



David Mandeville with dogs he trained

Too many people in Pennsylvania are serving long prison terms that don't make communities safer. There are plenty of people locked up like David Mandeville, who do not pose a risk to public safety yet languish in prison for decades because Pennsylvania's laws don't give them a second chance.

David Mandeville is not the same person he was when he committed the crime that landed him a life sentence at age 18. Now in his mid-40s, David has spent almost his entire adult life incarcerated – and somehow, he has thrived. Once adrift and lost in substance abuse and criminal behavior, he is now focused on giving back and helping others. “There’s an anonymous saying that goes, ‘Two men looked out from prison bars. One saw the mud. The other saw the stars.’ I’ve tried to keep my eyes on the stars.”

David grew up on a small farm in a big family, and “life was fun and adventurous,” he says. But in his teens, his outlook started to go south for a variety of reasons and he turned to alcohol and drugs. He barely graduated high school. “After high school I was lost. I got in with a group of guys who supported their drug habit by committing burglaries and robberies.”





One night, he went with three others to burglarize a house. Things went horribly wrong and he and his co-defendants shot and killed the homeowner. David was found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. That was 1998.

“This crime made me feel sick inside and I’ve never been the same since,” he says now. “My crime devastated the victim’s loved ones and my own. I am ashamed of what I did and all the pain and suffering that I’ve caused.”

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David got sober during his incarceration and has worked through childhood trauma that led him to use drugs in the first place. He realized he needed to better himself, and he knew his friends on the outside were going to college and getting an education. So, David decided that was something he needed to do for himself, as well.

“Coming to prison so young I couldn’t imagine where the years would take me. Facing a life sentence is daunting,” David says. “The things I thought were important like money, status, possessions, women, etc. were suddenly gone. I had to find new meaning in life. I turned to religion, philosophy, and stories of human triumph over adversity. When I turned to God, doors opened for me.

“I began to study and learn on my own. And over time, I became more involved in community things around here to try to get back and to help others. Now that’s kind of like who I am. I’m a helper.”

Prior to lockdowns in state prisons from the pandemic, David worked as a dog trainer. The dogs David worked with were part of the Hounds for Heroes. After their training, the dogs would become service animals for disabled veterans and first responders.

“It would break my heart to see the dogs leave but I knew they were going to go on to make a difference in someone’s life,” he says. “I love dogs. Working with them made me feel human again.”



He is now on a waitlist to begin working in his prison's hospice department. The work will be difficult and emotionally draining, but David looks forward to the challenge of caring for people who cannot be with friends and loved ones as their life comes to an end. "I know me, myself, I will be there someday," he says. "And I don't want to be sitting in a cell with nobody and nothing waiting to die. I would feel better if somebody would come and spend time with me."

He is currently part of a degree program at the University of Scranton, in which he's earned more than seven credits already. By May he will have completed nine more. He is also a proud uncle, and works hard on family connections.

But while David has changed, the laws under which he was sentenced remain rigid. One of his only opportunities for release is through a commutation. However, while that process was once robust and offered nearly everyone sentenced to life without parole the opportunity at a second chance in the 1960s and 1970s, it has since stagnated.

Even with recent changes to try to revitalize the Board of Pardons, only about 1 percent of all people serving life in Pennsylvania have their case heard and even fewer receive a commutation.

Geriatric or medical parole would provide a much-needed opportunity for people like David to give back to their communities by recognizing their growth and change.

"Unfortunately, I can't change the past and I can't change what happened or make things different," David says. "I wish I could, but I have to make the best out of the situation I find myself in. That's pretty much who I am. I try to do my best to help others and use my talents and skills the best I can where I'm at."





The Facts

Name: David Mandeville

Sentence: Life

Offense: Count 1: First Degree Murder, Count 2: Robbery, Count 3: Burglary, Count 4: Theft by Unlawful Taking

Priors: None

Year sentenced: 1998

Age at sentencing: 20

Release date: None



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