



# I Was Him

How Kelvin Lazaro '15  
became the face of change  
for New York's justice system

*By Jennifer Joniak '15*

Robert Amisler

Sixteen is a milestone age in New York. It's synonymous with learner's permits, driving lessons, car keys and new responsibilities. But for teenagers who get in trouble with the law, it means criminal responsibility and prosecution as an adult. Teenagers who go through the justice system are placed in facilities with adult criminals and often go on to live a life of crime. This is not the case for Kelvin Lazaro '15. He made the conscious decision to learn from his past and use it to brighten the futures of others.

Lazaro had his first encounter with the law when he was 14 years old and living in Bushwick, Brooklyn. He was charged with criminal possession of a firearm, and spent two weeks in a juvenile detention facility in the Bronx. On his 17th birthday, Lazaro went out with some friends, and a street fight broke out between two gangs. He was arrested again, this time with a charge of violent assault and robbery.

This time he was sentenced to time in Rikers Island. As a 17-year-old past the age of criminal responsibility, he was prosecuted as an adult, and in lieu of taking the maximum sentence, pled guilty and agreed to go to an inpatient program at Hope House Ministries in Port Jefferson, New York, a nonprofit organization run by the Rev. Francis Pizzarelli, S.M.M. Lazaro credits both him and the organization for giving him a second chance.

After experiencing the horrors of solitary confinement and the strict code among inmates in Rikers Island, Lazaro knew he wanted to change his life so he would not end up incarcerated again. When he was 21, he went back to school and received an associate degree from Suffolk County Community College. He then began his studies at St. Joseph's College as a criminal justice major on the juvenile justice track. Having been in the justice system himself, Lazaro is now using his own experiences to bring about change.

He first became involved in activism through the Herstory Writers Workshop's Hands Across the Community: Youth Writing for Justice program. Herstory was brought to SJC Long Island through the interaction of criminal justice professor Barbara Morrell, Ph.D., with the director of Herstory, Erika Duncan, to raise awareness about isolation confinement in jail. Lazaro expressed interest in getting involved with the organization and attended their writing workshop, which encouraged attendees to write about an emotionally impactful moment in their lives.

"I chose to write about my time when I ended up in lockup in Rikers Island," Lazaro said. The piece he composed,

titled "I Was Him," chronicles his experience one month into his sentence.

"Here, I have no family. All I have is a cell with a bed and a small sink. I've never felt this alone in my life," he wrote. "My days and nights are the same. With no way of telling time, I am stuck in a never-ending cycle."

Lazaro was locked up in a cell for 22 hours every day and was only allowed to leave for meals and a shower. At Rikers Island, the inmates are referred to by numbers, and unspoken rules dictate the goings on.

"When I first came here, no one told me the rules. Everything I did, I did wrong. ... At first I tried asking the COs [correctional officers] about the rules, but they would simply yell at me, and then came the beating from the inmates," he explains. "I broke an important rule — never talk to the COs, and never ask them for anything."

Once Lazaro shared his story, Herstory asked him to join the Raise the Age campaign, an initiative aimed at changing the age of criminal responsibility in New York from 16 to 18. "I had no idea my story would get the attention it did," he said. "Herstory told me about Raise the Age and how my story can put a face to the issue involving juveniles being placed in adult facilities."

Lazaro is also involved with the Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement (CAIC), which supports legislation that would reduce the number of continuous days a person can stay in solitary confinement, ban

special populations (such as individuals under 21 and over 55, individuals with disabilities, or pregnant women) from isolation and enhance due process protections before a person is placed in solitary confinement. He now shares his story at high schools and various universities, including Stony Brook, Hofstra and Columbia. "I am happy to help in any way I can to change a system that treats children as adults," he said.

Lazaro has gained peer support for his activism. Whenever he goes to speak at an event, he brings along fellow students Jorge Jerome '15, Kyle Stroud '15, Brittany Critelli '14 and Stephanie Bonilla '15. "If I have to speak in the city, they come with me just for moral support so I won't be the only one there," he said. "We represent our school by showing up as a group."

The future looks bright for Lazaro, as he plans to continue advocating for change in the justice system while pursuing a master's degree in social work from either Stony Brook University or John Jay College. ■

**"I want to help. I want to go where we can provide real help for juveniles so they don't end up in the system."**