confession, not because I felt it was the right thing to do, but because I felt it was the only thing I *could* do. Much like now, tears streamed off my cheeks and onto the blank statement. Like now, my hand quaked as it attempted to hold a cheap pen, and the room's fluorescent lights blared off the shiny, tiled floor. The detectives hovered, eyeing every pen stroke. I signed the tear-soaked document and they disappeared, only to return with handcuffs and the declaration that changed my life. "*You're under arrest for first-degree murder.*"

Once again, my life was about to change with the stroke of a pen.

Although I confessed to murdering my grandfather, my family and lawyers questioned the truthfulness of my confession. For four years I took advantage of that uncertainty. I wanted them to know the truth, but I didn't want them to reject me. My family wanted closure; I wanted acceptance. I've always wanted acceptance, ever since my dad - my hero - drove out of my grandmother's driveway and out of my life. I was barely five then but had trusted in one thing: the man who said he loved me 'more than anything in the world' *authentically* loved me. The deafening absence that followed broke my trust in that authenticity. I never confessed to him the betrayal and rage I felt from his abandonment because he died the very day I shuffled into prison with a 20-25 year sentence, forfeiting our irreconcilable relationship to eternity.

The words I was about to write could drive the rest of my family out of my life too. My name could be blotted out of my family's book forever. I managed to scribble *To My Family* at the top of the page before the thought of them reading this letter generated another tsunami of tears. The task seemed impossible, but it was necessary. For the past four years, depression defined my life; guilt and shame accompanied my every sleepless night; hopelessness shined brighter in the early mornings than the sun itself.

But something *incredible* happened just before my nineteenth birthday. I became a Christian. I confessed that I was a broken, sinful person and professed faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. My conversion brought an otherworldly and overwhelming desire to do good and to tell the truth. But the truth I needed to tell was that I am guilty. The truth could set me free, but the truth would also keep me in chains.

Confessing was excruciating, but words leapt from my pen. Ink, tears, and truth fused. Twenty pages later, a pardon and condemnation sat heavy on the stainless-steel desk. The letter could pardon me for the past, unleashing my faith, growth, and rehabilitation. Yet, the letter also wielded the power to condemn me to painful misery, permanent regret, and perpetual isolation; it could leave me family-less, ensuring the adjectives like 'rejected', 'unforgivable', and 'hated' defined my life. But faith in Christ promised acceptance, forgiveness, and love, promises not guaranteed by people, not even by family. These promises overcame my life-long fear of rejection.

Hours passed. The cell block fell almost silent, only a few distant shouts of late-night conversations echoed through the vents. I clutched the sealed, addressed envelope as if letting go would slay me - and, in a sense, it would. Doubts bombarded my exhausted mind. Remarks my family had made after my crime shrieked in my heart - *I don't want to talk to him... He murdered my father... He is a monster... He isn't wired like the rest of us... I wish he was never born.* I feared that my family would resurrect those remarks, but it was time to tell them the truth. They deserved the truth, and I had no right to withhold it. It was time to be authentic. Authenticity is transparency, accountability and maturity. Even if it cost everything I loved, I was finally ready to be authentic. It was the only way forward.

Sliding the confession under my cell door for the officers to mail out was almost harder than writing it. And when I did, I felt reborn - *tabula rasa*.

Not long after that night, tears would once again stream off my cheeks onto the most incredible and beautiful confession I could ever read. "*Dear Jon, You're my son, and I will always love you. Although I'm hurt, I forgive you.*"

# Escapism

by James Jaynes

I was arrested in the fall of 1990 for a series of crimes, 1st degree capital murder being the most serious. People who knew me were shocked, and people who didn't know me probably thought I was a monster. No one was more shocked than me. Hell, I'd suffered the brutality of an abusive father, I should have been the least likely guy to become involved in such a violent crime.

Growing up on NC's death row, I lived with con men, rapists, serial killers, armed robbers, the list goes on, and when guys in here start telling war stories, some names come up time and again. Many have passed away over the years, men like Joe Cobb, Bill Spaulding, Crow, Sick Mick, Treetop, Slick Rick and Mike Moore. Those guys had reputations for many things, demanding and getting respect at the top of the list. They were dangerous but not so dangerous you couldn't associate with them; you just knew to take great care in *how* you associated with them. I never crossed them, had no reason to. Had I done so, things would've turned violet rather quickly. We weren't friends, but we were friendly. I never crossed any lines that called for an immediate physical response and was careful things stayed that way.

In 1997 I was granted a new capital resentencing hearing and moved from 'the row' to regular population here at Central Prison. Not long afterwards, Mike Moore was moved from Unit 1 lock-up and placed in regular population as well. I knew Mike from my stints on lock-up, him being there for his involvement in the killing of another prisoner at the Salisbury High Rise. We'd had some minor dealings but weren't friends, merely acquaintances.

He pulled me up one day, said he knew a way to 'get out of here'. The catch was that we'd have to hurt some people to pull it off. I assumed he meant we'd have to hurt staff members.

Mike had done his homework, but he didn't do enough homework. He knew I could be returned to the row, but he didn't know I wasn't gonna be involved in hurting people. Mike wasn't physically imposing, wasn't very tall and didn't exude a really dangerous air, but I knew enough of him to be on my toes. If he thought I was belittling his 'plan' he would be an enemy I could well do without. So, I had to decline his felonious invitation tactfully. In the end, I simply explained that my chances for getting out of prison were legally strong, and I didn't want to screw things up on that end. While on the one hand I felt somewhat honored to have been offered a place in his plans, on the other I'd just made myself a liability. I knew he had a plan, but thankfully, I knew no details.

Scarcely two weeks later, Mike and his cellmate were charged with possession of escape tools and were heard on a recording explaining what the plan was. He undoubtedly tried to recruit another guy who was wearing a wire. It all came out and Mike was again on lock-up. Not too many months later, I too went to lock-up - possession of marijuana. Ironically, I ended up in a cell next to Mike and his cellmate. I was unsure of how I'd be received. While it wasn't so, they could've thought I'd been the one to set them up.

I came to find out Mike was aware I had nothing to do with it, and he ended up running down how things went sour. Ultimately, I stayed true to me and respected Mike a little more because he realized I wasn't sure how he would react to my rejection of his plan. Mike passed away in 2018, still a prisoner in a NC prison, may he rest in peace. I believe he is finally free.

# BENCHED: The Makings For Opportunity

By Terry Robinson

Don't be fooled - opportunities aren't given, they are created and earned. They are how the universe responds to our pursuing positivity, trusting the process, and staying the course. Opportunities are the product of good deeds when there is no incentive in sight; they are the chances given from others in recognition of qualities in us that we don't always see in ourselves. Incarcerated life doesn't offer a swell of opportunities, not when the recidivism rate is at stake. Prisons are designed with revolving doors, touting opportunities, but in reality, prisoner success is bad for business. That's why prisoners have to be vigilant in pursuing positive change and creating opportunities. Prison programs and other such activities are not about passing idle time but laying the groundwork for redefining our character.

I wished I'd said all that and more to a longtime friend, a former death row prisoner who is desperate to earn opportunity at his new prison home. I met Petey when I arrived on death row back in 2000. He was a first-timer, still in his early 20's and too green to be a troublemaker. Petey possessed likeability, and everybody here wanted to be his friend. His tone was disarming and he interacted with everyone the same, like old pals. Petey was an all-around guy - gambler, chess player, jokester, confidant, and sports aficionado. He was most influential on the basketball court, an Einstein on the hardwood. Before his death row stint, Petey was scouted by recruiters and awarded an HBCU scholarship. That all ended in 1995 when Petey's collegiate opportunities were benched for good, as he would spend the next 21 years facing execution.

Then in 2017, Petey was granted a resentencing hearing, his death sentence upgraded to life without parole. It was a momentous time for many of us here. Petey and I had grown close over the years after learning more about each other's background through prison programs like Houses of Healing. When I asked him how he felt about going into the prison's general population, he told me, *"I'm a little scared, 'cause I'm used to death row. Now it's like I'm going to prison for the first time."*

Petey had spent decades living in an aging death row community, many residents having grown weary and complacent. Our familiarity made for a moderate environment; the same could not be said for general population. G-POP was real prison, ever-changing, volatile, and highly unpredictable. It was all I could do to wish Petey well as he began his prison journey anew.

Recently, I had a chance to speak with Petey for the first time in eight years. It was a real homeboy's reunion: laughing, joking, and reminiscing on old times. When the subject of commutation came up, I asked what kind of programs he had participated in since leaving death row.

*"Man, this prison ain't got no programs. I've just been working in the sewing plant. Other than that, I ain't been doing much of nothing."*

This was disappointing news. No programs? What's does that look like for prison reform and those committed to making positive change? And for somebody like Petey, who was formerly on death row, no programs could mean no commutation. It was unacceptable. Every prisoner should have the opportunity to prove they deserve a second chance. My advice to Petey... if the prison won't offer programs, then he should seriously consider starting his own.

Prison can be a place of tremendous resources, but it is not the cure-all. Rehabilitation begins with the willingness to do better, and that requires putting positive change into action. Not every prisoner has the opportunity to participate in programs, instead they create their own projects. At Nash Correctional, Phillip Vance Smith co-authored a bill which was sponsored by 18 NC representatives in 2021. Smith lived alongside Kwame Teague, who writes books, oversees a creative writing class, and has produced movies. Steven Matthew Clark in a Maine prison started an online community called The Awakening Exchange, while Texas prisoner Jarod Lee Wesenberg is a DJ for The Tank, a radio station for the incarcerated in Texas. These are phenomenal feats in the face of adversity. When prison life makes it easy to sit around doing nothing, so many are opposing idleness, commanding prison reform, and making themselves candidates for opportunity.

There's a Kwame, Jarod, Steven, and Phillip in us all, without having to surrender our uniqueness. Not everyone can facilitate a class or edit material, but we are indeed phenomenal in our own way. Prison life is more than tabletops, TV, violence, and accepting the status quo. It's the critical time when we should be improving our character by doing something meaningful and constructive. Anyone with a pencil can become an author. Any prisoner with access to the phone can be a part of a podcast. A keen familiarity with the scriptures, or surahs, can work wonders in field ministry, and to hold a processing group simply requires transparency, vulnerability and courage. These are programs that can be instituted by prisoners without the support of prison staffers. It's efforts like these that will decide whether we are on the wrong side of recidivism, or the right side of change and second chances.

Not everyone will recognize our efforts, but when they do, it will come with merit. That merit will eventually present itself as well-earned opportunity. I hope my man Petey figures that out soon because it could be the difference in his commutation. If prisons don't provide programs where we can prove our worth, then we are obligated to do so ourselves. Shout-outs to the extraordinary men and women already working hard to change the prison narrative. And for those of us who haven't *"...been doing much of nothing,"* don't wait for opportunity, create opportunity, or we too might find ourselves benched.

**MORE WRITING BY TERRY ROBINSON, AKA CHANTON, can be found at: <https://walkinthoseshoes.com/author/chanton/>**

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