

# Running With A New Crowd

Malcolm McLaughlin and Amicus' "Men of Rafiki"

***"When you run with the wolves, you learn how to howl."***

That was how Malcolm McLaughlin described what it was like as a teenager in North Carolina. His mother was raising five kids by herself and Malcolm fell in with a crowd whose priority was nice shoes, a nice car and selling the drugs needed to buy them.

"My dream was to be a kingpin," he said.

He made mistakes leading to being charged as a juvenile with robbery and kidnapping, and was given jail time and probation.

Malcolm's mother sent him to Minnesota to get away from bad influences and he eventually graduated from South-west High in Minneapolis. It wasn't all positive in his life, though.

"I was running both sides of the fence," Malcolm said, talking about years spent drinking, smoking weed and being sexually promiscuous. "I'm smart, but why was I being so stupid?"

When those activities culminated in a sex offense conviction, Malcolm said he felt the world was conspiring against him.

"I blamed everybody else, society, the man... I wasn't really taking responsibility for myself. People around me influence me, but I make my own choices."

It wasn't until he was sent to Moose Lake Correctional Facility for Criminal Sexual Conduct did Malcolm decide to try a different route.

"I was tired - not just physically, but mentally. I was tired of doing the same thing, but I didn't know how to change. I knew I didn't want to come out the same way I went in, because if I did, I deserved to go back."

That's when a friend who was also incarcerated at Moose Lake signed him up for Men of Rafiki and he met Men of Rafiki Coordinator Haywood Kemp.

"I thought if it was all BS I didn't need to keep going, but it was a wonderful experience. Right away I had my thinking challenged, my ego challenged. Haywood made us see things the way they really are. Not how we wanted them to be. He didn't tell me what I wanted to hear. He told me what I needed to hear."

Through the 13-week pre-release program, Malcolm formed bonds with the other men in his class, learned to take responsibility for his own actions, participated in pre-release planning and was looking forward to his release on parole.

Things didn't go smoothly though. Upon release, Malcolm's parole officer picked him up from Moose Lake and drove him directly to his office.

There, Malcolm was handed a phone book and told to get to work finding transitional housing in Washington County, the largely white, suburban county in which he committed his offense.

Malcolm was given seven hours to find a place to stay. Despite his efforts, Malcolm couldn't identify any transitional housing. At the end of the day he was found to be in violation of his parole and was eventually sent to Lino Lakes Correctional Facility.

Malcolm said it was tempting to give up on Rafiki then, but Haywood Kemp wouldn't let him. Haywood visited Malcolm when no one else was doing so, and interceded on his behalf where he could. Four months later, Malcolm was released again and sent to a halfway house in Minneapolis as he had originally hoped for.

"Amicus really stuck with me," Malcolm said. "They made me feel like, 'Okay, this guy's got my back.' I realized that other people are holding me accountable. They're rooting for me."

Since his release, Malcolm has been going to the Rafiki "graduates" group and getting support from those who have been where he is.

"I bonded with those brothers there. What Rafiki does is break down walls. Before, we might have looked at each other with distrust or hostility. Now we look on each other with love, but we keep it real. We can't help anybody until we help ourselves first."

"I've been out since December 2008. It hasn't been easy. Nobody's giving me anything, but I went from no jobs to basically three jobs."

Malcolm's dreams of being a "kingpin" have now changed into dreams of a house, a car, a family and helping others.

"Rafiki made me realize how much I took from my community. That in itself made me want to give back. I see things with different eyes."

