
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Journey Behind Bars: Part 1

Canadian Karl Thorson currently resides in a California penitentiary. Emily Beers explains how he got there.

By Emily Beers

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Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

The story of the convict has been told many times before.

Usually it's recounted after the fact, once the former prisoner has proven to the world that he's abandoned his old shady life and reformed himself.

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This isn't quite that story. This is the story of a man who is still in prison today, a man who is in the process of transforming himself. After two and a half years behind bars, he still lives with crippling guilt because of the pain he knows his family endures every day.

The "Oh Fuck" Moment

The night before the day his life changed felt like another ordinary evening. And in a way, it was. He wasn't nervous. His task for the next day was simple. It was just work, after all.

Even on the airplane to Seattle the following day, Karl Thorson kept his lizard-like calmness. The thought of getting caught barely registered on his radar.

He knew what the consequences would be if he were ever caught, but he didn't let his mind go there. He needed money, and that was that.

Nov. 30, 2011, was a cold, crisp day. The sun was shining and things were going smoothly. He was on his way to pick up his rental minivan and would then head north to meet his partner in crime.

Once at the meeting spot, Thorson would transfer a suitcase into his minivan and make his way to the Canadian border. Simple as that.

Thorson knew what it meant to be caught with a suitcase loaded with 45 lb. of cocaine.

By the time he made it to the meeting spot—Everett, Wash.—it was dark outside. It was time to make the suitcase swap. With nerves of steel, Thorson casually took the suitcase of cocaine from his colleague and placed it in the back middle seat of his rental.

Suddenly, Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) vehicles surrounded him; DEA agents jumped out and swarmed the minivans, guns drawn.

"Put your hands up."

"Get on the ground."



Karl and his sister, Erika, before he went to prison.

Thorson—in shock—complied.

As the arrest scene unfolded, Karl started to boil with anger.

Who did this to him? Was he set up by someone who was involved? By someone he knew? Who was to blame? Who made the mistake?

His next thoughts were about his family. He knew how much trouble he was in and how his actions were going to cause serious pain and embarrassment to his family and close friends.

It felt like all the poor decisions he had made throughout his life—all the mistakes—culminated in this one moment.

He knew he couldn't take it back now, and he knew what it meant to be caught with a suitcase loaded with 45 lb. of cocaine.

At 32 years old, he was going to prison. Possibly for a long time.

The first words that popped into his head were simple:

"Oh fuck."

Dreamscape Ranch

It's Easter Sunday in 2013, and Bud and Lea Thorson are enjoying the uncharacteristically sunny and relatively warm weather for the time of year in the interior of British Columbia, Canada.

Courtesy of Lea Thorson



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

Karl's parents run a ranch for retired horses in Knutsford, B.C.

They sit on a deck the size of a small apartment and sip tea while enjoying the beauty of the morning. Their three dogs—Abby, Missy and a golden retriever named Rika—are never far away. Their property—Dreamscape Ranch—has been the retired couple's home for 10 years. It's a quaint 160 acres in Knutsford, a ranchland area outside the city of Kamloops, B.C.

There's no sign of civilization looking out from the Thorson's deck this morning, just their grazing horses.

"We always say this is the best-kept secret, this area of the province," Lea says. "We love it here."

Although the serenity of the place is unmatched, running a ranch isn't an easy task.

"We house retired horses. So they come here to live out the rest of their days," says Lea, who has always been passionate about the animals.

The international students who live on their ranch do most of the work tending to the 33 horses, but Lea loves being involved in the day-to-day happenings. Just yesterday, a

new horse was delivered to Dreamscape. Lea's eyes light up when she talks about it.

The Thorsons wouldn't want to live anywhere else at this point in their lives; they embrace the quiet peace, the wilderness and, of course, the animals. But Bud and Lea aren't as carefree as they would like to be. Their hearts are heavy, as if they lost a child. In some ways, they have.

The day Karl was arrested, Bud and Lea were in Mexico. They didn't hear about their son's arrest right away. And Karl didn't tell them.

"Karl thought he would wait until Christmas to tell us. He didn't want to ruin our Christmas," says Lea, who, prior to living on Dreamscape, was a teacher's assistant. She worked with teens at risk at Sutherland High School in North Vancouver for many years.

But getting arrested trying to smuggle drugs across the border isn't something you can keep secret for very long, especially from your parents. A friend of Bud and Lea's phoned them after reading about Karl's arrest in *The Vancouver Sun* newspaper.

The feelings that came when they discovered their son was being detained in Seattle ran the spectrum: anger, embarrassment, sadness, regret.

"Are we angry? Yes, we are," says Lea, talking two and a half years after her son's arrest. "It has been a lot of hurt."

Getting arrested trying to smuggle drugs across the border isn't something you can keep secret for very long, especially not from your parents.

Karl was charged with possession with intent to distribute cocaine, and he eventually pleaded guilty. He was sentenced to 30 months in prison on June 22, 2012.

Bud and Lea don't make excuses for their son. Of course, he's their son and they love him dearly, but they're still trying to understand and come to terms with why he got involved in drug trafficking. They have their theories.

"It was purely financial," Bud says.

Karl worked in construction but was never able to save much money, and jobs were tough to come by at the time.

"He had credit-card debt. He owed money. He never was able to get ahead of the game," Bud adds.

Plus, Karl was recovering from a tough breakup.

"Karl never said it to me himself, but I know that that breakup cut him right to the marrow," Bud says.



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

Karl's mom, Lea, with one of the retired horses on her ranch.

Journey Part 1 ... (continued)

"He was crazy about that girl," Lea adds. "It just seemed that every place he turned, everything he touched, seemed to turn badly."

A pleasant gust of wind breezes across their property. Rika lets out a subdued bark. Lea reaches down and strokes her on the head.

"Before he was arrested, he was a bit of a sad kind of guy. Kind of a lost soul," Lea says.

"I think he was motivated through desperation," Bud adds.

Bud and Lea don't think desperation is an excuse to do what their son did, but when you're retired parents living on a serene ranch with a ton of time to assess the world after your son gets arrested with 45 lb. of coke, you need to find reasons. They constantly ask themselves where things went so wrong for Karl.

Anger and confusion aside, facing others has often been one of the hardest things they've had to deal with.

"It's hard sometimes when you run into old friends. People talk about their kids, you know. They'll say things like, 'My son so-and-so has become a doctor.' And we have to say, 'Our son is in prison,'" Lea says.

"We only told good friends. It's embarrassing to say," she says, pausing for a moment while holding back tears, "to say your son is in jail for trying to smuggle drugs."

Lea adds: "Normally when people ask, 'How's Karl? Where's Karl?' I lie. I don't tell them. Sometimes I'll say things like, 'He's doing his own thing.'"

It's not as bad for the Thorsons as it used to be, though. The most stinging hurt happened when the story broke publicly. Online newspapers ran stories about Karl's arrest. Below the stories, people posted comments, often hurtful.



Courtesy of Errol Clark

Errol Clark (left) and Karl have been friends since eighth grade.

On Dec. 31, 2011, [one anonymous blogger wrote](#): “I’ve known Karl Thorson almost my whole life, and he’s been a menace his whole life. I was told about this story, and I was asked to ‘Guess who they were talking about.’ Karl was my first guess. Typical. His poor parents.”

When Bud and Lea read comments like that, it cut them deeply.

“Unless you’re a parent, you don’t know the pain,” Lea says.

“It’s a complete nightmare,” Bud adds. “It’s our worst nightmare.”

The Best Friend

Errol Clark remembers the first time he saw Karl. They were in the eighth grade, in the days when leaving the school at lunchtime was a new and exciting novelty. And McDonald’s was the happening place to go.

One day, Errol arrived at McDonald’s to see an altercation that was in the process of unfolding. An older student had allegedly said something offensive about Karl’s sister, Erika. Karl took immediate offense.

“Karl took a lunge at this guy, who was way bigger and way older than him,” Clark said, remembering the chaos that ensued. “He was fearless.”

**“Karl was always a bit of
a shit disturber.”**

—Errol Clark

“He kept telling the guy, ‘You take that back. You take back what you said about my sister ...’ I still remember. After the fight went down, the big guy ended up apologizing,” laughed Clark. “Karl was always a bit of a shit disturber.”

Clark connected with the shit disturber from Day 1.

The two friends went to Argyle Secondary in North Vancouver, a well-to-do area across the harbor from Vancouver itself. They experienced the joys and struggles of high school together—playing sports, socializing, drinking, making mistakes, just doing the things teenagers do.



Courtesy of Errol Clark

Clark (left) and Thorson (center) remained friends after high school but saw each other less often.

“We always related to each other so well. We’d always be the last ones up after a party, talking until 6 o’clock in the morning,” Clark said. “We always had the best conversations. We would talk about life—you know, real-life talks, not just the usual superficial-ness that most people talked about back then.”

He smiled, thinking about the memory.

“I swear my dad liked Karl more than he liked me. Any family event we had, whether it was someone’s birthday or Christmas, he was always welcome,” he added.

Even after high school, Karl and Errol remained close friends. They didn’t always live in the same city, and sometimes life got busy and they didn’t see each other much, but Clark still feels like the two friends know each other as well as anyone does.

“Karl is super protective of the ones he loves, super loyal. But he’s also fearless and doesn’t like authority. He’s a risk taker,” Clark explained. “And it can be a potent combination.”

Clark thinks this “potent combination” is what led Karl to some bad decisions.

“Before Karl was arrested, I could tell he was depressed. He never told me, but I didn’t need to be told. He was eating pizza all the time and living at home with his parents. And he was going through a breakup,” Clark said. “I have known him for 20 years. I didn’t need to be told he was depressed. I could see it.”

"I tried to get him into CrossFit. But he was sinking into a depression and was super out of shape at the time," said Clark, one of the principals of CrossFit Rocky Point in Coquitlam, B.C.

And then it happened: Clark caught wind that his best friend had been arrested south of the border in Washington, where drug laws are much harsher than in Canada. Karl was likely headed to prison for many years.

"When Karl was arrested, I pretty much, well, I cried like I had lost my best friend. It almost felt like he had died. I didn't think I'd see him again until I was an old man," Clark said.

"A lot of people just said, 'What an idiot.' And he was. But I was more sympathetic than that. I knew he was struggling. I knew what was really going on."

Childhood: In Karl's Words

Karl had what you would call a privileged childhood. He had two parents who stayed together, who love him dearly and who put him into all sorts of sports.

His parents are hard-working, honest people. His dad and the rest of his dad's family were respected longshoremen.

"I grew up hearing stories about uncles and family from North and West Vancouver who worked on the docks," Karl said.

Meanwhile, his mother worked part time and stayed at home looking after Karl and Erika.

"She always drove me and the other kids on my sports teams and always volunteered with all of my sports," said Karl, whose plate was often full of athletic endeavors.

At different times in his childhood and adolescence, he was involved in soccer, hockey, baseball, basketball and rugby. When it came to athletic pursuits, Karl was a coachable kid and he worked his butt off.

In school, Karl never found the subjects difficult—when he applied himself.

"But at some point, I started having disagreements with my teachers, and I started to pay less attention to studying," Karl admitted. "I obviously had serious issues with authority pretty early."



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

The wilderness of B.C. gives Karl's parents time to think about why their son went astray.

By high school, Karl started skipping classes and getting into some trouble: drinking, smoking pot and getting into the odd fight.

"I just always seemed to get myself into the middle of things. Usually I was stepping between friends trying to defend someone," Karl said. "For some reason, I just veered off course."

At the same time, though, Karl was a star basketball player. His team was one of the best in the lower mainland and qualified for and played at the AAA provincial championships, the premier high-school tournament in the province.

**"I obviously had serious issues
with authority pretty early."**

—Karl Thorson

And like many teenage boys, Karl had an interest in bodybuilding, following what essentially amounted to a "fuck the legs, let's bench" strength program that focused entirely on gaining upper-body mass.

"By then, most of my friends were involved in drugs somehow. A few of them were selling weed and cocaine as young as 15 or 16," he said. "And for some reason, I got it into my head that the answer to life's problems was making money, making easy money. I was always looking for fast money."

And he quickly discovered a way to do it. At a young age, Karl found himself making quick money.

In 2002, he was charged with trafficking in Canada, but the charges were stayed.

"I had plans to do things differently, but I went about it the wrong way and got lost," Karl said.

And on that night in November, frustrated with how his life was going at the time and driven by a craving for easy money, he decided to take a risk.

"I felt money could solve the issues in my life, so I went back to what I thought I knew," Karl said.



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

***As they wait for Karl to finish his sentence,
Bud and Lea still believe in their son.***

Solitary Confinement

Today, Karl is an inmate at Federal Correctional Institution Lompoc, a low-security facility that houses male inmates north of Los Angeles, Calif. Prior to being transferred to Lompoc, and during his trial, he spent a few months at Seattle's SeaTac, a Federal Detention Center, where he endured a month in solitary confinement.

"One month in solitary confinement doesn't necessarily sound like a long time, but time goes slowly in that room all alone," Karl explained.

Looking back more than two years later, the memory is still clear, and he sometimes goes back to that month in solitary confinement. He wrote in an e-mail:

"I break away that weak shell that is my body. I sweat away the fat in solitary confinement. I leave the mistakes behind me in that cell, and begin to rebuild from scratch.



Emily Beers/CrossFit Journal

Karl's time in solitary confinement was a stark contrast to the open spaces of his home.

This new body hasn't seen the sun yet. It hasn't breathed in the ocean's air; it hasn't felt the rain from the city that I call home."

Although Karl was allowed one book with him, there was little to do to pass the time. There were no sounds, and the only voice was the one in his head. So to avoid staying in his head every waking minute of every day, Karl started to focus on his physical self.

He began doing burpees, push-ups, squats and any other movement he could think of that required just his body and his will.

When he was released from solitary confinement, he felt like a new person. Two and a half years later, Karl reflected in an email on his first moments out of solitary:

"My new body first felt a sun that was closer to me, breathed a new ocean's air, and felt a warmer kind of rain.

I was motivated by visions of training in a CrossFit gym back home. In those visions, my body was strong; I could feel the force it was capable of; I knew its potential.

Intensity has become my preparation. Variety my trainer. Functionality my goal."

With a new body, Karl also began to transform his mind, his way of thinking.

"You start to appreciate the things you have, instead of my old life where my focus was on the things I don't have," he said.

So he focused on things like his body, his mind and simple pleasures like music.

"It's hard to describe how amazing music sounds after so long of silence," he said.

With this new perspective on life, Karl was released from solitary confinement and mentally prepared for the challenge of living two and a half years behind bars in the American prison system. He committed himself to a period of both healing and bettering himself.

The Karl They Know

More than two years later, Bud and Lea still remember exactly what Karl looked like in December 2011, when they went to Seattle to visit their son where he was being detained.

"He was all stressed out. He was all puffy. He looked awful," Lea says. "And we had to keep a certain distance from him. It felt like it wasn't really our Karl."

She takes a sip of tea and a deep breath.

"He's not a bad person. He did a stupid thing," she says, her eyes beginning to water.

She wipes a tear and continues: "He just didn't think."

**"He really wants to make a
change in his life."**

—Lea Thorson

Bud puts his hand on Lea's shoulder sympathetically.

"He just felt trapped and cornered," Bud says.

Lea adds: "He said he wants to make it up to us. He doesn't need to do that. We just want him to be happy. And to be the person we know he can be At the trial, Karl said, 'I made a horrible mistake.' Then he told us, 'I'm going to use this time as much as possible to move on and get going with my life.' He's trying to be as positive as possible."

Bud and Lea thoroughly believe their son.

"He really wants to make a change in his life," Lea explains.

"He knows what he's done," Bud says.

"I just want him home. Safe and sound," Lea says, before beginning to recount an old memory, a memory she feels represents who her son really is, who her son would like to be.

"I remember one time, when Karl was a teenager, a mom at my high school came up to me and said, 'Your son is the most fabulous kid.' And I asked why," Lea begins.

"I guess someone had been picking on her daughter—a heavysset girl—and Karl didn't even know this girl, but he knew it was wrong. And he stepped in and defended her Karl believes things happen for a reason, and I try every day to believe this. It gives us hope," she says.

Bud looks up from stroking Rika, the golden retriever, and nods.

"It's just really a sad thing. He's a decent man, so respectful to older people," he says.

"He's an old soul," Lea adds before pulling out an old picture of Karl at the age of 12.

She holds it up and beams.

"When you look at this picture—at his face, at his eyes—you can see he's a kind soul," she says. "You can just see it."

Part 2 of this story will take a look at Karl's physical and emotional journey over two and a half years at Lompoc Prison. He is set to be released in February or March of 2014.



About the Author

Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor. She competed in the CrossFit Games in 2011 on CrossFit Vancouver's team, and she finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012. In 2013, she finished second in the Open in Canada West.