

Honorable Katherine Forest
United States District Court
Southern District
500 Pearl Street
New York, NY 10007

Michael Van Praagh
Reg # 70470-054
MCC-NY 150 Park Row
New York, NY 10007

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My name is Michael Van Praagh and I am an inmate currently being held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in Downtown Manhattan. I am not proud of my current living situation but I am thankful because I know now that this experience has not only changed me, but probably saved my life. I have been fortunate enough to be able to use the resources available to me to become someone who I always wanted to be and grow to my fullest potential.

After just a few months here I started working with the Education Department and formed some GED prep classes on my unit. I found a passion for teaching and I held and still hold, one year later, two classes everyday for six days out of the week. I spend a major portion of my day in the classroom, in fact, it was in the classroom where I first met Mr. Ross Ulbricht. Mr. Ulbricht approached me after my class to inquire about how he too, might get involved in teaching classes. He explained that he was fortunate enough to have had a good education and that he was interested in getting involved with the Education Department or at the very least, helping me out in any way he could. I was moved immediately by his sense of concern for what we were doing in trying to share our gifts and help teach some of the other dedicated inmates who haven't been so fortunate to have had some of the same priveleges afforded to Ross and to myself.

Mr. Ulbricht began joining me every morning at 8:00 am in the classroom. His consideration and dedication made me realize that he is the kind of person that being around I found would prove to be in my best interest. From that point on, he and I became friends. That is not, however, why I am writing this letter. I would like to share with Your Honor, not that Mr. Ulbricht and I became friends, but why, and to shed some light, from my perspective, on the kind of person he is and how he has affected, not only me, but many of our other fellow inmates. Of course, I have no knowledge of who he was or how he lived before coming here, but I can speak for who he is today.

Ross Ulbricht and I share the common experience of having gone to trial, so I know how stressful of a time that can be for anyone. As difficult of a time as it was, he always was available for me and for my students. Sharing his knowledge and his experiences had inspired me to do something that I always wanted to do but never managed to accomplish. I enrolled in College.

As a first generation college student, the whole ordeal of choosing a school, enrolling, picking a major, and registering for classes was completely foreign to me and frankly intimidating. I am forever grateful that Mr. Ulbricht patiently walked me through the entire process. He has provided me the advice and confidence necessary to take those vital first steps. There are three other students in my class that are grateful to Mr. Ulbricht, for he convinced them too that as proud as they should be to have made such valuable strides and receive their GED's, that it is only the first step to ensuring a successful life that is free of recidivism.

I am so very proud to broadcast to anyone that will listen that Michael Jimenez, Elvin Soto, Leon Santiago, and I, aside from being inmates here at MCC, are degree seeking students, enrolled at Adams State University. We take classes through correspondence. The school mailed us books, course syllabi, due dates, and a note from our professors that says, basically, "Good Luck." That is pretty scary. I know that it is nothing that has not been done before, but with no personal instruction, it's a daunting task. Mr. Ulbricht sits with the four of us every single day and we've made such great progress that I fear what it will be like when we are no longer able to take advantage of his wealth of knowledge the unparalleled generosity with which he shares it. Mr. Ulbricht does all this without any expectation of something in return. It's is solely to help others and I have found that to be of the most endearing and noble qualities I have found in anyone I have met throughout this entire unfortunate experience. Ross Ulbricht kindness and devotion to excellence has truly inspired us all.

I cannot even begin to understand the pain and the stress this most exceptional person harbors because that is the only way that he would have it. He does not wear his misery like most people around here do and if I didn't know about it, I could never imagine what it is he is going through. He does not share most of the details but I am aware of his pre-sentencing recommendation. If I may most respectfully share with Your Honor, my feelings, to sentence this young man to a lifetime detained behind bars, kept from society, would not only be tragic but also a detriment to Mr. Ulbricht, his family, and society.

Respectfully and Humbly Submitted,


Michael Van Praagh