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# Virginia is finally giving felons like me the right to vote. We deserve it.

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Hallelujah.



By Terry Garrett May 4 at 6:00 AM

Terry Garrett is a public speaker living in Virginia.

I have never voted. By the time I was 18, I already had a felony shoplifting conviction, which meant that I forever lost my right to vote in Virginia. I never had a chance.

Not that I cared about voting at 18. I started getting into trouble very young. I didn't think of anyone but me. Besides, I thought voting was just for rich people. They made the decisions. I didn't think I counted.

But I did get interested in voting when I was maybe 21 or 22. Bill Clinton was running. I tried to register, but they wouldn't let me. That was the first time I learned that I couldn't vote because of my record.

After many years of trouble, including a number of felonies, I served seven months in 2005 for stealing a cash register at a Kinko's. When I was released, I knew I wanted my life back. I decided I didn't have to live a life of drug activity and crime. I wanted to accomplish my goals, and my one of my goals is to get my rights back.

My life is so different now than it was before. I worked for a time at the dining hall at George Mason University. A lot of the students were open to me. They didn't care about my past. The students and the university were open to giving people a second chance. We were a team, and that had an effect on me. I

started doing public speaking. I've been working on my GED. I've been certified to test people for HIV. I recruit people for treatment. This is a big deal, especially when you grow up thinking that you're nothing. When I look at what I've done and am able to say "I did that"— that's exciting.

But I still couldn't vote. With the encouragement of family and Friends of Guest House, an organization that helps women in Northern Virginia transition from incarceration to life in the community, I applied in 2010 to have my voting rights restored. It's a long process with a lot of paperwork, and the hardest part was waiting to hear back. A month later, my application was rejected. I cried. I felt like I still wasn't good enough, that my past was still being held against me. I applied again three months later. I was rejected again. (I also learned that I had a 20-year-old fine in Fairfax County? What's it for? I don't have a clue. I was young and making horrible decisions. I can't even remember everything I've done.)

It has not been easy to live in a community and not be able to participate in voting, especially during President Obama's first campaign. That was the time I most wanted to vote. I wanted to be a part of that, the first black president. But I couldn't. All my daughters went to vote. They all got their stickers. Everyone was talking on Election Day about the polls, how crowded it was. And I was jealous.

When you're walking around without an "I Voted" sticker, people ask you why you didn't vote. And you don't want to say, "Because I'm a convicted felon." It was embarrassing.

But I'm not ashamed anymore. I've grown up since then. I'm proud that my daughters can vote — they can do something that makes a difference.

When I learned I could get my voting rights back, thanks to an executive order from Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, I was relieved. Finally, I thought, someone sees past what we did. And I'm glad to hear other people are getting their rights back. There are a lot of us (more than 200,000), and even though we made mistakes, we're worthy. As for the Virginia GOP lawmakers who plan to sue to have the order reversed — it's just ignorant. Many ex-offenders have totally put the past behind them, and you still think we can't vote? Ex-offenders who turned their lives around 20 years ago — you still want to hold it against them? This is what we're running into.

In my old life, I was just here. I didn't feel as if I was part of the country, a citizen. Whoever they voted in, I didn't get to have a say. Today I know that I am an important part of society. But even if I hadn't changed my life, I should still be able to vote because I am a citizen and part of this country. Everyone should. No matter what.

*As told to Jenny Rogers*

Terry Garrett is a public speaker living in Virginia.