

Kennath Artez Henderson #250126
R.M.S.I. Unit 2
7475 Cockrill Bend Boulevard
Nashville, Tenn. 37209-1048

"A Message to the Youth"

Kennath Artez Henderson

I submit this to each of you with the uttermost respect and love. I am currently incarcerated on death row. Instead of my thoughts, heart and prayers being focused on myself and my current circumstances, they are focused on each and every one of you.

Each person on death row has his own story and background. My life's story and background are fairly unique, but yet and still I hope that someone may learn from my past experiences. There is an old saying, "You do not have to get burned by fire to know that it is hot." In the same sense, you can learn from my life's experiences without repeating my past flaws, mistakes, or bad decisions.

I was raised in a very loving, warm and generous household. Even though I am the oldest son, I grew up being a big "Mama's boy" and was the most spoiled son amongst my brothers. I grew up in church, sang in three church choirs, and was part of multiple church projects and activities. As a "book worm," I excelled academically in school and received "Highest Academic Honors" in several of my school's courses. I played several sports, but became mostly popular for being a good basketball player and for being an artist. My coaches and other people used to call me "Baby Jordan" which was a high compliment, being named after Michael "Air" Jordan. An accidental injury to my leg postponed my basketball career and my aspirations to play professional basketball in the N.B.A. after I would have completed college.

In spite of all these blessings, I still had a longing and a desire to "belong." There was a part of me that was a big "people pleaser" and I wanted to be liked by everybody. I chose the wrong groups of people as friends, which were the same groups of friends that used to hang out in environments that were not good for me – nor did they reflect the values that my parents placed in me. I never sold or used drugs, but I was in the environment where drugs were used or sold. Many of the "dope boys" were my cousins, friends, and even former basketball teammates. Images from television like the N.W.A. Music videos, the flashy jewelry, the big cars and houses, etc. became everyone's reality.

Even the movies of our generation played a part in this. For example, there was a movie called "New Jack City" which starred Wesley Snipes. In the movie, Snipes portrayed "Nino Brown," who was the drug kingpin and ran the entire portion of his neighborhood and city. Nino's organization also used its muscle to terrorize or even kill citizens when necessary. All of the "dope boys" I knew wanted to be like Nino Brown – to call all the shots like him, to make all the money like him, to act like him, to dress like him, etc. Everyone I knew wanted to have that same type of luxurious lifestyle by any means necessary.

Even though I knew what my peers were doing and still hung out with them in the wrong kinds of environments, there were also several times that they would do certain things that I would be unaware of. There were even times that I took the blame for things they did because they were looking out for each other; therefore it was their collective word versus mine. There were times that I used to wonder why they chose to do me like that. It hurt my heart when my brother gave me a reality check and told me that "Those dudes are jealous of you and they want what you have. They don't care about nobody."

I said all of this to say that sometimes it seems "cool" just to be able to hang out with certain types of people, but in the end, if it is not relationships that are genuine, healthy, or reflect good values, it could drag down a person's life. My fourteen year old aunt was like a sister to me. She was accidentally shot in the head on Christmas Eve at a party, by her best friend. Her death was a result of her being at a Christmas party that she was not supposed to even go to. She was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, in an environment of people whose acceptance she longed for.

Life is about choices. One choice can change a person's life for the better or for the worse. I have known several people who said they would never get a minimum wage job working at McDonald's because that would be "beneath" them. Amazingly, those same individuals are now in prison doing time and working jobs that pay them 17 cents per hour. I recall getting my first prison job as a "rock man," which is like a janitor. I asked the prison official if I would start off making 34 cents per hour. He told me that I would have to work my way up to make 34 cents per hour and stated I would only be permitted to make 17 cents per hour until that time. In addition to such a "belittling" wage reminding me of what is referred to as "modern day slavery," it is an insult to a person's intelligence and dignity.

It is my belief in each and every one of you that you have so much to offer the world. I offer each of you unconditional love, care, understanding, and concern. Each of you is talented, gifted, intelligent, and beautiful. The same smart mind that is used while selling drugs, dodging the police, and surviving in the streets (with the possibility of going to prison for a lifetime, getting killed, or having your closest family members killed), could be used in a wise and constructive way by becoming an accountant or any other kind of profession that includes counting or dealing with money.

Always remember that knowledge is powerful. Therefore, I encourage you to always read, as it will be your greatest tool. It would benefit you to find an area of interest and read all you can on that area. Initially do not try to diversify too much as you will need to develop the habit before you try to spread yourself too thin. In my personal experiences, I have found the true meaning of learning. I found that learning

is not just soaking up information to be regurgitated, but instead, it is taking information in, digesting it, thinking about your opinion of it, and then presenting your own opinion on the matter. Sometimes your opinion may or may not agree with what is taught or presented by someone else, but that is okay. That is the beauty of the human mind that was given to each of us. We can each form our opinions based on all the information we gather from other sources.

I also encourage each of you to be comfortable in your own skin. It is always good to continually improve yourself, but do it in a way without trying to be someone else. Love yourself, and it will be easier to give love to others, as well as to receive love from others. Avoid peer pressures and approval from others because that is not relevant. One has to be the person he/she is/ You have to build that person and those beliefs without the approval of others. It is important to be true to yourself.

From this moment forth, please be assured that each of you will be held in my thoughts and daily prayers. I will continually pray for your salvation; that you may grow in grace; that you will learn to live a life of love; that integrity and uprightness may protect you; that you will be alert and self-controlled in all that you do; that you will love justice; that you will be full of mercy and compassion for each other; that everyone will respect you and that you will show proper respect to everyone; that each of you will develop a strong self-esteem rooted in the realization that you are unique, special, and precious; that each of you will always be strong and courageous in your character and your actions; that you will be kind to each other and everyone else; that you will be generous and willing to share; that you will always make every effort to do what leads to peace; that you will be filled with joy in your hearts; that each of you will persevere in all that you do; that you will be filled with humility; that you will be clothed with the virtues of compassion; that you will be responsible and carry your own load; that you may overflow with hope and hopefulness; and that you will be filled with wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and discernment.

In closing, please permit me to quote the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr: "An individual has not started living until he/she can rise above the narrow confines of his/her individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."

And also the words of Anthony Robbins: "I've continued to recognize the power individuals have to change virtually anything and everything in their lives in an instant. I've learned that the resources we need to turn our dreams into reality are within us, merely waiting for the day when we decide to wake up and claim our birthright."