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EXCLUSIVE NEWS

'Ignored and Forgotten': Maryland Man Released from Prison 12-Years Early Thanks to Childhood Friend

By Kavontae Smalls | February 27, 2022  Comments (0)

Sura Sohna, 23, and Brandon Harris, 22, have been lifelong friends. They first met in the fourth grade in Annapolis, Maryland, about 30 miles south of Baltimore. The two had a close friendship akin to brothers, but as they aged their lives began to drift apart.

Project Highlighting Disparities in Criminal Justice System

"Around my middle school age. I started to act out around that time. and it was around



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As Harris worked his way into an elite private school which would propel him directly to college, Sohna attended a public high school and became a product of his environment, which included violence and crime that surrounded his public housing community.



He says his family didn't have much during his upbringing which motivated him into stealing and other crimes.

"That's what motivated me to gravitate more towards crime so I can help my family and more so I can help myself with issues of stuff like hunger, no clothes," Sohna said.



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After several run-ins with police and going in and out of jail, Sohna eventually found himself facing 15 years in prison at just 17 years old, his charges included first-degree burglary, destruction of property, theft, and gun-related charges.

As Sohna adapted to life behind bars at Patauxent Institution in Jessup, Maryland, Harris on the other hand was headed toward college.

“Pre-SAT, Pre-ACT, college applications and recommendation letters, these were the things that were consuming my energy,” Harris said of his focus, while Sohna navigated the criminal justice system at a young age.

Although Harris was doing well for himself, he says he never forgot about his friend Sohna. “There was a lot of worry and there was some guilt and shame involved because I felt like maybe I could have been there for Sura better during those years,” Harris said.

Sohna says he too thought about Harris and was happy for his success but lamented his own predicament. “He was doing something better with his life and I was in the worst place there could be on earth,” Sohna said.

Although several years went by since the two communicated, they never forgot about each other. As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold of society, Harris thought of his friend and questioned how the pandemic was impacting the prison population. He wrote Sohna a letter to find out.

“During that first letter — it was a written letter I asked him about his conditions — how he was doing. I asked him about life updates and how he was feeling,” Harris said.

Harris and Sohna rekindled their friendship over a series of letters back and forth, but even they didn't know what was on the horizon, which turned out to be a year-and-a-half-long journey to not only better understand the criminal justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline, but their efforts also expedited Sohna's life transformation and early release from prison.

In 2020, Harris began an independent project that focused on the ignored and forgotten in society, he says many of which are locked away in the prisons and jails across the country. He focused his efforts on his friend Sohna for the project.

“I interviewed his family members, I interviewed basically anyone who had a connection to his situation and anyone I could identify I wanted to speak with. I read through all of



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As the project progressed, it gained traction. Harris wrote Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan requesting Sohna be granted permission to participate in a virtual call for the project where he could explain in his own words his journey to prison and how the experience has affected him.

Hogan granted Sohna permission to participate in April of 2021. Sohna's attorneys also took note of the project and filed a motion to have Sohna's sentence reconsidered by a judge in December 2021.

Harris says convincing the judge to give his friend another chance was one of the toughest periods throughout the entirety of the project, but both he and Sohna were up to the task.

"I talked about the transformation that I've witnessed," Harris said he told the Maryland judge.



Harris continued, "I talked about our project and the findings from that experience and what I think can come out of it is a great support network for Sura. I would say it was fair when the judge pushed back, the judge made the argument you can take a horse to the water, but you can't force it to drink, and I countered by saying, Sura has drank for me over the past one and a half years working with him, and I am deeply convinced he would drink for the judge if given the opportunity."

Sohna also had to convince the judge he was a changed person from who he was when he was sentenced in 2018. Their efforts paid off, and after having served three of his 15-year prison sentence, Sohna's early release was granted on Feb. 8, 2022.

"I was proud of myself more than anything, I was proud of Brandon, I was just so proud, and I couldn't believe it," Sohna said of his early release.

Now that the two friends are back on one accord, they both agree their experiences in and around the criminal justice system highlight the inhumanity the system puts on people who find themselves within the justice system.

Harris, 22, is a senior at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. He plans to use his experience advocating for Sohna to pursue law school and do the same kind of

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