

Hardy, Otis: Stars in the Sky ^[1]

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Otis Hardy: Stars in the Sky

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 5/14/2000. Copyrighted.
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When I interviewed Otis Hardy last year, he was the pastry chef and baker at the Executive Mansion in Raleigh. He was also serving two life sentences at the Wake Correctional Center. He had been in prison for the last 17 years. Convicted for armed robbery, "Big O" discovered his genius for baking in a prison job. Together, his baking talents and exemplary behavior led him to the pinnacle of jobs performed by inmates in state government - work at the governor's mansion.

Recently paroled, Hardy hopes that he will one day have the opportunity to work with troubled youths. "There's a lot of young men who don't have any idea what this side of the world looks like, " he told me.

"If a man has never made a mess of his life, I don't believe he can have a message for them. I made a mess, but I got a message."

I suspect that he has a message for us all.

In Otis Hardy's words:

I got arrested in June of 1979. They charged me with six or seven counts of armed robbery. Before I went to prison, they let me talk to my wife. She was crying. I told her that I'd be home in a few years. I really fooled myself into believing that. They sent me to Central Prison. The first day, I was eating a meatloaf dinner, and I saw a man get stabbed, get killed. I don't eat meatloaf no more. A week later, on a Sunday, I saw another man get stabbed in the kitchen and killed. I saw a n... You have to learn quickly how to survive in that environment. Death loomed in there. I had to learn how to survive, how to get along with people, how to keep my mouth shut. It was the devil's den. I learned quickly that you walk lightly among... When I came to Central Prison, I discovered that I was empty on the inside, but I looked good from the outside. It's like baking a loaf of bread. If you cook bread from the outside in, the crust will look nice, but the inside will be mushy. That's th... All my life I had only been working on the outward appearance. So I had started being enticed. I had gotten involved in criminal activities. I had gotten involved in loose living. My resources dwindled, so I had had to rely on getting money any... I was never hooked on drugs: I was hooked on something worse than drugs, and that was being something that I wasn't. I had started robbing. I had stolen some money, and it got good to me. So I stole some more money. So it got better to... I stayed in Central Prison for four years. Then they sent me to the farm: Odum Farm, in Tillery, North Carolina. Worse than Central Prison. They raise corn, potatoes, cotton, everything in the world. They put me in the fields, then I became the... I was blessed to go to the kitchen. I was taught how to bake by a man named Billy Rose. A fine man. He taught me how to bake, and from then on I was blessed with a gift, the gift of baking. I never thought I had it before! I found out that in baking, as in anything else, the more you like something, the better a job you're going to do. I love baking. I love putting things together and seeing what happens. I enjoy working with the bare necessities, and I can improvise... I stayed at Odum Farm from 1983 to 1992. They moved me to Johnston County. I worked there about 30 days and went to Asheboro. I worked in Asheboro in the kitchen as well as the canteen. Then they moved me to Caswell. Everywhere I... I went to Reidsville, then back to Tillery. One day, they told me, "We got a letter from the governor's mansion. They want you to come and bake for the governor!" That knocked me off my feet! They had heard about my baking skills. I had hea... I'm the only baker at the governor's mansion. One of my specialties is pecan diamonds. A pecan diamond is like a pecan pie, but with no eggs, made with honey and brown sugar. We cut it into diamond strips. Key lime pie is another specialt... I make all kinds of yeast breads, white rolls, Italian bread, sourdough bread, any kind of bread. We do everything from scratch. Another of our specialties is biscuits. I only do biscuits on special occasions - good ol' country biscuits! I'll never forget the first day that I went to the governor's mansion: July 1st, 1996. When I got in the car to ride up there, I rode in the front seat. I hadn't rode in a car in 15 years! In the front seat of a car! With no shackles! All I've been doing al... That day I walked out of that gate at 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, with no shackles on, and I saw stars in the sky. That was the most momentous time in my life, the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

This is an excerpt from the "[Listening for a change](#) ^[3]" project of the [Southern Oral History Program](#) ^[4] at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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