

Driven by the possibility to earn back my freedom, I've spent 21 years pursuing every educational opportunity that the Department Of Corrections has offered me. After 2 decades, however, I am still incarcerated and still pursuing educational opportunities, but with a different motivation now.

As much as I would like to go home to my wife and daughter before 2029, I realize that with 4 years remaining, it is likely that I will serve the entirety of my 25 year sentence. My coveted trophy of "freedom" was what I spent the last 21 years working for, but the real prize was the personal education I've gained while obtaining 3 vocational certifications, an Associates degree (business management), and certification in Facility Stationary Engineering for Boiler operation, steamfitting, and Heating and Ventilation. In addition to these I've obtained around 80 certificates for completion and facilitation of self-help and betterment classes.

Freedom was the carrot that I dangled in front of myself to satisfy my need to have purpose and pursue an audacious goal, so I attributed all of my accomplishments to the pursuit of that goal. Although I still value my freedom, my focus now isn't to feverishly try to earn it, but to invest in my personal education as a form of restitution, thereby gifting myself back to society, at some point, having chosen to reform my entire way of being.

Now that the end of this prison journey is in sight, I realize that I generally have a value of learning. I love to learn just for the sake of learning. I am fascinated by everything and I can now define myself as a student of life and not just a chaser of goals.

If I'm giving an honest testimony of my educational experience while incarcerated, I must include the challenges and barriers I have faced in trying to pursue higher education. For many years I was excluded from taking any of the few Associates degree programs offered in prison, due to my time structure. My monthly requests were ignored or denied for years. Then an outsider joined the ranks of DOC, Kristen, who became our Dean of education at Monroe Correctional Complex. Bringing fresh perspective, she contrasted the arbitrary rules that were blindly followed by her predecessors. She rewarded my tenacity by allowing me to earn an Associates degree, and I am grateful for the true educators like her, who have chosen to invest in me and allow me to return to society being better equipped to financially provide for myself and my family.

I define my education behind bars as self guided, or self directed. Sure, there are the programs that DOC forces inmates to complete, i.e., GED programming, Chemical Dependency, and Anger Management, for example. These are the ones that are full of people who don't want to be there, so they goof off, complain the whole time, and have no desire to use them as steps toward something greater. They attend only to avoid receiving an infraction for rebelling against the rules. I, on the other hand, decided early on that I wasn't going to be the stereotypical complaining inmate wallowing in misery and self pity. I challenged the GED test my first month in prison, passed it, then began earning Information Technology vocational certification. I later added Technical Design, and CNC Machining vocational certifications to my list of accomplishments. Vocational education in prison is completely voluntary, so I chose to pursue these while also reading as much non fiction material as my rigorous schedule would permit.

Winston Churchill defined success as going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm. I resemble that remark, as I have made my share of mistakes, but I have learned from them, and they have been my toughest schoolmasters. I am not discouraged, worn out, or tired. I am just as enthusiastic about learning new things every day as I was when I was a 19 year old kid who made a very big mistake. Soon prison will be in my rear view mirror, and I will be making good use of the education that I have chosen to pursue with my time. I am truly a lifelong learner, a student of all that is life. Some have defined my 25 year sentence as a life sentence. I define it as my learning journey.