

Cellblocks to Mountaintops
Video Episode 03: Anthony's Story
Transcript

Anthony Pickens

OSP Inmate:

Back in November, we did a storytelling event with an institution that was surrounding the theme of life without parole. This is mine.

TEXT CARD:

Inmate Anthony Pickens shares his story with Willamette University students
as a part of the school's *Reforming Criminal Justice* class

Anthony Pickens: In 1997, at the age of 15, I took a man's life during a robbery. The outcome was that I was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison.

Anthony Pickens: Restorative justice has a focus on healing, and I feel like myself. Anybody that's involved in this system, human beings in general, but in prison in general, is difficult to find an outlet for true healing.

Anthony Pickens: I didn't grow up with my father in my life, but in my early years, I had a stepfather whose very presence made me feel like I was living in a horror movie. The film started with me witnessing him beat the hell out of my mother on a daily basis. When I was seven, we moved from Michigan to Portland, Oregon. It was here that his abuse shifted to me as well. So, I was removed from my home and started a cycle of group home and foster home living. The group homes were full of gangs and at nine years old I was the youngest and smallest there so the kids would harass me nonstop. I didn't join a gang because I had any intention on being a criminal. I didn't do it so that I could hurt another human being. I did it as a measure against myself being hurt.

Anthony Pickens: I was ten years old when I first started to sell drugs and cook up crack cocaine, learn how to steal cars. When I was about 12.

Anthony Pickens: I began to spend so much time in juvenile hall and Oregon Youth Authority that the state of Oregon decided they should try something different. So, at age 14 they made arrangements to send me back to Michigan to live with my grandmother on my mom's side. This started off an amazing experience because as soon as I got there, she introduced me to my real father. They both explained that he was not in my life, not because he didn't want to be, but because my mother and stepfather wouldn't allow him to be.

Anthony Pickens: It started off great. He came to all my football games and boxing tournaments and everything. Involved in my schooling. I was going to school on a regular basis, getting good grades, so I was happy. I felt whole and complete.

Anthony Pickens: Then something changed. Every day after school, I would go to my dad's house to hang out with him and his girlfriend. One Friday I showed up and his girlfriend was there, but he wasn't. That weekend I had a football game and looked into the stands at his normal spot. I scanned the crowd, and he was nowhere to be seen. I was

crushed. I soon found out from a friend that my father had been buying crack cocaine in the projects to smoke. I didn't know how to express the anger and pain and betrayal I feel, so I feel voiceless. So I turned back to what I was familiar with - destruction.

Anthony Pickens: When my grandmother found out me and a friend burglarized a police officer's home, she made good on her threat and put me on an airplane back to Portland, Oregon to live with my mother. I was back in Oregon less than 90 days before the robbery turn murder took place.

Anthony Pickens: I've known Sterling for 20 plus years. We both went to solitary confinement for like close to two years together, and that was my first time doing a long time in solitary confinement. But at the time, he taught me like, look, when we get in here, we're gonna read the complete works of Shakespeare. We're going to teach our skills how to write screenplays. We're gonna write a book. And he put all of these constructive things in my head to do during my solitary confinement, so that I wasn't just sitting in the hole going crazy. We're going to read the complete works of Shakespeare. So, I read it and I was like, this is interesting. Kind of didn't understand a lot of it because of the language and all that. But I was like, well, I finished it.

Anthony Pickens: My paradigm shift began in 2005 while in solitary confinement. I started to grapple with my existence, the effects my actions were having on myself as well as others. So I publicly renounced my gang involvement at the age of 24. This lost me a lot of so-called friends, but that also gave me the ability to start growing as an individual for the first time I can remember.

Anthony Pickens: The things that stood out for me coming to RJ is that it doesn't just focus on our healing, it focuses on the victims' healing. So, it's a full circle of healing that needs to take place and RJ kind of helped me with that process.

Anthony Pickens: After I was sentenced to 25 to life my victim's family stood up and vocalized words I will never forget, and at times still haunts my conscious. They told me they forgave me. To this day, I don't comprehend how they were able to do such a thing.

Anthony Pickens: At the time I was sitting there, and I was kind of like, you forgive me. It was a shock, like I didn't understand it. And so, I just was like, wow, that's crazy.

Interviewer: Did he look you straight in the eye and say that?

Anthony Pickens: Yeah. Once I started to grow and mature. It's always been fuel for my change. So that what I did wasn't in vain. If they can forgive me for what I did, then I have to make a positive impact in my life and in other people's lives. So that's how, that's how I kind of come to terms with my past and my actions and trying to somehow balance the scale that can't be balanced.

Anthony Pickens: I stand here today a man, accountable and remorseful for what I did in my youth. A man who values life, my life as well as others. No longer a lost child but a man who daily exemplifies the power and ability of a human being to transform, to reform, to bring value to myself, as well as to the rest of the world. If we have transformed. Should any of us just languish away here with no hope? Or no matter how much we have changed, how much we have transformed, are we just a lost cause? Those are the questions I leave you here with. Personally, I believe that we all should have the opportunity to present ourselves to the parole board and allow them to make that decision, because not to have that opportunity, that is life with no hope. Thank you.