

I Will Wear It with Pride

Brett Toney

Being a 37-year-old college freshman, I might have a different view of the world than most of my younger counterparts. Not only is there a significant age difference between me and most freshmen, but I have also experienced a tremendous amount of adversity – more than most of them have had the opportunity to experience at this point in their young lives.

School: Not Cool

Throughout my younger years, from kindergarten until seventh grade, I was a very capable and eager student who performed well in school; I had good grades and enjoyed learning. I was well be-

haved and never had any disciplinary problems.

In eighth grade, it all changed. That summer I had made new friends: the friends that I had from my childhood were

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no longer cool enough to hang out with. My new friends were all older. Some were only a year or two older, and some were as much as 20 years older.

With my new friends, I started down a long, dark journey. School was no longer important to me. I began cutting school. At first, I only skipped school occasionally because I was worried that my parents would find out and be angry with me. However, my parents were lenient with me, and when they discovered that I was cutting school they were angry, but not as angry as I thought that they would be.

By the time I entered high school, I was regularly cutting class. Some days I showed up



for homeroom and then cut the rest of my classes. When I did go to class, I would show up high on marijuana. This did not sit well with the school's administration. By the end of the first semester, I was transferred to an alternative school for kids with disciplinary problems.

Alternative School: A Place to Get High

My new school started at 2:30 in the afternoon and ended at either 5:00pm or 7:00pm, depending on whether you had two classes or three. There was never any homework issued by any teacher in any subject, and, best of

all, detention was non-existent. Sometimes, they told you that you had detention, but they never followed up on it.

This schedule fit well with my social life. The hours allowed me to hang out all night

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with my friends, get drunk and high, and still wake up in time for school. That was, of course, if I decided to go. At the alternative school, they did not notify your parents if you did not attend.

The alternative school was just a place to get high all day. We used to smoke marijuana on the little yellow school bus. On one occasion, we smoked a joint with a bus driver while he was driving us home. On another occasion, one of our regular bus drivers bought my friend a twelve-pack of Budweiser for his birthday. Yet another bus driver, on her days off, used to drive us to the city to buy drugs: crack, marijuana, angel dust, and heroin for her incarcerated boyfriend.

Prison: For Life on the Installment Plan?

I wound up dropping out of school after an arrest for drug possession. The last grade I completed was the ninth grade. The next decade and a half were spent mostly within the confines of various jails and state prisons. My life was out of control and it appeared to me and everyone that knew me that I would do life in prison on the installment plan. I have at this time four felony convictions as well as numerous misdemeanor convictions.

Finally: A Sense of Pride

I was at a point in my life that I had done nothing productive for a very long time. My living conditions left much to be desired: I was homeless and living in a shelter, drug addicted, unemployed, and under-educated. Then one day, I heard about a program named the Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center (MEOC). I enrolled and built

up my self-esteem by becoming certified in Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. Then, at the urging of many of the staff at the MEOC, I applied for college and was accepted. I also applied for financial aid and am receiving enough to accommodate all of my school expenses and have some left over.

On the first day of orientation at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, all of the students received a BMCC tee-shirt. The staff asked the participants to wear the shirt the next day. I heard many of my peers grumble at this, and the next day only a handful of us actually wore the shirt.

Hearing the other students grumbling about wearing the BMCC tee-shirts seemed real petty to me. If they grumbled over such a small thing as wearing a shirt from the place that might have the greatest impact on their future, then they have no idea how lucky they are to have this opportunity. However, for me, seizing this opportunity to attend college has created a sense of pride that

I have seldom felt. I will not grumble over wearing my BMCC tee-shirt. On the contrary, I will wear it with pride.



Brett Toney grew up on Long Island and currently resides in the Bronx. He is attending the Borough of Manhattan Community College, majoring in human services. His ambition is to become a social worker so that he can inspire others to make a change in their life the way he was finally able to make a change in his life.

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