

A linebacker's lesson in forgiveness

Ex-CFLer Orlando Bowen pens letter to two officers who he says brutally beat him

Laura Kane
STAFF REPORTER

With his face pressed into the pavement, blood gushing from his forehead and the taste of asphalt in his mouth, Orlando Bowen thought he was about to die.

The CFL linebacker had been out celebrating a new contract on March 26, 2004, when he says he was savagely beaten by two plainclothes Peel police officers. The officers then planted drugs on him, he says, and charged him with assaulting police and possessing cocaine.

Bowen was acquitted after one of the officers was arrested for cocaine trafficking. But he was forced to retire early due to a concussion he suffered during the beating, and the ordeal nearly destroyed his reputation and many of his friendships.

Ten years later, he wants the officers to know he forgives them.

"This may sound very strange but in this game of life, we are on the same team," Bowen wrote in an open letter addressed to the officers this week.

"I want to courageously express the fact that I am thankful, grateful and forever in debt to you for this experience, as it has forever changed my life. It has made me a better father, husband, brother, son and a better human being."

Now 38, Bowen is a motivational speaker and a father of three who lives in Brampton. The 6'2, 235-lb. former Toronto Argonaut is the kind of guy who gives bear hugs to strangers and thanks them for "sharing their gifts with the world."

But when asked about how he felt a decade ago, lying on the asphalt waiting to die, he bows his head and his eyes darken.

"In that moment, knowing my life was about to end, I'm thinking, 'I didn't give everything I had to make a difference. There's more I could've done,'" he says.

"If I'm able to live, I want to see my family again. I want to serve."

It all began, he says, when he was standing by his car talking on his cellphone outside a Mississauga nightclub. Two men approached him and asked for drugs. When Bowen said no, the men persisted, he says.

One grabbed his arm and Bowen, taken by surprise, broke free and began to run away. Then one of the men yelled, "Stop or I'll shoot!"

He says that was the moment he realized the men were police. He stopped, and the officers punched and kicked him until he fell to the ground, he says. Then he was handcuffed and thrown in the back of a police cruiser.

"It was surreal. No one was telling me what was going on," he says. "I was hopeful there would be resolution. I thought one of them would say, 'OK, we made a mistake, sorry.'"

Instead, he was taken to jail. While he sat in a holding cell, his face swollen and bloody, a passing officer recognized him.

Bowen had taught racial-sensitivity training to the Peel police just weeks before.

In fact Bowen, who played for the Hamilton Tiger-Cats at the time, had a perfect record of community service in Peel. He had recently partnered with police to teach youth about staying away from drugs and gangs.

So when he learned he had been



Orlando Bowen says he was assaulted by two Peel police officers who then planted drugs on him.



Police officer Sheldon Cook was charged with drug possession.

charged with assaulting police and possessing cocaine, he was stunned. He contends that he was searched without cause and a 17 gram bag of cocaine was planted on him.

Remarkably, he never felt angry at the officers, Constables Sheldon Cook and Grant Gervais, even when he heard them testify in court that he dropped the drugs and assaulted them while trying to flee.

"My heart sank. I felt sorry for them," he recalls. "To me, it was a realization that something must have happened at some point in their lives where they were broken. Hurt people hurt other people."

In late 2005, a judge acquitted Bowen of all charges after Cook, one of the arresting officers, was himself charged with drug possession and drug trafficking. Justice Ford Clements called the evidence of the two officers "incredible and unworthy of belief."

Cook has since been convicted and is appealing the decision.

Bowen later filed a \$14-million lawsuit against Peel police, which was settled out of court. The suit claimed the officers fabricated evidence and that the attack on Bowen was "motivated by anti-Black racism," and continued with a "malicious prosecution."

None of the allegations were ever proven in court.

Incredibly, Bowen, a native of Montego Bay, Jamaica, is grateful for the experience and even thankful to the officers.

He believes the ordeal made him a better man — someone who "can fully understand what it means to feel alone, broken and to feel like the weight of the world is on their shoulders," he wrote in his letter to Cook and Gervais.

"More importantly, someone who truly values the incomparable significance of precious time spent with loved ones . . . and time spent trying to make a difference in the lives of others," he added.

The Star sent the letter to Cook through his lawyer, Marie Henein. He replied in an email Friday. "At this time I would respectfully have to decline any comment," he wrote.



Bowen now works with an organization that empowers youth to become leaders through sports and workshops.

> EXCERPT FROM BOWEN'S LETTER TO SHELDON COOK AND GRANT GERVAIS

To my brothers Sheldon and Grant, life is a game . . . and we can win this thing. I come to you humbled and broken, yet with a calming peace.

I apologize for blaming you for my feelings of anger, disappointment and mal intent towards you, towards life and towards the system during this ordeal.

I know that this had happened for a reason and that the reason would be revealed to me in time but I began feeling sad, angry, resentful and impatient and that is not who I am.

This may sound very strange but in this game of life, we are on the same team. I want to courageously express the fact that I am thankful,

grateful and forever in debt to you for this experience as it has forever changed my life. It has made me a better father; husband, brother, son and a better human being. Someone who can fully understand what it means to feel alone, broken and to feel like the weight of the world is on their shoulders.

More importantly, someone who truly values the incomparable significance of precious time spent with loved ones, time meeting new family members and time spent trying to make a difference in the lives of others and in this world by loving people unconditionally. I love you guys unconditionally, wholeheartedly and I embrace you with every fibre of my being, with

strength that is much greater than anything I could personally bring to the table, divine strength . . . I pray that you feel love like you have never felt before, love deeper than you thought were possible. I pray for your strength to deal with your pain. Please know that you are forgiven 100% and loved 99% (I'm working on that last 1 percent today). We, through this experience, have a tremendous opportunity to change lives and I am grateful for that and embrace that. So please know that there is someone out there that cares about you, loves you and wants the best for you and your families . . . I want you to know that I play this game of life for you.

When asked to forward the letter to Gervais, Peel police spokesman Staff Sgt. Dan Richardson said the department wouldn't be responding to that request. Gervais is now a sergeant and received a commendation for his service in 2011.

But Bowen says he didn't write the letter expecting to get anything in return. He just thought it might have a positive impact on the officers.

"I put it out there in the hopes that it could help them in some way. At

least they'll know there's someone out there praying for them and wants the best for them and their families," he says.

Now, Bowen is executive director of One Voice, One Team, which empowers youth to become leaders through sports, workshops and other activities.

On April 12, he will receive the 2014 Harry Jerome Award for community service at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre.

While many in his position would harbour anger toward the officers, Bowen says he has more important things to focus on.

"We're losing young people all the time. Do I have time to channel energy into anger toward individuals when there are young people dying every day?" he asks, his voice rising.

"I don't have time to be angry at the officers. There's too much work to be done."

With files from the Mississauga News