

Sam Neil brief biography:

My life is like any other city black kid. I was raised in a single parent home, unfortunately. My dad left when I was about 3 or 4. He used to abuse my mother. My mother was a strong woman and she kicked him out.

We picked apples in Sodus and Williamson. About 20 people from the family lived in one place. My grandfather held us all together and he taught us about respect and loving your family. When he died it was a huge void. We moved to Earl Street and my mother did what she could. But I missed my father and wondered why he didn't want me-felt neglected.

I played football until I was 16 and that was a good thing. I loved it. When my mother moved me from the city to Chili where there was no football team I was crushed and rebelled. I went back to the city and joined the Junior G Boys gang. We started doing devious stuff, breaking into cars, stealing from lockers in the locker room. I used to blame my behavior on my parents but now I know it was my own doing, my fault. My mother was a good mom. It was just the choices I made. It saddens me to see I broke her heart.



I am 43 years old and I served 5 prison sentences before I recognized I needed to change. At 38 years old I saw the light and got down on my knees. I cried and cried and asked God to forgive me and wipe away the pain. I started going to church, started going to programs that would help me and started opening up more. The blessings that have come - that is why I am a mentor at Wilson.

Old friends and old places were the stumbling blocks for me. I had to change my people and places. I needed to join up with friends that were doing great. Strategies that worked for me were developing positive relationships with good, new friends and coworkers. Have one woman and be faithful to her. Get involved in church and helpful programs.

I am grateful for the obstacles I encountered as they made me the person I am today. People say when you are down and out, turn to God, but it's true. God wants to help you when you are down and out. He doesn't want to help the ones who are high and mighty. He wants to help the one who knows they need help.

The obstacles made me feel like a small man, alone in the world. But when I overcame those obstacles I felt confident that I could do more. But I served 5 prison sentences, one for assault, one for riot and assault, one for drug dealing, one for forging checks and one for selling an illegal gun. I also shot a man and took his life. They did not read me my rights so I did not serve time for that but it haunts me to this day. So I have dedicated my life to keep someone else from this life. Now I don't do any drugs or alcohol, am engaged to be married, don't lie, or do anything illegal. I work a good job (a friend hired me to work for his cleaning company) and go home after work. I promised

myself that I was going to dedicate myself to God and instead of breaking the community down I am trying to build it back up.

Old friends brought setbacks for me-going back to the old neighborhood. I had to recognize I couldn't hang around them. What helped me not give up were the good people I surrounded myself with. My mother, my brother, my aunt and my fiancé kept praying for me and now I am so thankful for them. They say I am the answer to their prayers. One turning point for me was my kids. I want the best for them so I have to be my best. So it gives me hope for my kids.

I had to ask for forgiveness from my mother and family. I had to ask God for forgiveness and for mercy for all the pain I caused others by my life of crime. I had to forgive my father for not being in my life - after all I am a part of him. I resented him because he wasn't in my life. But I had to let go of that and forgive him. If I didn't I wouldn't be able to be the person God wants me to be. I had to forgive my friends. "You were supposed to be my friend but you let me get into bad trouble".

I was determined to make it even though I was a bad person. Family members were praying for me and encouraging me that this bad person wasn't who I was supposed to be. Then I was in my cell in Pennsylvania and something just came over me. My sins weighed down on me. I got down on my knees and cried and cried and asked God for forgiveness. A big weight was taken off my shoulders. I started looking in the mirror and telling myself to take small steps each day-smile more, reach out more, do the right thing.

Success is seeing my kids with a smile on their faces. It's being able to be a mentor, waking up to someone I truly love, calling my mother and hearing the pride in her voice, having inner self pride. I had to choose between going back to the old life and going forward to a better life. I chose to go forward. I love mentoring the kids at Wilson. My heart is really for these kids.

I am thankful and blessed for all the things and people I have in my life now. My life was hell before. I got my GED after dropping out of school. I have also taken many courses to help better myself while in prison-computer, conflict resolution, counseling, etc.

To kids today I would say build good, open relationships. Don't lie. Have self-worth. Don't sleep around. Marry your girl and stay faithful. We eat meals together, pray together. My kids have a two parent home. Get a good job, go home after work, have family time, go to church. I am doing all right now.

Editor's Note: Material drawn from an interview with Sam for the *Creating Hope* video.