The Impossible Journey of Darryl Brooks

by Zoe Erler and S.L. Ray

Darryl Brooks started using marijuana at age 10. He lived in a sleepy little town in Texas, and he and his friends were looking for some excitement. His dad wasn’t around, and his mom worked two jobs to support her 12 children, so there wasn’t a lot of supervision. “I was practically raised by my siblings,” he explains. In junior high, he went from using to selling.

He managed to graduate high school, but he had no one around to help him plan for his future. He was more about short-term highs than long-term goals. One night, Darryl and his best friend were cruising the streets, drinking, and his friend handed him crack cocaine.

After that night, Darryl fell deeper into the drug scene. He felt hopeless. “I would tell my mom, ‘Just let me die in the streets,’” Darryl recalls. “I was practically raised by my mom, so there wasn’t much protection, it also offers a gang might offer a sense of protection, it also offers a sense of belonging. But it’s not just what you want to have a conflict with your cellmate or a corrections officer, you need friends to help calm you down. This longing to belong is why some people join a gang. But while a gang might offer a sense of protection, it also offers trouble and strings attached. You don’t need a gang—you need a handful of trustworthy and supportive people to help get you through life in a healthy way. You need a tribe.

Here are three ways to find and strengthen your tribe while serving your time.

1. Seek out positive influencers.
   Has your blood ever started pumping hard when you saw someone fighting, or have you ever teared up when you saw someone crying? Studies show that emotions are contagious. Hanging out with happier people makes you feel happier, less stressed, and more energized.

   Think of your habits and traits (short-tempered, lazy, critical, etc.) that you could stand to improve, and then find people who have the traits you’d like to have. Observe how they act/react. Mirror their behaviors. And the more positive people you hang around, the more their positivity will rub off on you.

   Even after receiving a 50-year sentence, Darryl stayed on a path to destruction. Eventually, he found the path to freedom. Now, he walks the same halls he once walked as a prisoner—but this time as a free man.

   About a week later, he found himself at a class about living life God’s way. While he was there, “God wrecked my life,” says Darryl, “and I ain’t been the same since.” Everything shifted that day. He stopped dealing drugs and started going to church regularly, even though his friends told him he was crazy. “Instantly, I started walking the compound and telling people about Jesus Christ,” he says.

   Darryl felt like a changed man, but he was still struggling to figure out who God wanted him to be. That’s when he was transferred to the Carol S. Vance Unit in Houston so he could participate in the Prison Fellowship Academy, an intensive year-long program of transformation. “[The Academy] really instilled in me the tools I needed to operate back in society,” he says.

   For one thing, he discovered what it meant to be a real father.

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Find Your Tribe

Behind Bars

by S.L. Ray

uddling through life alone isn’t appealing. We want a circle of friends who will enrich our lives and stand by our side.

That’s true even when—or maybe especially when—you’re stuck behind bars, having to deal with the same problems as the outside world and the problems unique to prison life, all while living in a fishbowl. When prison life gets stressful, you need companions to give you encouragement. When you

have a conflict with your cellmate or a corrections officer, you need friends to help calm you down. This longing to belong is why some people join a gang. But while a gang might offer a sense of protection, it also offers trouble and strings attached. You don’t need a gang—you need a handful of trustworthy and supportive people to help get you through life in a healthy way. You need a tribe.

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   One in-depth study from 1948 to 2008 revealed that having a close contact in your social circle who is happy increases your own chance of happiness by 15%. And a secondary social contact (friend of a friend) who is happy increases your chance of happiness by 10%. Even a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, someone who doesn’t even know you well, can increase your likelihood of happiness by 6%.

2. Find a tribe with balance.
   Healthy tribes offer a safe place to just be yourself—and to be called out when you need a reality check. Surround yourself with people who tell you what you need to hear, not just what you want to hear. People who simply agree with everything you say aren’t going to challenge you. But on the flipside, you don’t want a tribe that only brings conflict. If you and a friend/spouse feel tension, try this exercise together. Make a list of the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship. Write down more positive than negative aspects (at least a 2-to-1

   Continued on page 2
African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” That’s especially true when you’re parenting behind bars. Here are three ways to find your parenting village while incarcerated:

1. Tap another adult to be your child’s mentor.

Ask your child’s caregiver if there’s a trustworthy coach or other adult who can spend time with your child. Also, find a Christian community member, pastor, or relative who can serve as a spiritual mentor—someone to teach your children to turn to God whenever they’re afraid or missing you. Even if the child’s caregiver is doing a great job, the more positive influences, the better.

2. Do “shared activities” together.

If your kids are young, find activities you can both do, even while apart, like each coloring a picture. If they’re older, ask them to write a list of tough questions about faith, life, friendships, and then discuss the answers together, in person (ideally) or through video visits, phone calls, or the mail. The Angel Tree program is also a great way to bond. (See p.3.)

3. Encourage your child to find their best tribe.

Remind your kids to hang out with other kids who are making good choices. Positive influences—including books, movies, and social media sites, matter too. Your example matters most of all, so stay out of trouble yourself and dive into prison classes and programs.

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**Letters to the Editor**

**Elmer, North Carolina**

At 65 years old, my way or the highway has gotten old! I don’t want to do it my way anymore. I’ve always run away from God’s Word. I now have about five years left on a 22-year sentence. I don’t like the person I am today. A lot of good things are happening in my life today. In order to keep them, I must change. Today I know I need God in my life. I don’t know God, but I want to know and have a personal relationship with Him.

**Dear Elmer:**

We love your openness. God wants to have a relationship with You, too, and He’s opened the way through His Son Jesus. Keep digging into the Bible and seeking Him, and find other Christians who can help answer your questions. He’s close to those who want to find Him. And when you’re released, find a supportive church community and keep on this same path of transformation.

**Bobby, Virginia**

I was recently reading an INSIDE JOURNAL and saw in there the offer to take a free study. The offer was called “No More Anger.” I have been dealing with a serious bout of anger these past few years, and it has practically consumed me, and somewhat affected the people who support me from the outside, and the people around me here in prison. I would really like to learn more about this area. I appreciate your time, and God bless you.

**Dear Bobby:**

Anger is common in prison, whether it’s frustrations with authority, trust issues/feeling wronged, or jealousy. “Emotional flooding” is the term for the surge you feel when hormones are released in times of anger, panic, or even boredom. When you feel this surge, use tools like prayer, journaling, and breathing exercises to calm down, remembering that when you’re flooded, it takes the body about 20 minutes to physically calm down.

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**Find Your Tribe**

Continued from page 1

ratio) and to not critique anything that’s unchangeable (“I wish you had a different laugh”) or vague (“I wish you weren’t annoying”). To get you started, finish the statements “I appreciate ___” and “I get frustrated by ___.” Then take turns discussing your list using the “sandwich” feedback method: list one positive, then one negative, and then end with another positive.

3. Consult a trustworthy mentor.

To strengthen your friendships, find a fellow prisoner or outside volunteer who has a strong, healthy social circle. To strengthen your marriage or relationship with your significant other, find a prisoner or volunteer who is in a long, healthy marriage. Ask these mentors what they know now that they wish they’d known when they were younger or earlier on in their friendships/marriages. Turn to them for advice or support whenever you’re feeling lost or frustrated in your own relationships.

Surround yourself with positive and supportive people. Find the friends who will have your back while still bringing out the best in you—friends who care enough about you to give you what you need, even when it might not be what you want. That’s a sign of a healthy tribe.

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**Sudoku: It Takes a Village, So Find Your Tribe!**

**R**

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8 5 9 6
9 8 7 6
3 2 4 5
2 6 9 1 4
1 4 6 2 5
```

Use the key to unlock the message below!

```
K 2 9 5 4
D 9 3 6 9
W 3 1 1 5 4
S 8 7 5 9
O 8 9 8 7 9 6
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See p.4 for answer key.

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**The Impossible Journey**

Continued from page 1

When he went to prison, he had a 3-year-old daughter. She was growing up while he was incarcerated, and Darryl hadn’t done much to foster the relationship. But through the help of a parenting class, he began reaching out to his daughter through letters.

“This program gave me the tools I needed to be a parent,” he says. He participated in Angel Tree (see ad on p.3), where his daughter received a gift and personalized message from him, strengthening their bond.

He continued working on his transformation while behind bars. “I saw so many volunteers come through the gate and begin to express the love that I never felt growing up ... wrapping their arms around me and saying, ‘Hey, man, there’s a better way to live.’”

The power of a friendship

One of those volunteers, Jim, became Darryl’s mentor. They shared a love of Jesus and developed a strong brotherhood. Jim was the one who picked up Darryl the day he was released after serving less than 11 years. Darryl started going to Jim’s church. Later, Jim was a groomsman in Darryl’s wedding to Rosalind, a woman he met through another prison volunteer. The couple even asked Jim to be a godparent to their daughter.

After his release, Darryl got a job emptying grease trays for a cleaning company. A year and a half later, he began working as a janitor. Two years after he was released, Darryl returned to Carol Vance—this time as a volunteer. “Coming back in as a volunteer, coming back through that gate, it was an emotion that I cannot really explain,” says Darryl. It reminded him that living behind bars again is not something he ever wanted. Darryl volunteered at the prison for seven years. Then Prison Fellowship® hired him as a program counselor. And then five years later, in the summer of 2016, Darryl was asked to be director of the Vance Unit’s Academy program. It was an honor he could never have imagined receiving.

Had someone told Darryl 20 years ago that he would lead the very same in-prison program that helped turn his messy life around, he would have said, “Impossible.” But with Christ, Darryl is reminded that all things are possible.
Have You Got “Jailhouse Religion”?

by Johnathan Kana

I first learned about “jailhouse religion” when I came to prison. But as it turned out, I had been living it most of my life. You see, I was the “good kid” growing up—the kind who came from a solid family, made good grades, and never got in serious trouble. I went to church every Sunday and volunteered in the community. Others looked up to me as a spiritual leader. But that all changed when the story of my arrest made the front page of my hometown newspaper. People who knew me as a child were shocked. No one saw me as a spiritual leader. Others looked at me in that same way, and I was a time bomb, who had it all together. But it seemed like a “good Christian” religious activity and personal struggles behind a mask of careening out of control, making the front page of my community. Others looked up to me as a spiritual leader.

When I told my story to vice president Sam Dye, a former prisoner who became a chaplain, he shared with me what he had learned from the many other prisoners who had turned their lives around through the Prison Fellowship program. A few proudly went by names like “Preacher” and “Reverend.” But they spent more time boasting about war stories from the streets than they did reading their Bibles. People were what Prison Fellowship senior vice president Sam Dye calls “spiritual criminals.” They say they’ve changed and are working on getting right with God, but what they’re really doing is wearing their religious habits like a spiritual jacket. “You can take it on and take it off at will, depending on who’s around,” Dye says. “It’s really not a part of you.”

It angered me to see people trying to get the benefits of being religious without changing their lives to honor God. But then I knew I was just as guilty as them. Like my chaplain said, I had been a “spiritual criminal” most of my life, too.

Getting real
In the Bible, Jesus has some pretty harsh words for religious pretenders. “Hypocrites!” he calls them. “You are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones!” (Matthew 23:27).

In Jesus’ day, a “hypocrite” was a stage actor—someone hired to play a fictional role. Here, Jesus describes how certain religious leaders appear good but are lifeless in spirit. Like stage actors, they simply put on a good show for others’ applause.

People who practice “jailhouse religion” have learned how to play a fictional role, too. They act one way, but deep down, they’re someone else. They may be admired by others, but God isn’t impressed. “People judge by outward appearance,” the Bible says, “but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Sincere believers aren’t known by their religious behaviors. They’re known by the way they give genuine, selfless love to others. They’re constantly growing in patience, kindness, and self-control—what the Bible calls “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22–23). They make mistakes, of course; we all do! But over time, real believers look more and more like Jesus—both in public and in private.

The Bible says, “When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags” to God (Isaiah 64:6). That’s why God sent His Son Jesus to live the perfect life we never could—and to die the criminal’s death we deserved. And when God raised Jesus from the dead, it proved He had dealt once and for all with our spiritual crimes. Now, if we’re willing to surrender our lives to Jesus, God’s Spirit takes up residence in our hearts, changing us from the inside out. I’m grateful God pursued me into prison. For me, it was proof that no one—not even a spiritual fraud—is a lost cause. If we’re willing to drop the religious act and pursue God with all our heart, it’s never too late to turn “jailhouse religion” into an authentic, lifetime commitment.

REALITY

Jesus said the real deal is to drop the religious act and be real. Please help me to know You more deeply and genuinely. Amen.

To light your fire even more, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations. Just write to “Fired Up,” c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1701, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

Another way to get deeper? Dig in to the Word!
I learned that a program called Angel Tree exists. For the third year in a row, I got questions about Angel Tree, including how you and your child(ren) can participate.

Insider Journal spoke with Karen Beauford, a project manager for Angel Tree, a Prison Fellowship program that works to strengthen relationships between incarcerated parents and their kids. Below are some frequently asked questions about Angel Tree, including how you and your child(ren) can participate.

Inside Journal: What is Angel Tree, and how did it start? Karen Beauford: Back in 1972, a woman named Mary Kay Beard was sentenced to a 21-year prison sentence, which was later reduced to six. While in prison, Mary Kay read the Bible, and eventually she felt God guiding her to serve Him in a unique way. In the days leading up to Christmas, she would watch the other incarcerated mothers send the little they had—soaps, shampoo—to their children as gifts. These makeshift gifts brought so much joy to the children, simply because they had come from their mothers. Upon her release, Mary Kay joined Prison Fellowship’s staff. When asked to come up with some kind of Christmas program, she remembered the incarcerated mothers, and Angel Tree was born. In the 30-plus years since the program started, it has continued to grow, with around 300,000 children served at Christmastime each year.

I: So how does Angel Tree work?
KB: Applications are shipped to the chaplains of participating prisons. Prisoners then fill out an application, which the chaplain collects and mails in. In the fall, Angel Tree volunteers then call each child’s caregiver to coordinate the details. Before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers buy and wrap the gift, which is then delivered to the child at home or at an Angel Tree Christmas party.

I: How does this program strengthen the bond between a parent and child?
KB: On the application forms, prisoners can offer suggestions on specific toys or gift ideas for their kids. Prisoners also get to write their own personal message to each child. It’s a great way to connect parents and children who are physically separated. Kids get to know that their dad might not be home at Christmas, but he’s still thinking of them and sending his love.

I: What is Angel Tree Sports Clinic?
KB: In 2015, Prison Fellowship hosted the first Angel Tree football clinic at Stanford University. In 2012, Prison Fellowship began a partnership with the NFL Alumni Association. The Sports Clinic program expanded across the country and extended into such sports as basketball, soccer, and ice skating. Since then, Angel Tree Sports Clinic has held events for thousands of children of prisoners.

I: Can an Angel Tree Christmas child participate in Angel Tree Camping or Angel Tree Sports Clinic?
KB: Yes! Angel Tree Camping and Angel Tree Sports Clinic currently have limited space, but they are growing and serving as many children as possible. To find out if there is a summer camp near your child, you or your child’s caregiver can call 800.55.ANGEL (26435) to connect with an Angel Tree Camping specialist in your region. To find out if there is a Sports Clinic in your child’s area, contact Prison Fellowship’s call center at 800.206.9764.

I: Where can readers get an Angel Tree Christmas form?
KB: Ask your chaplain for a Prison Fellowship Angel Tree form between May and August. If your facility does not yet participate in Angel Tree and would like to, your chaplain can contact 800.55.ANGEL (26435) to learn more. Forms must be postmarked by September 8, 2020.

New + Notes

COVID-19’s Reminder of Resilience

COVID-19 has affected everything from our nation’s economy to the justice system. This virus is like nothing we’ve ever seen before, and people’s lives are forever changed. COVID-19 impacted our justice system, our prison system, and even Prison Fellowship’s Second Chance® Month prayer walk, which were changed from physical to virtual in response to the virus. COVID-19 has also shown how incredibly strong prisoners are. When faced with challenges and lockdowns, prisoners handled it with grace, even inspiring the outside society, who turned to those on the inside for ideas on how to handle being isolated from family.

On April 1, the White House issued a proclamation, signed by the president, declaring April 2020 as Second Chance Month for the third year in a row.

More than 380 partners joined Prison Fellowship in advocating for second chances, and several states declared their support for Second Chance Month. In April, social media campaigns, prayer groups, Twitter chats, and other activities centered around Second Chance Month took place around the nation. Prayer leaders in Detroit, Chicago, Minneapolis, Lincoln, Oklahoma City, Fresno, and San Bernardino joined forces for a Road to Second Chance Virtual Prayer Meeting, where community members from all these cities came together to cover our nation with prayer. Second Chance Month reminds us that we are more than our past mistakes. We are all made in God’s image, and each of us has a future. COVID-19 reminds us that we are all in this world together, and God can reveal silver linings even in the biggest storms.

Oregon Men Make a Difference for Children

For more than 10 years, men at the Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI), a medium-security, 900-person facility in Salem, Oregon, have held an annual fundraiser. Last summer they raised money for Prison Fellowship’s Angel Tree program, which helps ensure that children of incarcerated parents receive a Christmas gift, and personalized note from their parent (see p.3).

On August 16, 2019, a group of men at OSCI hosted a barbecue, a walkathon, and fundraising booths. Wonderful smells filled the air at OSCI’s large yard. The barbeque featured cheeseburgers, barbecue chicken, hot dogs, and more. Hundreds of people participated in the walkathon, each earning one penny per lap. After three and a half hours and hundreds of laps, walkers had earned hundreds of dollars, including donations from prisoner clubs. The event raised more than $4,000—a new record!“When you do something to help others, it’s going back to the community, and it’s a really, really positive thing,” said George Escalante, recreation specialist at OSCI. “It’s a great message, a great cause. The result is priceless at all levels. It’s helping others realize, ‘I can do something good.’”

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