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NEWS

From drug-dealer and prisoner to barber and preacher, Petersburg man is now changing lives

Joyce Chu The Progress-Index

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PETERSBURG—Inside Another Level Barbering and Cosmetology School on Sycamore Street, Wesley Nicholas walks from one station to the next, observing his students' hair cutting techniques.

"He's the best teacher," said one student who whizzed by.

Nicholas, 55, and his wife Candice opened up the barber school 13 years ago with the vision to foster people's talent and give them an alternative to the street life of prostitution or selling drugs to make ends meet—a life that Nicholas was once very familiar with.

Before he opened up the barber shop, he had spent over a decade in prison for shooting and paralyzing a man who had killed his brother over a drug territory dispute. In his teens and young adult years, he ruled the streets of Petersburg selling drugs.

He turned to selling drugs to get ahead, but it was leading him to destruction

Nicholas delved into the underground world of drug-trafficking at the age of 17.

After experiencing what he felt was racism at work where the white man he was training got promoted instead of him, Nicholas became convinced that the only way to advance in life was through illegal means. The new hire had only been on the job for a couple months. The owners of the store were also white.

I'll never work for a white man another day of my life, he told himself.

Hurt and livid, he quit working at the supermarket and turned to selling drugs in 1984.

Nicholas began to find other disgruntled kids who were similarly poor and didn't have a strong parental presence in their lives to join him. Soon, the group grew from 10, to 20, to 30, to 40 and then to 50 until they took over the entire block of Rome Street. They became known as the Fifth Ward gang, with Nicholas as the ring leader.

As he was stocking up cash from the drug deals, Nicholas' mind was set on using the money to open up a barber shop—a dream he'd had since he was a child. At first, he thought selling drugs was the way out of his problems, a way to give his community a hand up. Then he saw how the crack, cocaine, and marijuana he sold tore families apart, how people became so addicted they could no longer function, how Petersburg disintegrated into violence.

He decided that he wanted to leave that life, only to get pulled further in when an opposing gang murdered his brother, shot his mother's house, and wounded him over a drug territory dispute.

While his brother was on his death bed, he urged Nicholas to forsake his drug-dealing ways and dangerous lifestyle.

“Is this worth it?” he said as he looked into Nicholas' eyes. “Look at this hole in my arm, hole in my chest, hole in my back. Promise me you won't continue this life.”

“I promise,” Nicholas reassured him. But vengeance was still on his mind.

Weeks later, Nicholas searched out the man and shot him twice, paralyzing him from the waist down.

Immediately, Nicholas careened out the street, drove to Norfolk and got a hotel room. Hatred was still in his heart for other men who had shot up his mother's house. If the police found him, he was prepared to have a shoot-out with them. In his mind, he saw this going one of two ways—either he would get payback for the people who hurt him, or he would die trying.

When he checked in, he saw a Bible in the bedroom drawer.

He flipped the Bible open, and the verse from 1 John 1:9 jumped out at him:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Nicholas was never religious even though he grew up around it, choosing instead to chart his own path. At that moment, distressed and on the run, he knew he needed something bigger than himself to get him out of the cycle that would only lead to his death.

God, I'm going to give you one chance.

The next week, on Dec. 6, 1989, he turned himself in to the police and was sentenced to 59 years in prison. Nicholas was 23 years old.

Finding God and learning the power of forgiveness

Inside the cold, damp cell, depression settled in like a thick fog, obscuring his will to live. Spending 59 years confined to imprisonment—his entire adult life—was a daunting and dispiriting reality to swallow.

He continued pouring over the Bible, clinging onto the promises he found in the scriptures for hope. The words began to take root as his mind and attitude started to transform. The message of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer struck a deep chord in his heart:

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Nicholas wrote down the names of all the people that he had resentment towards, including the man who killed his brother, the police, the district attorney, his friend that testified against him as a witness. One by one, he chose to forgive them and release the anger from his heart. Later on, Nicholas saw the friend that had testified against him in prison and told him that he had forgiven him.

Months later, Nichols was summoned back to court. The judge had decided to lessen his charge from aggravated malicious wounding to a malicious wounding, shaving 30 years off his prison sentence to 29 years.

He was overwhelmed with gratitude, attributing it to the hand of God.

Inside the prison walls, he became a barber and a preacher

Nicholas learned to cut hair and preach in prison. When he first got into jail, he met a former barber who taught him how to cut hair with a razor and a comb. He observed how the former barber cut hair, then went around practicing the techniques on other inmates.

In prison he took online Bible classes, got ordained as a minister and led church services. At one point, his services attracted over 1,000 inmates. His primary message was forgiving others to experience freedom and healing, one that Nicholas has had to live out time and time again.

Nicholas thanked God again when his charges were reduced for the second time.

In 1996, he received a letter in the mail stating that they were going to slash his prison sentence another seven years, bringing it down to 22. He had an abduction charge removed; he had never kidnapped anyone but had been accused of the crime.

Throughout his time in prison, Nicholas moved around to 9 different correctional facilities. Eventually, he also ran into the man that killed his brother and the other man that wounded him. He approached both of them to tell him that he had forgiven them.

Though he had his sentence reduced to 22 years, Nicholas only served 12 years in prison. For a third time, he had his sentence shortened.

In 2001, he got called to court again. The judge that presided over his first sentence was retiring, but as he was going through his documents, he realized he never signed off on Nicholas' prison sentence back in 1989. The judge asked if Nicholas had completed his time. Nicholas responded with a yes, based on the fact that had earned "good time" by staying out of trouble, doing service and taking online classes. Back then, prisoners could earn back up to 30 days for every 30 days of service they did.

After hearing the case, the judge decided to release him that same day. On May 23, 2001, Nicholas walked out a free man.

"God performed a miracle," he said.

Fulfilling a lifelong dream

After spending more than a decade cooped up in a cell, he went back to Petersburg and moved in with his mother. He was still hungry to cut hair, so he took a chair out on the front porch and offered his service to his neighbors and friends.

Determined not to go back to his previous life of drug-selling, he began to attend church with a friend. Since he didn't have a car, he had to rely on people to give him rides. A lady named Candice, who was also a beautician, often took Nicholas to church and also helped him get a job at the barber shop she was working at. They fell in love and got married five months later.

Now Candice and Nicholas run their own barber shop and school, Another Level Barbering and Cosmetology.

“I saw a lot of people trying to find themselves like I did not knowing that they had the gift and the skills. So we began to mentor people,” he said.

Since opening in 2009, they’ve graduated more than 100 students, giving them tangible tools to build skill and wealth. Some have gone on to start their own businesses. At one point, they even taught the trade at no cost because they wanted to give people a way out of delving into the street life to make money.

“And it’s still our motivation,” said Nicholas.

Nicholas goes back into the prisons, this time offering inmates hope as someone who has been in their shoes and has seen the other horizon.

“I tell them that they can make it,” he said. “If God did it for me he can do it for you. A lot of people don’t realize that you’ve got greater things ahead of you than the worse things behind you.”

Instead of putting drugs in people’s hands, he’s now arming them with clippers and a true way to transform their lives, paving a way for them to fulfill their dreams.

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