



## **Voices from Death Row Lay Bare a Legacy of Racism**

It took Black people being beaten, bombed, blasted with fire hoses, and attacked by dogs to finally bring the Jim Crow era to a close. Laws that explicitly barred Black people from voting and fair employment were struck from the books, and “Colored” signs on water fountains, buses, and other public facilities came down. Yet, without any recompense for hundreds of years of forced labor, racial terror, segregation, and blocked access to economic opportunity, many Black families were hardly better off than before the Civil Rights Movement. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged at the end of his life, access to a restaurant means little when you can’t afford to eat in it.

Many of the people on death row today inherited this legacy of inequality and oppression. Because of generations of racism, their lives were shaped by poverty, violence, segregated schools, and abusive policing. [Hidden Voices](#), a creative collective that lifts up the stories of marginalized communities, spent years working with North Carolina prisoners and helping men on death row explore the paths that led them to prison. The result was a powerful collection of stories that illuminates the trauma that lies at the roots of crime.

Here are just a few of the narratives developed by men on North Carolina’s death row. Their stories will also be collected in the book, *Right Here, Right Now: Life Stories from America’s Death Row*, to be published in spring 2021 by Duke University Press.

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## **You Can Be Anything**

My mother used to say, “You can be anything you want.” But when words don’t match up with reality, you finally stop believing.

During my sentencing, a social worker got on the stand with a stack of documents: school records, test scores, all sorts of things. He said that according to my standardized tests from fifth grade, I was literally in the top 1 percent of all students in the whole country. But somehow in sixth grade, my scores dropped into the bottom 67<sup>th</sup> percentile. He said this was alarming and absolutely unheard of. How come someone didn’t notice this? How come a guidance counselor didn’t intervene and find out why a child in the top 1 percent of the nation drops to the bottom 67 percent in a single year?!

I was dumbfounded. But suddenly a lot of things made sense. See, all the little kids from my housing project got bused to this pretty affluent elementary school. One of the best in the state.

But for middle school, all the kids from all the housing projects in town were funneled into one school that was 85 percent black and 100 percent poor. I don't think we even had counselors.

I mean, I'd wanted to go to college. I wanted to make my Mom proud and give her all the things she never had.

"You can be anything you want when you grow up." It's crazy to look back now and wonder if it could have been true.

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### **Better Off Dead**

Man, I was excited. I loved football and it was the Y's "Take a Poor Kid to a Game Day"!

Now, at the time, I'm only ten years old. Plus, I'm short. But my Moms didn't care; she bought all our clothes big, to make sure they got plenty of wear. My orange goose down coat was a perfect fit – for a grown *man*. It reached my shins. I looked like a walking traffic cone.

So, we're strolling through the stadium when this woman starts hollering that a kid snatched her purse. Out of nowhere, five Security windbreakers appear. Then five cops.

The older boy tried to run but the cops pushed him into the men's room. They slammed the rest of us to our knees, hands on our heads. Over in the restroom, we could hear the boy begging for mercy. One cop kept patting me down and asking why I had on such a big coat. When I didn't answer, he put my hands behind my back and handcuffed me.

I thought "This is it." I figured I wouldn't live to tell about it.

He drug me into a dark labyrinth below the stadium and, believe it or not, there was a jail down there. What?!

The cop asked, "You ready to talk, tough guy?"

I was too scared to speak. So, first cage we came to, he pushed me inside and said, "One last chance, tough guy."

Even if I'd wanted to say something, I couldn't.

He slammed the door with a smirk. "Enjoy your stay."

It was crazy. I was inside a stadium with 65,000 fans who had no idea a 10-year-old child was trapped beneath them.

A few minutes later, I heard a cop say, “We had to transport the older kid to Metropolitan Hospital. Not sure he’s gonna make it.”

Another cop answered, “I think we oughta give this tough guy some of the same medicine.” I was terrified. Nobody would know what happened to me.

Suddenly the door opened again, and a friend’s mom rushed in, asking a mile a minute “Are you all right? Did they hurt you?”

I couldn’t do anything but follow her through the hallways. We’d almost made it to the last door when the same cop called, “Hey, tough guy.”

I turned. He aimed his index fingers and thumbs like a gun. I knew what he meant. In his eyes, I was better off dead.

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### **Shake It Off**

Our stadium was a patch of grass at the end of the apartment complex. First base: half a milk carton. Second base: a discarded potato chip bag. Third base: a bald patch where grass wouldn’t grow. Home plate: the other half of the milk carton!

We played four on four with a broken broom handle and an old tennis ball.

I was ten, and it was a perfect August afternoon except I was pitching, and we were losing. But I knew we’d make a comeback soon as we got up to bat.

I was about to fire in the next pitch when two figures emerged from the woods. Grownups. One guy was wearing a wool hat. In the summer? Slung over his shoulder was a shotgun.

When they finally passed, I got set to pitch, but everyone else took off running. “Hey, where y’all goin’?” I called. “I want my ups!”

Then we heard the shot. I froze. The gunman was running back towards me but now the wool hat covered his face. It was a ski-mask. I sped around the corner and saw a guy standing by a boom box. Except he wasn’t standing; he was slinking to the ground in slow-motion.

Half his head was gone.

My mouth went dry. I couldn't move. It didn't seem real. How could someone only have half a head?

A single eyeball hung out of his skull like some weird fruit. A lady was crying and screaming "Oh God, his poor momma, his poor momma!" But I couldn't stop staring at that eyeball.

When the police came, they barely glanced at the body. An officer walked over to me and said, "You see anything?"

I couldn't speak. I guess I was in shock.

He smirked. "Man gets his head blown off in broad daylight, and no one sees anything, heh?"

Two attendants put on these thick, orange gloves and gathered the pieces of his brain into a baggie.

Our whole lives we'd played there on that patch of grass: tag, kickball, football. We never played there again. That was the end of my childhood. That was my rite of passage.

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## **New Blood**

I didn't get hands-on with drugs till late. Maybe thirteen.

It was the first time my peoples had ever been short on rent. I had to do *something*. Honest, hard working persons that they were, they didn't like my idea one bit. But knowing there's a sheriff going to padlock the place you call home, well, that's a feeling that's hard to put into words.

So, they took a chance. They gave me three hundred of their hard-earned dollars. I had a weekend to flip it to seven and change. I was confident. How hard could it be? I knew where to buy drugs. I knew where to sell drugs. The only thing I didn't know was, well, *how* to buy and sell drugs.

Early Monday morning I crawled back to their house so exhausted I could hardly move. I was forty dollars short.

They said they appreciated me trying.

Around eight o'clock, the landlord and a sheriff showed up. They gave my peoples thirty minutes to leave.

Everyone said it wasn't my fault, but all I could see was that padlock. And my mistakes from the weekend. Believe me, they was mistakes I wouldn't make again.

After that, I hit the streets for real. Helping mom pay the rent. Buying my own gear. In no time, I was grown.