

Talking His Way to Redemption

Former hustler sharing his cautionary tales with young people

BY LAYLA GARMIS
THE CHRONICLE

For much of his youth, High Point native Greg Commander was a menace.

"I tore up High Point," admitted the 48-year-old. "I had a lot of people following in my footsteps; I sold a lot of drugs and caused a lot of havoc."

These days, Commander, a motivational speaker, dedicates his time and energy to repairing the ills he sees in his community, addressing young people every chance he gets and imploring them not to make the negative choices he did.

"God told me, 'You need to go back to the city that you destroyed,'" said Commander, who returned to High Point in 2009, following an 18-year prison term. "...For every wrong that I've done, I want to turn around and I want to show that you can do it. I work hard to better myself so that I'm able to better others."

This kinder, gentler Commander didn't surface overnight. The new, improved version is the result of decades of trials, self-discovery and an ever deepening faith. As a boy and young man, Commander said he ran the streets, doing as he pleased, believing he was "too slick" to get caught.

"I got caught up in the streets - that street life was alluring," recalled Commander, who dropped out of school in the eighth grade. "I went out there and started smoking weed and drinking beer and partying - that was my life - I was in and out of trouble, in and out of jail."

Commander's late mother tried to get him back on the right path, encouraging him to go to church and change his ways. When she died of an aneurysm in 1987, Commander found himself deepening his debt to the streets, as he struggled to keep a



Submitted Photos
Greg Commander speaks to a group of kids.

roof over the heads of his four siblings. Three years after her death, Commander and fellow members of his "Juice Crew" clique were arrested. The father of five was convicted of drug charges and sentenced to 24.5 years in a federal penitentiary.

"It was one of the hardest parts of my life I ever experienced, when I walked into the Atlanta penitentiary for the first time, shackled up, chained up," he related. "That was one of the coldest points of my incarceration when I walked through that door. This was like something I'd never experienced and it was humbling to me, because I'd come from a life of ballin'."

Although incarceration was a "culture shock" for Commander, whose life of crime had kept him in the lap of luxury, it wasn't until several years into his sentence that his perspective began to change. To pass the time, he had begun attending Bible studies and talking to others about their faith. Four years into his sentence, he watched a fellow inmate die after a lunch line stabbing.

Following an unwritten inmate

code, Commander said he and other prisoners ignored the victim, stepping around his body. Commander was no stranger to violence. He had seen a lot of it on the streets and lost sight in an eye after being struck with a baseball bat. But that day in the "chow hole," his heart went out to the victim, and Commander realized he had reached a turning point.

"From that point on, I felt something deep inside me that I needed a source that was higher than myself," he said. "I really started seeking who God was."

Shortly after returning to High Point, Commander met Paul Lessard, who helped secure speaking engagements for Commander at local high schools through The Lighthouse Project, a nonprofit speakers' bureau Lessard founded.

Lessard, who also heads the High Point Community Foundation, said he felt the message Commander has to deliver was too important to ignore.

"He's becoming a recognized and well respected speaker and has got a great way with the kids. He's got an in-your-face kind of presentation, which I think is what some of these kids need to hear," Lessard said. "The reason why Greg is so good at what he does is because he's been where these kids are and he's speaking from experience."

To date, Commander has addressed more than 50 groups in cities across North Carolina and beyond, delivering his no-holds-barred account of the consequences of a life of crime, in hopes of sparing the youngsters from suffering the same fate. Lessard also helped Commander enroll in college, an achievement the grandfather of five says he never even dared to dream about. A junior at Laurel University, a Christian college in High Point, Commander is pursuing a bachelor's degree in counseling and maintains a 3.2 GPA.

"It's been an adventure; it's been great, and I'll always want to continue doing what I'm doing," he said of motivational speaking. "...It's just my desire to give what I think society needs, and that's knowledge, that's love and to be an example."

Contact Greg Commander at 336-991-3592 or greg.commander@yahoo.com.

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