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Book about choices earns rave reviews

Inmates plead with kids: Do as I say, not as I did

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By DONNA HICKMAN

Daily Journal Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, October 14, 2007 12:00 am | (0) Comments

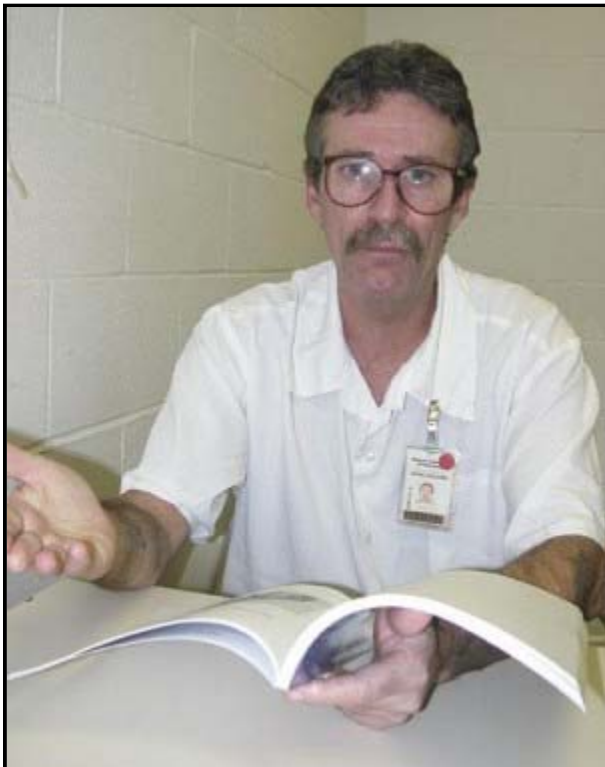
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On Missouri's Death Row since 1996, Dennis Skillicorn says 'œI think a lot of guys find their purpose here. Our priorities are different.'e He edited the book, 'œToday's Choices Affect Tomorrow's Dreams,'e a book of essays written by inmates designed to help steer young

people away from a life of crime. - Donna Hickman

When he was 8 years old, he would grab an old tennis racquet and hold it as he would a guitar, pretending to play. Eventually, his dad bought him a guitar and the little boy taught himself to play it. He dreamed of being a musician. His mother died and his father, whom he describes as a "functional alcoholic," got busy making a living to take care of his family. His son found friendships and heroes among the wrong crowd. By the time he became a teenager, his dream derailed. He chose drugs and sold the guitar to pay for them.

He would return to his music again, though, as a prisoner on Missouri's Death Row.

Dennis Skillicorn is 47 years old and has spent 28 years in prison. Now, he wants to help steer other young people from the paths that could derail their dreams and land them there, too.

"There's wisdom people have in hindsight," he said in an interview at the Potosi Correctional Center. "We tend to think we need to learn it ourselves."

His essay and those from other Death Row inmates and prisoners around the country are published in the book, "Today's Choices Affect Tomorrow's Dreams." Skillicorn edited the book for Compassion, a peace and justice group for Death Row inmates. All profits from the book go to Compassion. Neither inmates nor their families receive payment.

"We have sent books to over 200 juvenile centers around the country," said Fred Moor, a Toledo, Ohio businessman who serves as coordinator for Compassion. "The book is geared toward juveniles to help them make the right choices in their lives. "

Death Row inmates were asked to contribute to the publication through a bi-monthly newsletter. Their essays and art work are included, along with photos of the inmates themselves. Moor said offenders realize it is good for them to "do good," to prevent others from landing in trouble as they did. He said he sees a difference in the prisoners when they see they can make a difference.

At the Daily Journal's request, the book was reviewed by Circuit Court Judge Sandy Martinez.

"Most of the book is about choices and that's what we try to teach juveniles," she said. "We tell them it doesn't matter what kind of family you come from, you have the power in the choices you make."

She showed the book to juvenile officers and said together, they believed they might use selected essays as mandatory reading for kids on probation.

"Sometimes they won't listen to their parents, but they might listen to someone who has been there," she said.

Hindsight

Missouri prisoner Chris Santillan has been there. In his essay, he writes of how he chose to leave behind his life of privilege.

"Seventeen years old. Three months before my senior graduation, before the end of my stellar high school career and the beginning of a future where I had the opportunity to choose whatever life I wanted, I shot and killed my friend, ending his life...as well as my own."

Leon Taylor has been there. He chose to start stealing at the age of 9 and he didn't stop. He's on Missouri's Death Row.

He writes: "I don't know if this makes sense, but I guess what I am saying is, don't let your life fall prey to the ways of the world, thinking you are this or that to impress those you hang with. They won't be at your trial telling the jury not to punish you. Hell, they may be there to help send you away!"

Randy Knese has been there. He writes: "I look back on my life now and see that all my parents wanted to do was be my friend. They would have shared my ups and downs much better if they had known what was going on."

He's serving life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Rick Clay is on Death Row: "When I chose using crystal meth and other drugs over God and my family, I chose to be a loser in a battle that nobody ever wins."

The essays in the book are powerful. They reflect the thoughts of men who have taken the time to examine the choices they made that put their lives on the path of destruction. Many, like Marlin Gray, write of how a newfound faith in God transformed their lives. Gray was executed Oct. 26, 2005.

"The book is chilling. It's encouraging and I think it's absolutely wonderful," said Jane Markway, Restorative Justice Coordinator for the Missouri Department of Corrections. "In this book, they have poured their hearts out and seen what their crime has done to them and to others."

The book is in line with the goals of Missouri's Restorative Justice program in which offenders do work as part of their sentence to assist victims and communities. They even do such things as knit afghans for premature babies. About 15,000 prisoners take part in the programs. That's about half of all inmates in the 20 facilities in the state. Markway said there is a waiting list for prisoners who want to participate.

She said she would hope the book would help young people see how their choices — even one bad choice — can affect the rest of their lives.

"We have to show our youth that this is not the road you want to go down," said Markway.

Life Changes

Published in July, "Today's Choices Affect Tomorrow's Dreams" has drawn rave reviews and more than 200 orders. The Multi-County Juvenile Attention System in Canton, Ohio ordered 100 copies.

"Both I and the Director, Mr. Donald Thernes were so impressed with the honesty and beauty on the pages of this publication," writes Carla DeOrio, Administrative Assistant for the Canton program. "We both agreed that maybe reading the pages of this publication could change a child's life and divert him/her from a life of crime."

Debra L. Smith, teacher, wrote to Moor that the book would be used as a reading and writing activity during the English Language Arts block through the Clark County Ohio Juvenile Court. They'll learn critical thinking and writing skills.

Moor said a copy of the book was sent to a number of juvenile programs around the country. Additional copies cost \$17.95 and the purchase of one book funds the printing of two more. The money goes to Compassion, which funds scholarships for family members of crime victims. The group operates on donations. To find out more, contact Fred Moor at 140 W. South Boundary Street, Perrysburg, Ohio 43551 or contact him via e-mail at: fredkensflowers@msn.com. Donations should be made out to Compassion.

"I think it's important we all look toward the big picture of what we can do," said Moor. "We are protecting society by having these people in prison, but if we can show compassion to them, it helps us on the outside, too."

While the group is not strictly Christian, it is faith-based. Moor said the publications never argue the death penalty and do not focus on individual cases. Compassion is designed strictly as an outlet for prisoners to make a positive difference.

Dennis Skillicorn blames no one but himself for the way his life turned out. He is quick to say his brother and three sisters were never in trouble. He just chose the wrong crowd.

"The first drugs I ever experimented with were barbiturates that somebody gave me. They probably got them out of their mom's medicine cabinet. I moved on to harder drugs and the criminal behavior just went along with it," he explained.

He said his first crime was burglary. His last crime led to a man's death and a jury convicted him of first degree murder and sentenced him to death. He's been on Death Row since 1996. In the last two weeks, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear his case. He believes his execution date may soon be set.

"This book is a victory," he said. "It makes me happy to know we can help kids who still have the power to change the course of their lives. I believe there will be another book."

While the book is geared to youth, Skillicorn has a message for parents, too.

"Don't give kids too much freedom — know where they are, who they are with and what they're doing," he said. "You don't let a 6-year-old decide his bedtime, you choose it. Make smart choices for your kids."

In the introduction to the book, he pleads with young people to consider their choices and make the right ones because, "none of us wants to see you in here."

He said, "If one kid makes a positive choice in his life because of the book then it's worth it."

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