



Straight-A Guide Newsletter #11: Michael Santos Book Review: *Law Man*

August 5, 2012

Dear Straight-A Guide Participants:

I received an email from Michael Santos and I wanted to share some of its contents. In his book *Triumph*, Michael wrote about several men in prison who lived in accordance with the principles of the Straight-A Guide. When he wrote that book, Michael did not know the story of Shon Hopwood, another man who served time in federal prison. If he did, Michael said that he would've absolutely written about Shon and he wanted to share Shon's story with others who aspired to emerge from prison successfully. Indeed, Shon Hopwood is the embodiment of a man living a values-based, goal-oriented life, and the success he has achieved both through his prison journey and after his release showed it.

Shon recently authored a new book titled *Law Man* that Crown Publishing is releasing on August 7th. It is a magnificent story showing how one man can come into federal prison without much in the way of hope, then pursue a self-directed path to educate himself and emerge with extraordinary opportunities. The story will inspire anyone who reads it, but it would prove especially meaningful for any man in prison who aspired to build a life of honor, dignity, and respect. Michael urges others to order *Law Man* and learn from Shon's leadership.

Like many men in prison, Shon entered the federal prison system in a lost state of mind. After a string of bad decisions, he turned to bank robbery with the mistaken idea that it might improve his life. Crime may have been a bad choice, but it turned out to be the catalyst of an amazing journey for Shon that provided him with an opportunity to show the world that bad decisions didn't define a man, but rather, the way he responded to them did. While still in his early 20s, he was arrested and soon thereafter Shon was sentenced to a prison term that would keep him locked within the confines of medium-security federal prison for longer than a decade.

Shon did not have much hope when he began serving his sentence, and as such, he began his adjustment in a way that was typical of men caught inside the barbed wire bureaucracy. He got high, hung out with the wrong crowd, thought more about getting through his sentence than he thought about what type of life he would lead upon release. That initial adjustment led to some predictable disciplinary problems that included a job change to the prison's law library. While ensconced within the caverns of Federal Reporters and Federal Supplements that fill bookshelves in all prisons built before the introduction of the Trulincs computer system, Shon began to read. And in reading about legal procedures and legal decisions, Shon found his calling.

In time, Shon learned how to make sense of all of those legal books. Through the hours that he invested, he learned that there was a logic within them, and once he figured out how to use the books, he became a valuable resource for hundreds of prisoners around him. Shon was not the

typical jailhouse lawyer who schemed to fill his locker with commissary by writing ridiculous briefs that didn't amount to anything more than therapeutic litigation. Instead, Shon made a real effort to understand the law and how to apply it in creative ways that brought results. And he succeeded.

Law Man recounts the story of how one of Shon's fellow prisoners turned to him for assistance with an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. The circuit court had affirmed the man's conviction and he did not have resources to retain competent counsel for the long-shot effort for relief from the highest court in the land. Shon understood the enormous odds against being heard by the Supreme Court, but he agreed to research the case and write a petition for certiorari with hopes that his work would provide his fellow prisoner with relief.

Although most every prisoner has a right to appeal his case to an appellate court, the Supreme Court is different. It is a court that considers cases of national importance. Each year, the court receives applications from several thousand of America's most distinguished lawyers who implore the high court to hear the reasons why their clients deserve a hearing. Thousands of cases seek review, but the nine justices agree to hear and deliberate over the merits of only a small fraction of the cases submitted. Yet when the justices received the brief that Shon Hopwood put together, they decided that the case had merit. The justices agreed to deliberate over a full brief and listen to oral arguments on why they should reverse the legal opinion rendered by both the district court and the appellate court.

As a federal prisoner without a license to practice law, Shon could not represent his friend's case before the Supreme Court. Instead, he reached beyond the fences to seek legal counsel who would present the case. Seth Waxman, one of the most distinguished lawyers in the United States and a partner at the high powered firm of WilmerHale, took over the case. Mr. Waxman agreed to take the case on a pro bono basis on one condition: he wanted Shon Hopwood to serve as a "co counsel" of sorts. That collaboration not only led to a victory for Shon's friend, earning him an early release, it also brought Shon a team of legal mentors who would guide him through the remainder of his journey in prison and beyond.

In *Law Man*, Shon recounted other judicial victories that distinguished him through the remainder of his prison term. Upon his release, Shon continued his education and landed a job that would offer opportunities for him to further develop his competencies and work within the legal profession. Others became aware of his tenacity, leading to a wonderful article about Shon's accomplishments in the *New York Times*. That article introduced Shon Hopwood to millions of readers, which led to his receiving a full scholarship from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, allowing him to study toward a law degree at the University of Washington School of Law; it also introduced the amazing former prisoner's accomplishments to the literary community and resulted in his receiving a publishing opportunity from Crown Books, a first-tier New York publishing house.

Shon may not have been a participant in the Straight-A Guide program while he was traversing his journey through the federal prison system, but he embodied the values-based, goal-oriented program that we promote. After a somewhat predictable adjustment in federal prison, Shon set an ASPIRATION of learning as much as he could about the law. His ATTITUDE reflected his

100 percent commitment to emerge successfully, and in his wonderfully written book *Law Man*, Shon described the incremental ACTION steps he took to overcome the degradation of imprisonment. He held himself ACCOUNTABLE in measurable ways, and by doing so, he became AWARE of opportunities he could both create and seize; simultaneously, others became AWARE of Shon. Because of his commitment, they invested time and resources to ensure his continuing success. Shon celebrated every ACHIEVEMENT, which brought one success after another, adding meaning to his life along the way. And he never missed an opportunity to express APPRECIATION for the many blessings that came along his way. Shon lived the seven "A's" of the Straight-A Guide program.

It is for those reasons that Michael wanted to share the story of Shon Hopwood with others in federal prison. He urges those with resources to order a copy of *Law Man*, as Michael considers it important to support the work of men who overcame imprison to build lives of distinction. *Law Man* illustrates that an individual who applies himself can achieve high levels of success despite the external influences around him.

Sincerely,

Justin Paperny
Executive Director
Michael G. Santos Foundation