

# Messages from the Mound



In 2007, I began my prison ministry where I facilitated my Relationship First Aid spiritual based personal development classes at Mound Correctional Facility in Detroit. After Mound closed in 2012, I continued to communicate with the inmates through newsletters, birthday cards and attending/speaking at events at various facilities. It is suspected that the facility got its name because of the many ancient mounds that were found all over Detroit, and I believe the most concentrated and/largest ones

were along what is now known as Mound Rd.

"Messages from the Mound" is named after the newsletters that I send out to the inmates since that is where we all initially met. Because the classes that I was teaching them focused on spiritual elevation allowing the negativity within them to die, thus ultimately elevating their consciousness, I thought it an appropriate name because a "mound" is defined as: an "elevation" formed of earth overlying ruins, a grave etc., a heap or raised mass. The following articles are from men that are currently incarcerated or released and this serves as an opportunity for the voiceless to have a voice. If you have a loved one that is currently incarcerated and would like for me to send them newsletters, please forward their contact information with a MDOC number to: Relationshipfirstaid@yahoo.com or contact me at: Relationship First Aid, Attn: Ma'at Seba, 15224 W. 7 Mile Rd., Detroit, MI. 48235.

## Conviction designed for Greatness

By Bobbi Bostic  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN



When a person is convicted of a crime, greatness is the last thing on their mind. Freedom is what they are thinking about constantly. But in time they come to realize that freedom is a state of mind. So they begin to pursue mental freedom. Through this quest a prisoner comes to see that prison is not their greatest burden. Via their studies they come to see that the truly free are people that are great or at least striving for greatness. Thus a seed is born. From the depths of the dirt the convicted person starts striving for his own greatness. It is from the lowest depths that the greatest people have risen. That's even true for people in prison.

During pre-Biblical days Joseph rose from the rank of prisoner to one of the highest state officials in Egypt. While in prison he

had a vision, as do many of us who still sit in prison. There are countless examples of many men who were convicted of a crime; then found their true calling in life and then rose to greatness. In contemporary times we have Malcolm X, Merle Haggard, and Nelson Mandela as examples. Yet many of us have potential to rise to the same level of greatness. Yet as the saying goes: many are called but few are chosen. Meaning that many can potentially be called to greatness, but only a few will do the necessary hard work and make the needed sacrifices to achieve greatness in life or in their particular calling or field.

From the conviction of a crime a man can become convicted of his own potential for greatness. Let's look at the word conviction. Conviction: 1. the act of convicting a person in court. 2. the state of being convinced. 3. a strong persuasion or belief.

After being convicted of a crime in court the prisoner must use his time to find himself; thereby finding his true calling in life. We all have a gift, something that we can contribute to the world. A prisoner must be convinced of this. His strong belief in his own redemption will lead him to a path of maturity and growth. Once a person has been down for so long he wants to rise to unknown heights. If he doesn't limit his vision he can surely attain greatness. It's been said that the mind can achieve what the mind can conceive. This can be done even from a prison cell. In fact it has been done time and time again as documented throughout history. Certainly a criminal conviction is not designed to help a person achieve greatness. Designed conviction is when a prisoner personally designs their conviction to change their life for the better.

To construct such a design takes great conviction on the part of the prisoner. It requires a strenuous effort. Once the seed of greatness is implanted in the mind of the prisoner he must till the soil in order for the seed to germinate. This seed is watered through reading books and other materials. The sun shines on the seed through inspirational tidbits such as motivational music and encouraging movies. Doing the work to change his life is the air that allows his tree to blossom. Programs, classes, college, creating non-profits, blueprints for charity, etc. are the nutrients that nurture the seed of greatness. Look at Malcolm X and how he designed his conviction to become great. The average prisoner must also design his conviction to attain to greatness. Take the worse situation of your life and become your best self. There is greatness in you if you search for it by design. If you succeed in finding it then you can transform your personal situation from the worse to the best. Then you can turn your entire life around as a result of a designed conviction.

**EVERYONE HAS A PLACE, A VOICE.**

## Second Chance Legislation

By Jawan Hayes  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

The "Second Look Legislation" bill allows a defendant who has served at least 10 years in prison to petition a federal court for a sentence reduction. Here are two men of many eligible, who would be perfect candidates for a Second Look opportunity:

Dennis Berkey, at a very young age became the target of abuse. His biological parents who were very heavy drinkers verbally and physically abused him. He was told to move out of the house at 17. He joined an Outlaw Motorcycle gang for the companionship and acceptance the members provided. At the age of 33 Mr. Berkey participated in planning the murder of his ex-wife with his girlfriend Donna Shudell. Ms. Shudell was charged with 2nd degree murder and Mr. Berkey was charged with conspiracy 1st degree murder and 1st degree murder (aiding and abetting theory). Mr. Berkey was sentenced to 2 natural life terms, his co-defendant, who stabbed and did the murder, received a term of 10-2 years, paroled after 8 1/2 years in 1996.

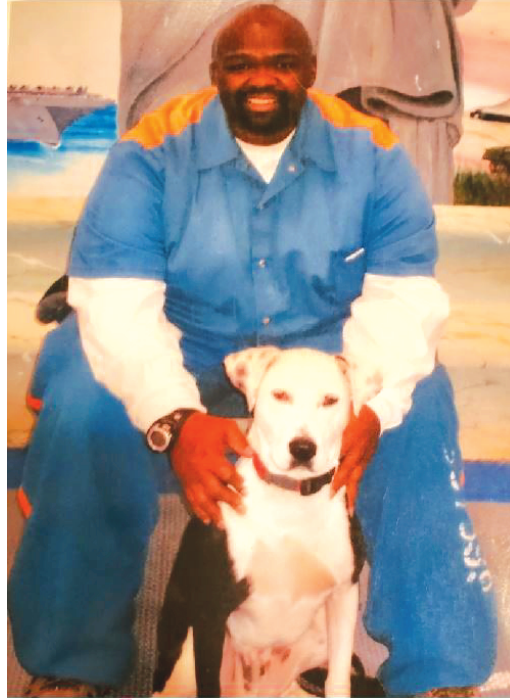
While in prison Mr. Berkey came to see the personal characteristics that led to his past conduct and the broken person he became. This disheartening realization motivated Mr. Berkey to participate in numerous rehabilitative programming and drove his desire to become the quality person he aspired to be as a child. Mr. Berkey participated in numerous MDOC rehabilitative programming, including; Chance For Life Tier 1), Cage Your Rage, Thinking For a Change, Conflict Resolution, Victim Awareness, Personal Enrichment, Grief and Loss Workshop, Leadership Development (CFL).

Mr. Berkey also participated in several correspondence courses such as, Criminal, Offender Responsibility and Anger Management from American Community Corrections Institute, HUSTLE 2.0 program. Mr. Berkey is a facilitator of Victim Awareness program offered by the National Lifers of America since 2019 and is also the Vice President. Mr. Berkey also facilitated Jaycee's CDL Truck Driving program for over 4 years. Mr. Berkey's transformation is reflected in his prisoner conduct. During Mr. Berkey's 37 years of incarceration he has received 7 major misconducts, his last misconduct was over 20 years ago, he missed a general library call-out. Mr. Berkey will turn 70 in 2024 and has served 37 years.

Laroy Strayhorn, #178167. 68 years old with an Honorable discharge from the military, has served almost 40 years of the life without parole sentence on a felony murder; ("larceny") conviction in December 1984. In his 40 years, Strayhorn has received five misconducts reports - "only one in the last 35 years." Given the realities of incarceration, (particularly for one serving a life without parole sentence), Laroy's institutional record over the last 35 years can only be viewed as exemplary. While incarcerated, Strayhorn has completed and received "Certificates of Completion" in numerous MDOC educational and therapy programs to better himself, i.e., "Cage Your Rage, Thinking For A Change," and others. He has maintained a steady work assignment with positive work reports. He donates funds from his prison jobs to community charities such as the "Crime Victims Fund" and "Domestic Abuse Shelters;" all while volunteering as a member in good standing with numerous organizations, i.e., The Jaycees, National Lifers of America, the Child of The Month Club, Chance for Life and worked as a handler and trainer in one of the MDOC's dog programs. "Seeing the progress in some of these poor dogs when you get one; there's no greater feeling of accomplishment than knowing you're giving back to your community by doing something that will someone other than yourself." In addition, the MDOC's "COMPASS," (a test given to determine a prisoner's mental and emotional

readiness to be paroled), rated Strayhorn's risk of Recidivism as "Low." Of course, it should be noted that the MDOC does have many great programs for the betterment of those convicted, yet unfortunately many of the programs are NOT offered or given to those whom have more than a 7 year ERD (Earliest Release Date). This hinders

many lifers from gaining a education and bettering themselves for future processes such as the "Second Look" or Good Time Bills. For the record, Mr. Strayhorn was blessed through his work and completion of programs to be given a "Warden's Recommendation and Referral" request for a Commutation to the Michigan Parole Board; asking the Parole Board to consider Mr. Strayhorn for release. In describing S. Trayhorn's character, the Warden began by stating, "Mr. Strayhorn is respected by staff and other prisoners... He is always willing to go out of his way in a quiet but effective way to assist others." She went on to note, "he (Strayhorn) is not only considered by staff to be a model prisoner, but also a



mentor and role model for other prisoners." "He follows the rules and is a calming influence to the much younger population." From my perspective, Mr. Strayhorn has served his sentence with optimism and increased insight." Unfortunately, due to Mr. Strayhorn's sentence, the Parole Board has no jurisdiction to grant even a Wardens recommendation, as commutes are designed for the Michigan Governor. Unfortunately, Mr. Strayhorn's health is declining, he has suffered a series of heart attacks in recent years that required placement of five stents. Along with being diagnosed with Coronary Artery Disease, he also has COPD, high blood pressure and degenerative osteoarthritis that limits his ability to perform basic daily functions (ie. walking and writing). In spite of his debilitating medical issues, Mr. Strayhorn continues to better himself by volunteering his time (when he is able), to the younger people and others by helping them to transform their lives for the better. Even under a life without parole sentence, he remains hopeful the "Second Look Legislation" will be passed which will give hope to many who are in need of showing society they are worthy of a second chance.

Call To Action: What you can do to help?

By Getting involved with the National Lifers of America Inc.(NLA) which is a registered organization whose purpose is to assist returning citizens in obtaining the tools necessary to turn their lives around and become pro-social; productive, law-abiding members of society upon release.

NLA Sponsors programs for prisoners in academic development, conflict resolution anger management, cognitive skills, leadership writing, informative updates on relevant legislative matters, organizing community support, rallies, parole workshops, fundraising activities, legal and legislative seminars with judges, attorneys, professors, state legislators, law enforcement and community leaders. The NLA is working diligently to bring positive changes by advocating meaningful for legislature such as Good Time, Second Look and ending JLWOP and more.

These Michigan Prisoners whose purpose is to affect changes in the State Laws which govern Lifers, Long Indeterminate Sentences ("Virtual Lifers") as well as those serving short-term parole sentences. This entails working closely with the Executive Branch Governor's Office, State Legislature and Michigan Department of Corrections Parole Board.

The National Lifers of America is seeking the following to help advance our efforts. Guest Speakers, Sponsors, Donations, Grant Writers

If you would like to know more about NLA please visit our website at: [www.Nationallifersofamerica.org](http://www.Nationallifersofamerica.org) or Email us at: [Info@nationallifersofamerica.org](mailto:Info@nationallifersofamerica.org). We thank you for your time and look forward to hearing from you.