

Justin B. Conrad
Riverbend Maximum Security Institution
Nashville, Tennessee

As young adults we are faced with many decisions, some good, some bad, and some that cost us our souls. Sometimes we are like computers, we need to shut down and reboot to run correctly. With years of incarceration, self-admittance and rehabilitation, we start a new program, faith-based and positive decisions and directions lead us to freedom.

My name is Justin Conrad. Throughout my life it has been a roller coaster. I was raised in a middle-class family of both loving grandparents that raised me and ended up adopting me due to my biological mother's continuation of incarceration multiple times.

When I was around the age of 16, my personal struggle was that society had taken my mother away from me and my mindset was that the world owed me everything. I had multiple run-ins with law enforcement and was put on probation in my younger years. I took many avenues to try to better myself always with the same results of failure.

In the early 2000's I had decided that I would get into trafficking guns and meth. Little did I know I was headed down a dark, one-way road where I ended up catching a 1st degree felony murder charge and was sentenced to an effective sentence of 60 years. Being 24-year-old and facing the rest of my life in confinement was a shock. The only decisions I had ever made were bad ones. I associated myself with a white supremacy affiliation that continued with my self-destruction. I thought everyone loved me and thought to myself that I had it going on and I was indestructible and would be on top of the world and feared and respected forever throughout the department of correction in my own mind.

Reality struck in 2010 when I was instructed to go to another unit at the facility I was at and to go to specific cell along with two others and (carry out) a beat down

and stabbing. I was ready. At my highest point of acceptance, I followed in the group to the housing unit to the specific cell anticipating myself here we go. We knocked on the door and when we entered, I immediately recognized it was a childhood friend I had not seen in over 12 years since incarceration. I was at rock bottom again about to repeat another bad decision. My entire life had flashed in front of my eyes but this time with a voice was speaking and reality, take my friends life or compromise. In a split moment I changed the outcome. With the four individuals in that room there, with anticipation of creating harm, all made decision that would become a breaking point in all our lives to change our ways and stop senseless violence and assaults, not just at that moment but forever. We went back to our unit and met with the higher ups and explained what had happen. They explained that they would evaluate the situation. Days later, after nothing was done to the individual, we were told that he had sat at the wrong table in the chow hall. From that day I have never committed another assault or the individual's along with me.

They were released from prison sometime later and became productive citizens in society and have families now and have been out of prison each for over ten years. We still talk today and realize that I made huge impacts in their lives in just an instant. I'm thanked regularly for not only making the right decision but saving their lives from heartache and lengthy incarcerations. Two of the individuals participate in church. The other has become a juvenile mentor to aid in the deterrence in violence and gangs.

I myself have stepped away from the gang and made many positive decisions to obtain my GED, many certificates and been on maintenance for in excess of ten years and have learned so much and gained a support system with faith-based individuals who I still lean on to guide me at times of despair. I don't dwell on my past and look forward to many more positive decisions and good things that come my way. I once heard a quote "the windshield in a car is bigger than the rearview mirror so I can see more forward than looking backwards." I have been disciplinary free for years. I have become the person I am today because of faith and the understanding of accepting the responsibility of my actions for myself and the hurt I have caused others.

Moving forward in here or the possibility that I'm released and have a second opportunity in life, I will always continue to strive to be positive and continue my education and to grow to my full potential. There's no use in me complaining that life threw me a curve ball and I had no choice, or that it was the environment I was in. I made my own decisions and placed the ball in my path, now it's up to me to catch the ball (responsibility) and throw it back and try another pitch straight down the line (obligation & positive decisions), but most important is follow my faith and belief that someone higher and above me has a plan.