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Breaking the cycle of crime—jail—more crime—more jail: This is what AWE is all about.

Corey: Successful Alternatives? Yeah, Right!

Corey had been in jail before. He'd also been released—twice. When he completed AWE's Meditation and Achieving Your Potential courses and heard he was eligible to begin Successful Alternatives, a wry smile crossed his face. Later he told us what he was thinking at the time: "Yeah, right. Like I can *make* it on the outside."

With few job skills, a short work history, and no family to support him since he was 13, Corey wasn't overly hopeful at age 20. He was street smart, though, and people liked him. They even trusted him and invited him over. While he was on the streets, he'd managed to find a couch to sleep on almost every night. That was better, he thought, than some could manage.

For eight weeks Corey stayed with Successful Alternatives. Ms. Terri, a former parole officer and current MSW student, had met many Coreys over her twenty years in probation and parole. She could easily spot potential, even when it was covered with cynicism and fear. She knew Corey's main fear was how to talk to people who were different from him, how to "fit" with people who were successful. She taught social skills and role played real-life scenarios where people didn't use their fists and didn't carry a gun. Corey listened and watched. Ms. Terri also taught and practiced meditation with the group, building on what she knew Corey had already learned.

One afternoon at the end of class, he told her, "I know I've changed more in the past several months than I've ever changed before. And I want to change even more."

Ms. Terri built on his desire—with practical skills for job readiness, with specific contacts for housing and employment after release, and with links to support groups that would provide the new relationships Corey needed.

Still, shortly before he left jail, he said, "As much as I want to make it...I don't know..."

Almost a year later Corey is still free. "This is longer than I've been free before, Sister Elaine," he told me when I met him for breakfast one morning. "It gives me hope, but I still wake up in the middle of the night with a knot in my stomach. This is such a new road for me. I don't think I was this scared when I ran the streets looking for a place to sleep. But it's not just fear—fear of losing this. There's something else. I think it's excitement. I can't believe I've got my own space. I know it's transitional, but I've got the same bed every night and it's not a jail bed. And there's that steady income from the loading dock—where they don't just pay me but like me. Even my support group gives me something to look forward to. This must be how people feel on Christmas."

I reminded him that people always liked him. There was so much good there. "I sort of knew that," he admitted, "but people never stayed around long. I didn't want to get my hopes up."

Corey still has challenges ahead of him—with only a year on the job and his transitional housing contract coming to an end. Aware of this when he dropped by one evening, he asked, "When do you all drop out of the picture?"

"We don't," I replied.

"You mean you'll still be here when I'm on my own?"

"We'll still be here."

With a wry smile, he said, "Then, maybe I can make it on the outside."

“You mean you’ll still be here when I’m on my own?”

“We’ll still be here.”

With a wry smile, he said, “Then, maybe I can make it on the outside.”