

Dear Mr. President,

Looking at the faces of the kids I am privileged to speak to as part of the TOAD program, I am reminded of myself 25 years ago. I get butterflies in my stomach. You know, the kind you get before a big game. Only this is not a game. As I know now, this is very real.

It's time to begin. My heart begins to race. I'm ready to go. I feel the weight of my responsibility. I must do everything in my ability to prevent these kids from making the same mistake I made in 1996. I probably have only one shot with them – just a few minutes to connect.

After introducing myself, I see a few eyebrows raise when I speak of the 20 year sentence I received. Others give the general response, a nod, acknowledging the area in which I grew up (Watts). I begin my story by telling them that I understand what it's like to be poor and to live in a negative environment. I was adopted by a Mexican-American mother and an African-American father. He abandoned us when I was 4 years old. Because my father was African-American, I heard negative racial comments from my mother's side of the family and from others. I felt ashamed, but I was too young to understand why. My mother was not really around. She drank heavily and took prescription drugs to deal with her depression. I didn't have any brothers or sisters. I basically had to raise myself. But as a kid, I did something different than most other kids in the 'hood. I distanced myself from the effects of the streets by playing sports. It kept me from joining gangs and using drugs. I was a part of something. Yet, it did not prevent me from making bad choices as a teenager. By the time I graduated from high school, I was already a father. But becoming a dad while I was still a kid wouldn't be the end of my irresponsible choices. The worst came later.

With the added responsibility of a beautiful baby daughter and the financial stress that me and her mother felt, I placed all of my energy into playing baseball. This eventually opened the door to playing professionally. I signed with the Chicago White Sox and later with the Kansas City Royals. I thought playing at this level would be the answer to all of our dreams. But not long after, I was released by the Royals. I was crushed. The game I loved so much and worked so hard to play began to crumble in my hands. I had no upbringing or education to prepare me for such a blow. For months I felt embarrassed and frustrated, and in my mind, everyone saw me as a failure. I tried to find suitable employment, but because I lacked skills and education I was unsuccessful. I still felt I had to do something to provide for my family and myself. That led me to a major crossroads in my life. And there, I mistakenly believed I could only go down one road, the wrong road, a short cut. I played a role in selling drugs. The same drugs I knew would ruin lives and destroy families. I now realize that at that point I basically *chose* to go to prison. Did I *want* to go to prison? No, but the actions I chose back then and the decisions I made (or didn't make) are what led me here. I did this. There's nobody else to blame.

In 1996, a judge sentenced me to a 20 year mandatory minimum sentence. I was thirty years old. I'd never been to prison before. I was going to prison for 20 years for getting involved in something that I didn't even think about before I did it. That was the last time I ever committed a crime. It is also the time my life changed forever.

At this point in my story, I can see that these kids relate to what I have said, and have begun to let their guard down. That's when I see them get the truth of my experience. Before I was in prison, I had control of my life, or at least I could have had control over it, just like they still can have control over their own lives. I tell them that within a prison environment, there are many complications and many circumstances a person experiences, and more times than not,

they are usually out of an inmate's control. Being housed with inmates serving life sentences, I have heard their stories of regret, of pain, of fear, and seen the epitome of hopelessness in their eyes. I've been surrounded by violence, anger, hate, and racial tension. That was the turning point in my life. I came to really appreciate the freedom and liberty I had lost. I realized that I could only have that again when I am released from prison.

Mr. President, when I speak with these adolescents, it is clear to me that they need positive role models in their lives, just like I did when I was their age. When I ask them how many of them know someone in prison, 90% of them raise their hand. I've seen the pain and the tears that they shed as they listen to the TOAD presenters speak. I get the picture. And I think about my own children and know that I'm responsible for them and they need me. I believe the youth outreach program (TOAD) I am involved with has sent the right message to kids in communities we visit, and has had a positive impact in changing the negative patterns of behavior that have been interwoven into the fabric of many neighborhoods. I continue to be a part of the TOAD program today and am committed to continuing it after I leave prison.

As I near the end of my story, I know there's something very important that must be said to the kids: They need a game plan or battle plan to succeed. I explain how I have changed my way of thinking, and turned my life around in prison, and why I will never come back. I begin by telling them the plan I implemented early in my prison term. This is a plan these young people can use to avoid trouble in the first place.

The first step in my plan was to take responsibility for my thoughts and actions. It wasn't easy, but I did it. I evaluated my life and the direction I wanted to go. I implemented various programs offered at the institution, e.g. college courses, art programs, vocational training and inmate instructed classes. In spite of prison cutbacks, I devoted all of my energy to working

towards activities I could master. I developed skills as a barber and artist. I say to these kids, “it’s your choice, your responsibility to get an education and learn how to make the right choice. Nobody is going to make them for you on the outside.”

Second, I restored a set of principles and values in my life, *e.g.*, integrity, dependability, accountability, and honesty. I let go of all bitterness and negativity from my past, through the use of prayer and meditation. My life’s purpose became service to my community, especially the youth. And I realized that had to start with my family and my kids.

Third, I implemented reasonable goals. I am now a barber by trade, an artist, and I enjoy training young athletes. All positive endeavors. So once I am home, I will have a system that will allow me to manage my time and maximize my efforts to continue in those positive endeavors.

The final step in my plan is to take action in spite of difficulties: This step never ends, it is ongoing. Through the first three steps of my plan I learned the truth about choice: (1) I’m responsible for what my life looks like in the past, present, and future; (2) There are always good and bad paths to choose between; (3) Although a situation may look hopeless, it’s not and choosing the right course, even if more difficult, will always produce the best result. I remind them, just like I continually reminded myself, that family, community, and self are worth the effort. Therefore, when the going gets tough, I choose the highroad, now and forever. That involves simply asking myself, is the action I’m about to take for the good of my family? Is it good for my community? Is it good for myself? Is it the best example I can set for others? And, later, when all is said and done, will I be able to hold my head up and be accountable? I must be able to answer “yes” to those questions.

It may be hard for the kids to understand, but it is good for them to hear that nothing else matters to me but creating meaning in my life through hard work and dedication. My family is my first priority. I assure the kids, just as I assure my own kids, that I will never again trade what is right for what is easy. Through our conversations, letters, and my art work, my family sees my progress and devotion to building a better life. They know they are my motivation. They know they are my team. And now that I am older and wiser, I don't fear failure or success. I'm not afraid of rejection or the unknown. My goal is to be able to have pride in my children and grandchildren, my work, and the people I help.

By the end of my time with the kids, they are laughing and enjoying interaction. Their questions are direct and to the point. They feel good. I can tell. This is definitely the most rewarding part of the day. There is a saying, "The only way you can truly get more out of life for yourself is to give part of yourself away." That's the truth.

It has been an honor, Mr. President, to share my journey with you. I hope you see clearly the man I have become. The change I have made is a lifetime commitment. If you find it in your heart to commute my sentence, there are no words to express my deepest gratitude. Yet, even now, I know my true reward is in my new life, and helping others find their way.

Sincerely and with the utmost respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kenny Lumpkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Kenny Lumpkin