

I reach out to you today humbled by the mission before me, grateful for the opportunity to still be alive after living the thug-life for more than a decade, mindful of the countless friends and foes who are dead and gone. I thank God for His grace and mercy, as well as the blessings I've received throughout my existence.

I have bad news for you, for all of you who believe that the thug-life is the good-life, and that is thugs don't live that long. Your country and your community are in the midst of a crisis. Your parents are at war, against a notorious network of gangsters, gangbangers and drug dealers. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of crime, drugs, violence, greed and irresponsibility on the part of what many of us have done, but also our collective failure to make good choices. As a result of our bad choices, homes have been foreclosed, families separated by incarceration, and untold lives lost. Out of 75.2 million American children, 15.5 million live in poverty.

Today, I say to you that prison and premature death is real. Over 200,000 youth enter the criminal justice system yearly. Two years ago about 1 in 10 (1,740) murder victims was a juvenile. In Chicago, over 130 youth lost their lives in the first 9 months of 2010. Sixty-two percent of those murders were gang-related. The challenges you face are real. They are dangerous and difficult. They will not be trouble-free. But know this, my friend - you don't have to end up dead or in jail.

On this day you can choose life over death, freedom over incarceration; right over wrong. You may be young, but you are gifted. You can have what you will and keep it, if you educate yourselves and work hard to beat the odds. The less you hang around the wrong people, the more your life will improve. Those who try to get you to do wrong can never be right for you. I had to learn the hard way in 1996 when I was sentenced to Life in prison. My enemies didn't tell on me - my friends did.

In closing, don't be me - be better than me. You don't have to quit school to be cool - that only makes you a fool. If you don't want to die or go to jail, you need to stop following people who do.

The more you keep it real with you, the more the future will be all about you.

I care about you - now start caring about yourself.

Peace,

Cedric Dean