

SPEECH TO THE 2019 GRADUATES OF THE PRISON UNIVERSITY PROJECT

San Quentin, June 7, 2019

by Kenneth E. Hartman

Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. It's a tremendous honor, and something I never thought could happen. Truly. It's almost overwhelming.

Like you, I was once in prison, although I never served time in this particular prison. I spent just shy of 38 years inside after being sentenced to life without the possibility of parole when I was 19 years old. I assumed I would die in prison for killing a man named Thomas Allen Fellowes in a drunken, drug-fueled fistfight in a small neighborhood park in Long Beach. I assumed that was the end of my life out there, the end of my story. I had to struggle to come up with good reasons to get up out of bed every morning. I know, I really know, what that's like.

But, in April of 2017, I was one of the first three adult-sentenced life without paroles commuted to life with parole, in a quarter of a century. I was paroled on December 20th of 2017. I've been out now for almost a year and a half.

What's it been like to be out? Because I built a wide social net from inside, I've been able to transition out into the free world relatively easily. It hasn't all been simple, and there have been challenges, but for the most part not overwhelming challenges. There are still days when the part of me that came to terms with dying in prison can't come to terms with me living on the outside, when I wake up in the middle of the night and have to walk out onto the balcony of my place and see the traffic light down the street and feel the cool air of the Pacific Ocean just blocks away, before I can go back to sleep. But that's happening less and less.

Since I was paroled, I've been able to complete a training program that resulted in me becoming a Certified Professional Coach, a life coach, and I plan to take that training into the reentry/recovery world. I've also been able to finish two different grant proposal writing programs, and I've written many successful grants for prison programs. I've continued to write for magazines, and I've been published a few times, including in Harper's magazine with another article coming out in Harper's in a couple of months. I was awarded a grant from Solitary Watch to write about the lives of men who paroled after serving long periods of time in the SHU that I'll begin working on in a few weeks. I work for a medium-sized nonprofit that helps homeless folks and conducts rehabilitative programs inside of prison. I've spoken at numerous colleges and conferences, and I have more speaking engagements scheduled later this year. I'm also involved in leadership roles with several organizations that are working to change the prison paradigm. I've been busy. One of the things I often say to people is the only thing I miss about prison is the free time.

What's been the toughest thing? The most challenging thing has been building new relationships with people I came to know while I was inside. The truth of it is, I had to end several relationships because they weren't healthy for me. These relationships had been constructed in a different context, the prison context, and now I'm no longer inside of that context. These folks weren't bad people, it's just that we couldn't remain

connected on the other side of the fences. More broadly, all relationships of a more personal and intimate nature have been difficult. I wish that there had been classes on understanding how to interact with people in those close relationships that you, too, will forge out there. I think that there should be marriage and family counselors brought in to run groups for anyone close to paroling, especially lifers.

Here's something good I want you all to know: It's one thing that I think everyone inside should know, and that I surely didn't know on my way out. People outside are not waiting to throw rocks at you and picket your homecoming. The truth is, most people outside know that there's too many people in prison, and that many of us have served too much time in prison. When I first got out, I was so concerned about this that I compulsively told everyone I ran into that I had just got out. At the end of a long Uber ride with a middle-aged woman driving and me talking about my life now that I'm out of prison, she stopped the car to let me out. But she then asked me if I would let her give me a hug and, of course, I did. When I finally got my state ID card, I went to Wells Fargo to set up an account. I had to tell the banker my story in the process. When the business was ended and we stood up, I extended my hand for a shake. He looked at me and said, "Could I give you a hug, instead?" I let him. On my very first day out, I went into the Verizon store to get a phone. I asked the salesclerk whether I should get the bigger memory version of the iPhone 8+. She asked me, "How much memory to do you have on your current phone?" I told her, "I don't have a phone." She looked confused because, basically, everyone has a phone out there. So, I leaned a little closer to her and said, "I just got out of prison, today. I did 38 years." She took this under advisement and said, "You won't need that much memory then." I haven't had a single negative encounter.

For so many years I was told, in word and deed, that I was not worthy of being treated like a human, that I was too dangerous, that I was just plain bad. I'm not and neither are you. And the world knows that people can commit bad acts and not be bad. Most people know that everyone is capable of being better than their worst moment.

But let's get back to why we're all here today. You are all graduating from a college that holds you to high standards and does the hard work of providing a real education. That is something to be grateful for, and it's a tremendous accomplishment. Period. Any way you look at it. Give yourselves a round of applause!

For many of us inside, there is little expectation that we would graduate from college. The expectation was so low that college was almost out of the question. But you need to know what's happening out there now. There are clubs and organizations on pretty much all of the California State Universities and the UC's just for us. Led by us. Project Rebound and the Underground Scholars groups are there to walk you through the college process. Our people, men and women, are succeeding in college! Professors are reporting that our people are exceptional students, and that they take their education seriously. Take your education seriously. That's another lesson from out there that's not known well enough inside. The better your education, the better your chances of making enough money to survive. That's important.

More importantly, getting your education is a really good reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Being inside is tough, that's for real. For almost all of the time I was in, 37 out of that 38 years, I assumed I would die in prison. I was never one of those guys that's packing his property waiting for that motion to walk on the ocean, or that writ of hocus pocus, to come through. I was guilty, and I was sentenced to die in prison. People always said to me then, people not sentenced to life without parole, that they couldn't do that kind of sentence, that they would go crazy or something else. I always said to them, "Don't underestimate yourself." The fact is most of us did figure out how to do that sentence. For me, it boiled down to coming to grips with it and moving on. I was alive, and I wanted to live, even if it was inside of a prison. I was a participator, a

volunteer, a guy who signed up for everything and anything that was offered. And, more importantly, I was a completer, a finisher. I put all of myself into everything I did. This allowed me to amass a very long good guy book. The ultimate lesson of that was I conducted myself with the assumption that I wanted to be the best man I could be, better than my worst moments. You are all finishers and completers! That's worthy of applause.

Anyone who was around me back when I was in could tell you this: I always told guys, doing the right thing doesn't guarantee you'll get out, but doing the wrong things guarantees you won't. I'd also say, particularly to my fellow life without paroles, but it applies to everyone inside, someday they might decide to take a look at us and see if anyone should be released. I want to be at the front of that line not the end. I didn't really believe in my heart of hearts that I would be anywhere near the front. As it turned out, I was at the very front. First in line, in fact.

Get up out of bed every morning like you are going to get out and do what will put you at the front of the line. It's worth it.

So, what's changed out there? Prior to going to prison, the world was full of jerks. Everywhere I turned I ran into another one of them. But something amazing happened while I was out of the country for those 38 years, the rest of the world changed. It's a miracle, actually. All the jerks and blockheads turned their lives around and became pretty reasonable folks, helpful and kind, the vast majority of the time. Obviously, the only thing that changed was my own perspective on things, was the kind of energy I brought into situations. In the past, I was a jerk. Now I'm not. I'm reminded of one my favorite AA/NA aphorisms: "Wherever you go, there you are." You can't run away from yourself. I spent the better part of a decade trying to run away from the person I was, only to discover that I had to change myself.

One of the great things I've discovered since I got out, in addition to the fact that everyone else changed, is the fact that our own change matters. Looking back, I wish I could have figured that truth out some other way than spending the majority of my life in the joint, but I have figured it out. Our change, your change from in here actually does matter and it will make a real difference in your life when you get out. You will discover, as I have, that the world changes with you. You will find that miraculous turnaround, too.

Which brings me to this, to the free world on the other side of the walls and the fences, to anyone listening, these lives in here matter. They matter because they're connected to many, many folks out there. They matter because the vast majority of them will get out one day. But, most of all, they matter because they are fellow human beings. You know, I often speak to folks out there about prison. I tend to start off by saying this, "The first thing to remember when you're considering prisoners is, they're human beings." That tends to get applause. Why? Obviously, you, we, are human beings. And human beings deserve to get an education, all of them, in here and out there.

Like I said earlier, I never thought I'd get out. Yes, I kept working to better myself, and I knew that wouldn't hurt my chances of getting out, but in my heart of hearts I assumed I would die in prison. Nonetheless, I also knew that doing the right things for the right reasons was a solid reason to get up out of bed in the morning.

More to the point, as someone who truly was there and did this, the system of mass incarceration works to dehumanize you every single day. We know that. The routine of prison is soul-deadening and crushing to the spirit. We know that, too. But every time you do something good for the sole reason of doing good, you are fighting back in the most effective, in the best way possible.

When my daughter was born of a family visit back in 1995, right before family visits were taken away from

lifers, I knew my responsibilities and my priorities had to change. I knew that I wasn't living for myself anymore. I had created a fellow human being and invited her into my life. All those years of visiting me inside she was able to come into a place where her father loved her, into a room filled with other men who truly loved her, who were her uncles and guardians. A safe space I worked to maintain. To this day, when my friends still inside talk with me the first thing they ask is, "How's your daughter doing?" That life in there mattered.

I was determined that she would be able to be proud of me, even if I spent the rest of my life inside. I'm glad I didn't spend the rest of my life inside, obviously, and I'm glad that she's here with me today. Proof positive that good things can come out of a prison. Today, my beloved daughter, we walk out of prison together. I love you, Alia!

I'm so happy that there are many family members and friends of the graduates here! This is a big day for you, too. Your loved one is achieving a real milestone in their lives, and you are here to celebrate this with them. Let me tell you something directly: You matter so much to them! Your presence here is validating and important and meaningful. The love and commitment you are demonstrating today is nothing short of heroic! I applaud you, and I'm sure all of the graduates will join me in that...

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the teachers, college program staff, and the donors who make this all possible. This program is a beacon inside of the prison system, and your work opened the doors for the many other college programs now operating throughout the system.

And, to the custody staff, the administrators, and all of the others who have made this possible, my deepest appreciation and respect. San Quentin is the flagship of California's prison system, and for that you should be proud.

I encourage the graduates to take what you've learned and use it for the good of those around you. There is a responsibility attached to an education that is all the more urgent inside of these kinds of places. Be cognizant of what you have and share it with those around you who don't. Be a healer and a force for positive change. Create, implement, be a doer!

Finally, let me just say one last thing to the graduates, to my brothers. The world out there is changing in ways you probably can't imagine right now from this side of the walls and fences. It is a diverse and inclusive world. It is a forgiving and compassionate world, too. The tide has turned toward rehabilitation and restoration. And those of us who've been blessed with being released, many of us, hundreds of us actually, are working every day to change things even more. Next week, I'll be in Sacramento pushing on the Department to provide more of these kinds of programs to more prisoners in more of the prisons. I'm not here because I liked the idea of walking back into a prison, I didn't. I'm here to look you all in the eyes and tell you this: Don't give up. Don't give in. Keep getting up every morning and getting about the work of doing the right things.

It matters.

You matter.

Congratulations to you all!

Thank you.