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LOCAL

Prison changed his life, now University of Tennessee student is opening DOORS for others

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Life looks a lot different now that Zachary Robinson is beyond four prison walls within Tennessee's infamous Corecivic Trousdale Turner Correctional Facility. He spent the last year of a nine-year prison sentence in a cage, envisioning what he would do with his life once he became a free man.

Today, he's a student in the prestigious Haslam School of Business at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and the founder of a nonprofit based in Oak Ridge that works to reduce disparities in education, health and economic equality.

Just over a decade ago, and just a few months shy of his high school graduation, though, it was practically unthinkable that Robinson would be where he is today.

In 2012, Robinson and a couple of his high school buddies made a decision that changed the trajectory of his young adult life. They broke into a house near the campus of the University of Tennessee and robbed the people who lived there.

They were caught and prosecuted, and Robinson, just 18 years old, had to make a life-changing gamble: Plead guilty to the robbery and go free in nine years, or go to trial and risk spending the next three decades in prison.

"When you are told you are facing a 33-year prison sentence for taking it to trial versus the nine-year deal I was offered, the nine looks pretty good. I'll take that bid," Robinson said in a long-ranging conversation with Knox News about how he dealt with incarceration and has refocused his life since gaining his freedom in 2020.

Robinson is reflective, and he's accountable. And he's clear about how far he's come despite the pain of incarceration. He vividly remembers the drug-infested, inhumane and violent conditions he experienced as he was bounced between Tennessee correctional facilities, fighting off the pressure to join prison gangs, falling victim to a global pandemic, and witnessing other inmates lose their lives to COVID-19.

"I watched men die in there from the virus. I caught COVID-19 and I remember feeling like I couldn't even breathe," Robinson said. "They weren't there to treat us or care for us while we were on the inside fighting the pandemic. I'm just glad I'm still alive to talk about it."

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Robinson got caught in poverty and school-to-prison pipeline

The road was never smooth for Robinson.

Born to a teenage mother with an addiction and a father who was in and out of prison, he never really knew what a stable upbringing felt like.

He spent time with his grandmother for a few years, and then his mother became pregnant again when he was in middle school, and he was mostly raising himself. He did whatever he could to get by, held down a job as a grocery bagger at a local grocery store at 14, and helped take care of his baby sister, recalling the days he would miss school when his mom wasn't well enough to look after her. There were many days that he felt his fate was sealed.

"Looking back as a kid I became labeled as this known troublemaker even in elementary school, even though my grades were good, I was smart, I was sociable," Robinson said. "But I couldn't get away with the things the other kids did, if I got in a fight for defending myself or any little thing, it was like all right, just suspend him."

"When you are in second and third grade you don't think like an adult so you don't really think too deep about it, but it had a dramatic effect on me. I felt labeled and eventually, you get so used to it that you just don't care. Sometimes teachers are part of a system, a broken one."

Robinson's school experience mirrors that of many Black children who face harsher discipline than their counterparts. It's a snowball effect that puts Black boys on a trajectory that lands them either in the streets or behind bars.

When he got to Oak Ridge High School, he made the basketball team, and his grades were soaring, but he had been expelled twice, sent to an alternative school for a fight and for taking a laptop from a classroom.

He said his expulsion from school set him back even further. In fact, according to data, more time out of school doesn't lead to greater outcomes for students.

In a National Association of School Psychologists report, school-to-prison pipelines are strengthened when out-of-school suspensions or harsh discipline tactics are used. Instead of stopping a particular behavior, suspensions often encourage kids to repeat it.

An analysis of discipline records for 9,039 students for one academic year found that participation of students in restorative interventions substantially reduced the odds that individual students would receive out-of-school suspensions.

"Alternative school doesn't help, it doesn't push you academically," Robinson said. "At one point I was making straight A's but when you have a computer in front of you and you can pretty much just google the answers, the teachers aren't monitoring you. It does not prepare you. Eventually, I was just filling in the blanks.

"I was greedy for money. I needed money – that's why I took that laptop. I needed new shoes, there was no food in the refrigerator. It paid for marijuana. Eventually, I started selling it. When you see your mom slumped over your whole life, it's not uncommon. I wasn't out here buying jewelry and cars, I had to take care of myself."

Home became just a place to sleep.

School to prison pipeline data

According to the American Civil Liberties Association:

- In 2020, Black Tennessee students received out-of-school suspensions at more than four times the rate of white students, and received in-school suspensions at nearly double the rate of white students, according to state school report cards that track discipline. Expulsions and placement in alternative schools for Black students were nearly double the rate.
- School disciplinary policies disproportionately affect Black students.
- Black students represent only 15% of students in the United States but make up 31% of school-related arrests.
- Black students are suspended or expelled three times more than white students.
- Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are more than three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.

The night that changed his life

On the night of Dec. 8, 2012, Robinson and two of his friends broke into an apartment at the 1700 block of Lake Avenue, near the campus of the University of Tennessee. He had just turned 18, only a few months shy of finishing high school.

All three fled the scene and Robinson was found shortly after by police, who discovered a handgun nearby where Robinson was arrested.

Robinson maintains his innocence about having the gun. But he felt intense pressure to plead to it anyway.

"I was 18 and my friends were 17. So I'm an easier target right? I felt like they were really trying to put this on me," he said.

Plea bargaining reform and youthful offender changes

Robinson was scared like a lot of teens are when facing what could be the rest of their life behind bars.

Had Robinson been sentenced today, his experience likely would have been different. Justice reform for young offenders was far behind in 2012.

Tennessee has made progress on reducing sentences for juveniles. In a win for justice reform advocates, for example, the Tennessee Supreme Court struck down mandatory life sentences for juveniles convicted of homicide. The landmark decision was attributed to the case of Tyshon Booker who was 16 when he fatally shot G'Metrick Caldwell in Knoxville in 2015 and received a 51-year sentence.

Criminal defense attorney Chris Martin told Knox News that Robinson's case, while not a homicide conviction, is a clear-cut example of why reform is needed in the first place.

"I think the natural trend there is to say that extremely long prison sentences for youthful offenders aged 18 to 24 should also be abolished," Martin said. "Under the same theory that abolished juvenile life without parole, that children's brains aren't fully developed, and they're more amenable to rehabilitation than others.

"The science supports more rehabilitative sentencing, especially at ages 18 to 24. And the idea that anybody in that age range would go to prison should shock the conscience of everybody. I don't think it's a particularly radical position. To say that people aged 18 to 24 deserve at least the first chance at probation and parole and the idea that they would spend almost half their lives incarcerated is outrageous. Prison should really if at all, be a last resort for someone who has offended multiple times."

The vast number of cases brought under the system of mass incarceration means that plea bargaining is the only way for courts to get through their dockets, according to the ACLU. And the impact lands on African Americans more than any demographic in the nation.

"I guarantee you if you look into the data, nobody who gets any kind of home invasion at 18, even if there is a weapon, possession with no injuries, is not going to be serving 33 years, not after a guilty verdict and not after a plea," Martin said.

"I would like to think that if a case like Zach's came through a city like Knoxville or Nashville or Memphis today, there would be enough intelligent informed practitioners that somebody in that situation will get a chance of probation."

According to sentencing data from the Tennessee Administrative Office of the Courts, the average sentence given for aggravated robbery in fiscal year 2022 is 4 to 7 years. For aggravated burglary, the average sentence given was 2 to 4 years – much shorter than the sentence Robinson was handed, and the one prosecutors threatened him with if he went to trial and lost.

Plea bargaining data

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, a national organization that works to end mass incarceration, powered by hundreds of researchers and advocates working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems:

- Most criminal cases that result in conviction are adjudicated through guilty pleas. Of these, researchers estimate that more than 90% are the result of plea bargaining.
- There is a strong association between pretrial detention and guilty pleas, as people who can't afford bail agree to plea deals to secure their release from jail.
- On average, Black men receive the least lenient plea deals, and white women the most lenient.
- Pretrial detention increases a person's likelihood to plead guilty by 46%.
- The odds of receiving a plea deal that includes incarceration are almost 70% greater for Black people than for white people.
- Custodial sentences imposed at trial are 64% longer than those imposed through pleas.

Criminal defense attorney and former Knox County public defender Chris Irwin told Knox News that these kinds of outcomes permanently damage the lives of youthful offenders who have a chance at rehabilitation.

"With a felony on one's record, they become part of the permanent undercast of society. The Scarlet F wrecks both employment and education opportunities. If prison really worked we would be the most drug-free nonviolent society in the history of this planet," Martin said.

Life in a cage became the catalyst for change

What was it about life in prison that could transform a young man and unleash the motivation and intellect to finish his GED and earn a college degree?

Robinson said it was nothing but a whole lot of time on his hands. That, and knowing that he would be free much sooner than a lot of the other men he was locked up with. He used it to his advantage.

But not before he spent half of his sentence cutting up and being a defiant inmate. He isn't sure if it was the hostility he held about his new living arrangements or the fact he was there in the first place, but following prison rules wasn't on his agenda.

"Being around guys who were doing life. Knowing they were never coming home made me realize that I had something to look forward to," Robinson said. "I had to get down to business and do something with myself."

He decided to become a leader and more of an inspiration to those around him who were there for a long time, taping Nelson Mandela quotes to the prison walls to give a little hope.

He was first housed at Bledsoe Correctional Facility, where he eventually entered a youth offender program and enrolled in college through the Tennessee Higher Education in Prison Initiative, a nonprofit that prepares those incarcerated for release and reentry into society by providing holistic support as they pursue college programs in Tennessee prisons.

Robinson completed his associate's degree at Nashville State Community College in 2018.

"Completing my degree was the greatest moment of my life. Before I went into prison I had goals for myself. I made some mistakes but I wanted to go to college," he said. "I had my sights set on ETSU. I never got to walk across my high school stage, never got my diploma, never went to my prom. So it was really something."

Since his release, Robinson has been making up for lost time. He became a father and has spent a lot of time just trying to get acclimated back into society, navigating a different Knoxville than the one he remembers a decade ago. Despite a college degree, the stigma of having a felony conviction on his record stood in the way of gainful employment and he is still fighting to get his voting rights restored. One in five Black Tennesseans like Robinson are barred from voting due to a felony conviction.

Despite all of the barriers, Robinson still keeps going.

In 2022, he was accepted to the University of Tennessee's Haslam School of Business as a supply chain management major as a junior. He plans to complete his bachelor's and master's degrees within the next three years.

But as an advocate for lifelong learning, the degrees are only his personal goal. Entrepreneurship and making a difference in the lives of youth who were once like him are his passion. It was a social responsibility class he took while in prison that inspired him.

"I have always been a visionary. At one point I even dreamed of having my own amusement park," he laughed.

DOORS, a nonprofit whose mission is to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and provide opportunities for youth, was just a forethought while incarcerated, and when Robinson was released from prison in 2020, he returned back to his hometown of Oak Ridge and started to make it a reality.

Today, thanks to the help of members and volunteers in the Oak Ridge community, the organization provides scholarships and summer jobs to youth through its lawn care program. Robinson's vision is to duplicate the model throughout East Tennessee and eventually nationwide.

"I hope I can do what I can to take the labels off our young people where the school systems have labeled these students as troublemakers," he said. "What we're doing is taking those students and making them productive community leaders."

For those on the side of restorative justice, guys like Robinson aren't merely offenders given a second chance.

"A lot of them really never really had a first chance," Martin said. "And Zach is proof that our youth are able to be rehabilitated."

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