



Planting the Seed

Stephen F. turned a seven-year sentence into an opportunity to change his life — and inspired others in the process

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Chapter One of Stephen F.'s life begins, he says, when he was incarcerated at age 17.



Everything that came before — bouncing around the foster care system, searching in vain for stable family role models, working two jobs at age 16 to support himself, descending into a Portland street culture of drugs and guns — was a

prologue to a 7½-year sentence for armed robbery. To Stephen, the real story begins with a teenager turning his mistakes into an opportunity to change his life for the better.

Stephen, now 24, recently walked out of the Camp Florence Youth Transitional Facility a much different person than when he entered Oregon Youth Authority custody. Eleven days before his release, as he took time to reflect on his time with OYA, it was easy to see why he had earned the respect of both youth and staff.

“While we’re in here, we’re sitting and reflecting, and we’re reliving the same memories over and over again,” Stephen says. “People on the outs, they don’t have that time to take a break, stop the chaos, and think about what’s going on. Incarceration gave me the time to evaluate myself.

Now I know that I want to change the world. If I don’t change the world, at least I can plant the seed with others so that future generations can do it.”

Path to Reformation

Stephen’s journey to change began his first night locked up in Multnomah County’s Donald E. Long



While in custody, Stephen F. learned he had a passion for poetry. Watch him read his poem, “Foundation”: <https://youtu.be/InClRwDJyvk>.

Juvenile Detention Home. He sat on his bed, reflected on his life, and wondered how he ended up in that cell. “I was already getting consciously aware of my place,” he says. “You reach a point where you step outside your house and you look up at the sky and realize there is way more out there. Once I went to jail, it was like stepping out of my house.”

As he observed many of the other youth in detention, he says he realized it was not a place for him. “I had morals, I had values, and I told myself I’d never lose those,” he says. “I wasn’t going to be institutionalized. I was going to always stay me.

“My first few years incarcerated, I got in trouble because I was being true to who I am. I knew I wanted to succeed, but I didn’t know what that looked like.”

When he ended up at OYA’s MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility, he finally glimpsed success — via the older youth who participated in programs, enrolled in college, and garnered respect from staff. “I thought, ‘If I have seven years to do in here, I’d rather do it like them,’” he says.

Stephen finished high school, enrolled in college, and dove into MacLaren’s vocational and enrichment programs. He got a job with [Project POOCH](#) — a

program where youth train unadoptable dogs and help them find new homes — and learned what it meant to “work with beings that needed help outside of myself.”

He joined Toastmasters and music groups through [Janus Youth Programs’ Hope Partnership](#), which connects MaClaren youth with the community through volunteer-led workshops and classes focused on the arts, life skills, vocational training, and transition services.

“Stephen participated in everything we had to offer,” says Kathleen Fullerton, Hope Partnership’s project coordinator. “Through his story and time with us, he gave us the understanding of connection as profoundly important. He always had everything he needed with him — a lesson for us all.”

Through Hope Partnership, Stephen discovered a way to use his talents to influence others in a positive way — by writing and performing poetry. “I realized my story is powerful,” he says. “This is not just my story, it’s the story of thousands of kids who are in similar situations. I want to use my music and my writing to let other young people know that there is a path out, that what you do is important.”

In his poem “Foundation,” Stephen notes that his childhood was “a bit different than the conventional childhoods depicted by Disney Channel and Nickelodeon.” He writes: “My earliest living room memories are of laying on cigarette-stained carpet, next to mostly empty Old English bottles, with ‘The Lion King’ on repeat as my babysitter.” (See him perform all of “Foundation” in [our video](#).)

One youth already inspired by Stephen’s work is Warith M., who met Stephen at MaClaren. Warith, himself a freestyle rapper, says Stephen taught him he could “rap about real life, not just fake stuff, and still make it entertaining.”

“When you see somebody, especially a person of color, doing good in and around the community you’re in, it gives you motivation,” Warith says. “It gives you a stepping stone for you to be able to do the same type of thing he’s doing. Stephen shows you that your downfalls won’t hold you back if you really put your mind to it. He opened doors for the stigma to be removed.”



Stephen earned his high school diploma and associate’s degree while in OYA custody, and he is six classes away from finishing his bachelor’s degree at Oregon State University.

Looking to the Future

Stephen’s early days in the Multnomah County juvenile facility had a lasting impact in more ways than one. While there, he met another youth who ultimately became one of his best friends: Noah S.

“He got sentenced on the same day as me, to the same amount of time,” Stephen says. “I remember he walked up to my cell after getting sentenced by the judge and he was sad. He said, ‘Man, he gave me 7½ years.’ I was sitting there reading a book, and I looked up and said, ‘He gave me 7½ years, too. We can do it together.’ He said that eased his tension, and we were friends from then on.”

Stephen and Noah both found their passion for poetry through Hope Partnership. When the two moved on to the Camp Florence transition facility, they started a program to teach poetry to students at the local high school.

They established a nonprofit, Verbal Escape, with the goals of “teaching poetry, being mentors to young people, and letting them know their story matters,” Stephen says.

These are just some of the many goals Stephen has for his new life after incarceration. While at OYA, he earned his associate degree through Lane Community College, and he’s six classes away from completing his bachelor’s in human development and family science from Oregon State University.

Before his release, he already had secured his first job — as a project manager for Teaching With Purpose, a Portland organization that works to educate and inspire teachers, parents, students, and community organizers about culturally responsive practices.

Fullerton is confident that Stephen will succeed in whatever he takes on. “Stephen has a good sense of self and identity, and a capacity to bring a lot of voices together,” she says. “His contributions to his personal life and community are essential in a world of transitory values, and they will be long-standing.”

But before he can do anything else, Stephen has the important task of re-entering society — and reconnecting with family — in a much different position than when he left.

“Am I scared of getting out? Nah. Maybe I’m still a little crazy because I’m not scared,” he says with a laugh. “I’ve got a lot of relationships to rekindle with family. They don’t know who I’ve become. They don’t know how I’ve changed. It’s time to show them who this new Stephen is.

“In my heart I know I’ll do the right thing, as long as I get out and stay true to myself.”