

Theodore Haywood

Transforming My Power

My name is Theodore Haywood, but everyone calls me “T,” which I will explain later. I was born sixty-nine years ago on November 13, 1947, and I presently reside in the Bronx with my wife and two children (they are not my biological children, but I am their Dad).

I was born and raised by my mother Lois Haywood and a stepfather on Tinton Ave in the Bronx (at the age of two my biological father was killed in an accident at work). At the age of ten my mother decided she wanted us to live in a “better neighborhood” (Soundview Projects), in those days Projects were classified as middle class neighborhoods, today they are called NYCHA Developments. Up until this time I thought I was living a normal childhood; going to school, behaving myself so I would get plenty of toys for Christmas, having weekly rock fights with close by neighborhoods (Union Ave, and Forest Ave). Throwing rocks was a skill you had to develop living in my old neighborhood. Rock fights was a game to us. Rocks were toys that was always available for us to play with. I never went on any trips or activities with my mother or stepfather they were always busy hustling to make money. A special event for me would be going into the bar where they hustled with the numbers and being allowed to sit in a bar booth and sip on a coke (this is what was normal for me). my mother expressed her love for me with “THINGS” I thought I didn’t want for nothing, but later in life found out that I lost my father and, I lost my mother as well to hustling to give me the best of “THINGS.”

In this new world of Soundview Projects, I observed young kids my age going down to the river (we lived across the river from the airport and Rikers Island) and going fishing with their parents. For the first time, I saw Little League baseball games (again with parents present at this and other activities) and in this new world I wasn’t allowed to travel freely, because there were white areas (Classon Point, Shorehaven Country Club) that Blacks were not welcomed, there were Civil Wars between blacks and whites every day. If I hadn’t acquired those rock throwing skills, I am sure I would have been captured as a “prisoner of war.” I had an older brother “Candy” (7 years older than I) who at the age of 16 had been sent to Warwick Training School for Boys (it is now called Mid-Orange Correctional Facility) for a gang homicide. No longer did I have a big brother protector, so I was out in this new world alone. My mother and stepfather was involved in the Policy Racket (illegal numbers) in our old neighborhood, so I found myself traveling back and forth to my old neighborhood where I had all my friends and was familiar with the welcoming culture (there were both whites and blacks living together on Tinton Ave). This culture did not exist in my new world: the so called “Better Neighborhood.”

As a result of the racial tension in the Soundview area young blacks were forced into relationships with each other very quickly, and gangs began to evolve to protect each other.

Maybe because of the protective relationship I had with my older brother I began to gravitate more to the older guys (by this time I was about 12 or 13 years old) probably two or three years my senior; and the rocks I once threw at “the enemy” now became sticks and knives. At this point I didn’t have a very close relationship with my mother, there was plenty love but we had never spent any real bonding time together. I loved my mother, but I bonded with the gang to survive the streets. Because I was usually younger than my friends, I felt that I had to be twice as: twice as bad, twice as violent, and twice as daring. This behavior led me to assaulting someone with a knife, and being sent to the same training school where my brother spent time before being sent into the Air Force as part of his sentence. At this point, my life began to really

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spiral; after spending a year at the Warwick Training School for Boys, I came home and at the age of 18 was introduced to drugs, first selling marijuana and then on to heroin.

At 19 years of age (1965), I found myself in Auburn State Prison via Elmira Reformatory, I had been sentenced to 0-5 years for another assault with a knife. I first was sent to Elmira because of my age, and after not complying with the rules (I refused to march and do military exercises) as a disciplinary move I was transferred to a state prison (Auburn). By this time, I had become pretty hardened and with an attitude to match, this was not a training school for boys, and because I was the second youngest in the prison I had to watch my back from the older prisoners who preyed on young boys. It was kind of exciting at first, this meant that I was tough, but that wore off pretty quickly when I had to prove myself and cut another prisoner after being there for only a few months. I was confined to the cell (keep lock) and the word got out pretty fast what took place. I began to feel really alone with no one to turn to, and afraid of what was going to happen next. The person I had the incident with was transferred, and after 30 days I was released back into population, I must have passed the test the older prisoners began to call me Young Blood and began giving me good advice about wasting my life away at a young age.

I was released after serving 2 ½ years. I got my GED while in Auburn Correctional Facility, but I knew I wasn't going to use it to find a decent job. You didn't need a GED to become a big time drug dealer, and that was my aspirations when I was released. After being home for 10 months, I violated parole and was returned to prison where I completed my sentence in October 1970. I returned to the streets and began selling and using drugs. I thought I had arrived at the big time drug dealer status not realizing in my addiction that heroin had become my boss. Two years after being released, during a dispute about drugs and money, I was shot 3 times and was in critical condition. The individual who shot me, shot me out of fear because of the reputation I had. Surviving the shooting only encouraged me to become more ruthless and violent. I began sticking up drug dealers and legitimate places of businesses.

In 1973, I was arrested for homicide, robbery, and the shooting of a police officer. Right away, the "Everything is going to be alright syndrome kicked in," preventing me from dealing with the seriousness of the situation. I also began rationalizing and justifying my actions. I even put the blame on the victims.

I was remanded without bail. In February 1975, I was found guilty of 2nd degree murder and sentenced to 25 years to life. I entered Green Haven Prison at the age of 25 after being sentenced to life, and like so many others, I involved myself with any program that I thought would assist me in getting released early. Still, I did not value my life or the life of others. There was no thought or contemplation about the lives that had been affected or destroyed by my actions. I heard about this "Lifer's group called Think Tank," and it caught my attention. It was about other prisoners in my same situation trying to get out of prison. I became involved in Think Tank and was welcomed by the group with open arms, but soon found out that this group was not only trying to get out of prison, but were thinking of ways to make their communities better. I was impressed by their mannerisms and how they expressed themselves. They were expressing their concerns about the violence in their neighborhoods and the youth. I committed myself to attending meetings on a consistent basis. Each meeting really focused on violence in our communities, and these Alternatives to Violence Ideas. We began talking about contacting the Quakers to partner with us (inside organizations needed to have outside sponsors), and out of this partnership the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) was born. This workshop consisted of a

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three day workshops (23 hours) were scheduled for the prisoners and certificates awarded for participation and completion.

I began to think that the Alternatives to Violence Certificate would mean that I was no longer violent and maybe I could get released earlier, so I took and completed the Basic Level workshop. But what I found was AVP was different, it wasn't a "program" but instead a transformative experience (a true way of life) anchored in the principles of Transforming Power. A few are, Build your own self-respect, Respect and care about others, Reach for something in others that seeks to do good for self and others, and for me most importantly, Help build community based on honesty, respect and caring. Thus the transformation from Teddy Haywood to TNT began. While taking the workshop I was asked to come up with a Positive Adjective Name (I had to pick a positive adjective that started with the same letter of my first name) I chose TNT (Top Notch T) my reasoning was I wanted to be the best at what I chose to do, even transforming my own life.

The AVP process is like a magic that causes all the "grudges and negative patterns" to disappear and be replaced by the spirit of caring. We then begin embracing each other as human beings allowing us to see the goodness in one another. I am who I am because of my passion for AVP. How could I not be passionate about a transformative power that reached out from behind prison walls and has become a way of for people in every state (AVP USA) and 44 countries (AVP International)? I am passionate about AVP because of the joy I receive when I see others begin to recognize the goodness in one another

While incarcerated, I graduated (1982) from Marist College with a Bachelor's in Psychology/Juvenile Justice (Magna cum laude) and in 1985 a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work (Magna cum laude). In 1996 graduated with a Master's Degree in Professional Studies (Summa cum laude 3.95) from the New York Theological Seminary. In 1975, I was one of the founders of the Alternatives to Violence Project Inc. and in the year 2000, I held the position of President of the Alternatives to Violence Project for New York State. I have been an Alternatives' to Violence Facilitator for over 40 years. I feel the prison walls had nothing to do with my transformation. I attribute my journey to the positive role models I surrounded myself with while, the system is now keeping men in prison for 30 and 40 years, what does that have to do with transformation?

When I was incarcerated, I coached organized football and basketball and at that time I was looked upon as a role model. I've been mentoring for a long time. I don't view the mentoring process as work; I view it as an exchange. There is a quote by Michaelson Williams that speaks volumes to this exchange for me, "As you become more present in your own life, you will begin to enlighten others by your example." Selfishly speaking, this is the most meaningful aspect of the mentor/mentee relationship for me, it makes me who I am, and fuels my passion to be the best.

I think the mentoring experience has allowed the young people to trust in people again, and become empowered to regain control of their lives. For the time that they are involved in the program, they develop an entire new way of being, which allows them the choice of embarking on this new way of being, or returning back to their old way of thinking. One of my mottos is "Pessimistic thoughts will only yield trees unwillingly to bear edible fruit. Optimistic thinking will always feed those who are willing to sit at your table."

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I feel that this movement is growing and individuals (community and powers to be) need to grow with the needs of this growth. What would definitely help in this endeavor is assistance and support upon program completion; how about jobs? Many of them are from broken homes, they come to group hungry with nowhere to go. We can't allow them to continue to yield trees unwillingly to bear edible fruit.