Billy Kidd Takes His Last Shot

by A.R. Quinn

William "Billy" Kidd used to live up to his outlaw name. According to his then-parole officer, Mark Goricki, he showed up at a parole appointment in the early 1990s in a black Grand Prix, wearing a black cowboy hat and a black duster down to his ankles. He liked playing the part.

Growing up in Michigan, Billy was an alter boy from a well-to-do suburban family. However, he doesn’t remember learning much from the Latin masses at the Roman Catholic church, and there was trouble at home. His father, a successful executive, traveled a lot. His mother, struggling with depression, self-medicated with alcohol. Embarrassed by the situation at home, Billy, who was often teased about sharing a name with a legendary Wild West gunfighter, started getting into all the trouble he could find.

He bounced in and out of juvenile detention and youth camp. The troubled boy unveiled even more after his mom died of a massive heart attack. At 17, Billy caught his first adult felony charges. He wound up on a cell block with men he calls "the worst of the worst." He remembers, "They became my mentors in crime."

Prison became a place of belonging. "Everyone I knew was [behind bars]," he says. "I would come out to the free world to wreak havoc, run deals, and get sent back."

Once or twice in the early days of his incarceration, Billy heard people talk about Jesus, but any "jailhouse religion" crumbled as soon as he was out. The streets, promising money and women, were too powerful a temptation.

From Dead-End to Deliverance

After years spent revolving in and out of the Michigan Department of Corrections, Billy had a body’s worth of tattoos and a rap sheet long enough to wallpaper a room. He also had a daughter that he had never met. In November 1998, he found himself in segregation for his leadership role in a race-based prison gang. There, he says, God got his attention.

With a Bible for a companion, Billy began to read. The words made sense to him in a way they never had before. He started to reflect on the way he was living and the collateral damage of all his bad choices. "I recognized the evil in my life," he says. "I thought, if I died right now, people would be happy."

Billy felt like God was giving him one more chance to get his life right. He begged for forgiveness and decided to make the most of his last shot. When Billy got out of segregation, he stayed true to his commitment. With good behavior, he got down from Level V to Level II. He got involved in the prison church, and in a place like prison, where self-preservation, privacy, and outward strength are prized, that doing it alone isn’t better than doing it together. And that vulnerability and community make prison time not only more bearable, but actually something beautiful.

Tapped by Loyd to lead the group, former banker and breast cancer survivor Nadine Eidman had never dreamed of visiting a prison, much less volunteering in one. But when Loyd asked if she would be willing to help, her own experience with the disease pushed her to say "yes."

"When you hear the word ‘cancer,’ it’s heavy. I had the... Continued on page 2
Dan Kingery

Guest Column: Dan Kingery

When you are in the system, it can seem hopeless. You have few choices, little input, and a lot of people telling you what to do. It’s tempting to shut off your brain and just do time.

However, we are each created with unique gifts. It’s unhealthy—and against our design—to numb out and let time slip by. It might seem easiest in the short run, but forcing yourself to “do time” wastes the gift of each day, promotes hopelessness, and sets you up for failure upon release.

The truth is, even when you are behind bars, you do still have some control. Your mindset is the single greatest factor in whether you do time, or whether you manage to use time.

Step One in using your time well is to resist thinking of yourself as the victim of a situation someone else imposed on you. You have the choice to be the best person you can be today and work toward the person you want to be tomorrow. Decide what action you will take to do more than just get by psychologically and physically. Think about what good you can do, for yourself and others, with the talent and opportunities you do have.

Step Two is to realize that everyone lives in a community. Sometimes we talk, as though “the community” only existed outside prison. The fact is, you live in a community right now, and you can be a powerful voice for wellness, safety, and growth.

From Angola to Zephyrhills, every resident of every prison has an opportunity to be a good citizen today. Your actions and attitudes shape your in-prison community. When you establish strong, prosocial relationships, it benefits you and your neighbors. When you help solve problems, give respect, and encourage healthy living, you are part of the solution. Whether you signed up to be one or not, you are a role model for the people around you.

Ninety-five percent of prisoners will be released, and many have a great vision for what they are going to do in the free world. But practicing good citizenship in the prison community now greatly improves your chances of being a good citizen when you get there. Don’t deceive yourself: there’s nothing magical about passing through the gate. The person you are in prison is the person you’ll be on the street.

So start right now. You might not have many free days left, but you still have what’s most important: control over your attitude and aspirations, influence, and a choice about how you will use your time today. Use what you have for good.

Dan Kingery is the vice president of ministry programs at Prison Fellowship.

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I n April 2016, Sgt. Joseph Serna faced a night behind bars. But the retired Special Forces Green Beret was not a stranger to dark places. Over the course of three tours in Afghanistan, Serna survived several traumatic experiences that could have easily claimed his life. He withstood the dangers of a roadside bomb and a suicide bomber. He survived another close call in an overturned bomber. He survived another close call in an overturned truck, which landed upside down in a canal.

Only Sgt. Serna would make it out of the vehicle alive. While these incidents earned Serna military decorations, they also left him with his fair share of emotional baggage. Like many of his fellow soldiers, he suffers from PTSD.

Part of Serna’s sentence required that he report to Judge Lou Olivera at the Veterans Treatment Court every two weeks. One time, Serna lied about a recent urine test. He later admitted this, and the judge sentenced Serna to one night behind bars.

A night alone in a cramped jail cell was the worst prescription for Sgt. Joe Serna’s PTSD. An unexpected visitor transformed the night in a way he wasn’t prepared for.

I’ve discovered that God is in the rehabilitation business—bringing about personal change in people’s lives. Christian rehabilitation is unique, for it relies on Christ’s power to change people from the inside out.

All of us, without exception, have fallen short of God’s standards. We are all addicted to sin and self. Every person needs to be rescued from sin’s grip and become a new person in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

We enter the Lord’s unique life-changing program the day we receive Christ, and that program continues for life—not just for a few months. The apostle Paul put it this way: “And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns” (Philippians 1:6).

Whatever our sin-habits are, we all need the same Savior. And everyone who comes to Him shows God’s love, healed the sick, and taught those who were blind (John 14:12). But God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ even when we were dead in our sins. Because of this, we can begin a relationship with God and find new life in Him. If you want to do that today, you can start with this simple prayer:

God, I have been separated from You, and I don’t want to be alone anymore. Thank you for showing me that You want to have a relationship with me. Please help me to turn from my past and to give my brokenness and shame to You. I want to have a fresh start and begin to walk in Your light.

Time for a Change

from Our Daily Bread

Check with your chaplain about receiving the Our Daily Bread devotional on a regular basis.

ourtaldybreed.org/
CorrectionalMinistries

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Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT

by Emily Andrews

Don’t Do Your Time Alone

No matter whether you’ve been in Ad-Seg for months, or you are packed like a sardine into a noisy dorm with tiers of bunkbeds, prison can be a place of extreme isolation.

The Bible makes it clear that we were never made to be alone. We were made for peaceful, loving relationships with God and other people from the very beginning. We have all messed that up. Even so, God could not bear to let us remain separated from Him. He sent Jesus—also called Immanuel, “God with us”—to die on a cross and pay the price for our sins. Because of this, we can begin a relationship with God and find new life in Him. If you want to do that today, you can start with this simple prayer:

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God has gone to incredible lengths to restore your relationship with Him. You don’t have to be alone anymore. If you’d like to learn more about what it means to have a relationship with God through Jesus, Inside Jails wants to help. Just write to “Are You Lonely?”, P.O. Box 1990, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

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Whatever our sin-habits are, we all need the same Savior. And everyone who comes to Him echoes the same testimony: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Are you letting Jesus Christ change you from the inside out?

-Joanie Yoder
Running Toward Second Chances

by Emily Andrews

Leaving prison, Rob hoped for a better life beyond the gate. He had taken life skills classes and studied dozens of books. But he also had rent and restitution to pay, as well as a family to support; and his record as an arsonist made it difficult to move forward. Though he was very qualified and performed well in job interviews, hiring managers turned him down as soon as his background check came back with a felony conviction. Discouraged, Rob felt like he was stuck in a “second prison,” unable to unlock the door to a completely fresh start.

The Second Prison Project, a campaign of Prison Fellowship, supports opportunities for second chances and real restoration. The campaign seeks to change perceptions about people with a criminal record by showing their God-given potential to lead transformed lives, filled with purpose and positive contributions.

The first step in helping the 65 million Americans with a criminal record to participate in its second chances and real restoration is the starting line. The Second Chances 5Ks were an important part of helping people in Minnesota and Colorado understand the “second prison.” Hundreds of participants walked, jogged, and ran to support the campaign. Various prisons also organized runs to take place within their walls, coinciding with the hosting cities’ runs. Whether behind bars or in the free world, the runners were headed toward one finish line: a society that supports second chances and restored futures for people who have paid their debt.

That kind of cultural change doesn’t happen overnight.

“We can have all the sentencing reform we want and have all the prison reform we want, but we still have to reform our culture,” Wiese told the Gazette. He knows from experience how difficult it is to regain the community’s trust. After spending nearly eight years in prison, Wiese had come to know God and decided to turn his life around.

He finished a bachelor’s degree from his cell, earned his law degree after release, and passed the Virginia Bar Exam. But his dream of becoming a lawyer was denied a license to practice law because of his record. As a felon, Wiese knew he would have to deal with stigmas. He just didn’t know it would be so hard to overcome them.

Despite these difficulties, Wiese kept a positive attitude.

A Strong Finish

Like Wiese, Dennis Avila, who was one of the runners in Colorado, had found God while in prison and resolved to turn his life around. But even with a change of heart, he struggled to reintegrate into society and build a stable life. He worked difficult jobs, he wasn’t paid much, and he had no retirement plan.

Eventually, Avila started his own business, but the road to his second chance was a long one. “I was the guy who needed a project like this,” he said on ColoradoSprings.com. For other people with a criminal record, events like the Second Chances 5Ks could instill a new hope.

Avila and others were running together from miles apart, displaying what the campaign is all about: creating opportunities to build and sustain positive community that open doors of opportunity. That kind of positive community can be formed even before people are released, and running for second chances gave women at MCF-Shakopee a chance to experience it firsthand.

“It was so cool to know that we were not alone,” said one participant, referring to the runners who ran at different locations. Another participant shared that feeling: “I’ve never felt such unity within the prison walls—all of us cheering for each other.”

One participant described the sense of wholeness that community brings: In a place like prison, where you can be surrounded by people and still feel alone, joining that community of runners was a powerful thing. “For a brief hour I forgot I was in prison and felt fully human again,” she said.

Real community is possible, and it is transformative. The Second Chances 5Ks remind us that there are people behind bars, and outside them, who believe in a future of authentic, healthy, restored community. Some people just need another way. Given a second chance, they might just take it and run with it. ■

Going Against the Grain

by Sam Dye

In the United States, there are about 1,800 state and federal correctional facilities, plus an additional 3,200 local and county jails. If you go into any one of them, the unwritten code that governs life behind bars is more or less the same: Don’t snitch. Mind your own business. Don’t trust anyone. Be your own person. It’s us versus them.

Adopting the prison culture around you might seem like a simple matter of survival, but it comes at a steep price. You have the best chance of turning your life around when you are in trusting relationships with other people who share your goals. But instead of building up positive relationships, prison culture leaves you isolated and breaks down true community—the very community you’re going to need if you want to change direction.

For many years, I have talked with men and women behind bars about prison culture. During these conversations, we also discuss the alternative values that build up communities where real transformation happens. In Galatians 5, a chapter of the New Testament, you find a list of the values that should define daily interactions in this new kind of community: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Unfortunately, for many people, these values don’t sound like something to aspire to; they sound too weak, impractical, and naive for life behind bars, or even back on the streets.

So what’s a person to do? If you want to change, and if you need community to do it, how can you go against the grain of prison culture to build relationships based on integrity and mutual encouragement? Here are some tips to get you started, based on what I have seen work in prisons around the country:

Take the lead. If you want to change the culture of your prison, you can’t just gripe about what’s wrong and hope it will change. You’ll be waiting a long time. Instead, seek out the people around you who aren’t just playing the game, but whose lives demonstrate their readiness to live differently. Band together and commit to help one another through positive, intentional relationships.

Recognize that you need a positive mentor. When Billy Kidd, the man whose story is on the cover, was 17, he wound up on a cell block with men who became his “mentors in crime.” Perhaps you have had a similar experience with someone who coached you in a criminal lifestyle. If you want to lead a transformed life, you need to find the opposite—a positive mentor who has walked a ways down the road you want to follow. That may be a volunteer who comes to your facility, or it may be a fellow prisoner who has consistently proven their commitment to life-change over time. Once you find a positive mentor, ask them to help guide you through the decisions you face and the goals you need to set.

Ask for feedback. We all have blind spots—difficult truths about ourselves that we cannot see, but which are obvious to people who know us well. The people closest to us rarely tell us about our blind spots, because doing so would cause conflict and might jeopardize the relationship.

That’s why you need to seek out honest feedback. Ask your mentor or a trusted friend to reveal to you what your blind spots might be. It might not be the easiest conversation you’ll ever have, but if you are serious about leading a changed life and building positive community, the information you get will be priceless.

Sam Dye is the senior vice president of field operations at Prison Fellowship.

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