

## UPUMONI AMA

My name is Upumoni Ama. I go by Upu. I'm from the beautiful City of Compton. I've been here since 1969 and I'm 56. I am a return citizen after serving 24 years in California State Prison.

*'That's why you're violent.'*

My family migrated from American Samoa. I was the youngest of five. The oldest was probably seven, I believe I was 18 months old. Then my parents had four more kids here in Compton, California. There's a total of nine of us.

My introduction to violence was if my oldest brother didn't listen or do what he says, my dad would whoop him. It started trickling down. If me and my other older brother didn't listen to [the oldest], he would beat us up. That's what I did to my younger siblings when they didn't listen to me. I beat them up. That behavior transferred out into the neighborhood where I would start fighting other kids that would argue with me or didn't listen to me. I would start fighting in schools, started getting expelled for fighting in school at a young age. I remember them sending me to a counselor. His answer to me was, "You're from a violent family. Your dad is violent. Your older brother is violent. That's why you're violent."

*'I wanted people to be afraid of me.'*

I was in the second grade and there were police cars all in front of the house and an ambulance. I see my sister crying. I remember walking into the house and there were a lot of people, and my brother was laying down on the couch. The pillow he was laying on was blood stained. His face looked like the Elephant Man – it was so swollen, unrecognizable. He got beat up by some kids at his school. He was in the seventh grade.

I remember asking my other brother, "Why did they beat him up like that?" He was saying because he is Samoan. I thought, *there's got to be more to it, you just can't beat anybody up because of who they are.* It didn't make sense to me. I remember being scared because I don't want to get beat up like that just for being Samoan. I remember feeling real anger. *I want somebody to pay for this. This is wrong.* I was developing this hate. I put this chip on my shoulder. I would go around in the school and let other kids know that you're not going to beat me up like that. I would do random stupid things like outbursts, destroy school property. I wanted people to be afraid of me, thinking that would prevent any type of attack on me. I was in the third grade. I was still a kid.

Around the same time that my brother got beaten up, my teacher was mugged and robbed right at the church we attended every Sunday. She was beaten severely to where the medics had to come and take her to the ER. I remember that feeling of anger again. We were attending the church that was in our rival gang's neighborhood. I wasn't even into gangs yet, but that was the history of it. The gang members would come and graffiti on our chapel with obscene words. As a young kid, I would have to help paint over the graffiti. That added fuel to the anger that I was already building.

*'This is what I was groomed for.'*

Shortly after that assault, my brother joined the gang. He wanted some revenge. My brother's getting a reputation, everybody is talking about him, all my friends. I could see how they glorified and romanticized the act. You hear that they beat up this one guy. I remember thinking, *I want a reputation like that.*

There wasn't a certain day or date that I joined the gang, I just transitioned my life into the gang lifestyle. I don't think we really had a leader, but we had prominent gang members everybody would fear and looked up to. My brother would be considered one of those leaders. We would break into houses, cars, stores, anything that had value that we could sell. When we would sell it, we would go back and give it to my older brothers or the older gang members, and they would give us something for it. The money didn't matter, just the validation I would get from them as a young kid. They would say, "You're down." That was a word that meant you're brave or you got heart.

First time I got incarcerated, I was 13 years old, for a weapon and possession of marijuana. They threw out the possession of drugs charge and sentenced me to probation for the weapon that I had. I went to juvenile hall. I did 30 days there and it was like, *this is what I was groomed for.* Going to jail is part of the gang life. It was this noble place to be. When I finally got there, it was almost like a dream come true. Checking off a bucket list. I couldn't wait for it. If I had a camera, I would have been walking around like a tourist taking pictures and doing my own interviews with people. I was very engulfed into this lifestyle; it was the culture.

*'I became almost this monster.'*

When I got out, the guys heard about the fights that I had gotten into while I was in juvie. That reputation followed me to the streets. That's what I always wanted since I was little kid. Everybody's looking at me and they're afraid of me. They're listening to what I'm saying. That continued and evolved into more violent crimes. I began going in and out for various crimes.

By the time I turned 15, I was arrested and convicted for strong armed robbery, the use of the weapon caused great bodily injury. They sent me to the California Youth Authority where I served three years, from 15 to 18 years old. When I got out, I was like a celebrity in the neighborhood. It felt good for me. I was the one that put it down for the neighborhood, the reputation, and the name of the neighborhood. The violence I would commit were on other gang members, I felt they had it coming. There was no remorse.

From that, when I started committing robberies, I didn't have remorse for those victims either. I was already used to committing acts of violence on gang members; once I started committing crime or acts of violence on civilians, I was numb to it. They were all faceless, nameless, raceless. I didn't even bat an eye afterwards. No matter how much harm I caused or committed, I still got a good night's sleep. I became almost this monster going around using violence as a way of communicating and problem solving and getting respect.

*'We were a ticking time bomb.'*

I came home from prison after committing a violent act. While on parole, I committed my life crime. I murdered [X]. At that time, I was 23 years old. We were at a bar. We came from a childhood friend's funeral service. Everybody was already charged up from that. Normally after funerals, we would be planning the retaliation. At this particular funeral, our childhood friend had accidentally shot himself. We were charged up, but we were like, *who do we blame?* We didn't have a target with this passing. We were a ticking time bomb, so all it took was something trivial.

I had never met [X] before and he said in the bar that night, "Hey, think you guys can keep it down?" We were being loud, and I thought, *how dare this guy*. I grabbed him and drug him outside the bar. When [X] asked us to be more civil, I didn't think I was that upset. Once I started beating on him, it was like I was getting angrier, to the point to where I didn't even see him anymore. It was like a blackout. Not realizing at the time, I was carrying around a lot of personal baggage. I just got out from prison. I had three young kids already with no future in sight. I wasn't thinking about working. The mother of my kids, we were no longer together. I was carrying around that type of hurt and shame from not being a father to my kids. All that brewed up that night with the loss of my friend. It all came to a head and poor [X] ran into a loose cannon like me. I was rightfully convicted for it. I was sentenced to 17 years to life.

I got to prison; my reputation followed me. Everybody was glorifying me in a sense, like, "Man, you beat this dude to death." I started living the life that I already knew as a gang member and as a prisoner. I was still committing acts of violence. If I felt that somebody shouldn't be on the yard for whatever reason, I

would remove them off the yard violently. I served 24 years. My first 12 years, I was still living a gang lifestyle.

*'I had to change.'*

Then I went to my first board hearing. The last time I saw the [victim's] family was at my sentencing, and they were offered an opportunity to speak at the sentencing. I remember I blocked them out. I couldn't even remember who was talking or what they were saying. This time I couldn't ignore them. They're literally sitting across the board table from me. They got to speak about the man I murdered. I could hear the sorrow and the pain that they were still going through, the loss that I caused. His daughter shared with the board that when she was a little girl, she wrote her dad a letter saying, "Happy Birthday Dad! You're the best dad ever. I love you." When she gave her dad the letter, she felt embarrassed that it's just a letter compared to the other gifts. She recalled how her dad lit up when he read that letter. Every birthday subsequent to that one, he would always reach in his wallet and pull out that letter and say, "This is still the best gift I've ever gotten for my birthday. No gift can top this." She shared how that always made her feel special. He'd always keep it safe in his wallet.

On the night of the beating, I went in his back pocket to take his wallet. I remember going through the wallet. I've been robbing people, committing violence for so long, it's almost like a second nature. If I'm fighting somebody and they fall, I'm going to rob them. I'm going to take their watch, especially if they're knocked out. That was the case with [X]. When he was unconscious, I went in his back pocket. *Did I happen to see that letter?* I think I did. I was throwing business cards out and there was some paper, that probably was the letter.

When she shared that, it hit me to my core. I knew then that I had to change. I can no longer be this person who I am, this violent individual. Along with her sharing that story, my wife, who I was with before the murder, would come visit me. She always wanted to share the gospel with me because she knew that I had to change as well. I can recall the feeling of being touched by the Holy Spirit along with that story. The combination opened my eyes of the harm that I caused. That was the turning point of my life. My wife says, "I hear they do self-help groups." It's not a masculine thing to do in prison, to fix yourself. But I did. I got to hear and learn words I never knew like "triggered," "coping skills," "character defects," "accountability." Nobody's in the prison yard talking about these things. The answers are in these groups.

*'That is the most gangster thing.'*

I started attending these groups and I started liking them. They would talk about other people's stories – how they became violent, why they became violent, how they're no longer violent and then would

walk you through that process. Before I would get mad and immediately go to violence. There was no in-between. Now I'm learning these coping skills. This is my late 30s, 40s now. I'm becoming this old guy in prison, now getting a grip of who I am. I no longer was surrounding myself around gang members in prison. I surrounded myself around individuals that transformed themselves into peacemakers. Prison, it's always been violent. To see this group of guys go take this class and now declare themselves peacemakers, I thought, *man, that is the most gangster thing. That's what I want to do.* And I did.

[The gang] didn't like me changing my life because I was such an intricate part of our prison structure. I was involved in getting the drugs in the prison and getting the contraband. From that, we were able to sell off things and be self-sustained. When I told them I'm going to self-help group, they were so confused. Once they saw that I was serious, they began cheering me on. A lot of guys came up to me and I walked them through the process. They would come to my cell and say, "I don't want to take this program no more. Making me think of all the bad things I've done." I said, "You got to think of all those bad things. You got to hold yourself accountable. You did those things. All these years we just been running away from it because nobody wants to be a piece of crap."

Fast forward, I went to my parole hearing. I went to five parole hearings in total before finally getting out. The [victim's] family came to all the hearings, and they opposed my release at each hearing. The last one, the sisters said, "We still oppose his release. However, we can't say that we don't see the change in him. He's not the same person who committed that crime against our family, but we're here to still oppose his release." Just to honor their dad and the memory of their father, which was understandable to me.

I was found suitable for parole. I was released from San Quentin in 2017. Coming back out to society was like stepping on Mars, just completely lost. Everything changed out here – the cars, the structure, the buildings. Everything was different. People are still the same. You still laugh. You still cry. There are still people that help and there's still people that cheat. Once I knew that, I was like, *all we do in prison is deal with people on that level. I should be okay.* We deal with people every single second of the day in prison; you're never left alone. Whether it's custody, administration, or the general population, you're dealing with people. That right there helped me out a lot. All the other times I was going in and out of jail, I never came home with any type of coping skills. I never understood what made me tick.

*'They love the story of resilience.'*

When I came home, I found that the community I'm from, which is the PI (Pacific Islander) community in LA County, still lacked resources. We had none when I left and I come home 24 years later, there were still no resources. So, we got together to get some resources for our people. We started going to the churches, the parks, the neighborhoods and asked, "What do you guys need?" We would talk to families

and go to schools that have PI students and find out their needs. Then we would go out and get it. We would hit the boots to the ground. We would raise funds through plate sales, food sales, T-shirt sales, and then take that money and invest in the resources. If a kid was needing a tutor for math so he can play football that semester, we'd raise money for that. If it was a mother who needed help with her three kids because her husband is in prison, we'd raise funds for that.

I think funding is huge, especially with our organization [the F.O.U. Movement (Fa'atasiga O Usos), a group of men of Samoan heritage, many of whom were formerly incarcerated]. We're doing everything out of our own pocket and volunteering. We can only fund so many kids, so many single moms or so many addicts. I know we can't save the world, but I think funding will go a long way. With or without funding, we're going to continue to do what we do, but with funding, we can help reach a lot more people.

In the San Bernardino area, we speak regularly with the youth. There's an AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) community out there. I used to ask myself, *had my probation officer been PI or Asian, would that have made an impact on me? Had my teacher been AAPI, would that have been different?* There was nobody that resembled me that would come and tell me all this good stuff. I think back now about what they were telling me. The advice they gave me – those were gems. But it was in one ear and out the other because, “who are you?” I didn't see no representation of our people. That's what we're also aiming to do, to be more visible in the community that way. We not only look like them, but they love our story. They love the story of resilience.

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