

FORMER INMATE KNOWS PRISONS, AND ABOUT LIVING RIGHT - BOOK IS TOUGH ON PRISON SYSTEM, INMATES, HIMSELF

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Whether writing or fighting, **Sylvester Long** never pulled a punch.

Long's book, "I Made It Through the Storm," published in 2003, is a nitty-gritty account of life in Michigan prisons. He wrote it while doing a 15-year bit for a drug-related, second-degree murder.

His writing may lack the laser precision of Tookie Williams' prison memoirs, or the raw energy of a Donald Goines novel, but it has the virtue of straight-up honesty. Long is hard on everyone, including himself. He doesn't claim to be innocent. Nor does he expect any sympathy.

"I'm one of the fortunate brothers who made it out," Long, 46, told me over a lunch of burgers and fries last week. "God gave me a second chance."

Long did time in 16 Michigan prisons and writes about them all. His book describes racial tensions, petty beefs among inmates, violence and indifferent or corrupt staff. Long considers the state prison system a warehouse that spits out convicts unprepared for little more than a life of more crime. But he is equally tough on inmates who believe they are never wrong, blame others and don't take advantage of the few opportunities they have.

"A lot of inmates don't try to advance their mental skills," he said. "They go to the basketball court, but they don't want to educate themselves, come home and do something with their lives. It's all up to you. You can't keep blaming the ghetto or the hood. You plugged in with the wrong people and it's costing you."

Crime cost Long some of the best years of his life. Raised in a housing project on Detroit's east side, Long never knew his father. His late mother worked hard to provide for Long and his three sisters, but she couldn't keep her son from the streets. Long started selling drugs when he was 11. At 13, he was arrested on gun and narcotics charges. He spent a year in juvenile detention and dropped out of Finney High School in the 10th grade.

Long went to prison for the shooting in 1985, when he was 26, and earned a GED there in 1993. He started reading and writing in prison, inspired by authors like Goines, Nathan McCall, Terry McMillan and Walter Mosley. He missed the computer revolution and still writes longhand.

Like many of the 12,000 inmates who leave Michigan's prisons every year, Long was tempted to go back to the streets for some fast money when he was paroled in 2000. But he decided against it after a friend died from swallowing an 8-ball of cocaine - several grams - during a police chase.

"I'm at peace now," he said. "I don't have to worry about the police kicking down my door or someone wanting some drugs at 3 a.m. The dope game carries so much with it. You have to start carrying a pistol. You have to start watching your back.

"When you sell dope, you hurt a lot of people and, in the end, you either die or go to prison. Unfortunately, money has become god in Detroit. There's no trust or honor anymore."

Long found a construction job and was married in 2003. His wife, Charlene, has been his anchor. He started speaking at youth homes and schools, trying to keep young people from going the route he did. He established a strong relationship with his 21-year-old daughter, who was born just before he went to prison.

"I'm trying to give back," he told me. "I'm sorry for what I did. When you kill someone, you don't just commit a crime against him: You commit a crime against his mother, his father, his kids and his family."

Although he's published a book, Long continues to struggle. After eating lunch with me downtown, he took a bus to his job as a janitor at a suburban mall. He earns \$7.50 an hour - a far cry from the thousands of dollars a day he sometimes made dealing drugs.

"I've been wrong, but it's harder being right," Long said with a laugh. "It's hard as hell to live off my check, but I feel good."

In spring, Long plans to publish a revised, tighter version of his book. He's also writing poetry and short stories. Most of all, he's looking forward to the next chapter of his life.

Whether or not he becomes a great writer, Long is making a difference as a husband, father, taxpayer and mentor. He's contributing to society instead of costing it \$30,000 a year in prison. That's a good example for the people locked up in Michigan's prison system - and for the rest of us who pay for it.

"I Made it through the Storm: My Fifteen Year Walk in State Prison" can be ordered at Borders and Barnes & Noble book stores, at www.amazon.com, or by calling Long at 313-247-9557.

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CAPTION: Former inmate **Sylvester Long** of Detroit with his book about prison life.

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