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PROGRESS REPORT

(OVERCOMING
INCARCERATION)



By Kunta Kenyatta

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REPORT
(OVERCOMING INCARCERATION)

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Driving home after another one of those long, late night runs, I think to myself, "sure glad that's over with." Winter has come early this year and the roads are treacherous. I use to hate the snow and the cold that came with it, but now, in the business I'm in, it's like money falling from the sky. Whenever you can make \$100.00 in a day that's a good day, but when you make \$500.00 in a day well... let's just say I'm not going to complain about it. So as I put the wraps on another year with over \$100,000.00 of personal income on the books, and all the luxuries that come along with being "hood rich," I can not help but reflect on how I come to be in this position. It's kind of hard to believe, in this economy, especially when you consider that I was buried deep off in Ohio's prison system less then nine years ago.

Like most people in prison, who had a chance of ever getting out, I had dreams of doing big things. But unlike most, I believed that the key to realizing those dreams was coming to terms with my reality. I had been in prison since the age of 18, and it would be sixteen years latter before I saw the streets again. Therefore I had a felony record, virtually no job experience, plus my educational credentials was lacking. This meant starting from the bottom, which I didn't have a problem with. I just needed the chance for some upward

—KUNTA KENYATTA (1995)—

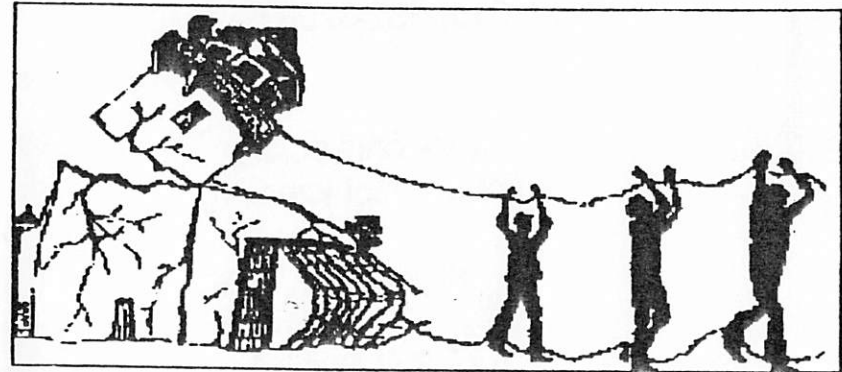
CRIMINALS

+

CONFINEMENT

=

CORRUPTION



NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO END CONTROL UNITS

I remember watching the debate over legalizing gambling in Ohio and those opposed to it were running an ad with a law enforcement officer claiming that the measure did not go far enough to ensure that felons would not be working in the industry. I was thinking, "this is the one industry where those who have served time would have an advantage in experience and they don't even want them to do that." So you know if voters can be swayed by not letting felons work in the gaming industry, or any other one for that matter, then the odds are against you. But you do what you have to, and with the right breaks here and there, hopefully it works out for you.

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Kunta Kenyatta



mobility. But there was one other thing that worried me that I could not quite figure out, that is until I actually got out. 3

In a lot of ways prison is just like society, but in other ways it's a totally different universe, with a very unique social order. And for prisoners serving long prison terms, there is a need to find their place within that order; it can be the difference between life and death. If you don't adapt, you don't survive, adapt too well, you are considered institutionalized. It was real easy for me, somebody who had never been released from prison before, to write off as being institutionalized those who I seen leave prison only to return looking a lot happier then they did when they left. Seemed strange to me, I didn't get it and it used to upset me very much.

When I left prison I was real eager to get out here and do some new things, especially meet some new people, but it didn't take long for that to change. After a while if it wasn't family, or very close friends, I just didn't want to be bothered with nobody. Never mind disrespect, it had been so long since I had been treated with disregard that I had forgotten what it felt like. The only thing that prevented me from falling into the deep depression that normally accompanies such a dramatic loss of social status was the fact that I was a psychology major in college while in prison, so I was able to recognize it for what it was. And let there be no doubt about it, for a lot of prisoners, who have served decades in the penitentiary, leaving prison is an instant and complete loss of hard earned social status. And for most, there is no way possible for them to regain the status they once held in the penitentiary while out here in society, and that's real talk.

Now I understand why somebody, after serving twenty years in prison, working in a dead end job, being talked to crazy by a supervisor half their age, would say "the hell with this." Armed with this understanding, I was able to start a new job prepared for these types of issues, still I had those moments when I couldn't stop the thought from running through my mind; "don't you know I will kill you." Prisoners

gain social status through various means; sports, hustling, and knowledge of the law. But in maximum security, it's mainly through violence. And I had my share of incidents, which I used to try and be discrete about, in order to get away with it. Then I learned the value of the public display of violence, and I realized that I had not been getting the maximum return on my efforts. Putting on a public display of violence within a prison environment, along with all the man down alarms going off and the noise of the "life flight" helicopter landing on the prison grounds, sends an instantaneous message throughout the entire prison population.

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Sure you will have to spend a little time in the hole, but by the time you get there everybody already in the hole will know what happen, "yeah Kenyatta then got him another one." And by the time you get out you will have eliminated most of the problems that other prisoners have to worry about. It doesn't take many of these types of actions to put you right at the top of the food chain, with all the proper dues and respect that comes with it. Needless to say, out in society it just doesn't work quite the same way, and you have to constantly remind yourself of this. However, I was able to maintain my job for five years, which is something I'm proud of, and gain some much needed on the job skills while I was there, but I knew that it was not something I was trying to make a career out of. It's bad enough being stuck in a dead end job, but the economy started taking a turn for the worst, and at my job they were laying off plus cutting back on hours. I knew I would have to find something else.

After being out of prison for a few years, I was so involved with the prison reform effort going on here in Ohio that it had actually become to be the dominant part of my life, but this is something I had done for years as a prisoner out of necessity so it wasn't that difficult for me to volunteer my expertise out here in society. This included writing, which is a skill I picked up during my many years spent in solitary confinement. I had gotten away from doing this, quite frankly,

party. So I got on the internet and spotted a H2 Hummer they were trying to sell at a dealership right over in Massillon. I went and dropped \$20,000.00 on the table and just like that they gave it to me. Having been on both sides of the spectrum I can say with certainty that having money is a lot better than not having it, but it does come with its share of problems.

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When I was heavily involved in activism in other cities around Ohio, people used to always want me to hold something political here in Canton. I always stayed away from that, this was my refuge, where I go to get away from the celebrity. The only thing they know about me here in Canton is I tow cars, that's it. But it got worse here than in other places. I cannot go to the grocery store, out to eat or anywhere in public here without several people approaching me about towing cars. I be like "damn, it's not like I'm selling crack." I have to put signs on the doors of my home explaining to people, "don't come to my house about towing no cars." And because some of these people are super stupid, they will call my phone ten or fifteen times in five minutes. I have to end my voice message with, "do not repeatedly call this number, if you have an emergency, hang up immediately and dial 911, thank you."

Whether its being an Entrepreneurialist or a Philanthropist, a lot of prisoners and ex-prisoners express the desire to achieve some of the successes that I have since being released from prison. While speaking in prisons I would often say; "the resume that you create for yourself while in prison is the same one that follows you back to society." Therefore, I expect for my prison affiliates to fare better then the average person getting out of prison. Because we did not waste time while doing time, we underwent extensive guerrilla style political training, with required studies in history, economics and sociology. Even with that under ones belt you still need hard work and sacrifice to make it out here in this society. Without that, it's just not going to happen for you.

over what I put into it. It was tempting to just sell it, go get another one and do it all over again. But after selling so many I would have to get a dealer's license and probably move into a bigger money market. Getting thirty or forty grand cash at a time in this town just ain't happening. Plus, I would lose big time trying to sell my house in this housing market. But I had the clientele in the towing business here so, with a little work, in ninety days I'll make my money back, and in six months I was off to Springfield, Missouri to buy another truck that I would make into a tow truck.

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With a little more experience this time around, I kept within my budget putting this next truck together, and I could have resold the truck for a profit of \$15,000.00 over what I put into it. Adding a rollback (flatbed) to the business changed the scope of the company. I now was able to tow a lot of vehicles that I wasn't able to tow before, with the various all-wheel-drive and what not you have on the road today. The beautiful thing is I didn't have to drive cross country to get it. I purchased the bed and had it installed right out in Dalton, Ohio for a little over ten grand. In this business you cannot be shy about spending money. I spend over a hundred dollars a day in gas alone, the average repair job to one of the trucks is a thousand dollars, and anywhere from four to eight thousand dollars in insurance. It's always something going wrong so I have to keep cash on me, causing my partner Yahya to say; "you be having more cash then what the dope boys do." And I have had a few Canton Police say, not knowing I'm a convicted felon, "make sure you got your gun on you when you are out here at night."

But I only keep day to day operational funds on me, I got to this point by living off of half of whatever I make, all the bank tellers know me. When I want or need something, I got it, and I don't have to be bothered with no credit. When Yahya and I were in the motorcycle shop and I caught a good deal on a 07 Yamaha V Star for \$5,000.00, I bought it. Then I started looking at boats, only to realize that I didn't have a vehicle to even pull it off the lot with, let alone transport a boating

because I did not have the time or the solitude I felt I needed to do a good job. But it needed to be done, so I knuckled down and cranked out my third book "Life After Life," which chronicled the beginning of my involvement with the prison reform effort on the outside as well as my extensive travels throughout Ohio and the world since I've been out. S

Before going to prison the only time I spent outside of the country was in Canada. Now I have been to England, Jamaica, Brazil, Mexico, Korea, Japan and China. I am a bonafide world traveler, now I can go just about anywhere and feel right at home, no matter what the language. One of the tricks I learned about getting around in those countries where I don't speak the language, is to always collect business cards everywhere you can, so if I get lost I just jump in a cab and show the driver a series of business cards from the area I'm trying to get to until he indicates his familiarity. Traveling abroad is something I do strictly for pleasure, but it does broaden your horizons and give useful perspective. I highly recommend it to anybody that gets the chance.

The coming out of my book "Life After Life" made me an instant celebrity within the prison reform circles in this state and beyond, but this was my third book so I was familiar with celebrity, and just like anything else it has its ups and downs. Of course the carte blanche treatment you get wherever you go within your realm of celebrity is a plus, but the unrealistic expectation that comes with celebrity has always been something that tends to weigh heavily on me. I was traveling all over Ohio giving speeches at prisons, churches and on college campuses. A lot of times I would do this for free, but sometimes I would have to charge a fee. Fame without fortune is a very frustrating predicament to be in, and I had not yet made my fortune out here in society.

Meanwhile, I was traveling regularly to Columbus for meetings with CURE-Ohio, an organization that I was on the board of. Also, to Toledo for meetings with a local chapter of the National Campaign To End The Death Penalty, and to Youngstown for play rehearsals about "Lucasville: The Untold

Story of a Prison Uprising." My involvement with CURE-Ohio was largely a waste of time, even though this organization had the most potential of all the prison reform organizations in Ohio it was doing the least, because every bit of its potential was being stifled by its leadership. The immediate goals of Toledo's local branch of the National Campaign To End The Death Penalty was quite simple, organize an event that would bring a national spokesperson against the death penalty to the city, but after the tremendous success of that we decided to try and build it in to something more. And I just happened to be in Youngstown visiting at the super max prison when I stopped in on the try outs for the "Lucasville Play," because acting is not my forte, but I went along with it anyway.

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Somewhere in the midst of all this I had managed to accumulate \$20,000.00 to work with, and I needed a new vehicle. I had put over three hundred thousand miles on my old Bronco. And I was tempted to get me an Avalanche, which is a truck that I always liked, but I remembered the words of an old friend of mine I grew up with in Cleveland, "out of the vehicles I then had the only one that's been worthwhile is my tow truck." So instead I bought my first tow truck, and the plan was to just have something on the side, if I could get two or three tows a day in between speaking gigs, that would pay anywhere from \$250.00 to \$1,000.00. I could leave my job, which had become more of a burden than anything else with all that I was doing. I never thought that this business would get to be anywhere near what it is.

It's a three hours drive from Canton, where I was now living, to the CURE-Ohio meetings in Columbus. The arguments would last about four hours, then another three hours drive back home that is ten hours of valuable time down the drain. Not to mention a \$300.00 loss, with travel expense and loss revenue, now that my business was up and running. As you can imagine I was ready to leave this dysfunctional group. But luckily, for the time being, the National-Cure stepped in. First, they scheduled an election

for \$18,000.00. This guy down in Whitesville, Kentucky wanted \$6,000.00 for his. So I hurried up and rented a pickup truck, got a trailer and went down there and snatched that up with the quickness. Now all I would have to do is find a truck, cab & chassis to put the bed on. This shouldn't be too difficult, I normally see these trucks sitting on the side of the road for sale all the time. Now that I'm looking for one I cannot find anything locally or even in the area. //

Back on the internet I kept looking at this 99 Ford F-350 cab & chassis that was for sale in Miami, that would be perfect; low miles, diesel engine, five feet from cab to rear axle and for a good price. I just didn't want to have to go that far to get it. But after I got tired of looking, I went on and contacted the dealer, made the arrangements and booked a flight out of the Akron- Canton Airport to Miami, Florida. I arrived at the airport with an overnight bag and ten grand cash in the pockets of my sweat suit jacket, as I approached the metal detector the officer asked me to remove my jacket, but I didn't have on a shirt under my jacket so I was going to have to be searched. During this search the officer discovered the money I had on me, and to them a Black Man plus large amounts of cash on the way to Miami equals drug dealer. So she asked, "What is the purpose of your trip... vacation?" I took my money out of her hand and gave a one word answer, "business!" and kept it moving, ignoring her obvious desire for a long drawn out explanation. My thoughts were, "you can believe whatever you want to believe, it's quite alright with me."

If it were not for the long flight delays in Atlanta due to fog, I could have been in Miami a lot sooner then what I did, but getting there and making the purchase was the easy part. Now for the dreaded 14 hour drive back, what a way to test drive a vehicle. I made it back only stopping for a couple hours in Savannah where my sister was staying at the time. I ran a little over budget getting the tow bed put on the truck, and I blame that on a lack of experience. After it was completed though, I could have sold it for a \$10,000.00 profit

row behind "The Lucasville Riot."

With all this behind me, and the prison reform establishment in Ohio not willing to make an all out assault on any of these issues, it was time for me to focus on my business which was quickly out growing me. However, I did accept a position on the board of Ohio's Justice & Policy Center, which has a paid staff of attorneys to do most of the hands on work because my business keeps my hands pretty much tied. I also co-founded Entrepreneurial Re-Entry here in Canton, which encouraged people coming out of prison to go into business for themselves, because finding a job with a felony record is becoming unrealistic in this economy. /o

In my eyes, my little towing business was not all that big of a deal, and it is sort of strange to me when I hear people say "you're the only black guy I ever seen with a towing business." Because I'm from Cleveland, where all the towing companies are black, unless you go out to the suburbs somewhere. But Canton is not unique in this regard. I've visited every county in this state, and based on what I know about the state, I would be willing to speculate that there were as many if not more black owned businesses in Cuyahoga County then there were in all the other eighty seven counties in Ohio combined, and to me that's a damn shame.

My plans were to keep the business a one man operation, but it got to be far too much for me to handle on my own. Eventually I was forced to buy more trucks and hire some help. Tow trucks can be very expensive, and I got lucky finding my first one for twenty grand on e-bay out in New Jersey, but it wasn't in the best of shape. To get a tow truck in good shape you are looking at kicking out \$30,000.00 or more, unless you have it built yourself. One day while searching the internet for tow trucks for sale, I spotted one that had caught on fire and burnt up, so the guy wanted to sell the tow bed off the truck, which was still intact. This auto loading tow beds go for around \$25,000.00 brand new, and there was another used one just like it outside of Chicago

of board members, which was years overdue. Then, they oversaw the election that ushered in a new board with me as the chair. Our new board was filled with professional organizers and activists, with proven track records in the field, for a minute, things looked promising. But as soon as the national organization was out of the picture, the old leadership went on the attack, suing me and everything else. The same way the republican party do president Obama, if I propose something that they were previously for, they all of a sudden was against it. But unlike Obama, this was not my job, I was not getting paid to put up with this, and I wasn't going to continue to ask anybody else to either. 7

Walking away from that foolishness was easy; abandoning the plan of action that grew out of Toledo's branch of the National Campaign To End The Death Penalty was a little more difficult. It was only four of us who used to meet in a small café on Bankroff next to the Toledo University. I was the only one that wasn't living in Toledo to attend these meetings, but they had received word of my coming from an Ohio prisoner serving time on death row. Our task was to bring in a speaker who was use to speaking in much larger cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. These speeches would normally draw a crowd of about fifty people in each place, so she didn't really want to come to a small town like Toledo, didn't think it would be worthwhile. But if we were able to raise the money to pay her fee she was willing to come. Well not only did we raise the money to cover the cost to get her there, but when she got there she spoke in front of a larger crowd then all the other crowds she had spoken in front of before, combined. Our job was done, we could have left it at that, but we had all these people fired up about getting rid of the death penalty in Ohio now.

Coming off that success we had a little momentum that we did not want to waste. People wanted to come to our meetings now. My thought was, "we cannot have people coming to meetings unless we give them something to do," and the big dance was over with in Toledo as far as I was

concerned. Toledo was another three hour drive from Canton, and again I had my business back home to consider. At the time, I didn't have any employees to pick up the slack. First, the suggestion was made that we could have them passing around petitions. As a professional agitator, organizer and activist there's nothing I hate more than these meaningless petitions. Except for maybe the meaningless letter writing campaigns to the politicians, which was CURE-Ohio's answer to everything. Then it was suggested that we make the petition binding, as in a ballot initiative or referendum at least as an organizational tool, now they were talking. With our contacts around the state we could most certainly put an issue on the ballot, even one as controversial as ending the death penalty. Getting the issue past on Election Day, however, was an entirely different matter. 8

We would have to consult with the lawyers, and Ohioans to Stop Executions (OTSE), which is the premier anti-death penalty organization in the state. The lawyers for OTSE's concern was that if we put the issue on the ballot and the voters shot it down, which they almost certainly would do, it would make it much more difficult to get a moratorium, which they were trying to do. It was also mentioned that the state has a law that denies people who have been convicted of a felony from putting forth a ballot initiative. To me this was not an obstacle but rather an opportunity, being that it's was unlikely we could get the votes to see the referendum through. We could have went forth with the ballot initiative with me as one of the sponsors, forcing the state to challenge it, then in turn challenge the state for denying me this constitutional right. The United States Supreme Court would essentially have to amend the constitution to vote against us, but this would have been years down the road, in a case that would have national ramifications effecting everybody from Martha Steward to Mike Tyson. In the meantime, the national spotlight would have been on the death row situation here in Ohio, a state that has more botched executions than any other one in the country.

Having the ability to put an issue on the ballot would have raised the profile of every group involved, subsequently giving them more political power to push any other issue that concerned them, and with the petition being caught up in the courts on a separate issue we could have withdrawn it after winning the case. All of this was just too much for OTSE. I didn't bother telling them that I would like to challenge the constitutionality of denying a person convicted of a felony the right to bear arms, I just don't like letting the United States Supreme Court off the hook on these issues. There answer was more non binding petitions, rallies in front of the governor office and more silent vigils. "Hell I don't have time for this," this is not what I have undergone years of training for.

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Starting off in Portsmouth and ending up back in Youngstown, "The Lucasville Play" would be a seven city tour around Ohio that lasted about a month. This is not something that I usually do, but it was for the cause and I enjoyed it. The ACLU of Ohio put up \$10,000.00 to kick the play off, and the ticket sales would keep it going throughout the tour. With the recent release of "Life After Life," these trips double as a book signing tour for me. Ohio's ACLU had also arranged for volunteers to give us a place to stay in each of the cities we went to. I know people in all of Ohio's eighty eight counties so everywhere we went I stayed with somebody I already knew. To me that part of it was like visiting old friends. There were two of us in the play that had served time in Ohio's prison system, and I was in Lucasville during the time that the riot took place, so I knew all of the people our characters would portray in this play. In anticipation of our arrival, all of the local newspapers played up these facts with the play in general, so we had a concert type of atmosphere following us from city to city. It surprised me that so many people had turned out to see this play; I just wish we could have been making headway on a referendum to end the death penalty while the play was bringing attention to "The Lucasville Five," all of who were on death