

Ex-gang member leaves criminal ways behind
By Kathleen Moore

Poetry offers path to redemption



Jamey Williams of Albany grinds a steel door at Metal Supermarkets in Guilderland.

SCHENECTADY – If you saw Jamey Williams now, you wouldn't think he was once hiding a gun under his clothes while dealing drugs as a respected member of the Cleanaz gang.

Now, Williams has a skilled job as a welder and is raising a 1-year-old son. He volunteers with a community arts group in the Hamilton Hill neighborhood where he once sold cocaine and marijuana. He is one of the first Cleanaz to return to his old haunts after prison. All of his friends are still behind bars, but many will be heading home soon – a wave that police have said they will watch closely in case some gang members return to their criminal ways.

So far, Public Safety Commissioner Wayne Bennett said, the few paroled Cleanaz seem to be staying away from drugs and violence.

Williams may offer a window into how – and if – the gang that once ruled Hamilton Hill will turn into a group of law-abiding adults.

For Williams, now 27, the turning point came three years into his sentence for gun possession. After hearing a poetry recital on the radio, he started writing about his experiences.

Over the next three years, poems taught him how to avoid conflict, showed him the connection between action and consequence, and served as his emotional outlet during days of misery in prison, he said. When he stopped acting out, his good behavior got him out of prison early.

"Poetry," he says, "was my escape. It kept me grounded."

He walked out of prison with few skills – he had been trained as a custodian, which he didn't like – so he scraped up the money to take college classes. Since he had missed seven years of computer advancements, he's working on an information technology degree at Bryant & Stratton College, Albany. He also learned to weld, which led to a job at the Metal Supermarket in Albany. That pays his bills and gives him enough extra to help support his son. He and his son's mother aren't living together, but they share custody.

In his moments of free time, he works with teens at Quest, the arts program in Hamilton Hill he enjoyed before he joined the Cleanaz. And he still writes poetry.

It may seem unlikely for a man who was carrying three handguns before he turned 18 to now express his feelings with a pen. But he insists that his younger self never set out to commit violence. It just took poetry – and prison – to teach him how to deal with people differently.

PRISON LESSONS

Early in his incarceration, for example, he said he would've been perfectly happy to get into a fight if someone offered one.

“Say there’s a prisoner who got no mail today. He’s feeling down, a little miserable, he might come out of his cell with a chip on his shoulder,” Williams said. “Before, if he wanted to rub his misery off on me I might’ve tried to rub it back off on him.”

But after describing such events in poetry, he realized fights were avoidable.

“Once you realize the circumstances, you know how to sidestep the misery,” he said.

Three years later, after serving his minimum sentence, he was set free. The state could have held him for another four years if he’d misbehaved.

If it’s clear now that he needed something to teach him the connection between action and consequence, Williams credits Elmira Correctional Facility with making that lesson stick.

“I learned a lot in prison. I learned things I don’t think I could’ve learned on the street,” he said.

Looking back at his time with the Cleanaz, it was as if there was a disconnect between owning a gun and killing someone. He knew that drug dealers like himself were often involved in deadly fights and he wanted to make sure he survived.

But, he said, he thought just carrying a gun would be enough. He didn’t want to actually use it to kill someone.

“I felt safe. I just didn’t want to be a statistic,” he said, adding that everyone wanted to have a variety of guns, almost as if it was the cool thing to do.

“It was the same as if someone had three game systems,” he said.

His .22-caliber and .38-caliber guns were prized because they were easy to conceal. His .357-caliber offered a much louder bang.

“At the time, we liked the noise,” he said. “We’d fire them off for New Year’s, Fourth of July. We’d fire them anywhere there was an open space.”

Then some Cleanaz started firing those guns at other people, protecting territory and drug supplies.

“It was like a wildfire,” Williams said. “We started just like any group of kids. We hung out just like kids would hang out to play basketball ... But it wasn’t basketball.”

SWEPT UP

As the violence escalated, police organized a raid on Nov. 15, 2000, netting 21 arrests and dozens of illegal guns. It was one of the first major actions to stop the Cleanaz.

Williams was one of the many gang members arrested that day, charged with weapons possession when police found his three guns at his home.

“That was the start of the Cleanaz extinction,” he said. He added that he was almost relieved to be arrested.

“It may sound funny, but I was kind of expecting to get caught. I kind of figured the run wouldn’t last too long.”

He pleaded guilty and was sent to Elmira. He kept track from behind bars as friend after friend was arrested. Every friend he had is now in prison.

“Some of my friends are in jail forever, for murder. Those were old comrades,” he said, regret and confusion warring in his voice.

It’s still hard for him to believe that the children he grew up with would actually kill someone.

“Sometimes best friends become strangers,” he said.

He’s moved on and made new friends. He isn’t eagerly counting down the days until his old comrades are released, and he said he doesn’t plan to renew those friendships unless they prove themselves to be law-abiding adults. After all, he said, he’s working full-time. He’s earned his GED and taken college classes. He’s raising a son. He’s volunteering in the community.

“If they’re not doing something like that, I don’t think we have anything in common,” he said.

He’d like them to turn themselves around.

“Those were the people I grew up with. Of course I’d like to see them doing the right thing,” he said.

“But I don’t lose any sleep over it. We all made our own beds. Some of us need to sleep in them a little longer.”