



Structure and Purpose Helped Me Do My Time

Angelo Britt

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Share what you know about prison education and work programs.
2. What does the author mean in the title (and elsewhere in the text) when he says “do my time”?

Taking Responsibility

The biggest challenge of my life was pleading guilty, being convicted, and being sentenced to serve 15-years-to-life for a violent crime I committed when I was 22 years old. I committed this violent *offense* due to poor impulse control and extreme *paranoia*, which was not normal for me. Due to committing the crime, I got more insight, and took on more personal responsibility and *remorse*.

Once I was incarcerated, I realized that I was facing a lot of prison time. I could do my time hard or easy. It was all up to me how I was going to do my time—not time doing me. For me, access to structured institutional programming was the key to keeping my sanity and giving me purpose while serving my sentence.

Opportunities to Learn

In my prison there were academic, vocational, and industrial programs available to me. I had to sit before a panel of prison administrators and decide what programs I wanted to sign up for. Each program had three-hour modules. If I took two modules, that would be a total of 6 hours per day, 5 days a week. Since I had a high school diploma, my prison wages ranged from 10 cents an hour to 20 cents an hour based on my performance rating. A job in industry paid the highest—40 cents an hour. Industry pay was the highest allowed by the State of New York.



GED graduation ceremony for incarcerated students. Source: State of California, in the public domain.

Once I selected two programs (which, in my case, were auto mechanics and building maintenance), the program committee gave me a program card that I had to carry along with my prison ID. I used these cards to identify myself to any prison staff member or Corrections Officer (CO). The cards included information about what cell block I lived on and what my assigned program was. I also needed these IDs whenever I passed through any checkpoints in the prison. Without this identification, I could end up facing disciplinary charges. “Write-ups” (disciplinary tickets) are common for prisoners who break the rules of the prison administration.

Participating in auto mechanics and building maintenance classes helped me learn how to use my mind and hands to repair cars and build and maintain household structures and fixtures. I now have knowledge on how to do front wheel alignments on automobiles. I can repair and install plumbing on sinks and toilets, and I can repair and install electrical outlets and circuit breaker panels.

Sense of Purpose

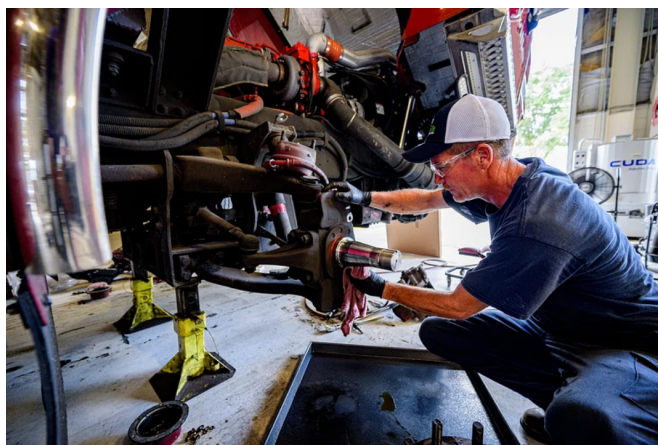
Having structured programs, with pay, while serving a lengthy prison sentence gave me a sense of purpose and a set of achievable goals to pursue. It also helped speed up the time for me and end the day on a positive note. I participated in these programs for 32 years.

In prison, it does not help me to be violent and confrontational towards Corrections Officers, civilian staff, or inmates because I'm having a bad day. It's counterproductive. I will just end up in solitary confinement. So I learned, regardless of my difficulties adjusting to the rules and my prison environment, that I had to carry myself as a nonviolent person. Believe me, it's doable. I'm a survivor. Also, it helped me to be in prison programs that taught me non-violence, anger management, and coping skills.

Finally at Peace, But I Will Never Forget

My 32 years of incarceration were not wasted. I met a lot of good people in prison who made some bad choices in life but never stopped learning from their mistakes and changed for the better. Some of them managed to serve their time and return home to their loved ones.

In prison, I learned a lot about myself and survived with my body, mind, and spirit intact. I'm finally at peace with myself. But I never



Auto mechanic working on a vehicle. Photo in the public domain.



Prisoners get vocational education. Photo from [Flickr](#) by Salah Mohammed, UNAMID, CC 2.0.

want to forget the crime I committed, what I survived, and where I came from. To be free from incarceration is an earned privilege that not everyone in prison achieves. Being on parole is such a privilege.

I am now 58 years old. I've been on parole for four years without any violations. I'm involved in a PROS (Personalized Recovery Orientation Services) program, which is part of a non-profit organization called Community Access. The staff and the program are great for people who have a mental health diagnosis.

I give thanks to the victim's family and the community for giving me a second chance at life. Peace everybody!

AFTER YOU READ:

1. As a prisoner and a parolee, how does the author navigate and use information?
2. Look at the words in *bold italics* in the first paragraph. What do they mean? (Note that in this context offense means one thing, but it has other meanings as well, including slightly different pronunciation. Watch this [video](#) to learn more.)

Angelo Britt is a student at East Village Access in New York City. He was born and raised in the Lower East Side of New York City. He graduated from high school in 1985, was arrested in 1987, and was paroled for life in 2019. His current status: unemployed and on disability.