

# Part 2: A New Way

## Chapter Nine ONE SHOT AT FREEDOM

Monday, April 19, 1999

We sensed in the moment that what just happened was special, but it would be years before we fully grasped the magnitude and uniqueness of what we pulled off. In effect, Junior had been granted a *golden ticket*.

Credit, in no small part, goes to Barb Riegelman. Everyone involved in the process within the Racine County Youth Justice system followed the law, but it was Barb's intuition and *superpower* of persuasion that led others to exercise discretion and take a calculated risk on Junior.

It was not common practice for the system to assign its subjects to the sort of alternative, remote foster care settings it did. Out-of-county placements were usually limited to someone in need of specialized handling in a controlled facility, an example being an individual requiring professional treatment for substance abuse or severe behavioral issues. Furthermore, our home county's foster parenting agency would be assuming joint oversight of a minor for whom it had no inherent interest, and yet its personnel agreed to the arrangement.

This was the furthest Junior had ever gone down the justice system track, and he knew he'd caught a lucky break. For this reason, he didn't hesitate to strike a gentleman's agreement with me, promising to honor my leadership in exchange for my family's support.

It was heartening to know the glimpse I'd gotten seventeen days earlier of his expressed readiness to make a life change had not been a false signal.

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Arriving at our Green Bay home late in the afternoon, the family and I focused on making Junior feel welcome again. The basic rehab plan we had in mind for him about expectations, rules, and so forth could wait. Our purpose this evening was to relax and get reacquainted.

We thought it important for him to immediately sense his belonging and know he'd be treated as one of us. With this in mind, I enlisted three kids, by name, to help clear the table after our low-key celebration dinner.

Later, as bedtime neared, all of us pitched in to set up his sleeping area in our basement's finished family room, the only suitable space in our modest three-bedroom ranch-style home. Designating it as Junior's bedroom meant the rest of us would lose regular use of the 400-square-foot space for our own purposes. Over time, though, its free-flow use by all pretty much returned, as Junior didn't mind sharing his new hideaway with us. Not so much, though, with our cat, *TT*. (More about this later.)

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How we parented him as a teen certainly would be somewhat different from our parenting of Megan and Kellen. Things may not necessarily be equal, but they would be fair. Ideally, there would be no conscious favoritism owing to whose offspring they were.

As we'd been doing for our own children, we'd continue demonstrating that genuine love—providentially—is not a zero-sum game.

It was tempting, this first night with Junior under our roof, to whip up a batch of worries as I drifted off to sleep.

*Would he truly fit in here?*

*How will he be received by our neighbors, other friends, extended family members, and the community at large?*

*Will more visits with his father rekindle their relationship, or might they fan embers of latent tension between them?*

It would be easy to bog down in aimless anxiety about this and more. Instead, I chose to rest comfortably in the faith that God's got this, no matter what.

## Chapter Ten

### FIVE PILLARS

The dawning of the next day brought to light an important family management change. With me returning to my work office and Josette home overseeing the household and kids, this would be the first time Junior would be under her solo supervision since he'd entered our lives.

"Well, today's the day," I said to her spryly while getting dressed in our bedroom. "He's all yours. You ready?"

She didn't have to say anything; her sideways head tilt and *Oh Yeah!* smile said it all—she was eager to dive into this day.

"It's time to get rolling on his school plan," she said determinedly.

Schooling was one of the rehab plan's five pillars we would be focusing on to help restore Junior, the others being church, work, family structure, and the father-son relationship.

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Moments after returning home from their short walk to drop Megan and Kellen off at the neighborhood elementary school, Junior witnessed his foster mother go into chief education advocate mode. Between her current work as a substitute public school teacher<sup>1</sup> and being a 1990's version of a *mama bear*, Josette naturally took the plan's school part under her wing.

Her objective was to get him enrolled as soon as possible.

"Let's get busy with your schooling plan," she told him. Checking to see where his head was, she asked how important he thought it was to get back to school.

"Can I start this week?" His answer was music to her ears.

In a matter of hours, she had called staff at the school district's main office and Green Bay Preble High.<sup>2</sup> The big unknown was whether they'd support Junior's enrollment or suggest he simply resume working toward a GED.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if they suggested school enrollment, which grade could he enter given the fact he had dropped out of ninth grade more than a year earlier and was now sixteen and a half years old?

Upon setting an appointment for the next day with a school counselor at Preble High, Josette sensed she should prepare Junior for the GED topic in the event it came up.

"When we meet the counselor," she told him, "she might ask why you don't get your GED instead of going to school. You're going to say, 'No, thank you. I want to be back in school, make friends, and get my diploma.'"

"I can do it," said Junior, grinning. Then and there, he realized she had his back.

It was an empowering moment for him. He learned the practical use of serious forethought when facing a crossroads. He would have many opportunities to apply it himself in the coming months.

Excitedly recounting the day's events when I got home from work, he told me he and "Miss Moore"—the sweet moniker he'd conferred upon Josette—were going to check out his "new school" the next day.

Having listened to details about Junior's situation, the counselor, as anticipated, raised the GED idea. Peering at him across her desk, she questioned his desire to attend school. "It sounds like you're partway there," she said. "Why not just get your GED?"

Prompted with a quick glance from *Miss Moore*, Junior straightened himself in his chair and met the counselor's gaze.

"Mmm, no," he replied. "I wanna be in school, meet some homies, and some girls. I wanna graduate."

*Close enough!*

Both women sat quietly for a moment, ostensibly united in support of his return to school.

Cracking her best *I told you so* smile, Josette stepped things up a notch.

"So, what's next to enroll him?"

The counselor committed to obtaining his records from the Racine School District and, barring any issues, said he would be inserted into Preble's freshman class as soon as possible.

With less than a quarter of the school year left, Junior would be on an expedited track, and the counselor made it clear that there was no room for error. He needed perfect attendance, passing grades, and a clean behavior record. She recommended tutoring and said he would have to go to summer school.

Junior nodded in agreement, his beaming eyes fixed on *Miss Moore*, indicating he was ready to end his one-year hiatus from school.

Josette requested an evaluation of his reading skills the next day, with the results revealing he was stalled at a sixth grade reading level. There was a lot of work ahead, and there was no time to waste.

Just one week later, Junior returned to Preble High, only this time as an enrolled freshman student.

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## One-Eighty

Junior's immersion into the Bayside Christian Fellowship Church community was another essential piece of the restoration plan. We would welcome any number of church friends stepping up to be in his support system. I envisioned a core group of people pouring into him,<sup>4</sup> contributing to the building of his character.

His joining us for Sunday services was a given. Equally important, though, was engaging him with a group geared to his age, along the lines of what Megan and Kellen were experiencing with the children's ministry.

Enter Karl and Amy Steinbrinck,<sup>5</sup> leaders of the church's youth ministry, including *One-Eighty* for high school teens. The Steinbrincks, notably Karl, the youth pastor, would come to play a vital role in Junior's character and faith development.

The one hundred or so high schoolers attending weekly Wednesday night gatherings in *One-Eighty's* space<sup>6</sup> to participate in Bible lessons, worship music, and social interaction were a mixed bunch. Their faith maturity levels ran the gamut, but a common thread was that everybody was trying to find themselves. The program excelled at cultivating healthy, faith-centered relationships. Somewhat ethnically and racially diverse, the group was mostly White boys and girls from middle-to-upper-class, stable, two-parent families.

Stepping into *One-Eighty* would be a culture shock for Junior. As noted in Part One, he had not been a churchgoer, let alone ever exposed to a concentrated group of young Christians. I was hopeful the balance of socialization and biblical teaching would eventually open his eyes to the word of God.<sup>7</sup>

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Taking him there for the first time the week after he started school, I handed him off to Pastor Karl in the youth center before doing the loitering thing parents do when dropping off a child at a new activity. I prayed during the short drive home, asking for the new kid in *One-Eighty* named Eugene<sup>a</sup> to have a fresh taste of God's sweet grace.

When I returned two hours later to pick him up in the youth center, upon spotting him, my first thought was, *He's nowhere near ready to leave. What the... Why is he sweating so much?*

He was cooling down in the midst of seven or eight boys and girls from what I assumed had been a pickup game of hoops or tag. His wide-eyed, sweaty face revealed he was having a blast.

"I'm not leaving yet," he told me. "How long can I stay?"

By now the room was thinning out. I suggested we head out in ten minutes so as to give the adult volunteers a break.

Making my way over to Karl (or "*PK*", as Junior would later refer to him), I said it looked like Junior was fitting in well.

"Yeah, he's doing great," said Karl with a big smile. "A little hesitant at first, but he met a few guys who I think recognized him from Preble (High). They're a good group of boys."

"Looks like the googly-eyed girls admire him, too," I remarked, both of us laughing.

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Reflecting years later on this night and Junior's subsequent *One-Eighty* experiences—it would become his favorite hangout—I came to deeply cherish the profound bearing the program had on the formation of his faith in God and ultimate rescue.

The name, of course, stands for an individual doing a one-hundred-eighty-degree turnaround with their life choices and direction. It was precisely the environment Junior needed at the time—the right balance of revealing lessons about the life of Jesus and healthy socialization.

On the flip side, Karl told me years later how he and other church leaders regarded Junior's presence as a gift to the *One-Eighty* family because he'd served as a living example for all to see of a deeply troubled peer being redeemed by God, thanks to those who attentively loved on him when he needed it most.

## Chapter Eleven **THE MATTER OF RACE**

## Chapter Twelve **GET ON THE BUS**

## Chapter Thirteen **RUNAWAY CHILD**

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<sup>a</sup> A reminder that for purposes of distinguishing Eugene, Sr., the father, from his son Eugene, Jr., I refer to the latter as Junior, except this one time. Others who eventually entered Junior's circle called him Eugene or Gene.

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## Notes Chapter Nine

<sup>1</sup> Substitute teaching of grades K-6 for the Ashwaubenon and Howard-Suamico School Districts

<sup>2</sup> [Home - Preble High \(gbaps.org\)](http://Home-PrebleHigh.gbaps.org)

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## Notes Chapter Ten

<sup>3</sup> As noted in Part 1, Junior dabbled with the General Educational Development (GED®) certification process while living in Joliet. <https://ged.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Relevant scripture: *“Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.”* Proverbs 11:25 ESV | *“...if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday.”* Isaiah 58:10-11 ESV

<sup>5</sup> [October 2020 – Memories of Ministry with Friends \(goingglobalinc.org\)](http://October2020-MemoriesofMinistrywithFriends.goingglobalinc.org)

<sup>6</sup> *One-Eighty* occupied the church’s 10,000 sq. ft. youth center, consisting of a stage with seating areas, concessions, and recreational games.

<sup>7</sup> Relevant scripture: *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* Hebrews 4:12 ESV