

Honorable Commissioners,

My name is Ronald Evans. Thank you for committing to hearing from impacted individuals and for inviting me to share my experience.

Nothing about what happened to me made sense. I was a teenager when I was arrested and charged in federal court. At the time, it was so hard for me to understand what my attorney was saying to me. It was like I couldn't speak his language and he couldn't speak mine. He used so many words I'd never heard before, and none of it made any sense. My attorney kept telling me to take a plea, but I didn't know him, I couldn't understand him, and I didn't trust him. The guys I knew and trusted told me to go to trial. So I went to trial, never fully understanding what I was up against, or the time I was facing. I honestly didn't understand what was happening to me until it had already happened.

I was raised by a family that really cared about me and wanted the best for me. I love my mother. She was sixteen years old when she had me, so she was just a child herself, but she never stopped working to support me. At one point she was working two jobs at once to make ends meet. She always tried to give me what I asked for, I was her only son, and she did her best with me. Since she was always working and my father wasn't around, my grandmothers helped raise me. Still, I had a lot of freedom.



*Me as a child in Tidewater Park.*

I grew up in Tidewater Park, in Norfolk, VA. In the 80s and the 90s, when I was growing up, drugs were everywhere, all the time. Even when I very young, and more focused on sports than anything else, dealing drugs seemed very normal to me. Everyone was either dealing or using.

I was 13 years old when I was handcuffed for the first time. There was an abandoned school in my neighborhood we would go to, to ride our bikes and play. On the night of my arrest, we went to the school and triggered a silent alarm. Police showed up with lights and sirens on. They handcuffed us and transported us to the station together. Police officers called our parents to pick us up. After a few hours, we were given court dates and sent home with our parents.

When I went to juvenile court for the first time, I was so scared. I'd never been in trouble before and didn't know what to expect. I was appointed an attorney, but I never spoke to him, and he never spoke to me. He only spoke to my mother. I

wasn't advised of my rights, informed of any consequences, or given any choices. I was just given probation and sent on my way.

By the time I was 15 years old, I was spending more time on the streets. I was placed in special education after struggling in school for a while. I was told I was educationally developmentally delayed, but the special education classes weren't making things easier. Eventually, school became so hard, that I stopped going and started doing what the men in my neighborhood were doing. I started selling drugs. I know now how wrong I was to leave school to sell drugs. But at that time in my life when I was looking to the older guys on the streets for guidance, selling drugs seemed like the right thing to do, it seemed normal, what was expected of me.

Shortly after I started selling, I picked up my second juvenile case, a possession of cocaine with intent to distribute case. Like the first time I had been arrested, I was handcuffed, and transported to the station. I was held there for a few hours before my mom came to get me and take me home with a court date. The attorney appointed to my case spoke to my mother, who couldn't explain anything to me, and no one ever advised me of my rights, told me I had any choices, or explained the consequences of my adjudication to me. At my court date, I was given probation, and sent on my way, again.

The third time I was "arrested", I was charged with obstruction of justice for interfering with a sting operation. That time, I was handcuffed but not transported, because I was released on the spot. The police officers gave me a \$100 citation and sent me on my way, I later paid the citation and thought I was done with it.

When I was 18 years old, I was arrested as part of a drug conspiracy. I was charged with drug trafficking for selling drugs as a teenager, from the age of fifteen to the time I was arrested, shortly after my eighteenth birthday. At the time, I had no positive role models and no real guidance in my life. I'd never been locked up before and I didn't know what to expect. It all came as a shock to me. I will never forget how I was treated when I was arrested. I was the youngest in the conspiracy and I was locked up in a cell by myself for a week, unable to speak to anyone who cared about me.

When the judge sentenced me to life in prison, I couldn't believe it. Honestly, it was years before I truly understood what a life sentence was. In juvenile court I had been treated very differently. But when I was sentenced to life for selling drugs as a teenager in federal court, I had to grow up really fast, almost



*My son and me at BOP visiting hours.*



*My mom and me, when I was 19 years old.*

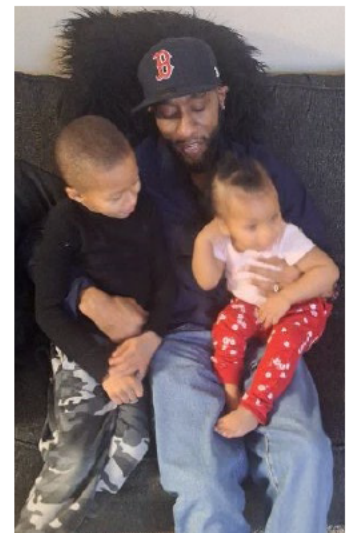
overnight. I decided to focus on becoming a better person. I started learning and challenging myself. I had struggled in school, but with all the time in the world to go at my own pace, I really developed in prison. I got my GED. I took as many classes as I could, such as: *Parenting from Within*, *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*, *Your Strategic Future*, and *Healthy Grieving: A Time to Heal*. Through it all my family never stopped supporting me or believing that one day we would be united. And I kept fighting for my freedom. I spent 24 years in custody, becoming a person worthy of a second chance. I lost every motion, every petition, but I never lost hope.

Eventually, in 2015, I received a one-time reduction from life to 30 years. Then, in August 2016, President Obama granted my clemency petition. Within a week I was being released from prison and transferred to a halfway house. I couldn't believe how fast things were moving after spending decades losing battles in prison. So much had changed that when I got to the halfway house, I just sat at the window and watched the cars go by for 30 minutes. It had been so long since I'd seen a car, and there were so many.

Once I left the halfway house, I committed to becoming the person I had been preparing to be for 24 years. I returned to Norfolk, VA and reconnected with my family. I immediately began working two jobs, with FedEx and General Trading, where I work long hours, most days, and I prefer it that way; it's how I keep myself busy. After four years without violations, my USPO asked the judge to terminate my supervised release early.

Today, my grandchildren are my life. I didn't have a chance to raise my son, so now they are the most important people in my life. I moved away from Virginia for a change of scenery, but I try to get down to Virginia to see them whenever I can. I also have a fiancée. I work as a mentor with the Incarcerated Children's Advocacy Network (ICAN), to provide support for other formerly incarcerated youth.

I have grown and changed so much since I was arrested as a teenager. Yet, it took President Obama granting me clemency, for me to get a second chance. That shouldn't be. I was a product of my environment, but I was



*My grandkids and me, back home in Norfolk.*

a child. And as a child, I had the capacity to change. When my environment changed, I changed. I just needed the time and the space to develop. I hope that reading about my experience with the juvenile and federal systems and my journey since my arrest serves as a reminder that children should be treated as children. When they are given the chance to grow and develop, not only can they be rehabilitated, but they can also thrive.