

## The Life of a Dandelion

My name is Shu'aib Abdur-Raheem, I live in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, New York. I moved here from the Upper West Side of Harlem five years ago in 2012.

I was born in Kings County Hospital and raised in Brooklyn up until early adulthood. My childhood memories are filled with mostly fun and laughter looking after my 7 younger siblings in a close family unit with my Mom and Step Dad, who was mostly away serving in the Army. My Mom struggled to raise us mostly alone, and we lived at or near the poverty level for most of my childhood. While we didn't have many material possessions there was more than enough love that kept us all together. We had an extended family that stretched from New York to New Bern, NC where my parents were from.

Since my return home, I was able to find and maintain my own apartment which I share with my common law wife, who mostly lives with me except on Fridays when she takes our laundry to her home where she has a washer and dryer. My wife still maintains her own apartment with her adult daughter whom she happily spends time with on the weekends.

My biological father had several children by different women in various cities from the East Coast to the West Coast, which was the result of his life on the road driving tractor trailers. All total, I have (at last count) 17 brothers and 11 sisters, but I am closest to my maternal siblings of 5 brothers and 2 sisters. We stay in frequent contact through phone calls, social media and visits. I have four children (one deceased), 7 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren. I have dozens of nieces, nephews, great nieces and great nephews spread out all over the country and needless to say it is a chore keeping contact with them.

Both of my parents, my grandparents, and my uncles all save one aunt have passed away. Right now I am the elder male in our extended family which hasn't really sunk in my conscience fully since we just buried my late Great Uncle just over a month ago, he lived until he reached the ripe old age of 95.

My greatest hardship was of course my surviving 37 ½ years of incarceration during which I endured the painful passing of my Mom, Dad (Biological and Step Dad), my beloved wife, my first born Son, 5 brothers (2 maternal) and 3 Sisters and too many other relatives and friends to count. The last 7 years of my imprisonment were the longest periods of grieving and loss of my life where I drained my tear ducts and soon became stoic as I managed to carry on after being denied parole 6 times.

I only have one conviction and incarceration was a near death experience for me. While I never contemplated suicide I never felt so hopeless and helpless in my life. I never gave up hope of one day regaining my freedom, but the days and nights became stretched out into one long endless journey where the end seemed to be elusive and most times out of reach. I created an alternate reality where I held on to my past memories of life before prison while I lived the prison life from day to day. My past memories became my frame of reference, like a beacon that guided me through the maze of prison life with all its convoluted rules and codes and distorted morality. I had to struggle to hold on to my humanity along with my sanity.

Years into my incarceration I learned that my extended family felt incarcerated long with me as evidenced by their many and frequent letters, cards, phone calls and visits over the decades. I was also aware that my community also continued to lend support to me and my family as evidenced by their outreach, expressed concerns for my and my family's well being. Of course there were other members of the community who maintained a constant vigil to insure that I remained in prison for as long as I did and still to this day would love to see my freedom revoked, if not worst.

The prison system is inhumane, period. The very structure of the institutions from the cells to the gun towers, massive walls and razor wired fences are designed to crush rather than uplift the human spirit. The fact that so many people survive decades of imprisonment is a testament to the strength of their humanity rather than to any redeeming value of the dungeon itself or what it has to offer. I drew strength from my early encounter with a dandelion that grew up through the concrete of the prison yard and reached for the sun. That was my first ray of hope and ignited the fire in me to survive one day at a time. Justice??? Wherefore art thou?

Despite the gloom and doom all around. I managed to gain an Associates, Bachelor and Masters Degree. I turned inward to refine myself and finally reached outward to extend my hand to countless other men around me who were broken, lost and on a destructive path for themselves and others around them to help them regain their humanity. I outgrew the walls that confined me every day until there was no more room inside for me and like the dandelion I became free and reached towards the Sun.

Ever since I was a child I spent my entire life looking after others, first my siblings, my family, community and fellow prisoners. While I was inside I vowed to Allah that when He set me free again I would spend the remainder of my life helping young people to find their humanity, realize their potential and seek a path away from the pitfalls of the streets that lead to prison. My present Job gives me the opportunity to reach young people at the crossroads of their lives where they can still turn back or go in a different direction.

The prison was my cocoon, I morphed into a Monarch Butterfly and I have joined my peers to pollinate the world with our message of hope, resilience and redemption.

I have been Mentoring my whole life, I am a Mentor.

My passion is to travel to see the world, meet new people and find those at the end of their rope and give them back their wings so they can fly again. My long term goal in life is to live free and long enough to tell my story until it reaches the ear of anyone who can take a lesson from the life of a dandelion.