

DON'T BAR PRISON INSPIRATION

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In the three years since he was released from prison, **Raphael B. Johnson** has become one of the state's most successful ex-inmates. He has graduated from college, published a book, started a business, become a husband and father, and challenged hundreds of ex-offenders to do better.

Instead of touting Johnson's turnaround, however, the Michigan Department of Corrections considers him a threat. The department has banned Johnson's autobiography and prohibited him from speaking to inmates.

It makes little sense. MDOC has made much of its Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative to reduce crime and recidivism by better preparing offenders for life after prison. What better way to do that than to offer up the example, and counsel, of an ex-inmate who committed a terrible crime and then re-created himself?

In 1992, when he was 17, Johnson shot a man to death. He can never restore that life, but he can show others how stupid and unnecessary his actions were.

"An innocent man lost his life because a 17-year-old punk - and I say that with emphasis - couldn't control his anger and walk away from conflict," Johnson told me. "Anytime you cannot control your emotions and you're trying to live up to this misrepresentation of manhood, you are a punk."

Through hard work, faith, discipline and self-criticism, Johnson, now 32, has changed from a self-described punk to a leader and contributor. When I met him recently, he was calm, courteous and soft-spoken, neatly dressed in a French-cuffed shirt and tie.

For those inside prison, Johnson's story is an inspiration. For those outside, it's a revelation.

Johnson was an honor student and captain of the University of Detroit High School football team in 1992, when he was charged with second-degree murder in the shooting death of 40-year-old Johnny Havard. The crime was front-page news in the Free Press.

As killings go, it was about as pointless as they come. Johnson didn't even know the man. He got a gun from a friend's car after the two were kicked out of a party for fighting. Johnson was young, smart, good-looking, popular, strong and arrogant. He felt disrespected, and he snapped. A man - another black man - lost his life because of a teenager's twisted sense of pride and manhood.

While out on bond, Johnson graduated from Cass Tech High School. As others turned their backs on him, Johnson embraced the Nation of Islam. "They told me they would embrace me but that I would have to make a change," he said. "That had a profound effect on me."

In 1993, Johnson was convicted of second-degree murder and received an 8- to 25-year sentence. His new faith gave him a steely discipline that carried him through nearly 12 years of prison, six of them in solitary.

In prison, Johnson read 1,310 books, covering a range of subjects, including philosophy, physics, military tactics, religion, geology, anatomy, horticulture and African-American history and culture. Johnson wanted to know why the grass was green and how the stars moved across the sky. Other inmates called him "the book." He became a leader who could squash beefs on the cellblocks or bring a guy from the gambling table to the library.

"I was very disciplined," Johnson said. "I studied, wrote, worked out. Worked out, wrote, studied."

After getting out of prison, Johnson earned a four-year bachelor's degree in legal administration in two years from the University of Detroit Mercy, graduating this summer with highest honors. He started Total Package Lifestyle, a company that provides motivational speaking, workshops, fitness training and other services. He was married in 2005 and had a son in 2006.

In December, he started working at Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit, helping other ex-offenders as Goodwill's community reintegration coordinator.

"Brother Raphael is a true motivator," said Walter Williams, 50, a parolee who served 20 years for unarmed robbery and knew Johnson in prison. "When I came out, I saw how much he had accomplished. I said I can go get it, too, if I go about it the right way."

It's not easy to move forward with a serious felony on your record. Johnson applied for more than 40 jobs, but the doors kept closing. Small wonder nearly half of the more than 10,000 people a year coming out of Michigan's prisons go back.

"The (prison) system is not designed to prepare guys for when they come home," Johnson said. "We say we want them to succeed, but we're not preparing them. They don't know about insurance, credit, investing, managing money - basic things that we take for granted."

"I re-entered a hypocritical, unforgiving world, and that's the reality most ex-offenders come home to. There's this blanket misperception that you're hopeless. As an ex-offender, no one trusts you."

But some people trusted and believed in Johnson. Keith Bennett, who runs programs for young minority men at Goodwill Industries, helped Johnson get a job at Goodwill. The Rev. James Atterberry, a member of the Michigan State Parole Board, argued for Johnson's release but also challenged him to reach out to other troubled young men.

"He told me that, if I ever came back, he'd never let me go," Johnson said.

I asked MDOC why Johnson's autobiography, "To Pose a Threat: My Rite of Passage," was on the restricted book list. The official explanation was that it describes weapons and self-defense tactics that prisoners could use.

Yes, makeshift weapons are mentioned as part of a realistic portrayal of prison life - but it's not like inmates don't already know about them. The important point is that many inmates would see themselves in Johnson's early life and maybe understand that they, too, could reach a higher ground.

If the people running the Department of Corrections want more ex-inmates to straighten up and fly right, they should beg Johnson to come into their 42 prisons - and order 50,000 copies of his autobiography, one for each inmate.

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(SIDEBAR)

Help Raphael Johnson win Hoodie Award

Raphael B. Johnson was nominated as best community leader for Steve Harvey's Annual Hoodie Awards. As one of four finalists, he will fly to the awards show at the Orleans Arena in Las Vegas on Oct. 20.

"The Hoodie Awards recognize our everyday figures and business owners for their beliefs, courage and commitment," Harvey said. Supporters of Johnson can vote for him by

logging on to: www.steveharvey.com/hoodie_awards/about_hoodies2.html. Voting day is Monday, Sept. 17.

ILLUSTRATION: Photo

CAPTION: Ex-inmate and now motivational speaker Raphael Johnson, at left, talks with Michael Harris-Bey, 29, of Detroit, who was released from jail two days before this meeting, after spending 10 years behind bars. They are at Goodwill Industries in Detroit on Aug. 16. Above is the cover of Johnson's book, which is on the restricted book list for Michigan prisons.

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MEMO: SIDEBAR ATTACHED

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