

Rick
Whitman

SPEECH FOR SENATE HEARING 3/8/23

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Good morning Chairman Wanzek & Member of the committee...

My name is Rick and I am 40 years old. I was 29 years old when I came to prison with a tumor eating the bone in my leg and a life sentence. I was overwhelmed by the fact that it seemed like I was going to die in prison either from the tumor or old age. I didn't know at first how I was going to face the situation I had gotten myself into. In fact I wasn't sure I wanted to go on at all.

Ultimately after some serious soul searching and lots of desperate prayers I decided to trust God and make the best out of whatever was left of my life.

I struggled at first but God's hand was at work in my life. First they were able to stop the tumor from spreading by amputating my leg. Then a while later my life sentence was overturned and I got an out date. Things were looking up.

I began going to Bible Study every week and eventually landed a good job at Rough Rider Industries in the metal shop. My time was going by and I really felt like for the most part everything was going good. I thought I was doing my time the right way.

Then Covid hit and things changed real fast. Volunteer ran Bible studies were canceled for a while. Our schedules and routines were disrupted. A lot of us had to be shuffled from one housing unit to another to make room for Quarantine patients. On top of that visitation was limited and we were worried about loved ones out there. I was frustrated at first ~~and~~ and then I began to feel depressed and hopeless.

Finally I realized that I was stuck in a rut and just going through the motions from day to day. I knew I needed to do something different so I took a chance and signed up for the Prison Fellowship Academy. I didn't know it then but it would be one of the best decisions I would ever make.

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When my class first started the Academy most of us didn't know each other and none of us knew Eddy. It took us a while to build trust and get comfortable enough around each other to open up and share our experiences and insights. But by the end of the year I think its fair to say that we built a strong community.

If you would have asked me before I joined Prison Fellowship what community meant to me I probably would have told you community is a place like Beulah or Bismarck. Now after fellowship I see community as so much more than just a place. To me community is the relationships people build with one another. I've learned that every one is a part of some type of community but not all communities are good.

What ^{prison} Fellowship has taught us is how to build a healthy community where people lift each other up and support one another and yes hold each other accountable. This type of community is contagious and I have already seen the positive culture of the Academy being spread to other parts of the prison.

Prison Fellowship has taught us the six core values of good citizenship which are integrity, Responsibility, Affirmation, Community, Restoration, and Productivity. Through out the year we built up our understanding of these values and learned how to live them out in our daily lives. I believe that by putting these values into action I have strengthened my character and I definitely seen the positive changes in my classmates through out the Academy process.

The year I spent in Prison Fellowship was a great experiance for me in so many ways. The Academy taught me so much about myself that I dont have time to cover it all here but there are two main take aways I would like to share.

The first thing I learned is that I was not living up to my full potential in life. And the second thing I learned about myself is that if I want to live up to my full potential I will need to step out of my comfort zone and take some healthy risks

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Before Fellowship I thought I was doing ok because I had a good job and was staying out of trouble. I had very little self confidence so I settled for just ok in life. Once I joined the Academy that began to change. All the way through Eddy and the other Prison Fellowship staff made it clear that they believed in us. We also had lots of support and encouragement from ^{the} Prison administration and staff.

Thanks to what I've learned and the support and guidance I've been shown from every one involved I have committed myself to living up to my full potential which for me means using my life experiences and whatever knowledge and wisdom I gain along the way to help others.

So many people have invested so much in us who went through the academy and I am going to pay it forward by doing the same for others. That is why I became a peer support specialist and that's why I joined the Restoring Promise Initiative as a mentor.

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I would not have had the courage or the confidence to do either if I had not first gone through the academy. In many ways I grew more in that year than I did in the 10 years prior. Now instead of just doing time I am doing something with my time.

In closing I can honestly say that the Prison Fellowship Academy helps to prepare us men to be assets to our communities instead of the liabilities that we once were.