

Preface

I waited for the boom. High above the Fort Lauderdale Beach, 4th of July fireworks exploded across the coastline, entertaining thousands of cheering families. Surrounded by concrete walls and a one-inch thick glass window, I could only glimpse the streaking pennants in seclusion, unable to hear the signature thunder claps. Instead of celebrating Independence Day with friends and family, like most other red-blooded American 11-year-olds, I stared at the Florida night sky, the silence in my isolation cell deafening as cold beams of color twinkled in the distance.

On that summer evening in 1982, I pleaded for a new beginning: *just give me one more chance—a real chance—and I will say goodbye to this lifestyle forever.* I was tired of the handcuffs, the shrieking red and blue lights, the sprinting police chases. I was tired of my older brothers kicking my ass, tired of my mom's inability to control them. I was sick of fending for myself on the streets and being forced to run away. Not even a teenager yet and I knew I had already missed out on childhood. I didn't want to lose out on adulthood too.

No one could do the hard work for me. Not disapproving cops, overworked teachers, callous juvenile hall guards or other Juvie misfits overwhelmed by the system. For change to happen, it had to come from me. *I* needed to prove people wrong. To lift myself out of this juvenile hell,

I had to show the naysayers I deserved to be called by a name instead of a number.

The following pages chronicle the moments that shaped me, challenged me, and nearly killed me. With each small triumph over adversity, I learned how to ‘win’ at the game of life, and with each setback, I learned how to improve myself. I wish to tell my gritty, unvarnished truth so it may serve as a beacon for other children suffering through difficult times. It’s you downtrodden, in particular, I wish to reach: those kids getting thrown in backs of squad cars, getting locked up when you should be outside playing. I also hope adults reading this will be better prepared to understand youth classified as “at-risk.”

The following stories include the obstacles and decisions that shaped my personal and professional life. Despite what everyone says, it’s my firm conviction we *can* shape our destiny. No matter the circumstances, we *can* impact the outcome. There will always be opportunities; it’s up to us to recognize and seize them. Make no mistake: this book cannot cure your problems, nor guarantee your success at any level. Nothing can do that but you and your efforts. This book will, however, give you a practical understanding of what worked for me. By learning from my mistakes and achievements, you will be better able to face your own unique life challenges.