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Final Draft

Dealing with Hope

Gerrod Thomas, a star running back at Brusly High, hid a secret throughout high school. He had been selling drugs every day since he was 16 years old.

“I lived a double life,” Thomas said. “I was doing landscape, and a friend asked to borrow \$200. He said he would give me back double, but he didn’t tell me what he was doing. That’s more money than I made all summer.”

A high school star athlete, on track for a future in the NFL, Thomas ended up in jail multiple times, but it was there that he found his true purpose.

Louisiana is home to Angola, the nation's largest prison, where thousands seemingly have come to a despairing end. Yet as many succumb to a diminishing hope, prison ministry is getting involved in bringing light to darkness.

Most U.S. prisons are short-staffed with only one full-time chaplain, many of whom aren’t properly equipped. Thankfully, scores of volunteers contribute to assisting chaplains in their monumental task.

Thomas thought he could do a few deals, secure a financial boost, and then abandon drug dealing—but he got hooked because he did well as a dealer.

“I thought I could just make a little money, but then it became an addiction,” Thomas said. “By the next year, I ended up getting busted.”

Thomas said people didn't realize it, but when he graduated high school, he was already a felon. Thomas was also a straight-A student while being a star running back and a wrestling champion.

"People didn't know I even had my own house my senior year," Thomas said. "I was making a lot of money."

After his release, Thomas enrolled at Southern University but continued selling drugs, leading to another arrest and a 40-year sentence.

Cleve Fontenot, who worked with Thomas at the Dixon Correctional Institute, said, "He believed that he knew the ins and outs of drug dealing after serving his first term in prison. He didn't think he would get caught."

Thomas believes people like Fontenot give prisoners a lot of hope. He said it means a lot for a former prisoner to see chaplains. Someone not in the system caring for those who were made Thomas feel like people cared.

"Brother Cleve and the prison ministry turned me around," Thomas said. "I felt at peace in prison, and I believe it is because of God."

Prison ministry has made several successes. Pastor David Hairford of Galvez Pentecostal Church has a budding prison ministry. Hairford contacted the Ascension Parish Prison to start his ministry. The prison accommodated a service, and the church visits twice a month.

"We go in there, and we have worship service," Hairford said. "Last year we baptized 46 people."

Hairford launched this mission two years ago. He had a burden for it since his high school days when his life was forever altered. His father went to prison where he served 7 years in the state penitentiary.

“I have just always had a burden for that field,” Hairford said. “The scripture kept coming to my mind that says I was in prison and you visited me.”

Hairford is referencing Matthew 25:36. Jesus was referring to Himself when He said, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

On average, 30 to 40 prisoners attend the services at the Ascension prison. Hairford wants to change the culture of the prison.

Hairford’s goal is not only to help prisoners directly but also to get them involved in sharing hope in Christ and teaching Bible studies to fellow inmates. “We want to put materials in their hands,” Hairford said.

Baptizing prisoners in nearly every service is exciting, Hairford shared. But they only had a horse trough to use for these special occasions.

“The parish sheriff saw the baptisms on social media, and he saw how I was struggling to fully baptize these 6-foot men,” Hairford said. “Some of these guys were big guys. The sheriff saw what we were doing, and he had a big baptistry put inside the building.”

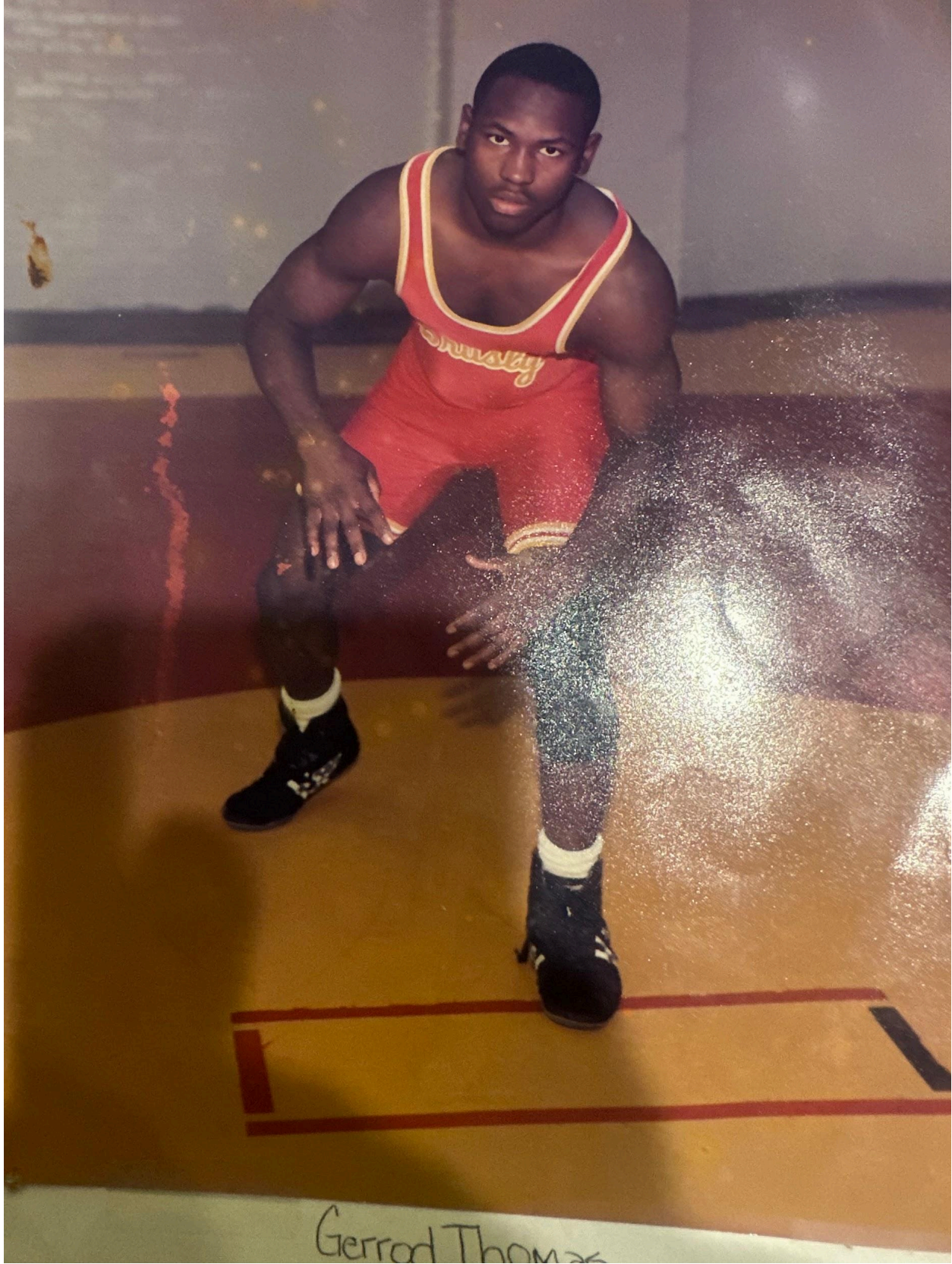
Hairford is contributing to these people's lives. Behind the bars of punishment, hope rises in the unlikeliest of settings.

One of Hairford’s baptized prisoners was released and went to church soon after, following the steps of many, including Thomas. A faithful churchgoer, Thomas has also found success as co-owner of MRG Construction.

Both former prisoners visit the prisons, trying to extend the light that was extended to them. Hairford said that although some contend these prisoners are too far gone, he firmly believes otherwise, as evidenced by a growing number of success stories.

“I had future NFL players looking up to me at Brusly, including some that were behind me in the lineup,” Thomas said. Randall Gay, former LSU defensive back, 2003 National Champion, and 2-time Super Bowl winner, was one of them. Thomas said Gay stays in contact with him, as well as many other former players.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” Thomas said. “God has shown me that I need to be helping these young guys.” Thomas wants to help them learn how to make money the right way, as well as how to find their deeper purpose in life.



Gerrard Thomas

Senior Gerrod Thomas of Brusly High School donning his wrestling attire in 1995.



Pastor David Hairford showing off the new baptismal tub at the Ascension Parish Prison chapel.

