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To My Brothers in Confinement,

Greetings! My name is Xavier and I am writing you from the place of solitude (AKA Soledad Prison). If you're a gangster following in my footsteps or an individual living a similarly destructive lifestyle, then you are gonna trip out on this. What I have to share is something that would have changed the course of my life. More importantly, it would have saved a person's life. It was a moment in time that would have prevented a lot of tears, suffering and pain.

Three days before my life went down this hellhole, I was going to make a life changing decision. A decision I had come to right after the birth of my son about six months back. To avoid all that mushy stuff, let's just say his birth was an awesome experience and witnessing his first breath of life was the happiest moment of my life. It didn't take long to realize what I had to do- let my homies know I was retiring from the gang life so I can focus on being a dad. I thought it would be easy, but for some reason it was hard to tell people I grew up with that I was calling it quits- that I was moving on with my life. So as the days, weeks, and months went by, I just kept putting it off.

It wasn't until after Christmas that I decided to finally break the news. The homies in my clique were looking to do something for New Year's Day, so I proposed a barbeque at the park. For them, it was just another get together to celebrate the New Year. For me, it was going to be the end of a lifestyle and the beginning of a new way of life. Even though I was still young (I had just turned 19), I felt like they would understand my decision and respect me for it. But when the moment came to make my announcement, I could not find the words to say what I needed to say. The courage I had when I faced my so called enemies failed me in front of my childhood friends...three days later I was involved in a gang-related shooting that ended in a young man's life and left another two injured. As a result of my terrible actions, the judge served me real good with multiple life sentences. 21 years later I'm still in the pen, not knowing when or if I'll ever get out again.

It's been a long and difficult journey since then. A journey filled with misery and pain, stress, frustration and regrets, and above all fear; fear of the unknown, fear that surrounds us and resides inside us all.

Since my incarceration, I have sat in a cell questioning my life and thinking how different it would be today if I had left that lifestyle behind. Why did I chicken out that night in the park? What was I afraid of? Why did I choose to continue on a destructive path instead of a productive one? Those are just some of the questions that have haunted my mind day and night. I used to think it was because my homeboys still needed me; that I couldn't leave them hanging at a time when the fighting was increasing. But that's all bull! They were just excuses I made up to justify my actions - to hide the root cause of my failure or inability to change. As much as I hate to admit this, fear played a bigger role. My hood and my homeboys were my comfort zone. So in reality, I was scared of letting go, of going outside that comfort zone and facing the world on my own.

Looking back, I regret a lot of things I did or didn't do, like putting off my decision to move on with my life, not being there for my son. I regret my actions that killed another human being. Putting my family through all this bullcrap, dropping out of high school, giving up my dreams and goals; if I could turn back time to undo all the pain and suffering I caused, I would do it in an instant, but nothing can change the past. All I can do is change myself; my negative lifestyle, my attitude, outlook on life, and the path that led me here. And all I have left besides the days ahead of me (which by the way are not guaranteed) is some hope, my family's love and support, the will to keep on living, a desire to better myself, help others, and if possible, make it home someday.

I hope my experience gives you something to think about, and if there is a lesson here, then may you figure it out before you end up like me, or worse, before it's too late. Stay strong and keep your spirits up. With Respect