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Inmate shares prison survival strategies

Sam Whiting

Published 10:22 p.m., Saturday, November 24, 2012

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Michael and Carole Santos were married while he was in federal prison serving a 45-year sentence for drug trafficking. He is now in a halfway house in S.F. Photo: Russell Yip, The Chronicle / SF



46 11 **32**

On a break from his desk job in Petaluma, **Michael Santos** climbs into his Chevy compact and drives to a quiet hillside estate, hands on the wheel at 10 and 2.

His wife, Carole, is living in a newly furnished guesthouse and is at the door as he parks and announces, "Honey, I'm home."

They both laugh because this is her home, not his. His home is in a halfway house in San Francisco, where he is finishing a 45-year sentence for drug trafficking. With credit for good behavior, he spent 25 years and two days, more than half his life, locked up. In that time, he published seven books on incarceration, ranging from the macro, "Inside: Life

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Behind Bars in America," to the micro, "Prison! My 8,344th Day," and married [Carole Goodwin](#), whom he's known since grade school.

Santos, 48, was released to community confinement in August, but he is still federal prisoner No. 16377004. There are institutional rules. Plus there are his rules that are strict and unbendable. "If I'm not exercising the same level of discipline that guided me through prison," he says, pondering the pull of recidivism, "I know the statistics."

So after a few minutes admiring the contents of a refrigerator, and a quick hand-holding session with his wife, he is back in the car, hands on the wheel at 10 and 2.

"The entire journey for me has been hyper-deliberate," he says, speaking softly and slowly. "It has all been in preparation for this period of time when I can emerge into society with opportunities to live as a contributing person. Nothing distracts me from what I need to do."

Santos is employed by Golden State Lumber, because its owner, Lee Nobmann, met him in Lompoc, where Nobmann was serving a 13-month sentence for tax evasion. On his way out, Nobmann promised Santos a place to live and a paying job, which has nothing to do with the business of lumber.

"My job is to continue doing what I was doing in prison," he says. "To help the people understand the American prison system, the strategies that I've used to get through it."

He has a website, www.michaelsantos.net, which gets thousands of unique visitors a day, and 1,124 daily followers on Facebook. Every day a hundred new inmates are writing to him in desperate need of his help.

'Messiah' to other prisoners

"For people who are lacking in hope he has become a messiah," says [Joan Petersilia](#), a professor at Stanford Law School and scholar in prison re-entry. "There is a dearth of hope in prison, and Michael is trying to give it to them. Through his books he's created this movement, this kind of, 'You can do it, too.' "

His most widely distributed book, "Inside," published in 2006 by [St. Martin's Press](#), is in its seventh printing. In it, Santos describes how he got by as just about the only inmate who was not either armed with a deadly weapon at all times and/or affiliated with a gang, or paying for protection against sexual predators and sadists.

In the federal prison system, prisoners move from place to place and state to state. Santos has lived in 19 of them, and at every new stop a new prisoner is tested for weakness. Santos' first stop was at a high-security penitentiary in Atlanta that, at the time, was the most violent prison in America.

"My strategy was to minimize my contact with the prison population to avoid violence," says Santos, and it helped that he didn't snitch against his partners in crime.

Inmates are locked down for half the day, and released into the compound for the other half. So at 6 a.m., when the doors unlocked, he'd spring to the track for a 10-mile run. Then he'd go straight to work in a prison office, where he'd stay until 5 p.m., when he would go to class until 8 p.m., when he would go to the prison hospital and volunteer.

Lockdown is at 9 p.m., but Santos got two extra hours by volunteering for suicide watch in the hospital. So the cellblock was quiet at 11 p.m. when he finally returned to his cell for bed. He never ate or watched television with the prison population.

Road to drug trafficking

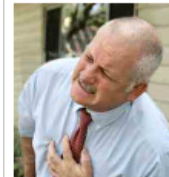
The son of a Cuban immigrant father and a mother of Spanish descent, Santos grew up in a five-bedroom house on 5 acres in Lake Forest Park, a Seattle suburb. In high school he

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played football and was a skier.

"We were a clean-cut athletic family," says his older sister, Julie Santos, a year ahead of Michael in school. "Nothing about our upbringing would lead us to deal drugs."

After graduation, Santos worked for his father's firm, installing street lighting, and helped grow the company, largely through bid rigging and collusion. That gave him a taste for lucre, and he began using company funds to finance cocaine distribution. He made \$100,000 in a day, but he wanted millions, so he moved to Miami to work directly with suppliers.

He says he was never part of the drug culture. Then, as now, he was an enterprising businessman, living in Miami and driving a Porsche with a diamond-faced Rolex on one arm and a South American wife in tight designer clothes on the other. "I was being influenced by movies like 'Scarface' and 'Miami Vice,'" he says.

Santos was 23 when the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) caught up with him in 1987. He was charged with operating a continuing criminal enterprise.

This was during the Reagan-era war on drugs, and examples had to be made. His partners testified against him. The jury returned a guilty verdict on all counts.

As Santos awaited sentencing, he picked up a copy of "Treasury of Philosophy" and started learning about Socrates.

"It was this commitment he had toward serving his term with dignity and honor, and I decided that's what I have to do," Santos recalls telling the judge. "I have to find a way to reconcile with society."

As soon as he got to the penitentiary, his wife divorced him. His father lost his business. His parents moved to Miami to be near him, only to have their marriage collapse.

Stuck to education goals

Amid all this turmoil and danger, Santos stuck to his goals.

"One was to educate myself," he says. "One was to find a way to contribute to society. The third one was to start building a support network of law-abiding citizens who could mentor me."

He got his bachelor's degree from [Mercer University](#) in Atlanta, majoring in human resources management. The graduation ceremony was deep inside the penitentiary, and Julie Santos recalls that her brother was the only graduate to wear a cap and gown.

Santos then got his master's, and he was working toward his doctorate when a warden put a stop to it, he says, by dropping his access to library books sent by the university.

No warden could stop him from writing, though he says some tried, through disciplinary actions and transfers.

"Part of what makes him unique is his ability to network," says Petersilia, the Stanford professor who responded to a letter that Santos sent her and ended up writing to the prison parole board on his behalf. "His reach within the prison to the outside world is unprecedented."

But he was unable to get outside to attend the funeral of his father, who died eight years ago. His mother, [Geri Fierra](#), living in Southern California, "has been emotionally devoted to Michael the entire journey," Julie says.

Missed reunion leads to wife

When the 20th reunion of Shorecrest High School, class of 1982, rolled around, Santos

was in a low-security institution at Fort Dix, N.J., and unable to attend. But Carole Goodwin, who organized the event and had known him since fifth grade, tracked him down through his website.

Divorced, living with two kids in Lake Oswego, Ore., she had been aware of his criminal past but that didn't stop her. "I was drawn to him from the second I saw his picture," she says.

As he puts it, "She went to my website and wrote me a letter. That led to a correspondence and then a romance, and then we got married in a prison visiting room in 2003, at Fort Dix. I still had 11 years to go."

Eleven long years, too. The honeymoon was at the vending machines. There are no conjugal visits in the federal prison system. Other couples find places, but not the new Mrs. Santos.

"I never was willing to take that risk to have some secret two hours in a broom closet somewhere," she says. "That's not what our relationship is built on."

While in prison, Santos used his allocation of phone calls to speculate on the stock of Yahoo and America Online. So he was able to pay for the relocation of Goodwin and her son and daughter, ages 11 and 13.

She'd left Oregon as a homemaker and arrived in New Jersey as a publisher, "helping me bring my books to market," says Santos, who had been compiling the stories of prisoners for whom he did legal research.

In 10 years, she has now moved 22 times, pulling her kids from one school and putting them in another. She's also cobbled together a nursing degree, and is working as an RN in Sonoma and starts graduate school at USF in January.

Meanwhile, Santos has published more than 1 million words, and made between \$300,000 and \$400,000 in royalties and fees. His next book, "Earning Freedom: Conquering a 45-Year Prison Term," is awaiting the last chapter, which began Aug. 13.

That's the day he walked out the door after 9,135 days in federal custody. Carole was waiting with a pizza from a local restaurant.

"I'll never forget the minute that we crossed over from the prison boundaries into the civilian world," says Carole. "It was ... I'm going to cry."

Re-entry to world

Santos went from 10 minutes a day on a prison pay phone to having an iPhone in his hands. He'd never seen one before. He hadn't touched a steering wheel since 1987 or eaten with a metal fork or taken a shower without shower shoes.

The reunion with his wife, while short, amounted to the most time Santos and his wife of 10 years have spent together. "I have to report to a halfway house in three hours," he says, "so I don't have time to stop for anything. I also know that I could take that chance, but I can't afford to do anything to screw that up."

When he is in his room, he is either sleeping or running in place and dropping to do pushups. Otherwise he is happy to chat between 7:30 p.m., when he gets home, and 8:15, when he goes to bed, in order to be up at 3 a.m. answering e-mails before he leaves for work at 6, six days a week.

If he follows all the rules, in February he will transition to home confinement at the pool house in Petaluma, before transitioning to several years of probation. There are more books in him. "Three a year" is the quota he's set.

Petersilia has invited him to lecture her law school class at Stanford, and he's been invited to lecture out of state. But he's not allowed to leave California for a year. That's how he was regrettably unable to attend the 30th reunion of Shorecrest High, just like the 20th. It came and went in August, and Carole didn't make it, either.

"She was picking me up from prison that week," he says with a laugh. "Maybe we'll hit the 50-year reunion."

Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: swighting@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@samwhitingsf](https://twitter.com/samwhitingsf)

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[jdmba](#) 7:37 AM on November 25, 2012

This is the rarest of outcomes, and I think he deserves all the credit in the world. So many high and mighty people bend the laws or treat people unspeakably badly, and then look down their nose at guys like this. Yes, he did bad things, but he seems to have plenty of good in him. As long as he stays on the straight and narrow, I wish him the best. Everyone deserves a second chance.

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[kennon](#) 12:44 AM on November 25, 2012

I enjoyed this article because it illustrates the point that many who are in prison on drug charges had or still have the capacity to contribute to positively to society. Who knows how many potential authors, doctors, leaders, business minds the "War on Drugs" has deprived us

of. I know some really decent people who've made a few poor choices, and ended up in prison, and have been fundamentally changed in a negative manner. If things are as positive as this article portrays them for Mr. Santos then I am glad for him. He is a stronger man than most. I hope I live to see a day when the majority of Americans are ready to deal with the reality that prohibition is a failed policy. It is only through education and rehabilitation that you can curb drug abuse. And I hope someday the majority of Americans realize that it really isn't anyone else's business what a consenting adult does with their own body as long as they have all the facts. Unless one is free to make bad choices they are not really free at all.

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32 replies



thejoker 6:49 AM on November 25, 2012

This story reminds me of "Shawshank Redemption." Goes to show that being active and busy is a good thing in general. It doesn't matter where you are.

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