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# Aspiring rapper, 'Pierre the Truth' uses voice to laud life's turnaround in Mental Health Court



**Melissa E. Holsman**

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STUART — By the time Max Pierre turned 18, he was running the streets in Boynton Beach making a name for himself as a burglar who'd break into cars and steal what he found.

That was 2018, when Pierre was arrested at least seven times in Palm Beach County and once in Martin County, mostly for robbing from vehicles or getting caught riding in stolen cars.

He made headlines in June 2018 when Boynton Beach police connected him and five other teens, the youngest age 13, to a string of car burglaries.



In November that year, Martin County sheriff's deputies arrested him on charges related to stealing a gun from a car four months earlier in Tequesta. One felony arrest involved allegations of sexual battery, but Palm Beach County prosecutors quickly dismissed the charge, records show.

Few people then, including Pierre, expected him to end up anywhere but in prison, or worse.

Police reports show when he got caught burglarizing cars, he repeatedly told officers he was searching for a way to buy food.

"I was looking for things to survive because that's what I knew," he said in an interview. "I'm 18, I'm starving. It was so bad to a point every night, the train would come by, I just wanted to kill myself."

Pierre had no parents; his mother was deported to Haiti when he was a child and he never knew his father. Other relatives, aunts, an uncle and sister, mostly "spoke down on him," he said.

None could provide him with a home, he said.



As a teenager, he hung with criminals he thought were his friends. But he wasn't like them, he said. He knew it in his heart.

"I'm following them, but at the same time, I know I'm different from them," Pierre said. "This is not who you are,' that's what I always felt when I was out there. I still get flashbacks of what I did and sometimes, I cry about it."

He cried, too, then, over memories as a small boy, being happy in church with his maternal grandmother, singing, making music and attending school.

## **Incompetent to proceed**

Today, the 21-year-old Stuart resident, who's been diagnosed with an intellectual disability, lives in a group home, is six months sober, has two part-time jobs and literally sings about his now-stable life every chance he gets.



Pierre's new path, which includes prescribed medication, therapy, mandatory drug testing and lots of rules to follow, is thanks to his ongoing participation in Martin County's Mental Health Court, and a devoted court-ordered support team.

Pierre was transferred into Mental Health Court after a Martin County judge ordered he be evaluated and later ruled that because of an intellectual disability, he was incompetent to proceed to trial, according to Assistant Public Defender Katharine Alonzo.

An intellectual disability is defined by Florida law as having an IQ of 70 or below prior to the age of 18, said Alonzo, a diversion court supervisor for Martin, St. Lucie, Okeechobee and Indian River counties.





“People who have intellectual disabilities, it adds a whole other layer of complexity and issues,” she noted, “because you have understanding and comprehension issues.”

Yuri Parraga, Pierre’s Mental Health Court case manager, said in addition to an intellectual disability, he was diagnosed with Adult Attention Deficit Disorder and has an extensive history of trauma.

### **“Pierre the Truth”**

It wasn’t long, though, before Parraga — who was key to getting Pierre’s court-ordered supervision transferred to Stuart from Palm Beach County’s Mental

Health Court — realized her client was an aspiring rapper with a songwriting and singing talent never before tapped in any meaningful way.

So, when he showed Parraga a self-produced video of him playing piano and harmonizing, she urged him to create a song about his newfound life.



“He took it very seriously and then one day he sends me this audio and I was like, ‘oh, my God,’” Parraga said. “I knew it was him singing because our names are there.”

What he produced, it turned out, has captivated all who hear it, which Parraga and others dubbed “an astounding” hip hop tune featuring lyrics Pierre rapped freestyle to a soundtrack selected from an online music production company.

Calling himself “Pierre the Truth,” his debut music track, “Support Team,” has since been sent around to dozens of prosecutors, court personnel, mental health professionals and was played in court before Martin County Judge Jennifer Alcorta Waters, who oversees his progress in Mental Health Court.



Since then, the positive reactions to his lyrics and musical talent just keep coming, Pierre said.

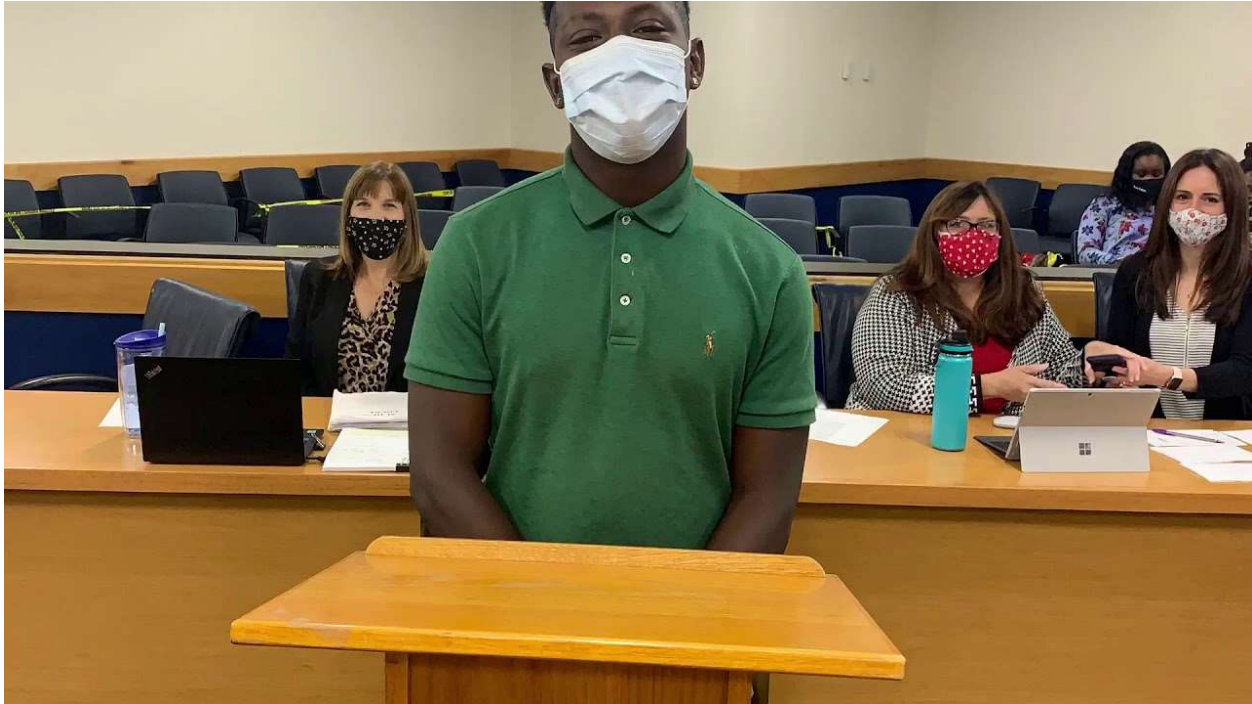
*“I put my heart in the cage, I’m not walking away; we’re so close yet so far,” he sings. “I’m reaching out to your hands, only you understand; we’re so close yet so far.”*

*“Judge Waters always tells me never give up, Yuri always used to tell me I believe in you, I see the best in you, no matter what you go through, I’m always here for you.*

*“So, call me anytime; you’re always on my mind, I’m trying to see you do good. I’m trying to see you precede, I’m trying to see you succeed.”*

When Pierre came to Stuart last year and Parraga arranged stabilizing behavior treatment, medications, housing and counseling, he “felt like his life was actually going to change,” she said.

“This is what he was feeling and he wanted to put it in a song.”



*“Me and the support team, we’re trying to see you make it, to have a better life; so you can make it right ‘cause I don’t want to give up now ... No more falling now ‘cause I can see it now. So much good people around me, I can be it now.”*

*“The old me is calling but I’m not picking up and I’m not messing up. This opportunity this court system has given to me, yeah, they see the best in me, and they believe in me.*

*“A new beginning in your life, so fix it right, yeah. Believe me, make it right. I owe apologies for the things that I’ve done but it doesn’t mean to give up. Only got one shot, to hit the side clock and hit the spotlight to always make it right...”*

Now, Pierre hopes to use his songwriting and voice to express humility, a message of gratitude, and inspire others who, like him, were once hungry, homeless and hopeless, overtaken by mental health issues.

“Nobody expects to go to court and have all that energy, that good happiness, that inspiration,” he said. “That’s thanks; that’s love.”



The reaction to “Support Team” has been exciting but unexpected, he said.



“When you’ve been a nobody, an outcast, you don't expect people to like your stuff,” he said. “Yuri told me to make a song about court, and I was like, OK, I’m going to call it ‘Support Team.’”

“I got the beat, and I heard it inside me, ‘put your heart in a cage’ and I was like, dang, this is it. And then I just spoke whatever was going through my heart.”

He used his iPhone and the Garage Band app to create the track.

“I had to teach myself the sound, the sound effects, all of it,” he said. “I can make things sound so good, it's just unbelievable.”

## **Mental Health Court**

Michelle Derrico, a social worker with the Public Defender's client services office, said Pierre's song proves many people with mental health or intellectual disabilities have hidden talents, but often feel "nobody will appreciate" them.

"The whole intention of Mental Health Court," she said, "is to take those individuals and say, 'we're here for them to fill that gap or that need.'"



Alonzo agreed.

The purpose of Mental Health Court, she said, is to provide people charged with a crime diagnosed with mental health and intellectual disabilities with a stable environment, treatment, housing and more.

Before Mental Health Court first began on the Treasure Coast in 2006, Alonzo said if a person was judged to be incompetent to proceed, "there were no real options except for the state to drop the charges."

“It was a rotating door,” she said. “Somebody would commit a crime, be found incompetent, charges were dropped, they were released, and they’d get arrested again.”

Solve key issues of food, housing, structure and support, and people like Pierre can begin to thrive, added Parraga.

“Having a support system, a team of people who are trying to see him succeed, he’s never had that,” she said.



And while he can’t currently be prosecuted, Parraga noted that if a court within a five-year deadline rules Pierre has been restored to competency, he could be returned to Palm Beach County to face pending felony charges of grand theft of a vehicle and two counts of burglary of a conveyance.

But that can be avoided, she said, if Pierre successfully graduates from Mental Health Court in Martin and Palm Beach counties. His Palm Beach cases

were transferred to the Mental Health Court there, after he was ruled incompetent to proceed.

## **'Nice kid,' tough life**

Bill Tome, a former Boynton Beach police officer who also worked as a school resource officer, first met Pierre when he was around age 15, attending Boynton Beach High School.

Tome now runs the Bill Tome Foundation, which he started years ago to give troubled adolescents a chance to play sports after school.

“We had 100 kids who wanted to play basketball every Thursday night and Max was one of them,” Tome recalled. “They’re on a team; they got a T-shirt, trophies. We had a good time, at least one day a week.”

He remembers taking Pierre and his teammates for burgers after their weekly game, and always dropped him off at a relative's house, but he wasn't sure who he lived with.





But it wasn't all fun.

When Pierre was on Tome's team in 2018, one night he witnessed a close friend get gunned down for trying to break up a fight. It was Pierre's second friend killed by gunfire, Tome said.

When a close school friend, Herman Denis, 18, was fatally shot, it left Pierre traumatized, Tome remembered.

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"He (Denis) was identical to Max: Tough kid on the street, but they played on my basketball league together," he said. "They stayed together in school."

Pierre was a "nice kid," who was often bullied in school, Tome said.

"He was in special needs classes. He kept to himself but there were always kids ... picking on him," he said. "When Max started getting called out for fighting, that's when I stepped in ... I told him don't fall for that. You got a problem when you get out of class, come to me."

"We became best buddies," Tome added. "I never had a problem with him, never."

After years of losing touch, he said hearing Pierre's music track "brought tears to my eyes."

"I'm just so happy for him," Tome said.

Meanwhile, Pierre receives therapy and learns welding skills at Project Lift in Palm City, a program for at-risk youth that also helped him get a job at a Stuart Burger King.



Pierre talks to his grandmother now too, he said.

“She calls me every day,” he said. “I respect that and I owe her for that.”

And he recently became a father for the first time, but his infant son has been in intensive care at a Miami hospital since his birth.

Parraga, though, said Pierre’s son is slowly improving and he's been able to visit him in the hospital.

“He wants his voice to matter,” Parraga said. “His goal is five years from now be speaking publicly about Mental Health Court and how you can turn your life around.”

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