



lost and FOUND

Michael Roberts'
story of redemption

Photos and story by Omar Mosleh

Michael Roberts' face is a canvas of pain. Almost his entire body is draped in ink, from faces and flames to skulls and swastikas. Individually, he says, his tattoos are meaningless. Collectively, they once offered a mask to his misery – a means of therapy for a life of crime.

Michael takes a slow, measured drag of a cigarette, standing at his doorstep in the bitter winter cold. Smoking is one of the only guilty pleasures he has left after more than two decades of drug and alcohol abuse. Known as “Bull” in his younger days, the Trepassey, Newfoundland-native is tired from walking up the stairs from his apartment; his 6'4", nearly 500-pound frame makes it challenging.

He is frequently asked what various tattoos mean to him.

“Nothing,” he states bluntly. “It was all pure pain therapy, man...just another way to cope.”

Barely a foot into his Ontario home and it's easy to see how Michael now copes. The words of John 3:16 hang like a sentry above the entranceway to his modest basement apartment: “For God so loved the world,” it reads, “that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Those words are especially meaningful to Michael, who has gone from hardened criminal and gang member to born-again Christian after finding God while he lay broken and bruised on a hotel floor. Now an award-winning author, Michael's story is the type that defies belief.

A Tough Beginning

Born into a life of abuse, he suffered daily beatings from his father and molestation by his older brother and friends, and later his babysitter. From an early age, he was taught that drugs held the answers to his problems: At eight, he was diagnosed with ADHD due to behavioural problems and was prescribed Ritalin. He soon moved onto solvents, marijuana and other prescription pills.

A sickly child, Michael was bullied by his peers – this on top of the abuse at home. “It got to the point where I was getting beaten so much I just didn't care anymore,” he says. “I craved the beatings.”

Michael says he never retaliated because he was afraid of his father's punishment if he got in trouble. But by Grade 7, he had finally reached his breaking point. After a verbal altercation with his chemistry teacher over a detention slip, Michael says his teacher shoulder-checked him. In response, he broke his teacher's jaw.

Knowing a severe beating awaited him at home, he ran away. Between homelessness, foster homes and shelters, Michael's life quickly spiralled out of control. As a teen, he transformed from victim to victimizer. When he wasn't engaging in petty crime or senseless violence, he was



in court or jail. He once had 13 assault charges laid against him in one day. He frequently tried to kill himself.

“It was so easy to hate,” Michael recalls. “I didn’t even know what love was; no remorse, no feelings ...nothing.”

By 16, he was labelled a sociopath and deemed criminally insane. He was placed in a mental institution, where he experienced further rape and abuse.

Later Michael tried to reshape his life by moving out west with a girlfriend and working a number of menial jobs. But the allure of quick cash proved hard to resist. He delved deep into a life of organized crime and quickly advanced in the ranks. He became extremely wealthy from drug and gun trafficking, and was soon one of Canada’s most wanted criminals. Michael had money, power and respect among his peers, but his life would soon crumble around him.

He ended his relationship with his girlfriend to protect her from his associates, and soon after, Michael and more than a dozen others from his gang were arrested in an undercover sting. Things really came to a head with an incredibly painful betrayal.

One day at his farm, a large group of Michael’s fellow gang members paid him a visit. They brutally beat him and left him with a fractured skull, broken bones and severe damage to his spine. One of his associates had called a hit on him to assume control of the gang. Michael’s own crew had left him for dead.

A neighbour had witnessed it all and transported an unconscious Michael to the hospital. Staff bandaged him up and once he was able to stand on his own, he was asked to leave. The hospital was uncomfortable with gang members lingering around, so Michael moved his recovery to a hotel.

It was in the hotel room that Michael found himself at death’s doorstep. While stumbling to the

washroom, with no one to help him in his injured and drugged state, Michael collapsed. There he lay for hours in excruciating pain, sure his life was over.

After a lifetime of numbing his emotions with drugs and violence, Michael started crying. He had had enough. He begged God to help him.

“I never felt love in my life, but when I reached out to God and asked for just that much love before I died, He hasn’t stopped pouring it out,” Michael says. “My heart just opened right up.”

For Michael, it was all part of God’s divine plan: the life of abuse, his crimes, his near-death experience. When he speaks about God, you can feel the conviction in his voice. This is a man who has been to hell and back – and now has his sights set firmly on heaven.

“I could never go back to the way I was. Even if I did, I could never, ever, deny God,” he says. “I wouldn’t have a story to tell if it wasn’t for God.”

Hope for a Happier Ending

Today Michael is a different man. He’s been sober for two-and-a-half years, is dealing with his temper and tries extra hard not to curse. He no longer sleeps with a gun; instead, he reads the Bible before bed. He’s not a racist anymore; he has friends of all colours and attends a Middle-Eastern church. He doesn’t mute his emotions with alcohol, drugs or body modification; instead he writes and prays. He no longer hoards weapons in fear of his enemies; he collects stamps.

The new Michael is an Evangelical Christian who is dedicated to God and helping street kids. He lives in the

Greater Toronto Area and speaks at churches, schools and shelters to youth about the dangers of street life and the power of faith.

Michael loves talking to kids. He explains that the opportunity to share his life experience is very therapeutic for him.

“I just love it because they listen,” he says. “They do a lot more for me than I could ever do for them. It’s like total medicine.”

Apart from the talks, Michael packs and distributes survival kits for street kids and writes a Christian prison newsletter, *Behind the Walls*, that’s delivered to 700 convicts monthly. He’s also an award-winning author; his recent autobiography, *The Tender Heart of a Beast*, won the general readership award at the Word Guild’s 2010 Canadian Christian Writing Awards.

Michael still battles with shells from his past. His health, to be generous, is problematic. He struggles with his weight, has diabetes, and his heart is in bad condition. But some old habits die hard – he still smokes, drinks coffee and keeps a questionable diet. Cigarette packs and McDonald’s wrappers litter his table, juxtaposed with plaques on the wall that encourage with the words “Faith” and “Hope.”

Despite his health problems, Michael is hopeful for the future. And he holds no doubt as to who is responsible for his hope.

“When I was laying there on that hotel floor, bag of broken bones, I know there was something in that room with me, holding me,” he says. “Who knows what it was... I choose to believe it was God.” 📖