

ESSAY

"HOW EDUCATION BUILT A BETTER ME"

by Phillip Vance Smith, II

I always wanted to be a good writer. But as a young man serving life without parole in a North Carolina prison, I didn't think I could overcome a lack of access to education. Luckily, an unlikely friend guided me toward the path to self-education.

At the age of 24, I was convicted of murder and sentenced to life without parole in 2002. A GED was my highest level of education.

Beginning in 2009, North Carolina prisons instituted a prejudicial policy that excluded those serving prison sentences longer than 10 years from enrolling in higher education programs. For near two decades I watched others earn college degrees while I could not.

With no resources, I learned to become a better writer by trial and error. At the time, I wrote fiction. To grow, I mimicked writers whose bestselling books I admired. I felt that I was a good writer, but I was aware of my shortcomings in grammar and storytelling. Regardless, determination wouldn't let me quit.

In 2014 I self-published a novel on Amazon called "Cage" under the pseudonym Vance Phillips. The book sold less than 20 copies, but to me it felt like a success, and I wanted more.

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In 2017, I sent an unpublished manuscript called "Ambitious" to The Permanent Press, a small publisher in New York. I received a letter from publisher Martin Shepard dated March 13, 2017 saying, "Phillip, I just finished reading your novel and liked it. I'm passing it on to my wife and co-publisher Judith...If she has the same response, there's a good chance we will want to publish it."

I strutted around the prison with my chest poked out that whole day, just knowing I had landed a publishing deal.

The next day I received a letter from Martin dated March 14, 2017 informing me that The Permanent Press wouldn't publish my book. After conferring with his wife, Martin's opinion had changed. He now found the book "overly complicated, confusing, and repetitious." Despite the rejection, Martin asked me to call him.

When I phoned, Martin told me that I was a great writer but I needed to work harder. Over the next three years I learned that Martin had once been Dr. Martin Shepard, a bestselling writer and a legendary psychiatrist. He was a brilliant man who had lived experiences I could only imagine. Not only did he teach me about writing and publishing, he taught me about life.

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I never submitted "Ambitious" to another publisher. I self-published it, too, under the pseudonym Vance Phillips.

Although I got to know Martin, who I called Marty, the best advice came from his wife Judy.

After rejecting my novel, Judy wrote to explain why. Her handwritten letter, dated November 4, 2017, said, "...we need a bit more skill in the writing style. Your writing is earnest, heartfelt and honest, but we need a bit more." In a previous letter, I had told Marty and Judy about my lack of access to education in prison. I blamed my poor writing on deficiencies in the prison system. Judy would accept no excuses.

Concerning the difference between me and educated writers, Judy wrote: "...you can have just as good an education, or better, by becoming an autodidact—teaching yourself." She even sent a list of books that I could read to help me.

Judy's letter forced me to confront a hard reality. The prison system was not preventing me from obtaining an education. My location was hindering, but I could learn to write better if I worked for it. I decided to give it a try.

Instead of asking family and friends on the outside to send money for canteen, I asked them to send me writing books from Judy's list. Once I finished the exercises in those books, I asked for more.

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Along my journey, I came to understand that the prison system saw no value in people like me. We were incorrigibles who were destined to die in prison. One fatal mistake defined not only the rest of my life, but also my worth as a human being. By excluding me from education, the state was telling me that I was worthless. As an impressionable youth, I bought into the state's definition of me. I saw little worth within myself.

Of course, prisons are designed to oppress. Prison, as a system, wanted me to be uneducated, docile, and dependent. If I allowed myself to be those things, I would be malleable and easy to control. Becoming an autodidact shifted my notion of dependency from what the state was willing to provide to what I could provide for myself. Self-education helped me reclaim independence and a newfound sense of confidence. After my outlook on life took this crucial turn, no limitation could stop me.

I pursued education wherever I could find it, including three years in a prison seminary, even

though I am an atheist. The seminary offered the only higher education program that lifers could participate in statewide. Although I didn't share Christian beliefs, I learned the difficult craft of academic writing.

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I used academic writing to coauthor The Prison Resources Repurposing Act (PRRA), criminal justice reform legislation, with another incarcerated lifer. The PRRA aims to offer release to those serving life without parole after the completion of educational, vocational, and behavioral goals over 20 years in prison. We designed a plan that would take into account a person's moral development while incarcerated and focus on earning release as opposed to being released after serving a set mandatory minimum. The PRRA uses early release as an incentive for rehabilitation.

Our legislative proposal was published in the North Carolina Law Review, a monumental accomplishment. North Carolina House Representatives sponsored the bill during the 2021 and 2023 legislative sessions. It didn't pass, but we hope for success during the 2025 session.

Education taught me how I could impact society from the inside. It is a testament that people sentenced to die in prison do have worth and can be a productive part of the outside world if given the chance. If those opportunities don't exist, we must create them.

Around the same time I began studying journalism on my own. I used those talents while working for The Nash News, a prison newspaper for which I was elected editor in 2021. Because of releases and transfers to other prisons, it fell on me to train new staff members. I developed a curriculum for the basics of journalism and held workshops to teach new reporters how to write an article.

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After becoming editor, I began pitching articles to free-world publications to expose injustices incarcerated people face. My work has appeared in dozens of publications, including Bolts, Inquest, and HuffPo.

When I look back over my 23 years in prison, I don't think about all of the things I lost by being incarcerated. I think of everything I gained. I found a way to thrive with what little I had at my disposal. I didn't allow prison to define me. I became the best writer I could be. I contribute to society in a way that only an incarcerated person can.

Education, in all its forms, enabled me to find my best self. I wouldn't trade that. Not even for freedom.

THE END

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