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Dennis Martinez (center)

LEAVING A LASTING LEGACY

Former World Skateboarding Champion Dennis Martinez Is **Off The Streets** for Good

words by: Ramon Gonzeles

N For those unfamiliar with the history of skateboarding, the name Dennis Martinez wouldn't ring much of a bell. For the names grabbing headlines and magazine covers now, Dennis Martinez remains one of the sports most formidable personalities and an undeniable influence. During the birth of modern skateboarding, Martinez was shredding and would not only help revolutionize the sport, but he would cement incredible success before he could legally buy a beer. Between sponsorships, demos all over the country, fame, fortune, and success, Martinez would fall victim to the clutches of addiction. His story would go from bowls and skate decks, to prison bars, hospital beds, drug dens, guns, and despair. In 1996, Martinez would begin his road to redemption and has not looked back since. As he begins a new television show following convicts looking to make good, his story reminds us all that it is never too late to make a change.

Tell me about your early years on a skateboard. It was more than skating, you were one of the few guys that not only watched it grow, but helped make it a lifestyle, not just a hobby. How did you get involved in skateboarding?

During the early years skating was true fun, before it got serious and turned into a business. Skateboarding back then was more like a family, team comradierie. Team Bahne had practice every week and you couldn't miss it. We took it seriously. One early summer coming home from summer school I saw this dude riding a skateboard doing a handstand. That was something that floored me. I wanted that. Even though I didn't invent the sport, I help developed it with so many great skaters who loved the sport like me. From steel wheels to clay to urethane,

from skinny boards to fat boards, that was the era that launched skateboarding.

Before you were even out of high school you were buying cars in cash and paying a full year's worth of rent on your own apartment. Do you think had the success not come so fast that maybe life would have been different for you?

Being at such a young age, focused, with this unstoppable attitude, nothing was going to stop me. When I found out that you could get paid for something that you'd do for free...It was on. The trick was to get as many sponsors paying you, magazine photos, commercials, ecetera. Things could of turned out differently had I had real friends back in the day tell me the truth about drugs. I'm not blaming

anybody but myself, but I know that things might of been different if I wasn't such a fool. Seeing my peers, the lifestyle, I wanted that at any cost. But young and dumb led me down a path of hell.

You talk about how drug use for you started casually, but it would later consume your life. Were there ever any moments where you thought, this is starting to get out of hand?

Dope at first was never a thought until I started skating. Being around it, seeing the cool guys (get high), I wanted to fit in. Peer-pressure was all around me, the best of the best. When I started to need massive amounts to go on a trip, when I couldn't even show up at demos because I was to high to qualify, that's when I began to see that my

life was taking a turn for the worst. I didn't care. Then the needle came into my life and I married it; loved it so much that it became my life.

I have read interviews where you talk about having to compete high. Did people around you know that at the time? Were you high when you won the world championship?

Look EVERYONE was getting high. Well a few smart ones weren't, like Stacy Peralta. Competing high was the in thing, made you have no fear. Sometimes it got so bad that we would miss the contest. I watched World Champion Bruce Logan be contained to a hotel room because he was so high. But I'm so proud of Bruce now, a true champion because he overcame the addiction. I never skated sober during a contest, ever. Never skated sober, period. Had to have it silly rabbit, I was out of control.

A pivotal story in your life seems to be the one where you sold your World Championship trophy for \$500 dollars worth of dope. When you realized what you did, when did the regret set in? What was going through your mind?

I think back a lot on my history I sold for the dope. Anger ran through my mind for being so stupid and controlled by a substance. I always say, nobody ever stole my crown but a powdery white substance and a piece of plastic with metal on the end. My Championship trophy deemed priceless, I put a price on it. Today I ask people how much are you worth? Priceless.

You turned from selling your personal treasures to stealing and committing crimes to feed your addiction. Can you tell me about the first crime you committed? What was going through your head? How did you feel after you did it?

Touchy subject because I've committed so many crimes and now as I look back, I'm truly ashamed. Started off stealing bikes, then cars, then jewelry, then guns, then well, let's stop there. Here's how it goes. I had to rob to get the money, to get the dope, to get the needle, to get the hotel room, to get the girl - The bigger the crime, the bigger the high, the bigger the rush.

People say change happens only when it HAS to; only when someone hits rock bottom. What was that moment for you? What happened in 1996 that made you say, "I'm done."

Change only happens when you change. Talk of change is only talk. In 1996, I looked in the mirror and was honest with myself. I said who am I? What am I? I was a junkie and a criminal. I hit rock bottom so many times but this one last run spooked me. I thought I killed someone. I'd been up for weeks, wasn't in my right mind. One right decision changed my life forever as did one wrong choice destroyed it. Best choice I ever made was giving my life to Christ. I'm not ashamed. I have life today because of Him.

After being involved in the film D.O.P.E. (Death or Prison Eventually), what kind of reaction did you receive? Did people, fans look at you differently?



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Dennis Martinez

D.O.P.E. was created by a group of people who believed in the project. Michael Clifford, Chris Ahrens of Risen Magazine did a great job writing it. BFC did a great job filming it and many great editors. The best part for me though is Bruce Logan, Jay Adams, Christian Hosoi, Rodney Mullen, and my family and everyone in it. The story is great, soundtrack is off the chart, with a great ending. People did look at me differently. A lot of people didn't know about my life when I became a Christian. I didn't boast about myself. I told the truth. The people in it told a true story. Its been a great tool to help people, to give hope.

You have developed a reality show called Off The Street that chronicles what happens as inmates hit the streets after doing time. How did the idea for the show develop?

Off The Street was written to raise funds to help convicts, drug addicts, alcoholics who had no money to pay for vital services. We use the very thing society calls the “ain't gonna amount to nothing” outcasts to win back what was stolen. Kinda like the snake venom that is used to make the antidote. Not just a reality show, OTS is a real working diversion program reaching the youth.

The statistics show that people return to jail instead of get rehabilitated. Does that weight ever make going into work difficult?

NO. I love what I do because early on my desire was to give back. I started my little brother at the age of 9, getting him high. Thinking it was funny, not knowing that for the next 30 years he would struggle with drug addictions and crime. My little brother went to prison 2 times. My best friend Paul Dornberg is doing 678 years. We were doing crime together at one time. These guys coming from prison and the streets are priceless. Seeing them get their lives back, get their wives back, get their children back and never go back to prison is worth every moment. I'm the richest man in the world.

Do you feel like the system is failing? You have seen and been through it first hand. Do you think the correctional system is lacking in the correction aspect?

Look everyone wants to blame someone. It starts first with the individual. The system has failed because man has failed. God's way has always been the right way. But I work with the prison systems, police, gang commission, sheriffs, parole board, probation and there is a lot of unreal people who really care. So as a team we are winning.

Considering that skateboarding introduced you to the side of life that nearly killed you, do you miss it? Do you still consider yourself a skater?

Skateboarding didn't kill me, Dennis Martinez did. Dope didn't kill me, Dennis Martinez did. I am and always will be a skater, even if I don't skate all the time. I skate in the prisons. To them I'm still a champion.

For athletes, legacy is always important. What do you want your legacy to be both as an athlete and as a man?

As a skater, I was known as an all around skater. Not too many skaters can do all around; I mean really do great all around. Some are only great on half pipes but no good in pools. Some are great on the street but no good in freestyle. As a man, I want to be remembered as an obedient man of God. Helping people make it in life is what I want to be remembered by, an all around good guy.

If you had to go back and do it all over again...the highs of being the best in the world in the bowl, the thrill of competition, the historical times of the Z-Boys era changing skateboarding, would you?

Heck yeah! I'd do it right, no dope, own my own company, be a Christian, and the best role model. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul? ■