

Use What You Know



Have you ever known a person who has changed his or her life? What caused the change? Write about it on the lines below. Then read the story of one man's change.



IT'S NEVER TOO LATE, PART 1

For some people, learning to read and write is a breeze. For others, it's not that easy. The Mexican-American poet, Jimmy Santiago Baca, didn't learn to read or write until he was 23 years old. Because of the hard life he lived, school didn't seem important. Then he decided to change his life.

When Baca was a kid, he always felt like an **outsider**. He felt like nobody really loved or wanted him. His mother and father couldn't provide a good home. His grandmother was going blind. He was sent to an orphanage at a young age. He felt like he didn't belong anywhere.

In the orphanage, he decided he needed to be tough. That way nobody could tell how hurt he was inside. Baca never talked about how he was feeling. The outside world would only see how strong he could be. He ran away from the orphanage when he was ten years old and lived on the streets with friends and strangers for a few years.

School was hard for him. Because his life out of school was so difficult, he didn't do any homework and couldn't pay attention in class. His main focus was survival. He worried about how he was going to eat and where he was going to stay. His teachers punished him because his English was poor and because he didn't do his lessons. The other kids teased him or avoided him. Finally, he gave up and **dropped out** in the ninth grade.



Will Baca go back to school to learn to read? Circle your answer.

Yes No

Then keep reading to find out the answer.

Baca needed money. The only kinds of work he could get were low-paying jobs that no one else wanted to do. He turned to small crimes to make money. It seemed as if he didn't have a choice. He was sad and alone, but he didn't have the skills to express his feelings. He knew he deserved a better life, but what could he expect? His life on the streets was the only life he knew.

His first trip to jail was when he was 17. Life in jail made him worse. He and the other convicts were not treated well. Even though it was a terrible place to be, he did get one good thing. He heard the prisoners read poetry and tell stories to each other. He heard the power of **finely-tuned language**. It was like a song or a sunset. It stirred something deep inside him that had been locked away for a long time. When he listened to another prisoner read, he felt alive.

After he was released, he quickly landed back in jail. He saw that this was how most convicts lived their lives, **like the jail had a revolving door**. He imagined that this was how his life was going to continue. His second trip behind bars began no better than the first. Little did he know that his life was about to change.



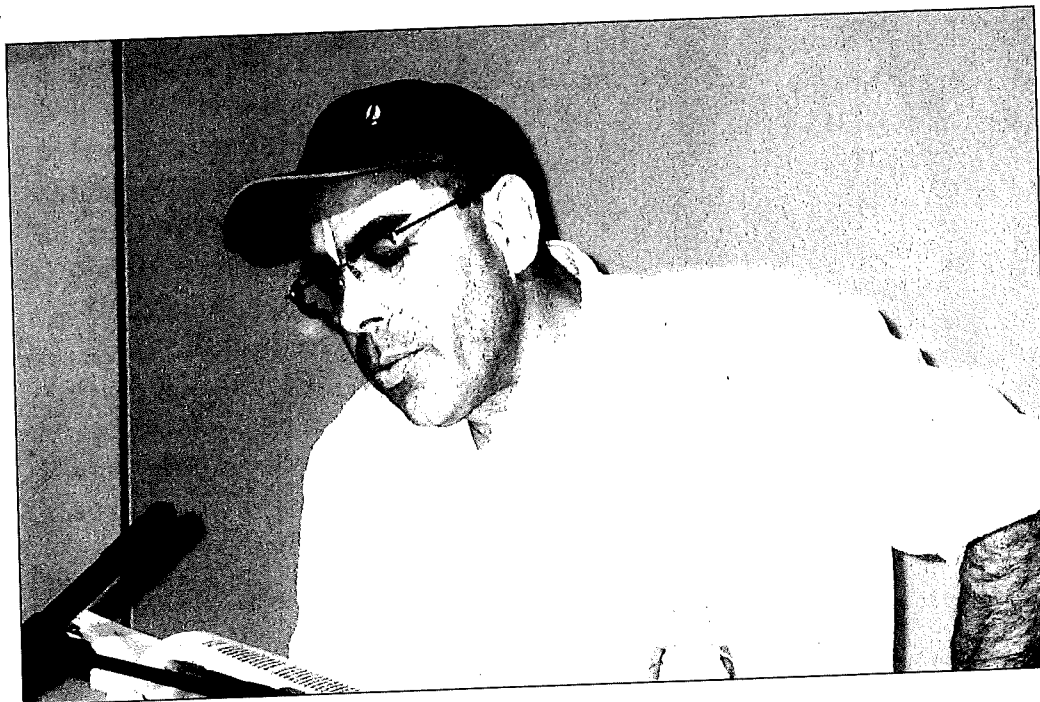
One day, Baca got so angry at one of the guards, he decided to get revenge. He reached through the bars and stole a book from the guard's desk. When he later returned to his cell, he opened the book and tried to read. He sounded out the letters. He practiced until he could understand some of the lines. What he had stolen was a book of poetry! As he read the lines over and over again, something electric happened. It was as if

his heart and his mind grew wings and began to fly! The beauty of language and of the world broke open for him again. This time he would never trade it for anything. Just a few days later, he wrote his first poem.

Baca knew it would be hard to learn how to read and write well. His reading was slow and awkward. He made up his own way to spell words. But he began to fill up notebooks with his new language. He read everything he could. He begged his jailers to help him go back to school, but they refused. He then refused to work, and they threw him in a locked cell for many years. He continued to teach himself and learned what he could from the supply of books he could find to read. He became serious about his studies.

For Baca, the beauty of language helped him see the beauty of the world. What used to be a dark, ugly, and hard place now held great wonder. Through his writing and reading, Baca began to notice small and good things: the shapes of clouds in a stormy sky, the patterns of sand, or the colors of a sunset.

While he was still in prison, he practiced his new skills. He wrote letters for the other prisoners and read poems and stories to them. Many of them were touched by words the same way he was. They could see he was serious about changing his life, and they respected him for it. The people who worked at the prison saw how Baca was changing. A few of them even helped him get books to read. After serving his long prison term, he was released.





What do you think Baca is like now that he is out of prison?
Write what you think on the lines below.

There have been many times in his new life when Baca has had to choose which way to go. Sometimes he gets bored. Anger and hatred get the better of him. But Baca has listened to the beat, tone, and music of words. They are his saviors. Because of them, Baca has not been in jail for many years. He has earned a college degree. His poetry is known all around the country for its powerful images and strong emotions. He has won many awards and has been an inspiration to all kinds of people.

Baca's life story is a perfect example of the saying "It's never too late." As a teenager and a young man, even he thought he was doomed to a life of prison and crime. It took a lot of hard work and faith in himself to turn his life around, but he did it. Today he lives a happy life with his wife and children. He continues to write poetry and other books. Learning to read and write made him a free man. ►