

## INTRODUCTION

Over 60,000 people remain incarcerated in New York State prisons, and most of them will have an opportunity at some point, and perhaps several points, to convince the Board of Parole that they are suitable for return to their community without endangering the public safety.

Preparing for a parole hearing is a bit of an art, and a bit of a crapshoot. At times, it appears the most likely candidates are denied parole and the least likely are granted parole. But while there is no magic formula, there is a certain rhyme and reason to the process, and there are things you can do and steps you can take to increase your odds. I never thought I would see the outside of a prison wall, and I hope that my story gives you both hope and insight into the parole process. But you have to start by believing in yourself and really making an effort to better yourself in prison. I pray that my story will encourage others to believe that there are alternatives to a life of crime, something that took me many, many years to realize.

On August 14, 2007, I was released from prison

after having served 37½ years for my involvement in a robbery in which three people were killed. So I had 450 months, 1,950 weeks, or 13,687 days to figure things out. It took a while before I even bothered to try.

You see, my original sentence was 50 years to life, meaning I had to do a half century before I could even be considered for parole, and with no guarantee that I'd ever be released. It seemed hopeless, and pointless. After 14 years, New York State passed a law which changed its sentencing guidelines and my sentence was reduced to 25 years to life. Regardless, correction and parole officials made it real clear that I was never getting out. I assumed that was the case, and remained a cynical, bitter, thickheaded, institutional thug living the prison culture and not doing a darned thing to improve myself or my odds of someday getting out. I flat out didn't care what happened to me.

The turning point came in 1988, when I was sent to Shawangunk Correctional Facility and placed in a Close Supervision Unit which had cameras and listening devices throughout the block. I was

informed that if I had any hopes of ever getting out, I'd have to play the game and start attending therapeutic and educational programs. I didn't think for a moment that any of those programs were worth a bucket of spit (and I was dead wrong), but I signed up, figuring I could game the system and maybe con my way out. In my self image, I was a criminal and nothing else, and figured I couldn't change that any more than I could change my DNA. Besides, just about everyone I knew and anyone I ever looked up to was a criminal.

My life of crime began when I was eight years old, and progressed rapidly until I finally committed a crime so serious that it appeared I'd be locked up for life. Crime was, simply, the only life I knew or understood. I was abandoned at birth and spent all of my early childhood in a series of foster homes, an orphanage, detention centers, and reform schools. I became a product of the system and really didn't care about anything or anyone, not even myself.

When I committed the crime that sent me to prison for life, I had a fifth grade education. I had no social or vocational skills, no positive role models,

and nothing that would inspire anyone to even think of giving me a job. I had a big chip on my shoulder, figured the big bad world owed me and felt that I could take and do whatever I wanted. I never felt a twinge of remorse for any of my crimes, no more than a hyena feels guilty for devouring a fawn. It's just the way it was, kind of a law of nature. Survival of the fittest and all that.

As you might have guessed, prison didn't improve my attitude or my character one bit. I served time in 17 prisons across the State of New York (Elmira, Coxsackie, Attica, Auburn, Clinton, Great Meadows, Eastern, Shawangunk, Sullivan, Woodbourne, Sing Sing, Tappan, Downstate, Upstate, Orleans, Collins, and Fishkill), and was constantly transferred from prison to prison for one reason or another. I spent years in solitary confinement and under other restrictions imposed on prisoners like me who just wouldn't follow the rules. I actually took pride in the fact that I was never in an honor block or received any special privileges for being a good prisoner. I was bad and I liked being bad, and I got involved in all sorts of illegal activities in prison. So life

on the inside wasn't really all that different for me than life on the outside. There I was, associating with criminals and committing crimes. What else was new?

Because of my lousy record and crummy attitude, I was shipped off to Shawangunk, which in retrospect was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. Maybe I was finally starting to mature, and maybe I was just getting bored sitting around acting like a tough guy and watching my life waste away. In any case, I decided to sign up for some of those educational and therapeutic programs, mainly with the goal of snowing everyone. Regardless, some of what they told me started to sink into my thick head, and suddenly, like an epiphany, a whole new world opened for me. Is it possible, I wondered, that Jerry Balone has potential and promise and can improve himself? Sadly, the thought had really never occurred to me before. But at Shawangunk, for the first time in my life, I realized that I could influence my destiny, that I wasn't predetermined to remain a criminal and maybe, just maybe, I could turn myself around.

When I finally saw the light, I went at it like a banshee. I took all the mandated programs, and eventually became a facilitator and coordinator for almost every program that was in the prison at that time. I worked my way toward college and, many years and many prisons later, earned five degrees, including two masters' degrees. I also became the Resident Director of the Pre-Release Center, helping to prepare people for parole board hearings. I was able to help thousands of individuals obtain their release, but I couldn't seem to win my own. I was denied again and again and again until, to my surprise, they finally voted to let me free.

My release sent shock waves throughout the prison world. If Jerry Balone could make it, anyone could. But what some offenders fail to understand is that my release wasn't entirely a matter of blind luck. I had, after years of doing nothing, worked hard to at least make myself suitable for release. I knew the odds were slim and I never expected to use my education and skills on the outside. But I learned to care about myself, and to want to better myself and to want to be a good person, no matter what God

and the State of New York planned for me. That's the first step, wanting, really wanting, to change.

I am not saying I have all of the answers, or suggesting I can give you the secret to obtaining parole release, but I did learn from all of the denials I received, all the thousands of transcripts I read and all the debriefings I did of those who made it and those who did not. I can't give you a surefire way to get out, and I remain mystified as to why the parole board favors some and not others. But what I can promise you is that if you follow the suggestions I make in this manual, you will enhance your chances of being granted parole.