



I first met Tony Wood in 2002 and shortly thereafter was introduced to what Carmen Ministries was. My life at the time was out of control and I had really hit rock bottom. I thought that I had hit rock bottom before, but it was nothing like my life in 2002.

I came from a really rough childhood. I was in and out of foster care for the first eight years of my life. My biological mother gave me up at the age of two and there was a lot of abuse I was subjected to. By the time that I was eight years old I had five legal last names and had been bounced around a lot. Needless to say I acquired quite a few behavioral problems along the way. I was an extremely angry kid who did not trust very many people and I acted out a lot. When I turned eight I was adopted by my last family and I was a handful to them to say the least. They had four other children aside from me, three of which were also adopted. Along the way I had really only grown close to one person and that was one of the other kids in one of the foster families that I lived with. I say kid, but he was in his late teens while I was still a young child. He was like a big brother to me and treated me as such. His name was Rick and he took me everywhere with him. When I moved to other families he still stayed in touch with me and would come and see me. When I was nine he was killed in a car accident and once that happened I turned a switch. I never was going to allow anyone that close to me again and all my other behavioral problems that I had up to that point just amplified. At which point my adoptive parents tried very hard to deal with and work through them, but I just refused to take any help. By the time that I was twelve my adoptive parents had had enough and they placed me back in the system. This time in a group home and I spent the next five years bouncing around from different group home, institutions, juvenile detention centers and independent living homes. When I turned seventeen I was kicked out of what turned out to be my last group home and I moved in to a friend's house. I soon started partying full time and found what I thought at the time to be a very good friend in alcohol. I first experienced with alcohol when I was twelve and had experimented with it a few times over the years, but once I moved out on my own it became a full time experience. I always felt like the world was a little out of focus and that I never really fit in. When I was drinking that all changed, it felt like things were finally in focus and I could be that person that I always wanted to be. Of course that was just an illusion and only led to more problems. I drank and partied for the next five or six years pretty hard. I met a woman who I ended up marrying when I was seventeen and I ended up marrying her when I was twenty-one. I was drinking and partying just about the entire time and I did not in any way give the relationship the respect that it deserved. I started to get into serious legal trouble when I was about eighteen or nineteen and it just got progressively worse as time went on.



In 2002 things just came to a head and on July 26, 2002 I was arrested for a very serious crime. I ended up in Warren County jail and my life at that point was so out of control I ended up even having problems in the jail itself with everybody, custody staff, inmates, everyone. I knew my life was out of control and I knew that I needed a power greater than me to get my life back on track. I attended a church service that was held at the jail and Tony was the one who was leading the service. Anyone who has ever met Tony can tell you that there is just something about him that draws you to him. Through

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the help of the social worker at the jail I started meeting with Tony on a one on one basis. Those meetings truly changed my life. Tony started mentoring me and really helped me to start building a spiritual foundation on which to rebuild my life. As I started following Tony's advice and guidance my life started to change. It was not instantaneous, but slowly people at the jail started noticing the changes that I was making and started treating me differently. The other big thing that Tony stressed to me during our one on one visits at the jail was the importance of education. I spent about two years in the county jail and during the entire time I met with Tony on a pretty regular basis. In 2004 I was transferred to state prison that pretty far from where Tony was and where his ministry was located. Tony still came to see me when he could, but it was a lot tougher for him to come and see me then it was in the county jail. However; the things that he had taught me in the county jail stayed with me during my years in prison and the spiritual foundation that he had helped me to build was always there. I slowly started to rebuild my life off of that foundation. I earned my G.E.D. in 2005 and I also earned a few other educational certificates over the ensuing years. Unfortunately I also slowly lost touch with Tony somewhat over the years. I was transferred to a different prison and I was having a hard time, but the things Tony had taught me always were there.

On January 23, 2011 I was released from prison after serving eight and a half years. My adoptive parents who I had rebuilt a relationship with while I was incarcerated picked me up. I was able to get my parole transferred to Middlesex County and my parents helped me to get a place to live. I had developed a plan before I was released on what I wanted to do when I was released, so I immediately set out to start working on those goals. I wanted to go to college. Three and a half weeks after I was released, I was accepted at DeVry University. I am currently half way through my first semester and I already finished two courses, which means I have official earned my first six college credits. I am currently working on my last two classes of the semester and to date I have a 4.0 GPA. My majoring is to be a Computer Information Specialist, specializing in Database management. I wanted to find work when I was first released, but due to the job market and the fact that I was just released from prison I was not able to find work, but that turned out to be a blessing because I received the maximum financial aid possible to completely pay for my schooling. I am also a recovering alcoholic and I have almost nine years of sobriety, so upon my release I immediately got hooked up into the local AA community and I currently attend four to five meetings a week. I also do a lot of service work with the local AA community which really helps me out a lot. One of the best decisions that I made upon my release from prison though was that I reached out to Tony and got back in touch with him. I had held on to his phone number over the years and I called him a few days after my release and the first thing he asked was what did I needed. He told me he would come and see me a few days later. Sure enough the following Monday he came to see me and had a ton of stuff for me from cloths to food, things that I really needed. Tony later told me that his plan that day was just to drop the stuff off and leave, but we got to talking went to lunch and next thing we know a few hours had past. It was like we never missed a beat. From that day to now Tony has been a huge part of my life, one of my biggest supporters and always willing to help me in any way that he can. Tony is a huge part of the reason why I am having the level of success that I am with my reentry back into society.

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Lastly I just want to say a twofold message, the first goes out to the other guys who may be getting ready to be released or have been just released. You guys can make it and you can succeed. It does not come easy though and there is a lot of hard work that you have to do, but it is more than worth it. You have to be willing to let go completely from old habits and start fresh. You have to be willing to go to any (legal) lengths to achieve success. If that means riding a bicycle when you are first released to appointments and job interviews that is what you have to do. If your parole office catches an attitude with you it means biting your tongue and not reacting to him. Most of all when times get really tough and you just feel like giving up and going back to that old live style DON'T. I know that it may seem hard or even impossible, but I am living walking, talking proof that it is possible, **if you are willing to work for it.**

The second part of the message goes out to the people who may think that people who are prison deserve to be there and that they get what they deserve while they are there. What I would like to ask is: What kinds of people do want those prisoners to be when they are released? In New Jersey, 65 percent of those who are released from prison are arrested again within five years. That's a fact. So if an inmate only gets what he deserves in prison, what happens if that prisoner is released into your community? Prison ministries like Carmen Ministries offer something different to a prisoner, a chance to rebuild their lives on a spiritual foundation. Even if it only works on a few, that is a few less that will commit a new crime when they are released.