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## Peter Bronson

Cincinnati.Com » Peter Bronson  
Last Updated: 10:03 am | Thursday, August 21, 2008

# After 25 years in prison, he's grateful, not hateful

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Gary Reece is a born story-teller. And he has a heck of a story to tell. It was 25 years in the making, with a script from "The Twilight Zone" and background scenery that would make Alcatraz look like a Holiday Inn.

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In 1980, Reece was sentenced to 70 years in Ohio's worst prisons for a crime that probably never happened. Thanks to digging by a Cleveland reporter and students from the Innocence Project at the University of Cincinnati Law School, he was finally set free on Feb. 22, 2005.

When he went into prison, "The Dukes of Hazzard" was a hit TV show. When he got out, it was a nostalgic "throwback" movie starring actors who were barely born in 1980.

"You just don't think a guy could come back from this kind of thing," said Northern Kentucky lawyer Burr Travis, who invited

Reece to speak at a free event on Aug. 26, "An Evening That Could Change Your Life."

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Travis said he chose Reece for his inspirational message that the human spirit can overcome anything.

Reece proved that. In 1979, "I was a ne'er-do-well, a slacker, an 11th-grade dropout," he says. But he always insisted he was innocent when police arrested him for the brutal rape of a woman who lived near his apartment.

There was no evidence of a rape, and no evidence that he had been in her apartment. The initial descriptions she gave did not fit Reece. But the jury believed her, not Reece. And it took 20 years for her testimony to unravel, as reporters and forensics experts took a closer look at the case.

In prison, Reece went on a three-year "hygiene strike." He refused to wash, shower or brush his teeth. "I have the record in prison for having a whole cellblock cheer when I finally took a shower," he jokes now.

What turned him around, he says, was faith. After he came to Christ in prison, Reece was a new man. The former slacker earned his high school diploma and kept hitting the books until he earned a college degree. Along the way he tutored hundreds of inmates, such as his cellmate "Bo," who was so illiterate he couldn't tell his fake "Rollex" had an extra L.

Reece was finally paroled, based on evidence that the victim made up the rape story. Since then he has been returned to more than a dozen Ohio prisons to share his faith and encouragement. He also speaks for corporations, schools, wherever groups need a motivational, inspirational message.

As he tells his stories, he landscapes them with vivid details of grim prison life. They are not just colorful - they have a point: "You gotta be grateful, not hateful," he says.

Where others might be warped by 25 years in prison, Reece says he learned the power of faith and forgiveness. "Those who tried to do evil to me, God turned it into good."

Reece is now employment development director at Jobs Plus in Over-the-Rhine, where he finds jobs for ex-cons fresh out of prison and others with felony records.

They say you don't know love till you lose it. The same is true of freedom. And Reece savors it every day.

When he finds himself in a frustrating situation, he remembers all the prisoners who would give anything to be stuck in traffic or waiting in line. "I owe it to them to be happy, to praise God in every situation I'm in now."

Reece will share his stories at the Carnegie Performing Arts Center in Covington on Tuesday, along with Hamilton County Judge Melba Marsh and Louisville horse trainer Garry Simms.

The free evening is intended to encourage people who think all the cards are stacked against them, said Travis, who organized it through Oasis Community Center. "It's aimed at people on probation or parole, addicts and alcoholics," he said.

The message: It's never too late. People who have been written off by everyone else might be just turning the first page of their own story of inspiration and hope.

"We can believe in people if they are given a chance," Travis said. "Give them a chance and they will surprise you every time."

Reece is Exhibit A. "Years before I was arrested, I was already locked up in my mind," he says. "And

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Contact Enquirer columnist Peter Bronson at 513-768-8301 or [pbronson@enquirer.com](mailto:pbronson@enquirer.com).

## In your voice

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**georgeebay** wrote:

Gary thank God you and may he continue to bless you in ways that will allow you to be a blessing to others as you have done here in the Bahamas. We await your return my brother.

George Clarke

JC's nephew

8/31/2008 11:06:18 PM

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**cincitraci** wrote:

Gary, I praise God for your saved soul and your tremendous faith. You are an inspiration indeed. I loved your comment about being in prison but was already free. There is a great song by a Christian recording artist named Steven Curtis Chapman called "Free". Google the lyrics, I think you'll like them. We all have the chains and bonds of imprisonment until we allow Christ to set us free. May God continue to bless you and the great work that you are doing. I am proud of you to call you brother.

8/23/2008 2:59:17 PM

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**OutsideCinn** wrote:

Glad gary is out....But what happen to the LIER

8/22/2008 12:12:03 PM

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**KJMack** wrote:

Gald to hear that Gary is out of jail and hopefully doing what he wants to do. He certainly has a compelling story to tell. FWIW Conservatives don't want the throw the death penalty at anyone so the prior poster Xmas you are nutty.

The statute of limitations is a tricky thing. Since this woman made up the entire story, does the clock start ticking then or when her crime was discovered. in 05' or 04'?

8/22/2008 10:07:24 AM

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**GaryBR** wrote:

There is a statute of limitations on a crime such as this... Also to be noted, she received victim assistance funds in the thousands. Most importantly though, I have not been formally exonerated by a court of law, which is what is needed. I still have to register as a sex offender every 90 days! Despite this, the court of public opinion, the news media, and my clients who pay me to come speak at their companies all believe in my innocence. The Innocence Project is still dedicated to one day obtaining my exoneration. They are a great bunch of students doing a wonderful job. They just last week got an innocent man out after 18 years for a rape he did not commit.

GaryBR

8/22/2008 2:38:22 AM

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