



Straight-A Guide Newsletter #9: Preparing for Success Upon Release

June 25, 2012

Dear Straight-A Guide Participants:

I'm pleased to respond to any questions that [participants of the Straight-A Guide](#) may have. As of today, I've been imprisoned for 9,086 days. That experience has brought considerable insight, as I served significant lengths of time in prisons of every security level. From the beginning, a focus to prepare to emerge successfully sustained me. In *Earning Freedom* I tried to describe the vision that I found necessary to sustain me through a lengthy sentence. It was my hope that other prisoners would find encouragement through that book. Although sometimes the walls and boundaries may feel as if they were closing in, with a long-term commitment, a man can create his own hope and find strategies to carry him through. Now, I expect that I'm within 90 days of leaving prison.

One Straight-A Guide reader recently asked how many hours I devote each day to preparing for success upon release. I wrote *Prison! My 8,344th Day* specifically to answer that question, and to let readers experience the discipline that I found necessary to carry me through a typical day of confinement. Almost two full years have passed since I wrote the book, but my schedule is remarkably close to what it was then. I still wake very early in the morning and lie down to sleep in the late afternoon. It's part of my strategy to avoid anything that could disrupt my 100 percent commitment to prepare for success upon release. That focus carries me through from the moment I wake until the moment I lie down to sleep. And committing to the strategy day after day has made all the difference in my adjustment. Now, as I approach the beginning of my 26th continuous year, I feel stronger than ever and absolutely ready to succeed when I walk out of prison later this summer.

I'm on my rack about eight hours a day. I consider the other 16 hours as being essential to my preparation for release. Because it's all work. In many ways, I feel as if I'm at war. I'm not at war against people, but I'm at war against a system that seems exquisitely designed to perpetuate failure. Statistics bear this out—more than 750,000 people each year leave prison, and of those 750,000 people, more than half will return to prison within three years. I do not ignore those dismal statistics. Instead, I stare at them, internalize them, prepare myself to overcome them. As a warrior against failure, I establish strategies that ensure I never become one of those people who leave prison and return to prison. Accordingly, every decision I make advances my preparations.

When I say every decision I make, I mean *every decision*. That focus plays a role in determining how I spend my time. The decisions that I make today differ from the decisions I had to make early in my term. Back then, I had to focus on educating myself. That meant devoting extensive hours toward building my vocabulary. I spent many more hours learning how to use words to write effective sentences, paragraphs, and longer essays. I used to make a habit of writing at least 1,000 words every day, as it was the best exercise I knew to help me develop communication skills. Besides writing, I read, and I always read with a purpose. I chose books and newspapers that would help me understand how others used language to persuade, to change opinions, and to advance an agenda. Then I wrote about what I read. Such strategies were effective, I found, for prisoners who wanted to educate themselves.

As the years turned into decades, my strategy evolved. It became important for me to build a stronger support network. So I invested many, many hours to persuading other people to work with me. As I wrote in the literature that is part of the Straight-A Guide, I sent unsolicited letters to people from whom I wanted to learn. I found numerous mentors in academia, and later, I found mentors from the business sector, from the entertainment sector, and from the literary sector. Those mentors played influential roles in helping me grow. As a consequence, I am prepared to leave prison with values, skills, and resources that no one would expect of a long-term prisoner.

A commitment to fitness has always been essential to my adjustment through prison. Exercise helps me work through the stress, and while I exercise I'm always thinking about what more I can do to prepare for release. So I even consider exercise as part of my work, part of my preparation for the life that I want to lead upon release.

As my books show, I am a man with many flaws and I'm not perfect, though I strive to ensure that I keep everything I say, everything I think, and everything I do in harmony. That is my definition for leading a values-based, goal-oriented life. The vision isn't about being "a model inmate," as I couldn't care less about how the prison system defines me. My vision is about preparing in ways that would define me as a man who responded to struggle with dignity. I'm not interested in labels of "inmate" or "convict." Statistics show that working toward strong family and community relationships represent the surest way to prepare for success upon release, and I'm always focused on that fact. As I've written in all of the books, my wife, Carole, plays an integral in the preparations that I make for success upon release. Indeed, I consider it essential that I'm always working to prove worthy of the love and commitment that she makes to our marriage. That requires a focus through every day to avoid the noise of imprisonment. Because I'm always thinking of how the decisions that I make through the day could influence her life, I am extremely careful about what activities I pursue in prison and about the nature of my conversations in prison.

So, the short answer to the question about how many hours I spend working toward preparations for success upon release is that I spend 24 hours each day working to prepare for success. Rest is essential, and I try to get eight hours of sleep daily. I spend the other 16 hours on strategic, deliberate activities that I hope will advance my intellectual, emotional, physical, and mental strength that I intend to rely upon in order to overcome the enormous obstacles that will await me after a quarter century of continuous confinement.

I urge all participants in the Straight-A Guide to do the same.

Michael Santos
#16377-004
Atwater Prison Camp