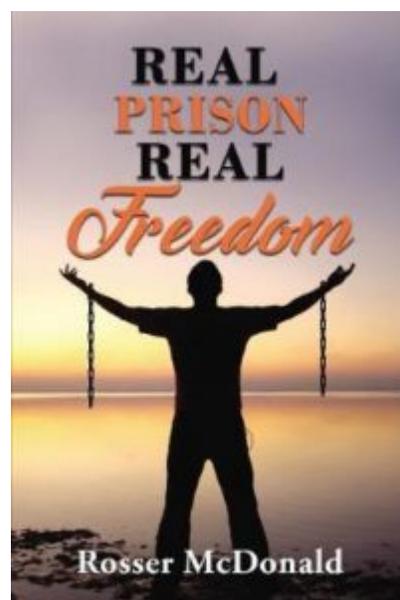


Veteran reporter writes about inmate's radical transformation

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A major retailer's website classifies *Real Prison, Real Freedom* in the "true crime" genre, but author Rosser McDonald views the book as more of a "true transformation" story.

"It's a clear, graphic example of what can take place when Christ comes into a person's life," he said.



McDonald is a veteran TV news reporter who spent 28 years producing documentaries for the Southern Baptist Convention's Radio & Television Commission. He felt compelled to write about convicted felon Rickie Smith because of the stark difference Jesus made in the life of an inmate once characterized as the most violent man in the Texas prison system.

McDonald first met Smith in 1990, when he was working on "Set Free," a documentary about prison ministry the Radio & Television Commission produced for NBC. Jack Wilcox, a layman at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas who served as a volunteer chaplain in the Texas prisons, introduced them.

At the time, Smith was confined in the Super Segregation Unit of the Coffield Unit in Anderson County, where Wilcox had begun disciplining him after his Christian conversion.

In a meeting with the unit's warden to arrange interviews, McDonald asked for permission to bring cameras and microphones into "SuperSeg" to talk with Smith.

McDonald later recalled the warden's sharp reply: "No way, Jose!"

Dramatic before and after story

The warden knew Smith's record and his reputation. At that point, he had no way of knowing about Smith's redemption and his rebirth.



Rickie Smith (right), once known as the most violent inmate in the Texas prison system, now enjoys singing praises to God in chapel services. (Courtesy photo)

But McDonald started corresponding with Smith, and he recognized the change in the offender's life. Several years later, McDonald included him as one of several interviews in another program, and he began to think about

writing a book based on Smith's life story.

"It's a tremendous story that shows the difference of a life before Christ—when Rickie was living his life his own way—and after Christ—when he began doing things God's way," McDonald said. "He went from being one of the worst to being one of the best in the Texas prison system."

As a young man, Smith spent time in various city and county jails for a variety of offenses—burglary, drug-related charges, concealed weapons and assault. In 1983, he entered the Texas prison system after convictions for possession of a controlled substance and for criminal mischief when he kicked out the window of a police car.

Smith could have been released within 10 years—earlier if he had exhibited good behavior. Instead, he joined the Aryan Brotherhood, a white supremacist prison gang, and gained a reputation for violence.

Multiple fights with other inmates and destruction of prison property led to Smith being placed under increasingly more restricted confinement. Stabbing a correctional officer with a makeshift spear and an attempted gang-ordered "hit" on another inmate led to charges of attempted murder with a deadly weapon and a couple of hundred years added to his original prison sentence.

Peace and rest

But then Smith's on-again, off-again girlfriend—whom he later married—became acquainted with Bob and Nelda Norris, who operated the Huntsville Hospitality House, a Texas Baptist-sponsored ministry to the visiting families of inmates. At her urging, Bob Norris began writing to Smith, letting Smith know Jesus loved him and wanted him to experience peace and rest.

After three failed attempts to take over his cell block and kill another inmate, Smith reached a point of desperation. He reread one of the few letters from Norris he had not torn to pieces and became fixated on one Scripture verse Norris cited: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Facedown on the concrete floor of his cell, Smith prayed, begging Jesus to give him rest for his soul and relieve him of the burdens that weighed upon him.

In the months that followed, Smith broke ties with the Aryan Brotherhood, and he added both Norris and Wilcox to his list of approved visitors. Both men began discipling him, helping him take deliberate steps to forgive those who had wronged him and ask forgiveness of those he had hurt.

Eventually, Norris and Chaplain Jerry Grooms received permission to baptize Smith in the Coffield Prison chapel, even though the authorities insisted Smith enter the baptistry handcuffed and wearing leg shackles and heavy chains.

Inmate mentored by Christian warden

Soon afterward, Wilcox told Smith about a restorative justice ministry conference he attended where Keith Price, warden of the Darrington Unit, presented his Christian testimony. Smith bitterly told Wilcox that Price once broke his nose slamming him to the floor, back when Price was a correctional officer and Smith lunged at him with a knife. Wilcox firmly told Smith he needed to add Price to his “forgiveness list.”



Rickie Smith, once known as the most violent man in the Texas prisons, has been a Christian 30 years and has led many former gang members to faith in Christ. (Courtesy Photo)

Eventually, Smith wrote to Price, asking forgiveness and describing his commitment to Christ. Later, an official from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice classification office informed Smith he was being removed from Super Segregation and transferred to the Darrington Unit.

At Darrington, Price saw firsthand the positive influence Smith had on other inmates, and he became a mentor to him. When Price was transferred first to the newly opened Terrell Unit and later to the Clements Unit, he also arranged for Smith to be transferred each time.

In 2003, Price retired from the TDCJ and now is a professor of sociology and criminal justice at West Texas A&M University. Smith continues to serve time, currently at the Hughes Unit in Gatesville.

“The Lord has used Rickie in prison, and he continues to use him,” McDonald said. “He has led many of his former gang buddies and some

members of rival prison gangs to the Lord. A man who used to be part of a white supremacist gang tells black inmates he loves them and Jesus loves them.”

Long-term research and writing project

McDonald began working on [*Real Prison, Real Freedom*](#) “off and on” when he retired in 2001, interviewing Smith, Price, Norris and Grooms, along with Smith’s parents, wife and at least one ex-girlfriend, as well as some prison officials who still judged him according to the violent reputation he earned before he became a Christian.

“I talked with people who like Rickie and with those who didn’t like Rickie,” he said.

McDonald wrapped up work on the book last week. Elm Hill Publishing, a division of HarperCollins, will release it May 19.

He acknowledges some ambivalence about the book’s intended audience, noting the early chapters that describe Smith’s life before Christ are grittier than a typical Christian book, while the latter chapters are far more Christ-centered than most biographies about former criminals.

“I don’t want to run off people who need to read this kind of story who don’t want to read what they see as a ‘Christian book,’ but I also hope it will be helpful to Christians who read it,” he said.

“The long process of forgiveness Rickie went through after he came to Christ—that’s something that can be tough for any of us. It’s important for Christians to remember, and I think there are good lessons Christians can learn from his story.”