

He's a large White man with an eye patch and tattoos from his neck to his feet. He approaches the group of small, young Black man slowly, respectfully.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asks, and they look at each other before they nod.

He steps forward and tells them his story, a shorter version of this story he tells me.

"My mother came from a middle-class life, but she had a big drug habit," he says. "She taught me how to sell drugs, pick locks and steal. The first time I got shot at was with my mom. I was thirteen."

Thomas Engelmann grew up with his abusive mother and his step-father in Jackson, Mississippi, hanging out with outlaw biker gangs, learning that obeying the law was optional unless you got caught, sleeping in drug houses as a child, listening to the adults talk about the Aryan Brotherhood "like they were Santa Claus, like some mythical beings you only heard about and hardly ever met."

By the time he was arrested for robbing a gas station, at 19 years old, he'd been using drugs for years. "Whatever was around," he says. "Hallucinogens were my drug of choice. They don't have addictive qualities or withdrawal symptoms, and they have a more enlightening mindset. They helped me through a lot of trauma in my life."

He spent his first two years in prison working out so he'd be fit enough to join the white supremacist gang the Aryan Nation when he was released. Members of the Aryan Brotherhood of Mississippi, a violent white supremacist prison gang, were watching. They invited him to join them.

Thomas hesitated. He wasn't a white supremacist. He'd grown up with African American friends. And he certainly didn't need to join for safety.

But he had very little support from outside the prison and he longed for the comfort of being in a community. And he still had six years of his sentence left to serve.

"I knew what kind of people they were and if I joined it would be a constant battle," he says. "But I also knew if I could get respect and rank, I could do things my way." His way was to keep the peace, both within the Brotherhood and between them and the other gangs.

He said yes. "I took the Brothers as family in my heart," he says.

Most people who join the Brotherhood aren't in it for the rhetoric or the beliefs, he says. Ninety to 95 percent of them aren't even racist. Most join because, like Thomas, they see it as family, a community where they're accepted. Prospects are taught to use hate as a constant fuel by recruiters who are trained to condition them into what the Aryan Brotherhood of Mississippi demanded.

Other people join because they're attracted to the Brotherhood's racketeering activities, including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, assault, money laundering, prostitution, drug and firearms trafficking.

"The Brotherhood is a drug cartel," Thomas says. "It had a tight relationship with the Mexican Mafia and many other criminal organizations. The drugs transfer hands at the border and makes its way to the streets."

He chose the most violent, hardcore gang in the prison to prove a point. The thought triggers him and he's the old Thomas of his Brotherhood days. "If you fuck with me, I'm willing to die and take as many of them with me as I can," he says. "That fear alone is enough to stop them."

Surprisingly, the Brotherhood has a formal constitution, with a structure and laws and bylaws. As part of his year-long initiation, or prospectship, he memorized all 31 pages.

The second part of the prospectship is similar to basic training in the military, where members try to break down the prospects mentally, physically and emotionally, and rebuild them into Brothers who would do anything for the Brotherhood and each other.

In one test, he was given a paper tattoo with white supremacy symbols on it and told to not to let it go. At any time of day or night, for the entire year, Brothers would beat him, trying to take it from him. If he'd let go, he would have failed.

"It's a love-hate thing," he says. "There's a lot of bonding."

Eighty to 90 percent of the prospects don't make it. "It breaks the wrong people, but the right people can make it and be something," he says.

Thomas boxed up his emotions. He learned to talk like a racist. He beat people up when they didn't pay their debts. By the time he was released from prison, he was a captain, running the compound.

"I got elevated by doing violent missions," he says. "But I was also a long-term player and I looked at the macro view. I was the one who came up with things that could make the Brotherhood more money and I was smart about communications."

Eventually, though, while he was doing his best to keep the peace when members of the Brotherhood competed for power and when other gangs tried to take over the Brotherhood's drug routes, his inner conflicts spilled over.

"I'd pretended to be someone for so long that I became that person," he says. "I realized when it happened. I cried so hard. It meant I had lost what little bit of innocence I had."

He resolved to leave the Brotherhood as soon as he was released. And he did. He disappeared. He used the work ethic and the skills he'd learned inside the prison, tiling, welding broken cell doors, doing maintenance, and he found work.

He bought a house that bordered two lakes after marrying his first wife. When that marriage failed, he relapsed and rejoined the Brotherhood. As he hit rock bottom, he tried to kill himself by overdosing on meth.

"You can't kill yourself with meth anymore," he says. "The formula has changed. You just gain a very heavy addiction."

He tried to leave the Brotherhood, and meth, again and again. The last time, two young prospects shot him in the head with a .45-caliber handgun at point-blank range as he was driving on the interstate. He's blind in one eye and virtually blind in the other.

"Getting shot was the best fucking thing that ever happened to me," he says, reverting again to

the old Thomas. He spent five days unconscious in neuro intensive care. As he recovered in the hospital, he listened to Christian music, often with the woman who is his soul mate, he says, and who later became his wife.

One day, he was watching a documentary on Netflix about the international nonprofit organization Life After Hate, which was founded by former white supremacists and helps people leave violent far-right gangs. He contacted them.

They helped him heal and he began to volunteer with them. Now he's part of the team on one of their programs, ExitUSA, and one of the first contacts for people who want to get out of white supremacist gangs. He's also teaching classes with Life After Hate, is a public speaker, and is working on a degree in counseling and human services.

"God is providing ways for me to be a better person," Thomas says. "I'm a better person today than I was yesterday. I'm a better person this week than I was last week. I'm a better person this month than I was last month."

It hasn't been easy.

"Crime was always a big part of my life," he says. "It's been hard to exit that role and the money I had. I'm fighting to be someone society deems as being worthy. That's always there."

It's also been hard to leave his former life as a tattoo artist and certifications in eight trades, none of which he can practice because he's blind. "I still reference myself to them," he says.

He's still discovering who he is, who he could be, even what he likes doing for fun. He's becoming someone he likes, he says. He loves the water and nature.

"My son told me he's proud of me now and that makes me really happy," Thomas says. "I don't want to leave a legacy of being a drug dealer or a white supremacist."

That dehumanization is what Life After Hate fights against. When people want to leave these groups and they feel rejected by society, they'll go back and be more violent.

"We all come from different things and we all have different stories," Thomas says. "It just means we're going off of what we know. Some of us need help behaving differently. For the people who want out, compassion should be the first thing we give them. If hate leads to hate, then compassion leads to compassion."