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Journey to Freedom

by TaSin Sabir

After serving 12 years in prison, Daniel Alem returned home on February 22, 2023. But he likely would still be locked up if not for the dedication and tireless efforts of his cousin, Abel Kebreab, and the Oakland Participatory Defense Hub's Resentencing Project.

Participatory Defense transforms the "in just" system by empowering incarcerated people and their families to positively impact the outcome of court cases. Nationwide, participatory defense programs have helped to shave thousands of years off people's prison sentences. Based on a community organizing model, this approach creates opportunities for families and friends to take an active role in their loved one's defense, demanding that their voices be heard in the court process.

Often, one of the steps in resentencing cases like Daniel's is to create a social biography packet. When you create the social biography package and go in front of the parole board, you might have to admit to charges that aren't truthful, such as in Daniel's case, where he had to admit to a robbery charge on top of second-degree attempted murder. In Daniel's social biography packet, he writes about being raised in an abusive household and the difficulties that ultimately led to his incarceration.

As a young man, Daniel often acted out of anger and thought he could fill the void created by a painful childhood with material things. He writes, "I was callous and angry and didn't care about anyone's feelings and was willing to do anything to fulfill my greedy and materialistic obsession that derived from my poverty and shame of having so little as a child. I decided to find a way to make some quick money, that's when I attempted to rob [victim's name withheld], and when he struggled, I shot him, and for that, I am now serving a life sentence. This was rock bottom, traumatizing someone and putting them through so much pain because of my hurt, my greed, and my selfishness."

As Bryan Stevenson says in his book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done." But what does this mean for those who are sentenced to life in prison? To Daniel, it meant don't give up. "For me, I've never been willing to give up," Daniel says. "I can be up against every obstacle possible, I'm not giving up. I'm not giving up for nothing."

Daniel started taking classes because of a conversation he had with two older men who were serving time with him. They told him that he had a choice: he could either be about the "bullshit" or get in the law library, take classes, and figure out a way to get out of there. "Getting advice from these two individuals who have seen a lot in the course of their prison career, I take heed to that," Daniel says. "These older individuals have been through experiences and have wisdom and guidance."

The journey to freedom began with Daniel going to the law library, where he learned more about the parole process, as well as classes he could enroll in that would serve both his case and his personal development. What started as Daniel trying to please the parole board grew into a process of self-discovery and an attempt to heal his childhood trauma. To learn new skills and how to make positive behavior changes, he took classes that helped him identify the types of coping strategies he had used in the past, why they didn't work, and, most importantly, how to replace them with new ones that were beneficial to his growth.

"Through my years in prison, I have achieved a deeper understanding of my crime and myself," Daniel says. "Even though I've made so many mistakes in my life, with the time I've spent incarcerated, I've been able to focus on my behavior and learn more about myself by taking the self-help groups that were available and even talking with the clinician. They have helped me to understand my character defects, and my actions, and how to correct my unhealthy way of thinking to become a better decision maker, which will allow me to have a successful reentry into society."

In his social biography packet, Daniel created a detailed "Healthy Relationship Maintenance Plan." He explores his history of numbing himself through marijuana and alcohol, which only exacerbated already unhealthy relationships. He went on to make lists titled "Red Flags in a Toxic Relationship" and "Warning Signs, Exit Strategies, Relapse Prevention, and Support System." He closes this section with a paragraph that asks the question: "What is a healthy relationship?" To summarize his answer, a healthy relationship consists of mutual respect and boundaries.

While Daniel was doing all this work inside, his cousin Abel was busy on the outside researching bills that could help with reducing Daniel's sentence. In March 2022, Daniel came across Oscar Flores' name in the AOUON Newspaper. Oscar represents AOUON on the Oakland Participatory Defense Hub. Daniel suggested that Abel call him. Abel did and started attending weekly family support meetings with Oscar, where they discussed strategies to petition for his release. One of the steps was for Daniel to complete a social biography packet.

Every step was instrumental to the process and done with intention and detail. Daniel and Abel talked on the phone every Saturday, and Abel would relay the information that was shared in the meetings he had with Oscar. Meanwhile, Abel printed and mailed the social biography packet template to his cousin. Daniel had already been doing the work to better himself for 10 years; so completing the packet was a matter of gathering all that information and organizing it in a way that would communicate to the court the changes he'd made within.

"Initially, Oscar gave me a template of the things that he should do for the social biography packet," Abel says. "A lot of those things Daniel had already done, just from the different programs he was in. For example, writing to the victim and accountability letters and things like that. Daniel and I had really good communication, and on the weekends he always called me, and I would tell him what Oscar wants, and if I needed to mail anything to him, I would mail it."

Abel describes Daniel as a motivated and genuinely good person. While in the past, his trauma caused him to react in negative ways, Daniel never liked to cause chaos and didn't want to be a troublemaker. "Daniel isn't a lazy person, and if he sets his mind to something, he sticks to it," Abel says. "Just from observing him while he was inside, he was always working, and he knew that eventually it would help him heal as a person because he did have a lot of trauma growing up."

When asked what made him put in the effort to help his cousin, Abel replies, "For me, it never felt like I was giving up too much of my time. It's just something that I knew that he would do for me. I just wanted to do anything I could so that he could come home."

Although the resentencing process is structured through weekly meetings and templates, there are outside factors that can make it difficult. "You have to be diligent," Daniel says. "You have to be patient. This process can be lengthy, and there can be a lot of obstacles for the family members or for you when having to deal with correctional officers or counselors finding out that your C-File is being requested, because they may retaliate and use forms of deterrence. I actually suffered a retaliation once my C-File was requested, and my cell was searched twice within two weeks, and I have never been on the radar. They try to find any type of dirt on you or put you in a position to get a write-up because the California Department of Corrections, in no type of way, wants you to go home. They want you to serve out the rest of your life in prison because you are the biggest commodity they have. Patience, diligence, and just keep on hustling and keep on grinding and getting them classes in. Getting those support letters in and networking. Really talk to individuals about the programs that are out on the street. How volunteers who come into the prison can help after incarceration or how they can help with the process of trying to get somebody resentenced. There are a lot of people out there fighting for us, so being vocal and willing to communicate with individuals that can lend a helping hand is one of the most vital things."

When asked how he feels about the work that his cousin Abel put in on his behalf, Daniel pauses, laughs uncomfortably, then says, "Abel knows how I feel about him. I mean he showed me that I am valued. I love him, you know." Love and hard work can make the impossible possible. Welcome home, Daniel!