

I'm still working at trusting people.

Zach Ross

Zach Ross slowly makes his way down a hallway that leads to what looks like an interrogation room. The sound of his ill-fitting plastic slippers, loudly rubbing against the shiny tiled floor, is the only sound in the building.

The dimly lit room's only redeeming feature is a small window that frames beautiful misty and green rolling hills in the background. A more sobering scene is in the foreground: a grassy yard outlined with a tall chain link fence; a long single-file line of young men walk slowly across, watched closely by the guards. There are 6-foot men with big bulging muscles. And there are the puny 4-and-a-half foot boys who look like they should be playing on the monkey bars at an elementary school playground.

Zach is neither.

Dull gray walls spotted with plaster, a black metal desk, and one empty chair awaits Zach's arrival. The sound of the shuffling slippers crescendo and then the flop-haired, crooked-tooth man/boy slinks into the empty chair. He wants to be here. He personally asked for the visit. I abided.

Zach seems used to the drill. He is calm and, regrettably, at home. He looks down at the floor and then out the window; back and forth, rarely catching the eye of the man with the notepad across the 4-foot wide drab desk. His wire-rimmed glasses habitually slip down the bridge of his nose. I tell him my little boy's name is also Zach. He nods.

Eighteen-year-old Zach is in prison.

He won't reveal exactly what got him here. He doesn't have to. I quickly connect the dots. It's safe to say what Zach did to land him in the big house, surrounded by other 12-to-25-year-old offenders also in custody of the Oregon Youth Authority, was serious. Very serious. The facility features more locking doors than one first-time visitor can count. Cameras abound, as do walkie-talkies on the hips and in the hands of beefy staff, announcing the every move of each resident and visitor.

Zach admits to "anger issues" and a tough time growing up. But he quickly fesses up that simple anger doesn't land most people in prison at such a young age. And with that confession, the philosopher — and the artist and poet — begins to unexpectedly emerge.

"My parents did the best they could," Zach says. "But other people, not so good."

Zach was molested by a close family member beginning when he was 10-years-old. He told, but his family didn't listen. The creep continued to violate young Zach a couple of times a week for a year. Eventually they busted the guy, photos of young Zach filled his hard drive. He's in the penitentiary for 10 years. He gets out in two years though, a free man. It

bothers Zach but he won't elaborate.

"I don't want him to come around me and my family members," Zach says, shaking his head side to side.

Zach didn't have much of a chance at a smooth transition into young adulthood. Chronic sexual abuse was followed by a diagnosis of Autism — Asperger's Syndrome to be exact — at 13-years-old. He is beyond intelligent, with near-genius IQ, but socially handicapped, and with not an ounce of trust in humanity.

Despite his ill fortunes as a youth, society expects him to get along and do the right things. But he has struggled, and still struggles, with living up to that expectation.

"I'm still working at trusting people," Zach sighs.

THE DREAM

Zach is looking at transitioning out of this prison. He's excited, he says. And anxious. The real world, or half the real world, awaits his arrival. A half-way house will be his next stop if — big if — he makes all the right decisions and stays out of trouble until his release. He's known to get angry and explode. Serious consequences typically follow and they tend to keep him in custody longer than not.

This young man has big hopes and dreams. He wants to work for the video conglomerate Pokeman when he's older. He'd like to be a video game designer. Pokeman helped him through a tough time in his life, he explains. The characters never left his side. They never talked back. They never yelled. And they always listened to him, Zach says.

He goes on about the videogame.

Clearly, these Japanese characters are quite possibly the best thing that ever happened to Zach as he grew up. Nothing else, animate or inanimate, elicits such adoration as Zach unrolls his life story. It's difficult to write that on my notepad as I glance out the small window, wondering how I would have fared in such a place when just 18.

Zach changes the subject and wants to know if I've read his poetry.

Zach is but one young gay man in the prison system. There are too many others. But he just may be the only one who is a published poet. And that is what not only makes Zach unique, but gives him hope. Poetry keeps him going; keeps him in the game when he might otherwise consider throwing in the towel. Suicide often crosses his mind.

Continues on page 29