

Hello and thank you everyone for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is Department of Corrections Number 296659 or Terrance Winn, a native of the plantation known as Angola by way of Shreveport. Angola is also known as the Louisiana State Penitentiary, an 18,000-acre prison larger than the island of Manhattan.

My name change took place on December 25, 1989 when I was a 16-year-old kid and took the life of Jeffery Owens and attempted to take the life of Dejuan Lewis. For my actions, I was arrested and taken to Shreveport's Juvenile Detention Center where Judge Gallagher ordered that I was to be tried as an adult. I was immediately taken from Juvie and left in a one-man cell at the Parish jail. For my crimes, Judge Hamilton gave me life without the possibility of parole plus 25 years to be served at hard labor.

I heard my mother cry when the Judge read the sentence. But I promised her and myself that one day I would come home.

I was eventually transferred to Angola, at the time one of the bloodiest penitentiaries in the world. Upon entering the gates of that former plantation, one sees a beautiful, manicured lawn. There are flowers and open fields. For one second, I thought, maybe this won't be so bad. That second didn't last.

Within a few days, I was transferred to the infirmary where a doctor is in charge of determining if a person is fit to work the field. As a 17-year-old, the doctor confirmed I was fit to work. I had never worked a day in my life when I found myself walking out of a gate, rifles pointed at me, next to a guy that I didn't know. The line was made up of 125 men. When the last guy came through that gate, we were counted by the guards and the field foreman got on his horse and gave an order "Walk it on."

The field is back breaking work. Every day, we would walk for miles in excessively hot weather and work sometimes bent over, on our knees, without breaks for hours. We would go back in to eat then out again until the work day was finished. Working in the fields I was forced to goose pick (that's picking grass with your hands), I was forced to dig ditches, I was forced to cut the levy with a hoe, while officers on horses looked over us holding rifles.

There were a few occasions when the field warden decided to bring the line in early from work. Those rare occasions happened when one of the horses would fall due to the oppressive heat. If a man fell over, we kept working. If you got injured, you kept working. Nothing took precedent over going to work. I witnessed tool fights that led to the death of a man and we kept working. I suffered a back injury at the age of 25, an injury I live with today and I was forced to work until I got so tired of suffering that I chose to be sent to the hole. That's the dungeon or administrative segregation.

I spent 30 years at Angola. 25 of those I spent working in the field. I received 75 disciplinary write ups for aggravated work offense. This means, in layman terms, refusing to work. I mostly refused to work because of the physical pain. More so than out of a rebellious nature. I admit though, every time I was told to pick cotton, I refused to do it. Every time, I chose to go to the dungeon.

2 cents an hour, 8 hours a day, five days a week. That is the pay they decided makes us human and not slaves. Those two cents never made me feel better than how I know my ancestors felt. I felt humiliated every time I had to use the restroom in the field, every time a horse defecated in my path as I walked to a work site, every time a guard refused to let me use the restroom with threats of writing me up, every time a white foreman called the whole line “N’s” or “Boys” and every time a guard took their anger out of me while I worked.

Was the modern version of slavery better for me than it was for my ancestors? Two cents is what separates 17th century slavery and 21st century slavery. The dungeon replaces the whip as punishment. The dungeon is a place of humiliation where you’re stripped of all of your possessions and placed in a jumpsuit. You can only have a toothbrush and toothpaste, nothing else. Just you and your thoughts and the sounds of people losing their minds or fighting or being beaten to death.

After 25 years being forced to work in the fields, I was assigned as a tier walker, a job that forces you to be an inmate guard. The job required me to walk up and down the extended lockdown tier for hours, making sure that no one was trying to commit suicide. You become a security guard and a mental health worker, while being labeled as a “rat.”

I also attended the culinary arts school in Angola, and once I completed the course, I became a kitchen worker.

My last job was as a nurse’s aide, a job that changed my life forever. Taking care of people who were dying and could no longer take care of themselves, showing care and compassion for guys in their final days, that truly changed me.

Thirty years of incarceration at hard labor. I never made more than 16 cents an hour. It would have been easy to come home and never look back. But when I was released, I found my old neighborhood plagued with violence and a lack of resources, so I immediately knew what I needed to do. I founded my organization, PIPE (Priorities, Intentions Practical Exchanges), our mission was and remains today to make life better for our community members, especially our youth, while working with formerly incarcerated people in their reentry process. Post incarceration syndrome is real, and our people need support.

I still think about my family all those years serving time with me. I think about the families of people who are incarcerated today, all of them directly impacted as well. My goal doing the work I do is to keep our communities safe and thriving. I believe we can create a system that does not simply punish perpetrators but works with them while investing in communities and taking care of victims.