

December 2022

JOURNEYS

Letter from the Director • SoCal Office • Incarceration & Conversion Stories



TAYBA FOUNDATION
Freedom Through Education

Letter from the Director

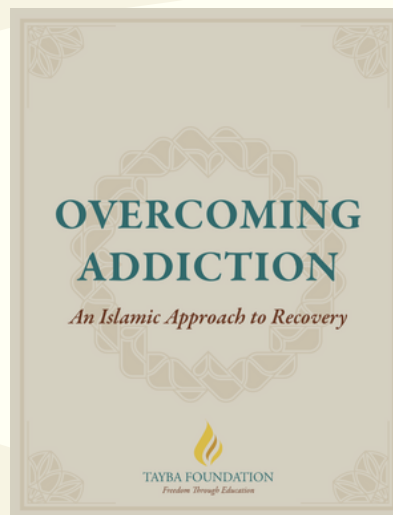
Over the years working at Tayba, I have had the honor of meeting many wonderful souls: some who were incarcerated for decades, some who are still incarcerated. I have heard countless people thank me and the entire Tayba team for what we have done for them. My response now when I am thanked is to tell them how much they have done for me. I am who I am today, in my religious practice, my teaching, my development, in great part due to the people I have met through my work with Tayba. I would like to share with you one of those great people who has helped me as a Muslim and as a human being.

His name is Ahmad Adisa. Over 20 years ago, he was a hard-working father and husband. He had two young daughters who were 5 and 3 at the time. One night in December, Ahmad was in a laundromat doing his laundry. On the other side of town, a man was murdered. A “witness” came forward and testified that the murderer was Ahmad. After a trial, Ahmad was given a “life without the chance of parole” (LWOP) sentence. That means he will never be eligible for parole. In one night, Ahmad lost his freedom, his wife, and the chance to be with his young children. He was 28 at the time. He recently celebrated his 50th birthday.

I always wondered at how a human soul so tragically and unjustly oppressed for so long could not hold deep resentment at the situation. It's that point where I get to witness some of the most deeply spiritual people I have EVER met in my entire life. Men like Ahmad who are at peace with the decree of Allah while, at the same time, fighting the Pharaonic system that is unjustly keeping them behind bars. Especially after two of the main witnesses in the case came forward and said they lied. You can read about that story and watch a 20-min documentary about the case here: <http://tay.ba/witness>.

Ahmad reached out to Tayba over 7 years ago and quickly showed how avid a student he was. Not only was he scholastically inclined, but also artistically. I remember seeing his project for Tayba's *Right of Parents* course; it was a poster with an intricate mind map. He then began sending us calligraphy and I sent him some books on *Maghribi* scripts, which he has become proficient in. I put him in contact with a *tajwid* teacher who has been working with him for over 6 years. Ahmad now has an intention to create a new, uniquely American, Arabic font and write out an entire Qur'an in it! That is its own story and we will share it soon.

The card enclosed with this booklet is a reproduction of an art piece Ahmad sent me from prison in that same *Maghribi* script. On the back is his story.



Ahmad also runs an Intensive Therapeutic Community in prison where they work on many different aspects of self help. It is entirely developed and run by prisoners. It was through those conversations that I asked him to co-author a Tayba book on *Overcoming Addiction*. We published that book last year.

In all our conversations about Islamic knowledge, art, self-help, community development and more, I no longer see Ahmad as a student. Ahmad is my friend. I often reflected on how those around the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ were not called his students. They were his *Sababa*; his companions ﷺ. To me, that signifies the highest state of relationship that two people can have. I have told Ahmad that I am honored to have him as a *sahib*.

There have been many times that I have opened up to Ahmad about things that I am going through and he has been able to help me understand them and work through them. I call him Zarruq in reference to the great imam, Ahmad Zarruq, due to his deep connection with the spiritual path, his knowledge of Zarruq's works, his devotional worship, his connection with the Book of Allah and more. I used to ask people, "How many Malcolm X's languish in the dungeons of America?" That question still stands. Now I add, "How many Zarruqs languish in those pharaonic dungeons?"



Ahmad Adisa

I will end with a thank you. To you, the Tayba Supporters. I could not do what I am doing now, I could not know Ahmad, I could not have the time to build this relationship without having an organization like Tayba to do it within. That organization is supported by you. Built by you. Maintained by you. Thank you for being the *Sababa* of Tayba Foundation.

Your brother,
Rami Nsour



The Tayba Team
wishes you a
prosperous new
year!

Did you know about our SoCal Office?

It started with a small grant in 2021 that allowed us to open up a tiny office in San Bernardino and offer food pantry services to the largest community of former prisoners in California. *Alhamdulillah*, today it has grown into a busy center offering much-needed services for the formerly incarcerated and those affected by incarceration.

Here are just some of the services we're able to currently offer in SoCal:



Food Pantry Services 1200 Bags Delivered

Thanks to a connection with a local food pantry, we're able to deliver a bag of food to our clients every week.



Mental Health & Substance Abuse Help 120 Enrollees

Too many mentally ill and those suffering from substance abuse are incarcerated instead of receiving treatment. Thanks to a clinical therapist on staff, our office is able to help clients where the criminal justice system failed them.



Technology Education 5 Clients per Week

Imagine being behind bars for 30 years and coming back to a world full of smartphones, internet browsers, and Google Docs. We recently hired a full-time technology instructor to educate the formerly incarcerated in using modern technology.



Case Management Services 500 People Served

Whether it's getting a driver's license, birth certificate, or finding housing, or work, our case manager supports clients with re-entry challenges and gets them on their two feet.



Peer Mentoring 25 Clients per Week

With two peer specialists, we're able to go out into the community, bring clients who are in most need of our help to our office, and stay with them through as they work through their challenges.



Project GIFT 60 Enrollees

Short for "Google Instruction From Tayba", Project GIFT offers clients in-depth technology education along with a free computer at the end of the program. They're even paid during the time that they're training!

Thanks to your support, we are growing fast. Jazakum Allahu khayr!



Difficult Roads, Blessed Destination

Over the years, we've been asking Tayba students to tell us their stories: what led up to their incarceration, how they became Muslim, and what are their hopes for the future. Today we're sharing some of these stories with you, in their own words (only slightly edited for brevity and clarity). Each story is different: we tried to bring you a collection that's representative of the whole. We hope it helps you better understand your brothers and sisters behind bars.



LEADING UP TO PRISON

I was two blocks away from the scene of the murder, but still found guilty of it.

KANE

☞ My mother had me when she was 16, and my biological father wasn't around for reasons still unknown to me. The man who raised me had 3 sons with my mother and we were raised together. We were dirt poor. We lived with more than 8 people in a house, slept in basements, and even had to sleep in a van once. Despite all my adversities, I tried hard to break the cycle of poverty. I tried to take school very serious, being the first to graduate from high school in my family. I had a son while I was working two jobs and enrolled in college. One night, I went with a group of people to another town, hoping to get a ride to the store. We stopped at a subway, and three of the five individuals got out and walked two blocks away. I stayed back. A few minutes later, they ran back acting frantic and threatening.

I asked to be dropped off at home, where I discovered that one of them killed a mutual friend over an alleged money transaction gone awry. The next day, I turned myself in *willingly*, and they charged me with Party To A Crime of murder. I had just turned 20. I went to trial and was found guilty, despite the fact I was two blocks away and a witness testified I had no involvement in what happened.

At Tayba, we believe that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Our team crafts evidence-based parole plans for clients approaching their release dates.



During a court date for my appeal, the gunman also testified that me and the occupants had no idea what he was going to do, or that he even had a gun. The court still denied my release or even a new trial. I'm still trying to find ways to fight my case. My son was about to be 8 months when I was arrested, he is now 7 years old.



My father was a biker, my mom was a prostitute, and I joined the Aryan Brotherhood.
DAVID

☞ My father was a member of a motorcycle gang and my mother was a prostitute. I entered into the criminal justice system as a juvenile at 10 years old. I was sentenced to adult prison at 18. I came in and out of prison 7 times over 30 years and was only in the free world 19 months and 3 weeks in all of that time due to being addicted to drugs, stealing and running with gang members. I joined the Aryan Brotherhood in the 90s, which resulted in my being placed in Ad-Seg (solitary 23-hour-a-day lockdown) for 15 years. I renounced my membership in the AB, entered into a gang renouncement and dissociation program and was eventually released from Ad-Seg. What led to my renouncement was Allah ﷻ leading me to the truth of Islam. I offered my *shabadah* in 2009 with 3 Muslim brothers in front of my cell in Ad-Seg.

Since that time I've disassociated with the gang I was in and stopped using drugs and smoking and stealing and I am trying to stay in the *deen* as best as I can for the pleasure and forgiveness of Allah ﷻ. It isn't always easy and there are many obstacles for a white, tattooed, ex-gang member Muslim in prison but Allah ﷻ is guiding my path. *In sha Allah* I will be shown mercy on judgment day that I am sure I don't deserve.



☞ My father was a Muslim, but not a practicing Muslim. As a child, I was told I was Muslim and to not eat pork, and that God's name was Allah, and his prophet was named Muhammad ﷺ. I was about 8 years old. I did not consume pork or attend any religious services or know how to pray. My father was never around due to his heroin addiction. My mother was occupied with crack addiction. The streets became my safehaven.

My parents were Muslim, but they were addicts, so the streets became my safehaven.

ALI

I started selling drugs very young. I dropped out of school in the 7th grade and spent most of my life in jail. At the age of 15, I went to jail and did not get out until after serving 10 years, then returned shortly after again. I am currently serving 20 years for shooting someone. I was everything violent in the streets. My focus was only money.



My sentence was increased because of a false rape allegation.
ROY

“ Before my incarceration, I had people who loved me and wanted the best for me. But I got stupid, started to hang out with the wrong crowd, party, and sleep with different women. Once, a woman I was sleeping with got angry with me so I threatened to tell her fiance about us. 7 months later, I got arrested for breaking into a house and stealing some guns. Per the jail’s policy, I gave DNA samples. It turns out that the woman I was sleeping with really thought I was going to tell her fiance, so she said she was raped instead of admitting to cheating. During the arrest, the detective threatened to charge the only person in the world who was always there for me, my grandfather, with the guns I stole if I didn’t plead guilty to the rape charge. So, I gave them what they wanted and was sentenced to two 23-years-to-28-years, back to back. I am scheduled to get out when I’m 67 years old.



My mother was an addict and I didn’t know my father.

JONATHON

“ I come from a Christian family. They tried to raise me off the Bible and Christian beliefs. But my mom was a single parent on drugs and I never met my father. I grew up watching my brothers get into trouble. All my family was either on drugs or in prison. Growing up on that and rap/hip-hop music kind of brainwashed me. As a young teenager, I wanted to be a drug dealer. Soon I was selling drugs, robbing, breaking in houses, and everything that comes with the street life. I was in and out of juvenile. I ended up getting a girl pregnant at 16 years old. I really thought I was going to be rich from all the things I was doing in the streets and be able to take care of them. I ended up being 18 years old with a capital murder. I pleaded out for 45 years. I spent the first 5 years of my sentence getting in trouble. I’m now an ex-member and haven’t been in any trouble for almost 2 years. I’m striving for growth and development and to stay out of trouble.

I started selling weed again to pay for my son's hospital bills.

JOSEPH

66 This is my 4th time in prison, my longest sentence and the one that has changed me from a lost, confused young man into the man my family is now proud of. My son was born 5 days after I got released from prison last time. I told myself I was done with the gangs, drug dealing, and everything that would jeopardize my freedom again. I was doing real good, doing tattoos out of my apartment to help pay the bills until I could find a better job. I got back into school and started my bachelor's degree. But a few months later my son began to have seizures and had to be hospitalized. The hospitalization drained us both financially and physically. We started to fall behind on bills and arguing about money. I soon started to sell weed again in an attempt to make ends meet. This only led to more fights and eventually the end of our relationship.

I didn't know what to do. I felt like I lost everything. Eventually, I was arrested for possession of weed with intent to deliver. The officer gave me a break for being honest with him and released me on a recognizance bond. I ended up losing a job I recently found over it. I had no place to stay and started messing with a few females. I started spending what money I had left, and when time for court came, I was broke. I knew that if I missed court, I'd go to jail and didn't want that. I had a gun and decided to rob the local gas station. Prior to robbing the gas station, my cell phone started vibrating. I pulled it out to check it, and all I saw was a picture of my son. This happened 3 times. I honestly believe this was a sign from Allah to walk away.

To make a long story short, I ended up robbing the gas station. I got away that night but 3 months later I got arrested and sentenced to 21 years in prison. I was sentenced to serve 50% of my time with 3 years Mandatory Supervised Release. I've been incarcerated for 6.5 years and currently have 4 years remaining, *in sha Allah*.



COMING TO ISLAM

66 It was 2001, just after 9/11. I was on my way to visit a friend of mine at his cell. His name was Jihad. When I arrived, I heard him singing, only it wasn't like anything I heard before, nor was it in a language I understood. But it was so beautiful. I asked him what he was singing and he said it was the Qur'an. I asked if he would sing more of it and he obliged. As I listened, I couldn't get enough. My heart filled with this intense warmth, and was moved in a way I cannot explain. It was almost like my heart recognized something that "I" knew nothing about. That night I spent the whole hour with him listening to him recite Qur'an in the most beautiful voice, entranced by its rhythm and beauty. When I had to return to my cell for lockdown, he gave me his Qur'an as a gift. He told me that he was not trying to



Tayba's educational philosophy centers on character reformation through spiritual and behavioral modification.

convert me, but simply suggested that I read it along with my book (i.e. the Bible).

I didn't know about the Qur'an, but I couldn't stop listening to its recitation.
JASON

I couldn't wait to get back to my cell and start reading. I remember looking at it and admiring the Arabic, the borders of the pages, the detail on the cover. As I held it, the book itself felt Divine. It felt like a treasure, like inside of it held all the answers my heart and soul searched for. It felt like a mercy and peace for my heart that I was desperately in need of. When I began to read it, I was instantly drawn to the *Fatihah* and memorized it, not realizing that this was part of the prayer. Then when I started to read *Baqarah*, within the first 40 verses, it was like a light switch turned on inside of me and there was no doubt. My heart was convinced and covered with this sense of peace and tranquility. The answers I have longed for were there.

When I bowed down on my face in *sujud*, for the first time, I was overcome. For the first time in my life I felt accepted, not by the Muslims, but by Allah ﷻ. I was a Muslim and it felt like I reclaimed my birthright after all these years. As a Muslim, I have discovered who I am and am comfortable in the skin I am in. I have defined myself and refined myself. I was once a follower of men, of vain whims and desires, now I am a servant of my Creator and leader amongst men. *Alhamduillah*.



My boyfriend's brothers told me about the Qur'an, so I began reading.
SALIHA

“I was living with a man from a Muslim culture and his brothers looking at my cross necklace asked if I knew everything about Jesus ﷺ. I said, “Yes”. Then one said, “So you know he was born talking?” With disbelief I answered “What? Where does it say that?” They told me, “The Qur'an” and closed the topic by saying it was a book, giving no response about who the author was.

You can bring Tayba to your community to conduct educational programs.

Please contact Sister Erin at erin@taybafoundation.org to participate.



I ended up reading the Qur'an, looking for the story they mentioned in *Surah Maryam*. I was so enveloped and worried that I was going to hell that I accepted Islam on my own. After I became Muslim I've always felt alone. People here have mistreated me and mocked me, threatened me and hurt my feelings for being so eager and engulfed in learning but I'm better now.



“ I started going to *jumu'a* [before I became Muslim], mainly because I wanted to know more about Islam, as I knew basically nothing. I thought Muslims were all terrorists, and I wanted to see why they hated America. I wanted to know more, I always wanted to know things I didn't know, and thought there's no better place to start than where I was. After a few weeks of *jumu'a*, and having a peer mentor who is also a Sunni Muslim, I knew this was right. I felt at home and was happy regardless of the circumstances. I took my *shahadah* and have read, and read, and read since. I feel great.

I knew nothing about Islam, so I decided to learn.

ALLEN



I prayed to God to tell me whether I should be Muslim.

CHRISTOPHER

“ I always knew about Islam, but didn't know the actual beliefs and practices. When I was arrested for the last time, I was transferred to a county prison that housed only one Muslim. He and I started to debate my Christian beliefs vs. his Islamic beliefs. I was too much for him and he gave up. But first, he handed me a book to read called *A Muslim and Christian Dialogue*. One night after finally reading the entire book, I sat on my bed and prayed to God that if Christianity is for me, then leave me to it. If Islam is for me, then guide me to it. The next morning I woke up without any doubt that Islam was for me. Since then, I have never struggled or wavered with the beliefs of Islam and what it taught about Jesus ﷺ.



HOPING FOR A BETTER FUTURE

I hope to open a barber shop so I can network with people and tell them about Islam. I really want to go home, and do right, and have a family.

Jonathon

I am interested in establishing a Muslim charity that is committed to building bridges between faith groups through various kinds of charity works. I want to do Muslim outreach programs that introduce Muslims to everyday people who may never have met a Muslim and may have a negative view of Islam and what a Muslim is, and strive to change that paradigm. I have also been creating a business plan to start a halal roadside fast food stand, since there are no halal eat-and-go places in my city.

Jason

In sha Allah, I hope I will speak to the youth about the choices and consequences of their choices. This is something I am currently involved in and have been for the last 10 years—speaking to students that visit the prison, as well as mentoring younger inmates. I also hope to be quite active in my local *masjid*.

Derrick

I want to have the courage and support to live openly as a Muslim woman, mother and grandmother, to teach my sons and their future wives about Islam in hopes that they'd accept. I don't know how I can work in a [hair] salon with a hijab, but *ma sha Allah* this COVID-19 keeps doors open to a brighter future of work within the home.

Saliha

I am a lifer. If Allah wills for me to ever be released, I pray I can be a benefit to my brothers in any community that I would be blessed to go to. Having a life sentence sometimes makes you not entertain that type of thinking, it can lead to depression and bad thoughts, if one starts to dwell on some things it can go bad.

Nathaniel

I hope to establish an Islamic household. I would like to operate a business in merchandise and real estate. I am an author, so writing will also be a profession for me. I hope to include Islamic concepts into my literature once I obtain more knowledge in *deen*.

Angel

Make a gift to support your brothers and sisters behind bars:

tay.ba/give



A sign displaying the many reentry services Tayba provides





Your *zakat**,
sadaqa, or gift
can help an
incarcerated
Muslim:

- Learn his or her *deen*
- Develop critical life skills
- Succeed after parole



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