

A MAN WITH A PAST GIVES BACK

Told by Diane Saunders

It's ironic, Will agrees, that a man with his past now works with the police, some of whom have become his best friends. And it's sad, he tells young people, that it took his brother's death for him to find life. He often looks back to the turning point. Though he wishes it had come sooner and more peacefully, he's grateful it came at all.

William Morales was in solitary confinement—"the Hole"—where all he could do was think. There wasn't much else to do. Screaming, bragging, blaming, tripping on the past, plotting revenge, he'd done all that. It had gotten him nowhere, and had gotten his young brother, Hector, dead, shot during a gun battle with the police.

Will could never change that fact. As he sat alone in the Hole, thinking over his life, and Hector's death, he finally realized things would never change for him unless he changed himself. With a determination he had never felt before, he decided to let go of his past and start working on his future, and he knew that it was the best decision he had ever made.

Up to that point, his life was made of one bad choice after another. When he was only sixteen, he founded a gang, the X-Men, on the lucrative profits of cocaine trafficking in Boston. Known for their targeted attacks on police officers, other gangs knew better than to mess with the X-Men. Will went from infamy to incarceration within a year. By the age of seventeen, he was quite literally a prisoner of his own bad

choices.

On his long road to self-rehabilitation, he met his first mentor, Perez, a lifer who'd gotten his master's in education inside the walls, who agreed to teach him to read. Starting with Little Bo Peep coloring books, Will devoured words, then sentences, then paragraphs and chapters, and after a while he wanted to share his fulfillment with others. He joined a speaking program so he could talk to troubled teens, in real street terms, about his brother's death and how it had changed him. The kids listened. Will began to understand that intervention at the right time, and from the right person, could keep a teenager out of trouble.

Four years after Hector's death, and six years after Will was locked up, he was released. He got a job at a pizza company. One day he met up with his friend Luis, who had also been paroled. Together they formed a group called X-Hoods and made plans to give presentations to high-school kids.

Will and Luis knew they would always be associated with their former violent gang, the infamous X-Men, so they decided to twist that association to teach kids. They told Boston students that the "X" was a symbol for crossing out drugs, gangs, violence, and all the other bad elements in their community. "Hoods," they said, stands for Helping Out Our Dysfunctional Society. They added the caution that if not used wisely, the "X" could be the mark of poison, ruining a young life. But the same "X" could also mark the spot where you'll find the buried treasure within yourself.

When Will met the Reverend Wesley Williams, a Methodist minister who directed an urban youth service program, the reverend was working

on bringing the kids, the police, and the church together with “tough love,” strong values, and open communication. Out of their collaboration, the Boston Youth and Police Partnership was born, a breakthrough in community relations and the first outreach program in Boston’s history created by teenagers. They organize and run a crime watch in the city and lead workshops to teach adults how to start crime watch groups.

Still on that good road, Will got the Massachusetts School of Law in Andover to create a special curriculum for his kids. The school teaches them to think and act like lawyers. “Now when the kids see a problem they can analyze it in their minds, then verbally say, ‘This is why that’s wrong.’ They can state their arguments clearly and defend themselves with words, not fists, knives, and guns.” Will tells them, “Hey, I still carry a gun, but, it’s not a physical gun, it’s a mental gun. And what I’m shooting for is the sky—the hope, peace, and freedom in the sky.”

On some nights, Will visits gang members to talk about jobs and other opportunities. Occasionally he meets with the police to mediate and resolve problems. Officer Juan Torres, who coordinates the Youth and Police Partnership program, says, “There is definitely a new trust between us and the kids. They get to know us, in and out of uniform, as real people. We’re constantly reminded these are good kids who want to make a difference. They just need to know someone cares.” Torres continues, “When they see a guy like Will let old wounds heal and move ahead, then they can also trust us and work with us to make the community a safe place where they’ll have opportunities for personal growth.”

As a law student, homeowner, husband, and father of a three-year-old son, Will is an inspiring role model for young people who are looking for a better future. He is now the executive director of the YMCA of Greater Boston, Egleston Square Youth Center, directly across the street from where his brother was killed. “Some days it’s kind of tough,” he admits. “I see ghosts—the ghost of my brother and of my former life.” Then he adds proudly, “I want to live this life for both of us.”

There are two ways of exerting one’s strength: one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.

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Learn how you can bring the youth and police in your community together to build healthy relationships and teach children how to prevent violence through problem-solving forums and recreational activities. E-mail Will Morales at wmorales@ymcaboston.