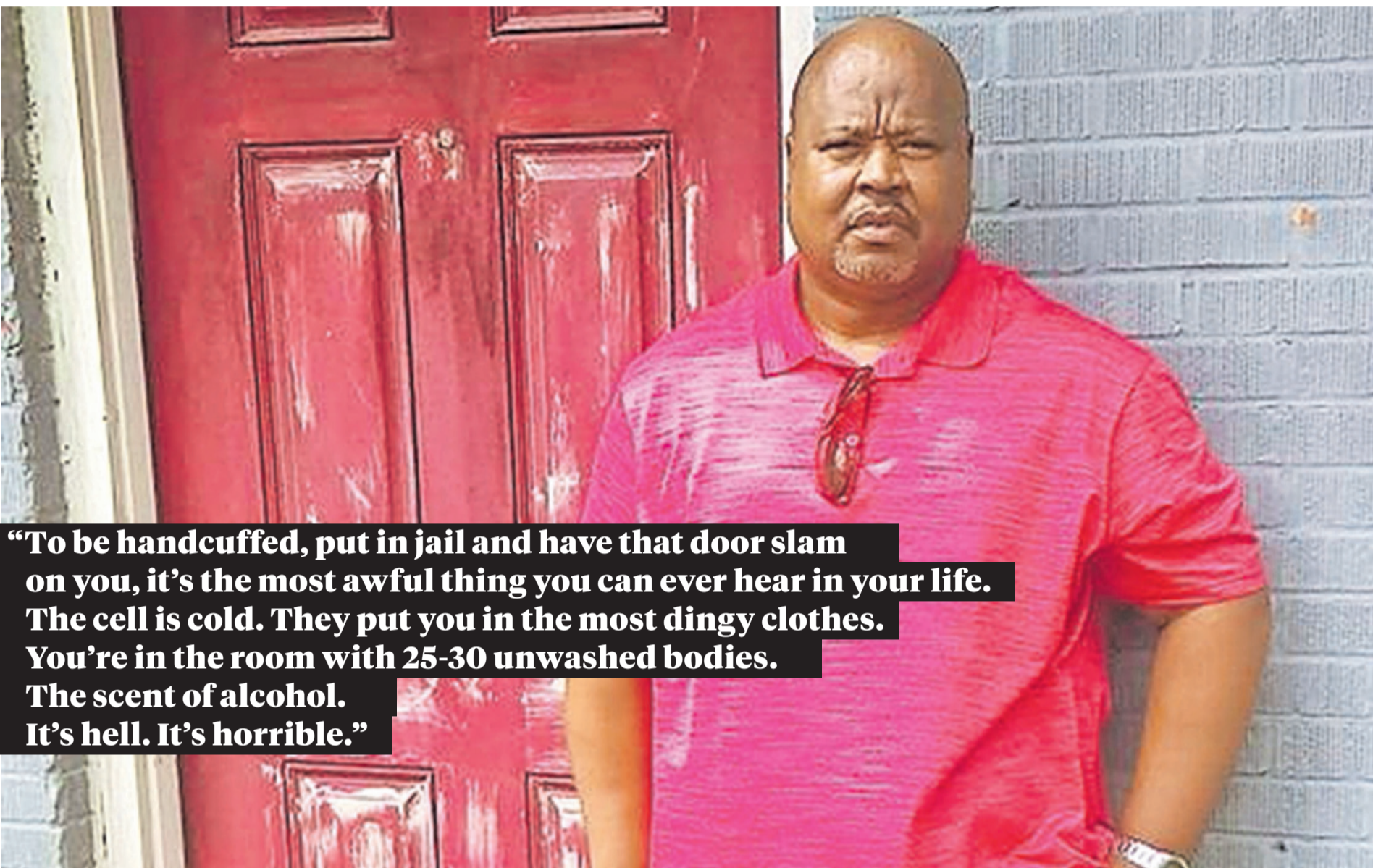


THE STORY OF A DEALER

‘Champ’ Napier turns painful past into teaching tool



“To be handcuffed, put in jail and have that door slam on you, it’s the most awful thing you can ever hear in your life. The cell is cold. They put you in the most dingy clothes. You’re in the room with 25-30 unwashed bodies. The scent of alcohol. It’s hell. It’s horrible.”

Chris “Champ” Napier stands by the door of his childhood home in Prichard, where he saw his father die. Jared Boyd / jboyd@al.com

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Chris “Champ” Napier was just 3 when he saw his father die in front of him.

“Me, my brother and my cousins — we were standing outside. The bullets went over our head,” he says. “My aunt, my momma ‘nem, they just called us in the house. My father was lying on the floor with a lot of buckshot wounds to his body.”

Having lived a life in which violence was too often a companion, this particular encounter remains Napier’s focus. After serving nearly 15 years in Alabama’s prison system for killing a man in a drug deal, he has dedicated the rest of his days toward using the examples of his past to invest in his community’s future.

Armed with a book of his most candid memoirs and an accompanying film, Napier is keeping it real. But, he’s also trying to keep people in a similar circumstance from repeating his mistakes.

The young Champ was a fighting man. He wrestled on top of abandoned mattresses with his peers on his gritty street in Prichard, the blue-collar city perched on Mobile’s shoulder.

At home, he battled his brother at dinner time arguments. At school, he bitterly antagonized white students in an empty attempt at retribution for the pain that he associated with poverty and disenfranchisement.

In his book, he describes in great detail the daily routine of his teenage years in the mid-1980s. In short, a lot of it was drinking, smoking weed and skirt-chasing.

Napier dropped out of high school at 15, although he’d been a truant for much of his time there. Hanging out around the local lounges, Napier knew what lengths that drug-heads would take to secure a high. He worked for a bit in a restaurant, but eventually sought after faster money. He hawked crack.

“In my neighborhood, you could get crack before you could get a job,” Napier says.

Napier says he was making upward of \$2,000-\$3,000 a week from crack dealing.

Napier says, “Even my schoolteachers; they were buying drugs. The same people who were tellin’ me I was gon’ be a thug. But, how can you tell me I’m a thug when you’re one of my customers now?”

It was an existence, he says, that filled his pockets but slowly tore at his heart.

He tells of selling drugs to a close friend, and for the first time, addressing the regretful aspects of his means to make ends meet.

“One of my friends came to me and he was beggin’ me for some drugs and for some money,” he says. Watching from the window of her home, Napier’s grandmother intervened.

She didn’t quite know what the friend wanted, but she believed that her grandson ought to be a compassionate man.

“She was like, ‘Give it to him. That’s your best friend!’” Napier says of his grandmother.

“I was just looking at him with tears in my eyes, like, ‘I can’t believe he’s doing this.’ And I went in my grand momma’s house and I was crying, saying, ‘I don’t wanna live like this anymore.’”

Ten days after his 18th birthday in April 1989, Napier was out on the streets, dealing like always. When a buyer tried to short-change him, Napier chased after him with a pistol, shooting him six times.

“I got out of jail April 11th, by the 15th, I was back selling drugs,” Napier says. His goal, he says, was to finance his legal fees. “People were telling me, ‘Man, as long as you get a lawyer and pay you some money, you don’t have to worry about it.’”

But he was worrying soon enough. The following January, the sentence clanged like doom: life.

“To be handcuffed, put in jail and have that door slam on you, it’s the most awful thing you can ever hear in your life,” Napier says. “The cell is cold. They put you in the most dingy clothes. You’re in the room with 25-30 unwashed bodies. The scent of alcohol. It’s hell. It’s horrible.”

Napier’s violent ways followed him into prison. What threw him a lifeline, he says, was his illiteracy.

“I sent my first Mother’s Day card. I didn’t know whether to spell ‘dear’ as ‘d-e-a-r’ or ‘d-e-e-r.’”

From small beginnings, studying the dictionary, he went on to literature, computers and eventually the Qu’ran.

Napier says, “Physically, I was locked up, but mentally and spiritually, I became free.”

In 2004, a parole officer gave Napier a chance. Despite Napier’s history of scuffles while on the inside, the parole officer said that he’d been paying attention to Napier’s interest in education, and to his changed attitude.

In August 2004, Champ was back on the outside, cautiously walking free.

“It was like a culture shock,” Napier says. The first thing he noticed was the music he heard in the car on the way to eat with his family. His favorite cousin Tiffany put

herself in charge of getting him up to date on the latest rappers. The next thing he noticed was how much the outside world had changed.

“Just to hear leaves crack under your feet, is a unique sound, because in prison, they don’t have trees,” he says. “That first night I was out of prison, my mother had gotten some orange juice. I opened the fridge and I had tears in my eyes. She came to the kitchen, I was crying. It was like 2 o’clock in the morning. I just thought, ‘Man, I finally get a chance to open a refrigerator.’”

Much of what he knew about the drug game had changed, too. A lot of the old dealers and hustlers were homeless, hopelessly addicted themselves.

“That just goes to show you the deteriorating and degenerative effect that the game can have on your life,” Napier says. “You see someone one six months and they are up, they have a Cadillac or Jaguar — nice car. Then in the next few months, they might be one of your biggest customers. It’s a see-saw effect.”

These days, Napier speaks frequently, often engaging with young people at schools, churches and community centers. In his message he levels with those born in poverty, but he makes a point to detail the ills of taking a shortcut out of tough circumstances.

“I see young kids that I know everybody deemed unworthy. They ask me when they see me at places, ‘Mr. Champ, do you still have the same number? I want to put you down as a reference,’ or ‘Man, I graduated from school’ or ‘I want you to come to my wedding.’ Things like that are my greatest accomplishment.”

He says, “My job is to prove everyone who doubted me wrong and be an example for other people that are going to get out (of prison) that if I can do it, they can do it. We all can do it.”

His first job after prison was a janitorial position in Mobile, at the Ben May Main Library in downtown.

On Thursday, he enjoyed a full-circle moment: Napier, who was pardoned for his crimes in 2015, returned to the library to show the documentary about his life — “Redemption Beyond My Past” — and sign his book, “Poverty and Prison,” chronicling his incarceration experiences.

“I’m not cleaning up the library this time,” Napier says of his return to his old workplace. “I’m cleaning up the misconception that’s attached to people getting out of prison.”