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Once homeless, Miami man earns FIU law degree

Erick Johnson | 5/29/2014, 9 a.m.



Desmonde Meade, a former homeless man who once tried to commit suicide, graduated with a law degree from FIU last Friday.

Desmond Meade remembers standing on railroad tracks in Miami waiting for a train to come. Homeless, hungry and broke, Meade became convinced that there was no reason to live. So he waited for a train to kill him. It was a long wait.

"The train didn't come," Meade said. "I was there for a while. My mind was filled with thoughts of how much pain I would have to endure to go through with it."

That was 10 years ago. Today, Meade is a happy step-father of five who graduated with a law degree

from Florida International University last Friday. He joined approximately 153 law school graduates who celebrated a festive ceremony at the school's south campus.



Desmonde Meade, a former homeless man who once tried to commit suicide, graduated with a law degree from FIU last Friday.

But for Meade, the degree was the latest in a string of achievements that has highlighted a dramatic comeback for the 46-year-old, who hit rock bottom with a prison sentence followed by years of homelessness on the city's streets. But on Friday, Meade's wife, family and friends applauded as he strutted on stage to accept his Juris Doctorate degree, beaming with pride and vindication as he continued on his fairy-tale ride to success. Loud cheers erupted from the crowds as Meade's name was called.

"It (graduating) hasn't sunk in yet, but it's getting there," Meade said.

'A PRISON SENTENCE'

Following high school in 1985, Meade pursued a military career in the army, which ended after he was caught stealing liquor while stationed in Hawaii. He returned to Miami, where he became a celebrity bodyguard — a job that exposed him to long nights, a fast crowd, and a hard life that resulted in several drug convictions in 1994. His criminal record also included several convictions of aggravated battery including one against a police officer.

Then in 1995, Meade's mother died. Meade slipped into a deep depression and his drug habits increased, leading to more convictions. He moved into the home his mother had left him. He then became homeless after losing the house to foreclosure after he failed to make the mortgage payments. Meade then turned to a precarious life on the streets of Little Haiti.

The biggest blow came in 2001 when Meade was sentenced to 15 years in prison for possession of a firearm by a felon. But Meade served only three years after an appellate court remanded the case back to lower court which did not retry the case.

'A SUICIDE ATTEMPT'

A free man, Meade became homeless again after failing to find work because of his other criminal convictions. He grew depressed and decided to attempt suicide in 2005. He stood on the railroad tracks in Miami's garment district at NW 22nd Avenue and 20th Street.

"That was the place where I was at my lowest," Meade said. "So many things were going through my mind."

After waiting for about 20 minutes, Meade suddenly changed his mind and walked over to Central Intake Center, a drug rehabilitation facility. That visit sparked new hope in Meade who eventually entered the Chapman Partnership, an organization that helps the homeless get off the street and back into the workforce.

"It was like an oasis," he remembers. "There were trees and grass, clean running water. And I was in heaven. They treat people with respect. And they loved me until I learned how to love myself."

"When you're homeless, there's a harsh emotional aspect," he said. "No one really cared one way or another if you lived or if you died."

'THE BEGINNING OF A COMEBACK'

After completing the drug treatment program from Chapman, Meade entered Miami-Dade Community College's North Campus where he graduated summa cum laude in paralegal studies from the college's special bachelor program in 2010. Four months later, Meade enrolled in FIU's law school.

"I realized all the pain and suffering I went through all my life became worthwhile when I used it to help someone else," Meade said. "I realized that was my purpose — to help those less fortunate."

But despite his achievements, Meade's troubles are not over. A convicted felon, he is unable to practice law in Florida, because of the state's disenfranchisement law that revokes civil rights of convicted felons. Additionally, Florida citizens with criminal records cannot vote, run for political office, serve as a juror or possess firearms. Florida is only one of three states with such laws, thanks to Gov. Rick Scott who reversed a decision by Charlie Crist who restored these rights during his term in office.

But with his confidence high from his latest academic achievement, Meade is leading a campaign to restore the rights of convicted felons. As director of Lifelines to Healing Campaign, he is also engaged in a national campaign to reduce mass