

Megan Wilson:

Okay. I am Megan Wilson. I am a researcher with Confronting Conditions of Confinement, and I am here interviewing...

Jonathan Smith:

Jonathan Smith.

Megan Wilson:

Today is November 18th, 2020, and we are in Ann Arbor conducting this interview over Zoom. So Jonathan, where and when were you born?

Jonathan Smith:

I was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1988, so long ago.

Megan Wilson:

And what's your earliest memory?

Jonathan Smith:

I think it's because I actually saw a picture of it afterward later down the line, but I kind of vaguely remember it, but I remember playing with this big red ball in front of our grandma's house on the west side of Detroit. And I was super tiny, like three years old. And I remember seeing that picture later down the line and I like to convince myself that I remember that even if I don't really remember that.

Megan Wilson:

What did the world outside your family look like when you were growing up?

Jonathan Smith:

Like, outside of my household?

Megan Wilson:

Yes.

Jonathan Smith:

Yeah, I think as a kid, you don't really understand, I don't know, kind of like where you live. Any way of conceptualizing that, like if you live in a bad neighborhood or not, I think that when I was younger I just thought that where we lived was and how we lived was how everyone else did. So, I just thought it was regular and normal, should I start going into detail of all this.

Megan Wilson:

I want to let you know at this point that my internet connection is unstable and I'm not sure whether the recording will have come out right.

Jonathan Smith:

Okay.

Megan Wilson:

But let's continue on for now. And if something happens, if we get disconnected, for example, we'll figure out what to do.

Jonathan Smith:

Okay.

Megan Wilson:

So who raised you and what were they like?

Jonathan Smith:

My mom raised me, and I think my mom was, she was young when she had me. My mom had me when she was 16. I know this now, I imagine that she didn't really know what she was doing. She was just like doing the best that she possibly could. And I think that she grew a person, as she was raising us at the same time. And I think that she was really dedicated. She was just super... What's the word I want to use? She just was so persistent in ensuring that we had a place to stay, regardless of what she had to do to make sure that that was a thing. Which was three jobs, or we moved around a lot. She just did a lot of different things to make sure we had a place to stay. But I think that if I can describe my mom in one word it's passionate.

Megan Wilson:

How was discipline handled in your family?

Jonathan Smith:

I think when I was younger, like my mom, she's a yeller. So if you're doing something you're not supposed to be doing, she will like scream at you about it. Because I was a kid who I was really mischievous, so telling me nicely not to do a thing was not going to get you anywhere because I just was like that type of kid. And I think that like. I think that definitely I used to get whoopings when I was younger, like for crazy shit that I did. But I think that after I turned like 12 I never really got whoopings anymore because it didn't really have the same effect. And she's like a five foot woman and by the time I was 12 it just didn't really have the same effect on me as it did when I was a kid.

Megan Wilson:

Where did you grow up and go to school?

Jonathan Smith:

I went to school... Well, are you talking about throughout my childhood or just the city?

Megan Wilson:

Yeah.

Jonathan Smith:

So I went to school in Detroit, I went to Detroit Public Schools. I moved around a lot, we moved around a lot. So I went to multiple elementary schools, multiple middle schools. I went to Webber Middle School, Frank Murphy Middle School, then I went to Cody High School, I went to Robert Shaw High School. I don't really remember any of the elementary schools I went to.

Megan Wilson:

What was your relationship like with students or teachers?

Jonathan Smith:

Elementary school was, I would like to think of it as just a daycare more so than it being for education. I think I learned stuff, but I don't really remember much of what I learned in elementary school. I think that most parents that are from the inner city have the opportunity, once their kid turns five years old that's effectively free daycare. You're sending your kids to public schools. 40 people, 40 students packed in a class, 45 six, seven, eight, nine year olds all in one class. So I don't know if the education was tip top shelf or tip top education.

Jonathan Smith:

Middle school was interesting because I think that middle school was about the time where kids started to exhibit teenage, adolescent, bad behaviors where the things that in elementary school where you would just get in trouble for like writing on your desk, middle school was like now you're skipping class and you're doing this questionable stuff that you know you shouldn't be doing in middle school. And then high school, the relationships completely shift. I think that by the time I got to high school teacher was just like, "If you want to come, come, if you don't, I'm not calling your mother because we have like 65 other kids that we have to focus on", so I think that I don't really remember any of my high school teachers and I think the odds were not in their favor.

Megan Wilson:

So what did you do for fun as a young person?

Jonathan Smith:

Um [inaudible 00:07:13, connectivity issues] and you just take a lot of young kids that are around the same age and put them on the same block and it's just a recipe for disaster. And I think that when we were like 12, I remember I had a friend, he was like my best friend back in the day, his name's Will, we used to do kid stuff. We'd play flag football in the street and play basketball in the street and play video games or just run around and ride our bikes and simple stuff. And then by the time we're 13, different things started to matter. Now we're no longer just having fun, now we're like, "Oh, who's that girl who just moved down the street?", and it's different now. And then things that matter changed. I remember what I found fun wasn't kid stuff anymore, breaking rules got fun. Like not going to class and playing knicker knocker and doing all of this stuff that's just, I don't know, delinquent behavior, by the time I was like 13, 14.

Jonathan Smith:

But on the other side of things, I really enjoyed playing basketball, I love sports. I used to draw a lot, I played the piano, I danced. I had hobbies and things that I was interested in, but I think that at that time just fitting in with what everyone else was doing was my focus.

Megan Wilson:

Who would you say influenced you growing up? Did that change over time?

Jonathan Smith:

I think that my neighborhood influenced me more than anything. I think that my mom and my grandma tried to teach me the difference between right and wrong, and I would know the difference. But the pressures from the people that I hung around, the kids that I hung around, were more important than what my mom ever said. So I think that nature versus nurture thing kind of kicked in. And when I went to I know that doing certain things are wrong, but when I would go to school, all of that stuff would go out of the window. I was super impulsive when I was younger, still to this day. It definitely made for a really interesting adolescence, I would say.

Megan Wilson:

What were your ideas or perceptions about the government or the police when you were young?

Jonathan Smith:

Didn't really have any perception about the government. The government to me was just who we got support, like financial and, I don't know, like Medicaid and stuff like that. That's how I thought of the government. I never really like looked at it beyond that. The police though, we rarely interacted with the police. My mom didn't call the police often, and if you did see the police, even as a kid, I think that, even if we did nothing wrong, we would run from them. We could've just been standing on the block doing absolutely nothing, but just like 20 of us doing absolutely nothing, and we'd see the cops and we'd just run. But also that was fun to us. That was like, "Oh, there's the police, let's see who gets caught," jumping fences and running in the backyards, your adrenaline's rushing. You didn't even have to really do anything wrong, you just wanted to defy the people who seem to be in an authority throughout the community.

Megan Wilson:

It seems like your friends had a lot of influence on you.

Jonathan Smith:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think so, yeah. I think my friends played the biggest part. I think that it's really weird. There's this really weird dynamic in which I've always thought of myself as being an individual thinker, even as a kid. But if there were things that I absolutely didn't want to do, I wouldn't do them. Like, I've never smoked weed in my life. My friends have smoked weed since I was like 12, and I never did. And I just remember, didn't really have a real reason why I didn't want to do it, except for that I didn't want to do it and when other people will be like, "Oh, Jay, hit this blunt or hit this joint," and I'll be like, "Nah, bro, I'm good," and they'll be like, "Why not?" And I'll be like, "Because I don't want to."

Jonathan Smith:

But I didn't always do that. Like, there'll be other things that they would do that was wrong or exhibited bad behavior that I wouldn't like say, "I don't want to," because I wanted to be involved in that stuff. But I would definitely say that my friends had the most influence on me, and I also had the most influence on them. There were times where I was the person who was like suggesting that we go out and do things that we shouldn't have been doing.

Jonathan Smith:

But yeah, if I think about it, I think that when I was between like 12 and 16 I think that all of us were just trying to find our way in the world. We hadn't really become the person that we were going to become yet. It was still super unclear. And I think that once we all got around each other we all started to morph into our own selves based off of the things that were around us. I remember starting my eighth grade year and not really being materialistic because my mom couldn't afford clothes up until that point. But then also remember my seventh and eighth grade year I remember kids hammer on you hard for not having the shoes and the clothes and all that stuff. And then those things started to like resonate. Like, "Oh, if I don't have this, I'm not valuable. If I don't have this brand of clothes, then no one will like me", and then those are the types of things that drove me more than anything, just fitting in and going along with the norm.

Megan Wilson:

So when was your first contact with the carceral system and what was that experience like for you?

Jonathan Smith:

I think that I remember just being really, really young and even at a young age, I didn't feel bad for taking something that didn't belong to me. So when I was like seven or eight I remember taking a candy bar at a store. Asking my mom, "Can I have this candy bar?" And her not being able to afford it or telling me no, and then me just putting it in my pocket and knowing that I can get away with it and not really feeling bad about the fact that I just took one candy bar out of the hundred that they have here or whatever. And I would say the first time I got arrested I was probably like 14 years old and I got caught shoplifting and then went to the back, cops came, obviously mom just comes and pick you up, but I think that was my first interaction with the legal system.

Megan Wilson:

And did those kinds of interactions continue up until you got incarcerated?

Jonathan Smith:

Yep. Yeah, it did. It progressed. It started off with a candy bar and then it kind of progressed into a t-shirt, then a pair of shoes, and then a video game, and then just whatever I wanted or things that I thought that I wanted, until it like became I need money to get the things that I want. No longer the things, it would be like shoes and clothes that I want or whatever the case may be.

Megan Wilson:

So if I may shift a little bit now, what was incarceration like for you?

Jonathan Smith:

Okay, so I did two terms in prison. The first time I did time in prison I did from 18 to 20 and I went to prison for home invasion. By that time I had already progressed into this, that was a thing that was commonly done around the time I was between like 16 and like 20ish. That was what everybody who was, it was either you were breaking into cars or you're breaking into houses. And I just remember always rationalizing with myself being like, "I'm not violent," or, "I'm not hurting anyone, I'm just taking things", and then I would take things from people not in my neighborhood, but I would go into other neighborhoods and do it. So I went to prison for two and a half years for that.

Jonathan Smith:

And I think that there was a point in time in which I had a time to think about what it is that I was doing, but I didn't necessarily feel bad about it. I just knew that I didn't want to go back to jail. And then I got out, but then I got out and went back to the same exact street that I grew up on and I just remember walking out and seeing all of my homeboys. Same stuff. Went right into my house, changed my clothes and came right back outside and hung out with the same people I hung out with before I went in.

Jonathan Smith:

I did two and a half years and I didn't really learn anything. I think that I was kind of afraid at first, not the fact that I was afraid to break the law, but just that I didn't want to be caught and it was so fresh. But then all it took was the first time that I would do something that I wasn't supposed to be doing and get away with that and me be like, "Okay, cool", and then adjust right back into that same way of living, and then I got caught a second time and that's when I got sentenced to the seven and a half years in prison. What was the question though?

Megan Wilson:

What was incarceration like for you? How about, what did it feel like to live in a prison?

Jonathan Smith:

I would say that in some ways it wasn't much different than the streets, because the same people and the same mentality that you had on the block that you lived on, you're right next to those people. The difference though is the police are now COs and they're right there on top of you at all times. They have you confined to a space, but you still have this sense of lawlessness, "I can do what I want," type of thing, we just have to be more, I don't know, careful about what you did because you were confined to a space. But I would say that incarceration the first time, it was just like a sit-down, it felt like a punishment, like where I got my game taken away from me for a couple of weeks. But it didn't really have any real impact. The second time incarceration felt a bit more real because I was looking at a lot more time, I'm looking at myself being 21, leaving when I was like 28, 29.

Jonathan Smith:

I don't care who you are, that makes you think about stuff. And I remember going to quarantine and just starting off on the sentence and looking at how much time I had to myself and then I started to journal in quarantine and quarantine is just like the place you go before you go get house, you're sent to a specific prison. And I started to journal and I still have all of my journal entries, but I just remember sitting there and always having sense, but just not using it. I remember one of my first journal entries is just like, "I'm going to make the most of this time." I was like 22. "I'm going to make the most of this time, I'm going to study as much as I can. I'm going to use this to learn so much that once I get out I'm able to live a good quality of life."

Jonathan Smith:

And it took years for me to figure out what that thing was, but this experience was both positive and negative. It was negative in the sense that I didn't want to be confined, I didn't see my family, I had guards always on my head about what to do, when to do it, et cetera, the food was horrible. And then not to mention how you're locked up with a bunch of people who some of them don't give a fuck and

now you have to kind of adjust that same mentality to kind of coexist with these people. And then on the flip side I felt like I was growing more than I ever had in my life.

Megan Wilson:

Did you spend time in segregation?

Jonathan Smith:

Only a couple of times. I was not a bad inmate. It was rare. I think only did segregation a couple of times, it was a couple of fights that I got in, which are inevitable inside of prison and they were never like long stints. I never did eight months or something like that. It was more like, "You've gotten laid down for three weeks for this fight that you had in the chow hall." And I don't think it was that big of a deal because you are locked up. I mean, I've done 22 hour lockdown, so being in segregation is not much different. You're locked down 24 hours, you don't get one yard, but it's not much different from being 24 hours lockdown. The difference is you're by yourself. So I never did any extended period of time, so it wasn't really that complex to adjust to doing segregation.

Megan Wilson:

Okay. What were the living conditions like?

Jonathan Smith:

It varied depending on the prison you're at. Some prisons, like level four, when you go to them you have a bunkie and two men cells and basically everything was in there. Your sink, your toilet, you and your bunkie's bunks, one desk, two lockers, type of thing, really small area. Depending on where you were and depending on how old the prison was kind of determined how good or bad the living situation was. If you were in some of the newer prisons, which most level fours are, you get lucky because it's new and they design the rooms to be better equipped for two people. But then you go to certain places where you go down to the lower levels and you're in this barn yard, I don't know, area where it's just open space and it's a bunch of people live in there and some people go to sleep at 10 o'clock and some people stay up until two. So you have to adjust to other people's schedules and stuff like that.

Jonathan Smith:

But I would say, yeah, it definitely varied. Some places were dirty and you wouldn't want to stay there for any long period of time, and then other places are super clean. And it's just entirely dependent on how long that prison's been there and then also who was there.

Megan Wilson:

You can name names if you want to talk about particular prisons that stood out to you.

Jonathan Smith:

Okay, so Kinross is known for being one of the best prisons to be. No one wants to be in prison, but if you were going to be at one, Kinross was probably one of the best ones. It was a level two, it was pretty much open all day long. It was probably 1800 inmates there, 1800 prisoners, and it ranges from people who go home in six months to people who've been there for 40 years and have life, and you have people who just got sentenced to 45 years and they just started their sentence, or like ranged. So you had all types of different things going on.

Jonathan Smith:

Kinross was really known because it just felt like an actual town rather than a prison. There's so many different areas. It was so separated. You have different segments of the prison where you can be on one side of the prison and could not even see the other side. And I think that that's what a lot of people liked. And there people who did extensive amounts of time in that prison and didn't have a problem doing the time there. There was just like so much to do, they have like a lot of recreation, have big gyms, basketball courts, multiple weight pits, baseball, diamonds, had skis and skates in the winter time and all of this crazy stuff. When you're in prison and you're at a level four or five they lock you down 24 hours a day.

Jonathan Smith:

But eventually no matter what, your management level goes down and they have to take you to a prison that's at a lower level. When you have a bunch of people who are at level two management level, but have life in prison, you don't want them to be unhappy in those spaces. So within reason, you want to be able to make it as comfortable as possible and that's what they did with a place like Kinross. It was built for people who are doing life that were never going home and that they wanted to make it as cushy as they possibly could because these people are going to be there for a long time.

Jonathan Smith:

So the people who did all of the time that was there, they liked it there, they didn't want to mess it up, so they were on their best behavior. So the prison had an incentive to give all of these things out, all of these incentives and then the inmates had the motivation to do good and stay focused there and not do anything wrong because it was just a nice prison. Kinross is great.

Jonathan Smith:

Places like Marquette, which has been there for so long, horrible. Chipped paint and I think they turned their factories where they, I don't know, stored stuff, and they turned that into the actual prison. Created these barns and just like went in there and was like, "Yup, we could turn this closet into a room," and stuff like that that was not livable what they converted into livable spaces. I would say up North usually has a lot better, what they call, jailing because of the fact that people are further away from their family. So usually, it's like better living situation, more activities to do, than downstate.

Megan Wilson:

You said the food was bad. Can you talk more about what the chow hall was like?

Jonathan Smith:

Yeah. So the food was pretty bad. That also depended on where you went. So if you were at a place like Kinross, once again, you have those folks who are there for a long time, they're not having that fucking you're just going to feed them anything. Inside of prisons, even though the government and the MDOC like pays for the majority of the food, lots of times food choice and stuff [inaudible 00:27:10, connectivity issues]... But like... You back.

Megan Wilson:

Sorry about that.



Jonathan Smith:

No, you're good. How does that work with the recording though? Does it still record when you leave?

Megan Wilson:

I don't know. It says it's recording. So I think what happened was that you became the host temporarily. For the sake of the recording, do you mind, can we start over with that question? What was the chow hall like?

Jonathan Smith:

Yeah. So the chow hall depended on where you were. Sometimes you would go to the chow hall and if you were at a higher level they would tell you where to sit. So the reason why is in prison there are lots of gangs and different groups and most of the time, a lot of incidents that would happen, would happen in the chow hall. Either in the chow hall or in the yard. They would try to control how people sat because they can therefore control different incidents. So they would try to not sit you and your homeboy together because it's less likely that the two of you would start some shit if he's over here and you're over here, so you would never know where you're going to sit. You walk in CO say, "You go this way, you go this way." Sometimes you get lucky and sit next to the person you came in the chow with, but most times you wouldn't. So they pretty much assigned seats when you walk in.

Jonathan Smith:

You go in, you get your tray at the beginning and you push it down the line, and they slap the stuff on there. And you would know what you were going to eat before you even got there because they have a menu that's printed out and it just repeats on the monthly cycle. Like, "Oh, we have hamburger day," or we have, I don't know, I don't even remember all of the names of the stuff, but it was just like so many different foods. Wasn't always greatly prepared. There were some meals that people looked forward to like pizza and chicken and stuff like that. And there were most where the chow would be pretty much empty because only the people who couldn't afford to buy their own food would even go. So yeah, it was pretty bad stuff.

Jonathan Smith:

You just imagine this big open area, if you can imagine like being in a school cafeteria, but just think about a bunch of guards placed throughout the cafeteria and they're watching you and making sure you're not passing contraband. And if you get up, you have to leave and they give you time, you really only are allowed 15 minutes and if you're sitting there eating your food and they're trying to move other prisoners through, they'll tell you to get up and you're like, "I'm not even finished eating yet," and they're like, "Nah, don't matter. You got to go," and if you don't, then they'll give you like disobeyed and get a ticket or disobeyed a direct order, and all of this stuff. So yeah, I would say the chow hall was just, it was, I don't know, not where you would want to eat because the food wasn't greatly prepared, the tables weren't always cleaned, floor was pretty messy.

Megan Wilson:

So did you eat out of the store a lot?

Jonathan Smith:

Different stages I had the luxury of eating my own food. In the beginning of most people's sentence you have a lot of support, friends and family reaching out. Over time people just kind of fall off because they're out living, maybe they don't have the money, maybe they're just like, "Yo, this is too stressful." So in the beginning of my sentence, I had a lot of family, a lot of friends who were reaching out and supportive. And then in the middle of the sentence a lot of people stop reaching out and you stop hearing from people, which mean that you don't get as much money, which means that you have to eat at the chow a lot more. So I had different stages.

Jonathan Smith:

For the most part, I was really smart about what I bought. I didn't buy a lot of expensive junk food, I bought stuff that would be able to last like noodles and tuna and stuff like that that will like make a difference, and I wouldn't buy food to eat fancy meals, but just make sure that I have something to eat in general.

Megan Wilson:

What was it like on the yard?

Jonathan Smith:

[inaudible 00:32:25. This portion of the recording ended here due to connectivity issues. Recording and transcript continue in Part 2].