

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

I'm Michael Santos, founder of Prison Professors. We produce these self-directed lessons to prompt members of our community to memorialize their journey in preparation for better outcomes. I provide a sample response.

We offer full lessons through our books and courses. Family members should feel free to print and share lessons with loved ones in prison. They also may open a profile at PrisonProfessorsTalent.com for their loved one.

For more information, visit PrisonProfessors.org, or reach out to us at Impact@PrisonProfessors.org.

Self-Directed Learning Question:

- » In what ways will you be able to show the thought that went into your strategy for bringing value to your community?

STRAIGHT-A GUIDE

JANUARY 4, 2025

My grandmother is 103 years old, and our family is eagerly anticipating March, when she will celebrate her 104th birthday. Today, Carole and I went to visit her. She told me she hadn't been feeling well, so we hoped a little family cheer might lift her spirits. Below I include a video from our visit.

(video)

I'm deeply grateful for the chance to spend time with her because I know how hard it was for my grandparents when I went to prison. In the early stages of my legal troubles, I refused to acknowledge my wrongdoing. Rather than accepting responsibility, developing a plan to atone for my crimes, and demonstrating remorse, I lied—and in doing so, I brought profound shame on our family. My grandparents stopped speaking to me.

It wasn't until a jury convicted me on all counts that I realized I was on a destructive path. I had to find a way to make things right. As I've written before, I found my strategy for personal transformation by reading philosophers, one of them was Jean-Jacques Rousseau.



FINDING ROUSSEAU IN SOLITUDE

I first encountered Rousseau while confined to a solitary cell, reading *The Social Contract*. His famous words—“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”—spoke to me on multiple levels. While my physical chains were literal, I recognized that Rousseau referred primarily to the invisible chains people place on themselves and on society. He explained how individuals, by entering a social contract, agree to give up certain freedoms in exchange for the benefits of civilized life. In return, they receive protection under the law, a sense of order, and a communal responsibility to work toward the common good.

This concept opened my eyes to the harm I had done and to the role I needed to play in making amends. Rousseau’s writings urged me to look inward and ask myself how I could contribute to society in a meaningful way, especially after accepting the jury’s verdict for the crimes I committed.

SEEDS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Rousseau’s emphasis on responsibility planted three key ideas in my mind:

1. I couldn’t expect to contribute to society unless I first worked to improve myself.
2. If I wanted to contribute to society, I needed to align my personal will with a greater good.
3. Before attempting to pursue larger goals, I needed to educate myself and learn more about the world.

These insights didn’t come easily. I had to ask myself difficult questions:

- What value could I offer?
- How could I prove I deserved to rejoin society?
- How would I atone for my crimes and still contribute meaningfully?

THREE-PRONGED PLAN FOR LIFE

From these questions, I developed a three-pronged plan to guide my life in prison and beyond. That plan shaped my adjustment through 26 years as a prisoner, and it still helps to guide my decisions today:



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1. Education

Ignorance led to bad decisions, such as trafficking in cocaine. To show that I didn't want to be a criminal anymore, I had to transform my life. If I worked toward educating myself, people might believe that I could bring value to the world. I pursued formal degrees, read every book I could, and documented my journey of growth through writing.

2. Contribution

I wanted to work toward something bigger than my own problems. As I began to learn more, I began to write more. I wrote to share the lessons I was learning and to offer practical tools that others could use to prepare for success, regardless of what challenges they were facing. If those tools could help me through 26 years in prison, I believed that others could use them to overcome crisis in their lives.

3. Support Network

I've heard that an overnight success is always 20 years in the making. I made it my mission to build relationships based on trust and respect, demonstrating that I was committed to living differently—responsibly and ethically.

Through this plan, I began rebuilding my character. Even in solitary confinement, I could make choices that moved me closer to the person I aspired to become. By consistently acting in accordance with these principles, I created a record of responsibility, discipline, self-direction, and thoughtful engagement. I took ownership of my past while preparing for a future in which I could contribute positively.

REBUILDING WHAT MATTERS

These efforts guided me through the darkest moments. Over time, they helped me reconcile with my grandparents. They began to see me working sincerely to become a better person. The adjustment opened opportunities for education, connections with supportive people, and roles where I could truly serve others. My grandparents, my sisters, my parents, all became more optimistic for my future, and they invested heavily to help me grow. Because they believed in me, my personal life flourished. While in prison, I met Carole, the love of my life.



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Today, I continue striving to be part of society not just as someone who has “served his time,” but as someone dedicated to uplifting others. This mission is at the core of our nonprofit, the Prison Professors Charitable Corporation, where we focus on teaching others the power of self-directed learning and personal development. Through Prison Professors Talent, we show them how to memorialize their journey so more opportunities open for them.

I’m grateful for every day I get to spend with my grandmother, especially as she nears her 104th birthday.

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND?

- » In what ways will you be able to show the thought that went into your strategy for bringing value to your community?

As a not-for-profit entity, we do not have a staff to work on individual cases, and we do not offer legal advice. We base our work on personal life experiences, showing how decisions in prison influence prospects for success upon release. It’s never too early, and never too late to work toward better outcomes.

We’re grateful to others who support our work, including our first sponsor, www.WhiteCollarAdvice.com, a boutique consulting firm staffed by formerly incarcerated individuals who share strategies that people can use to self-advocate. For more information, visit our website at www.PrisonProfessors.org.

Spread awareness!

Support our efforts for reform by asking your friends and family to follow Prison Professors on social:

