

## Meet our Guests

**Kenneth Lawrence** is 57 years old and has spent most of his adult life in prison. Yet, in meeting Kenneth, I met a gentle spirit who speaks well using many thoughtful insights from his life experiences.

When we began our conversation, Kenneth told me that he was looking for a structured way of living and that he did not want to fall back into old habits. I invited him to tell me something of his life story.



Kenneth grew up in SW Rochester and attended schools in this area of the city. He is the only child of a single mother, but he has a lot of cousins, aunts, and uncles in the area. He knew his father but spoke of him as someone who “was not attached” and who was “not really there for him.”

He recalls being five years old and so proud that he had learned his ABCs and was thrilled to demonstrate this talent to his mother. At the same time, a cousin of his of the same age demonstrated her skill with her ABCs. Kenneth recalls that his cousin was given much more praise from his mother than he received. He tells this story as a way of explaining how he grew up longing for recognition and acceptance.

When he was nine years old, his mother married and he now had a stepfather, but his strongest memory of this period was his jealousy that now someone other than him was getting his mother’s attention. By the time he was in his teens he was seeking recognition and acceptance in the streets, and this led to some poor choices. By the age of twelve, Kenneth started smoking pot and stole a model car with a friend. They were caught and he recalls the sense of shame he felt for doing wrong, he recalls that both his mother and his grandmother expressed disappointment, but as he says it got their attention—the attention he longed for.

At sixteen he was caught committing a burglary and faced a prison sentence, but his mother bailed him out. He was sentenced to five years of probation. His mother got him into Job Core, but it did not last. He

returned to “running the streets.” Looking back, he wishes that his mother had not bailed him out. He might have learned his lesson from a spell in prison.

At eighteen he was again caught in a burglary. This time he was tried as an adult and was committed to state prison. Kenneth says that now a pattern was set, “this was now my MO.” But, at the same time he says, it was a way of “getting attention and acceptance.” He wanted a mental health program, but told he was not eligible. In prison he tried new ways to understand himself. He tried fasting and meditation to get to know his “greater self.” He got out at 21 and came back to live with his mother.

He had many jobs, but his main source of social life was in the street. He began to use cocaine, though he says he prefers marijuana. He also met and married an older woman and had a child, Stephan. The marriage did not last. He was restless and continued to live in the streets. The child was raised by a grandmother. Kenneth is sad that, like his own father, he has not been an active part of Stephan’s life. He says, “I didn’t want to do what my father did, but I couldn’t change.”

He had a huge setback at this time. He came to see his mother only to discover her body—she had been murdered. He speaks very fondly of her as someone that he loved dearly. His world fell apart and his old MO kicked in again. In fact, he would be caught and arrested several more times ending up with a longer sentence in his late forties.

Now at fifty-seven, he told me of two things he learned during prison. The first is that he learned to run. During one of his times in prison, Kenneth watched a person running every day in the yard. He joined him in this exercise and has continued running ever since. He runs daily while here at REACH. The second is that it is important to take care of himself and to keep his “issues to himself.” But now he wants help and guidance.

REACH Home is giving him a place of respite as he makes his reentry into society. He now has a mentor from the Judicial Process Commission to help him in this journey.

REACH wishes him well on this new beginning.

Peter W. Peters