

ENGULFED IN THE STREET LIFE

(Taking back the narrative of my young, tragic life)

My name is René Francisco Rodriguez, but my friends and family call me Pito. My story begins in the late '70s in the Bronx, a poverty-stricken neighborhood saturated in drugs, violence, and crime. I was born (along with two sisters) to parents who were crack and heroin addicts. There was never enough money, so my sisters and I often went without eating. Pediatricians diagnosed my sisters and me as being severely malnourished and cognitively underdeveloped.

A lack of food wasn't the only issue we faced. We often went without heat or hot running water. Our education was almost nonexistent since my parents' eagerness to sustain their drug habit was more important than taking us to school. So going to school was a flip of a coin.

Making matters worse, my father, who was diagnosed as schizophrenic, had a nasty temper. He believed that in order to make a man out of a boy, it was necessary to beat him. Being the only boy in the family, I became the brunt of his rage. The physical abuse began at age seven. Whenever my father got mad, which was often, he would tell me to strip naked, take a cold shower and not dry off. Dripping wet from the cold shower, and standing in the middle of the living room, he'd tell me to raise both arms up high. With his leather belt, my father's lashes came forcefully across my upper and lower wet body. I screamed in agony. He would say that I better not cry. If I did, he would beat me harder and longer. For years I endured the excruciating pain from those beatings, always trying not to cry.

When my parents were not in their self-induced drug coma, they often went in search of drugs leaving my sisters and me alone for hours at a time. Being left unsupervised a lot, at an early age, I became engulfed in the street life. Gangbangers, drug dealers, and pimps became my everyday circle. I experienced shootouts, gang fights, drug sales, and other things that most adults should never see, let alone a child.

I was around 11 or 12 when my father was incarcerated. This led to the fracturing of my family. Thereafter, my sisters were sent to live with one aunt in the Bronx, and I went to live with another in Michigan (these were my father's siblings). Transitioning to my aunt's home was rough. I couldn't understand why I was living with her when all I wanted was to be with my mother. I didn't even know my aunt until the day I arrived at her doorstep. Confused, angry, and out of control, I made her life miserable. After about a year, believing she had no other choice, she sent me back to New York.

I was glad to be back in New York and reunited with my mother. We were living in my grandmother's apartment with an aunt and several uncles (my mother's siblings). All of them were dysfunctional drug and alcohol abusers. With no parental guidance or boundaries, at age 13, I was left to fend for myself. Spending time with my cousins and their friends, who were connected drug dealers, I got involved with drugs. This is when my life reached a major turning point. I became heavily involved in the transportation of narcotics and my lifestyle transitioned into something even more dangerous. I began carrying guns, using drugs on a regular basis, and drinking hard liquor. Embracing this lifestyle as a young adolescent, I quickly spiraled out of control.

Despite spiraling out of control, I continued to push forward. I had come to believe that the street culture was the only way of life. However, this delusional thinking led me down a self-destructive path resulting in multiple arrests for drugs, possession of a weapon, and assault charges that landed me in a juvenile detention center. After serving my time, it was unclear where I was going to live. After an exhaustive process, it was determined that I would not return to my grandmother's home (where my mother, aunt, and uncles were living) it was too toxic an environment. Consequently, I was told that foster care was being considered if no alternative was found for a home placement.

Not wanting to be placed in foster care, I asked my aunt (my father's sister) who had custody of my two sisters if I could stay with her. She refused. I then begged my father's other sister in Michigan to take me in, which she did, reluctantly and under strict conditions. So, at age 16, I was released into her care. However, because I disregarded her rules, my aunt kicked me out after a few months. Displaced, I began bouncing from one friend's home to another. But this didn't last for too long, since the illegal activities I was engaging in, caused me to once again be in trouble with the law.

By now I had just turned 17, and not wanting to go back through the juvenile system or be placed in foster care, I lied to law enforcement about my age. I told them I was 18 to be classified as an adult. As a result, my felony charges landed me a two-year sentence in state prison. After serving my time, I was released with \$180 in my pocket and still nowhere to live. As an uneducated, homeless parolee, with no life skills, I quickly found myself making, yet again, one bad decision after another. And at 19, in a robbery gone horribly wrong, I took the life of an innocent 29-year-old man. I was convicted of murder and given a life without parole sentence.

The courts expressed that I was beyond hope of redemption because of my actions. I entered the prison system with no thought of ever getting out. And, as I did in the streets, I quickly immersed myself in the social norms of prison culture—a culture saturated in toxic masculinity. Living in a hyper-masculine environment means you have to prove you can hold your weight against those who nurture a "dog-eat-dog" mentality. Setting out to prove that I was an alpha dog, I carved a path that entailed multiple assaults against both prison staff and inmates.

These acts landed me in several stints of long-term isolation (segregation). It was during one of these long-term stays that I began to reflect on my bad choices. When I realized that it was causing me nothing but pain and suffering, I finally said enough! I'd grown tired of perpetuating a prison culture that got me nowhere, so I decided to change. Changing was difficult. This is because the prison environment doesn't nurture change. However, by understanding prison culture, I was able to navigate some of these hurdles. I turned to books, which is the only available resource, one most people in prison stay away from. I began reading voraciously. At first, I read about Puerto Rico and my culture, then world history, politics, and religion, and finally I studied philosophy and many different ideologies.

Reading and learning about numerous subjects was a different experience for me. I never read to develop my mind, nor to expand my horizons; but now, I began to change the way I thought. I started to see value in my life and the lives of others, which was something new to me. I started

imagining what life would have been like if I had rejected street culture. I saw potential in that image. This was the beginning of my transformation through education.

However, my deepest transformation came when I was 33 years old and received a letter from the niece of the young man whose life I had taken. This young woman (who was a young girl at the time) expressed the damage I had caused her family and how I ruined her life. By then, I had been incarcerated for 13 years and never once thought deeply about my crime. After reading her letter, I carelessly threw it away, dismissing what she expressed—or at least I thought. Later that night as I tried sleeping, I found myself haunted by this young woman's words because I realized I had contradicted the only “moral” boundary I’d sworn never to cross: Regardless of how embedded I was in the street culture, I promised to never hurt kids or the elderly.

After wrestling with this young woman’s reproach, I confronted both the truth and reality of what I did. Doing so allowed me to accept guilt and responsibility for my crime. I also came to realize the ripple effects of my actions. I caused so much pain and suffering to this young man's family, especially the niece whose letter impacted my life. I know the community was impacted too by fear and insecurity from what I did. Lastly, I realize that my family also bears the burden of my shameful acts, suffering throughout my incarceration.

Coming to terms with the realities of what I did caused my life to shift in a different direction. I needed to know where I went wrong, why did I easily embrace a culture saturated in drugs, violence, and crime and why was I so determined to live a life that caused nothing but pain and suffering? How did I become so broken? I asked myself these questions and went searching for answers.

I began a journey of self-development through education. I started attending peer-sponsored critical thinking/impulse behavior courses and read self-help books that taught me how to identify many things including personality and criminal disorders. I then became aware of an opportunity to get a college degree. I applied to Calvin University. I was accepted and awarded a full scholarship, and in June 2021, at 48-years-old, I successfully earned a bachelor’s degree in Faith and Community Leadership, with a minor in Social Work.

Earning my degree from Calvin University not only instilled a moral obligation to right the wrongs I created in my life, but to also align myself with the school's mission to think deeply, act justly, and live wholeheartedly. Harnessing these values, I plan, as a person serving a life sentence, to utilize my education to mentor as many incarcerated individuals as I can about the transformative power that education can have on one's life. I know that my education will guide me through this positive journey, a journey I hope will help shift the minds of incarcerated individuals from the street life to a life that promotes the wellbeing and flourishing of others.

I am driven to make something out of my life despite knowing, with my sentence, that I will die in prison. I hope, before I go, that people will come to know me not by my worst mistake, but instead by the person who I’ve become: An individual who tried to right the wrongs he's created in his life, a life I know could now do so much more if only given the chance to rejoin the free world.