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It's all about choices

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Troy Evans asked students at Spencer High School to take a good look at him. Standing alone on the floor, in the middle of the Spencer Fieldhouse, in front of the entire student body, teaching staff and administration, Evans opened his heart and then opened his mouth sharing everything that made him the man that stands before them today.

"Look at this face. This is the face of a recent college graduate. An honest man. A kind man. A man of his word."

A brief pause. He dips behind the podium, turns his back to his audience, and then spins to face him again.

His face covered in sheer panty hose, his hand clutching a shiny gun, he continues. "Look at this face. This is the face of a man who at 28 years of age committed five armed robberies during a six month spree. This is the face of a drug induced, bank robber who was transformed after seven-and-a-half years in a federal penitentiary."

Evans relieved any possible teen concern that this was going to be some kind of a preachy, scared straight talk. "I'm just here to talk to you about choices."

Evans

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Photos by Randy M. Cauthron

Wearing a panty hose stocking to hide his face and brandishing a firearm, Troy Evans shared a life of bad choices that eventually landed him in federal prison. It was a seven-and-a-half year stay that he credits for saving his life.



Troy Evans spoke to the Spencer High School student body in the Spencer Fieldhouse Thursday afternoon.

Evans

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Specifically the choices that he made. "What would bring me all the way from Phoenix, Ariz. to Spencer? I'm simply here to share my story. The struggles and accomplishments, the ups and downs, the good times and bad."

Evans told those gathered that he was an honor roll student and a star athlete, but all of that fell apart when a family move resulted in new friends. The wrong kind of friends.

He got involved in drugs, a move he credits for the eventual chain of events that left him behind bars and without his freedom. "By the time I was out of high school, I had tried everything on the street. Over the course of one-and-a-half years, drugs and alcohol became the single most important thing in my life. I robbed from my family, my friends. I would do anything to pay for the next fix."

Then in 1992, his conviction in a series of robberies left him incarcerated in the federal systems, spending time with the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer, Timothy McVeigh, and the Unabomber.

He said the two most miserable days of his life were his day of sentencing and the following day, when he had to tell his seven-year-old son from an ill-fated marriage that daddy wasn't going to be around for a while.

He received wake up calls along the way that his life needed to change. Citing three things that led to what Evans calls his "awakening," the reformed convict six months in, the dead time in prison, his desire to impact his son's life in a positive matter, and words his dad told him as a child. "He said, 'Son, anything worthwhile is never easy.'"

The perhaps the biggest impact came to him from an overheard conversation his son was having with one of the prison guards. Trying to negotiate for more time with his dad, he asked the officer, "If my dad can't spend the night with me in the hotel, can I spend the night with him here?"

Wanting to make his son and others close to him proud, Evans through himself into education. In his free time each day, sometimes 14, 16, even 20 hours a day he would study. He received assistance from an organization willing to help off-



Photo by Randy M. Cauthron

Sophomore Dawn Munoz takes a few minutes at the completion of Troy Evans talk to visit with the guest speaker. Evans encouraged Munoz along with all of the young to "keep a clear head and make good choices."

set some of his educational costs.

"Education became something I could share with my child," explained Evans. "He would send me his papers with the little smiley faces, and I'd send him mine with professors notes on them. I wrote him every day. I did not miss one day."

While in prison, he survived a two-and-a-half day race riot where the prisoners ran the facility and the guards stood outside the walls with automatic weapons to ensure that nobody got out. Evans said he spent those brutal days hunkered behind a cabinet in his cell, hoping that nobody would find him. He survived threats on his life after he refused to smuggle drugs for a prison gang. He survived a new warden who didn't like the idea that he was getting special treatment in order to earn his education. After the warden found himself on the receiving end of phone calls from 28 congressmen and senators wanting to know why Evans was no longer being able to get his education, the prisoner found himself locked away in

"the hole" for 60 days.

"Up to that point, I thought that everything happens for a reason. But this time I didn't understand. I was trying to better myself. Why was this happening?"

To compound matters, Evans was transferred to FCI Englewood, regarded as one of the worst federal prisons in the United States. It was crowded and deficient. Once again, he questioned why this was happening to him after he worked so hard to right his wrongs.

Then one day, Evans found himself sitting in a room after his sentence computation had been reviewed. The person told him, "You shouldn't have been sentenced to 13 years, it should have been eight years. You're going home in 10 days."

It was at that time that Evans belief, "Everything happens for a reason," was reaffirmed.

He explained that FCI Englewood was the only institution that still reviewed sentence computations.

"If that warden hadn't transferred me there, I'd still be in prison today."

Evans noted four single truths

that he learned during his seven-and-a-half year stay behind bars. He learned the value of time, the most precious commodity. He learned to appreciate the people he loves and the people who love him back in his life. He learned to have faith in something other than himself. And, he learned that it wasn't important how he came to be at a certain point in his life. What was important was how he dealt with it.

"Every person in this room has at least one person that genuinely cares about them. When you're having problems or your being pressured, whatever happens, go to them and listen."

Evans reminded the group, "The decisions you make as teenagers are going to impact your life."

Since his release, he has married and still has a good relationship with his son. A couple of years ago, Evans recalled coming home to a house in chaos. Items were strewn about. He and his wife had been burglarized and lost everything of value they had in the home.

"I remember thinking, why did this happen? I'd never been on the other side. Maybe I needed to

feel that. Maybe that was the final nail in the coffin and I could lock the old Troy Evans away forever," said Evans. "Everything happens for a reason."

He reminded the teens that if he could get an education in the harsh and tormented world behind prison walls, that somebody with all of the benefits and resources the free world has to offer can accomplish anything.

"You can be anything. You can do anything."

Evans said he was going to close with his favorite quote from Martin Luther King, Jr.

"And it's not, 'Free at last. Free at last. Free at last,'" he joked, drawing laughter from his audience.

Pausing before the hushed crowd, he said, "I may not be the man I want to be. I may not be the man I ought to be. I may not be the man I could be. I may not be the man I can be. But thank goodness I'm not the man I once was."

• Anyone wishing to contact Troy Evans can do so at troy@troyevans.com. He also has a website, www.troyevans.com.