

MAY THE GROANS OF THE
PRISONERS COME BEFORE
YOU; WITH YOUR STRONG
ARM PRESERVE THOSE
CONDEMNED TO DIE
PSALM 79:11



DAUGHTERS

ISSUE #2 SUMMER 2021

MATRIARCHS

THE QUEENS BEHIND THE MOVEMENT



ETTA CETERA



AVA NISHITA -
HAWKINSON



PATRICIA VICKERS



JESSIE ALEXANDER
(FREEDOM DAY: MAY 2020)
& PAULETTE CARRINGTON
(FREEDOM DAY: APRIL 1, 2017)



GHANI, KURAME, & MONAY SONGSTER
GHANI'S FREEDOM DAY: DECEMBER 28, 2017



MAGELINE STEWART, SPRING 2021
FREEDOM DAY: DECEMBER 6, 2019



opportunity, Inc's Sista2Sista Soul2Soul program wants
you to always remember that you are PowHer-Full...

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Daughters is a faith-based, political publication founded by Sarita Miller (SCI Muncy) that aims to illuminate issues and perspectives, specifically those of women, pertaining to the crisis of mass incarceration in this country. A platform for us and by us, *Daughters* will be a pathway to the expression of our fears, our struggles, our pain and our needs. Although for now we are confined, our spirits and voices soar free.

A Note on Subscriptions, Letters, & Submissions:

- Please write for a free subscription to our publications: *Daughters* & Let's Get Free Magazine.
- If you would like to make a donation you can send checks to Let's Get Free (we are a 501c3) or donate online at letsgetfree.info/links/donate/
- Please do not write to specific people in the organization but to the group as a whole. If you have questions of a specific person you can ask but they might not be the one to respond. Thank you for your understanding and respecting our capacity.
- Please do not send unsolicited legal papers.
- All submissions welcome but we can't promise they will be published in either publication.

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we are more than the things that have happened to us

by Iresha Picot

Memory is this powerful thing. But for people struggling with themselves, that power can be heavy. Memory comes and resurfaces itself at some of the most surprising times. Sometimes, when we feel like we have everything under control, or when we are at our happiest, or sitting still, our memory slides back into places that can literally frighten us. Memory tends to have an easier time remembering the negative memories that we've experienced. Those unhealed parent-child relationships. Those abusive situations. The times we felt most neglected in life. The time that people who we thought cared for us were actually the people that harmed us the most. Memory keeps a record and it can have the ability to undercut a person's sense of self-worth.

Rightfully so, people try their best to run from the pain of those memories. We even try to change the form of the memory. We engage in harmful behaviors such as addictions, self-harm, and risky behaviors. We let things distract us. We tell ourselves that those things didn't happen or we even normalize them to make ourselves feel better. All to run away from the memories that haunt us.

One of the biggest things that I tell clients is that you have to face those memories head on to understand that you are more than the things that have happened to you. There are parts of our memory that will continue to resurface - whether it be out loud or to yourself - but you have to remember that you are more than those memories. You are more than those traumas*. Those events that have happened in your life have helped to shape you into the person that you are and the person that you will become. You are someone that is made up of many experiences that go beyond the memories and traumas that follow you through life.

No, we can't escape the things that have happened to us, but we can start to clear the way to allow truth-telling, healing and self-reflection into our lives. Face those memories, tell your stories

and understand that you are of essential value. And most importantly, believe in the fact that you are more than the things that have happened to you.

*Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea (American Psychological Association)



*Iresha Picot, M.Ed, LBS is a Licensed Behavioral Specialist and Therapist, Doula, and Community Activist. A Philly transplant by way of Virginia, Iresha graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with dual Bachelor's degrees in African American Studies and Gender & Sexuality Studies, a Master's degree in Urban Education from Temple University and a Post-Graduate degree in Applied Behavior Analysis and Autism from Arcadia University. Iresha is the co-editor of the book, *The Color of Hope: People of Color Mental Health Narratives*, and has written articles in the *Research in the Teaching of English*, *The Philadelphia Weekly*, *Elephant Journal*, *Aunt Chloe's Journal*, *Specter Magazine*, *For Harriet* and has been featured in *NPR*, *Bicycle Magazine* and *PBS American Portraits*. Iresha spent many years working in prison abolitionist organizations such as the *Human Rights Coalition* and *Books through Bars*. Currently, Iresha hosts a "Sis, are you good?" series with *Girltrek, Inc.* that digitally centers mental health check-ins with Black women.*

aren't our sisters worth it?

mental health stigma in the black community | by Sheena' King

Few people, if any, at Muncy, knew that I have a diagnosed mental illness. I hid it pretty well. Unfortunately, while it remained largely hidden, it was also untreated.

Statistics reveal that Blacks/African Americans are the least likely to have mental illness or affective disorders diagnosed because of the negative stigma attached to mental health. Already marginalized, underemployed, undereducated, and under-served, my ancestors did not want another reason to be further segregated, so it was hidden. Everybody has a crazy Uncle Billy right? That's what we thought. We didn't know what was troubling him just like we didn't know what was wrong with me... or my sister.

Like most traits, mental illness can be hereditary; from my father and beyond, passed down to me and my sister. After a proper diagnosis, I stopped

hiding and endured a decade long journey to mental and emotional recovery and wellness --- but not my sister. Our father withdrew from life and buried himself in his mother's basement until his heart grew as weary as he was and stopped beating. His daughter, my sister withdrew from our home and our family and chose a life on the streets following wherever the voices led her.

I try to avoid the "what ifs" because they serve no real purpose, yet I wonder if my sister's life would have been different if I would have been evaluated in middle school as the guidance counselor suggested? My early diagnosis could have removed the rose-tinted glasses of denial from my family's eyes and saved my sister.

No one will ever know if we continue to hide... but no one can help us either. Aren't our sisters worth it? Aren't we?

short circuits

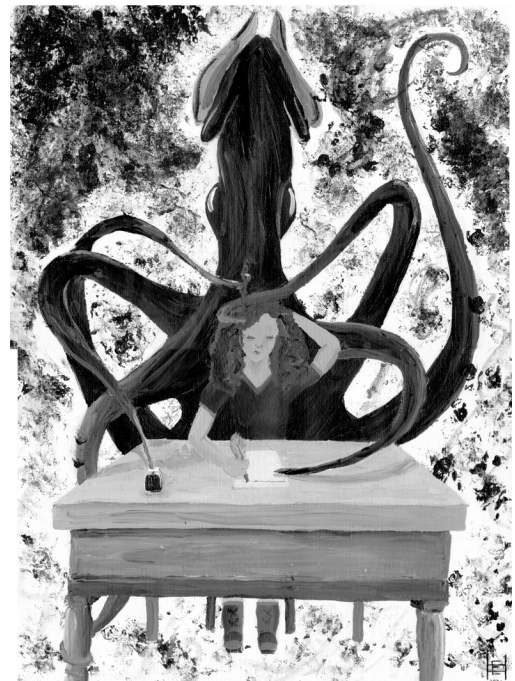
by Elena House-Hay

I feel like the transition out of the COVID lockdown has paralyzed some kind of upper-management section of my brain and it's short circuiting. I'm happy to get things back, but I'm experiencing whiplash from all the time we spent locked down. During that lonely time, I survived on a self-imposed schedule, crammed full of solitary activities and focused tasks. And now, emerging from that desperation and half death, things are different. The guards changed. The institution changed. The world changed. I changed.

With restrictions lifting, I have to change again and redefine my expectations and daily/weekly/monthly goals. After living on such a shoestring existence, these new changes are scary. I have more trouble coming to peace with the new and old realities. This place gave me COVID, deprived me of family time, moved me around, compelled me to work, locked me in for 20 hours a day or more for a year, fed me crap, forced me to choose between family and showers, and stunted my support system. I struggled my way through all of

it with a very specific mindset that is now obsolete and subject to a forceful readjustment.

How do I get past it? Why do I feel like other people are doing better than me? What's next? Will I ever be OK?



painting by Elena House-Hay

mercy and the board of pardons

by Ellen Melchiondo, Co-creator of the Women Lifers Resume Project of PA (www.wlrppa.org)

How does a government agency such as the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons practice “mercy” in the form of evaluating and recommending commutations of life without parole sentences to the governor?

To expect mercy from the Board of Pardons may seem like a contradiction and possible violation of the separation of church and state. Mercy appears in old religious texts, literature, song, and can even be a child’s name. Interestingly, nowhere is the ability to practice mercy a requirement to run for an elected office. Oddly, the state attorney general, an elected position, is a member of the Board of Pardons, and so is the lieutenant governor. Presently, the attorney general’s MO is to re-litigate the cases and the lieutenant governor’s motivation is to expose the inhumanity of life without parole sentences, without referring to moral leadership.

The other three members of the board are appointed by the governor. I am not sure if these other positions-- corrections expert, victim advocate, and psychologist--have to take any kind of oath that they will practice mercy in their unique position of power. In order to grant a pardon, the five-member board of pardons must vote unanimously to recommend a person’s petition before sending it to the governor for his signature. That means that one member can usurp this by voting no, and so his or her vote is as powerful as the governor’s!

As each term of an elected official ends and a new administration begins, so does the direction, commitment, and philosophies of its members about how to do the job of extending mercy and what is required of the applicants. This can be very confusing and stressful for the applicants and advocates. Currently, the Board of Pardons no longer wants letters of support until a public hearing is granted and does not allow the applicant’s narrative to discuss their religious practices as they pertain to their rehabilitation. At the moment, religion has no place for an applicant

board does not view religion or faith as an example or extension of one’s conversion from criminal to peaceful citizen. Isn’t that a paradox?

So many prisoners credit rehabilitation to God, faith, and, more importantly, hope. I reflect on this topic not as a churchgoer, but rather as someone who believes that even the most marginalized, deprived, and repentant prisoners who took a life, or assisted, deserve mercy. I believe that they deserve a second chance to return to society and rebuild their lives as they see fit, albeit while on lifetime parole as required by the law.

At the same time, the Pennsylvania Office of Victim Advocate stipulates that prisoners may not write a letter of apology as an expression of their remorse or quest for forgiveness. Prisoners I know want their victims to know how sorry they are for the harm they caused. Their desire for forgiveness could aid their own rehabilitation to progress to another meaningful level. However such letters will be rejected by the Office of the Victims Advocate.

These two powerful offices could do the most good in our society, but they sure make it difficult not only for the prisoner, but their family and friends too. The job of the Board of Pardons is a glorious one. Sadly, their members seem oppressed by the pressures from forces that believe in prisons as a way to create some semblance or mirage of “public safety” and hold on to retribution forever. “Bare your soul” is the unofficial mantra of the board to the applicant for commutation. They expect the applicant to do this while at the same time see no place for religion or faith. What the heck is going on?

I believe the PA Board of Pardons has become secular. So what is their job description? How do they line up mercy with recommending commutation if there is no place for a prisoner to share their most profound purpose in life: to make amends, to ask for forgiveness and be a loving member of society once again-the type of person their God expects?

rhythm from the heart

selected poems

*Your voice at times a fist
Tight in your throat
Jab ceaselessly at phantoms
In the room,
Your hand a carved and
Skimming boat
Goes down the Nile
To point out Pharaoh's tomb
You're Africa to me
At brightest dawn.
The Congo's green and
Copper's brackish hue
A continent to build
With Black Man's brawn
I sit at home and see it all
Through you.*

"To A Husband" by Maya Angelou

"Freedom's Time is Ticking" by Keisha Barnes, SCI-Muncy

*Looking out the window
Counting days down for freedom
Some days are better than others
The days you get lonely and try to hold on
But you start to cry
Other days you get on your knees
And pray Oh Lord why
Why do this empty space behind a locked
Door make me feel like I'm losing HOPE
Why does the words
I really wanna say make me choke
I know you forgive me, so I know I still have HOPE!
A strive to move on and move forward because this prison life isn't
a joke overlapping mistakes in the past I was playing in the field with
snakes
Now I'm transformed waiting for them to open the front gate.
FREEDOM
So I have no more fear with the grace of our Father the time is near.*

rhythm from the heart

selected poems

I know I speak softly, but I try to speak clearly. I don't yell or curse often since I'll end up in tears first out of frustration. Allow me to repeat myself so that you can better understand what I'm saying; please always put others before myself. I already said I don't drink, I don't smoke, and I don't do drugs. I don't know how else to say it, I'm a good person! I admit this type of life can feel lonely and I admit I like male attention at times. Did you hear me? I said it. I had an affair, but I also said I didn't kill my husband! I can think of no reason not to hear me, except that I said all of this to my lawyers. I didn't say a word out loud to the jury at my trial. I was found guilty of 1st Degree Murder and am appealing LWOP. I am a "newer" lifer, as I have only been down 5 years. Silence is not always golden. It can sound very loud in prison.

"Did You Hear Me?" by Amy Gipe, SCI-Muncy

"Dear Diary" by Jameisha White, released prisoner

Dear Diary,

I'm a prisoner within myself, awake thinking how I hate me. When I go to sleep I wish that someone would just love me. Stuck in a phase, I've been sad for days. My heart is contaminated with AIDS the way I relieve pain is PCP, weed, alcohol, and cocaine. Drugs keep me numb for days. A prisoner locked up (cages), no food in the fridge, same clothes on for days. Body looks like 50 years a slave. Body broken down, bones brittle, back pain severe, prisoner within myself cold, ice, no water, nor heat, love don't live here, please leave a message if the phone beeps, But it won't because it's disconnected. Paper, pen, bullets, blunt, guns, no safety, trigger finger steady, aim to my temple, trigger pulled. Dead prisoner still lost without a trace of hope.

***Note: Ms. White is doing well as a returning citizen.*

juneteenth and a texas prison

by Vikki Law

Juneteenth marks the day that government forces rode into Texas and announced the end of slavery. The news of emancipation had already reached the rest of the country two years earlier.

Today, the United States has five percent of the world's population and 20 percent of its prison population. What then does Juneteenth—and the promise of freedom—mean today for those deprived of freedom, both in Texas and across the United States?

Texas has the country's sixth highest incarceration rate with 99 prisons and state jails. Texas prisons also have field squads, where incarcerated people toil under the punishing sun—planting, weeding, picking produce, and sorting cotton, while armed guards keep watch from horseback.

Lisa is a 54-year-old trans man in one of the state's women's prisons. He is also a parent and grandparent. He has long struggled with drug addiction, leading to several arrests and prison sentences. The last time he was arrested, he was in his forties. When he got to prison, he was assigned to the field squad.

He described having "to crawl on hardened earth clumps to gather potatoes or bend at the waist to remove weeds or use a hoe to clear a grassy field that a tractor attachment could do way more efficiently." He described armed guards on horseback whom he and the women had to

call "Boss." Those guards, he said, called them derogatory and racist names. They did not hesitate to draw their guns to enforce compliance.

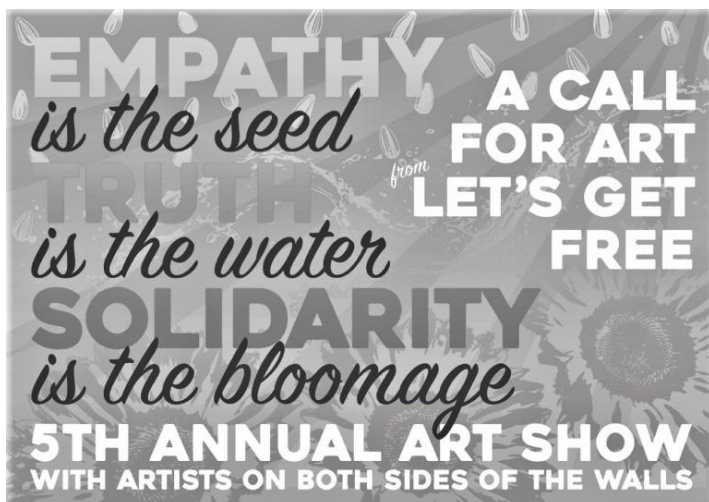
Lisa is Black. So are nearly one-third of Texas prisoners in a state where Black people make up less than 13 percent of the population. Texas does not pay incarcerated people for their labor.

Lisa is not wrongfully convicted. But, like so many others behind bars, he was not provided with counseling, treatment or resources to help overcome his addiction—and prevent the crimes that stemmed from it. Instead, he kept getting prison.

His circumstances aren't unusual. Black Americans are still paid substantially less than their white counterparts. Black Americans are more likely to be locked out of the resources and opportunities offered to white Americans. They are more likely to be targeted by police and treated more harshly by the criminal justice system. Black people make up 13 percent of the country's overall population and one-third of its prison population.

Juneteenth commemorates the end of slavery in Texas. In 2021, over 500 of every 100,000 Texans are behind bars.

What then does Juneteenth—and that promise of emancipation—mean for those deprived of their freedom in Texas and across the United States?



Reminder! Deadline Extended!

Submit your art and poems to Let's Get Free's 5th Annual Art Show by Friday, October 15.

Send to: Let's Get Free, 460 Melwood Ave #300, Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Find more details at creative-resistance.org.

Prizes available!



ALOK (they/them) is an internationally acclaimed gender non-conforming writer, performer, and public speaker. As a mixed-media artist their work explores themes of trauma, belonging, and the human condition. They are the author of *Femme in Public* (2017) and *Beyond the Gender Binary* (2020). They are the creator of #DeGenderFashion: a movement to degender fashion.



foreword by etta cetera:

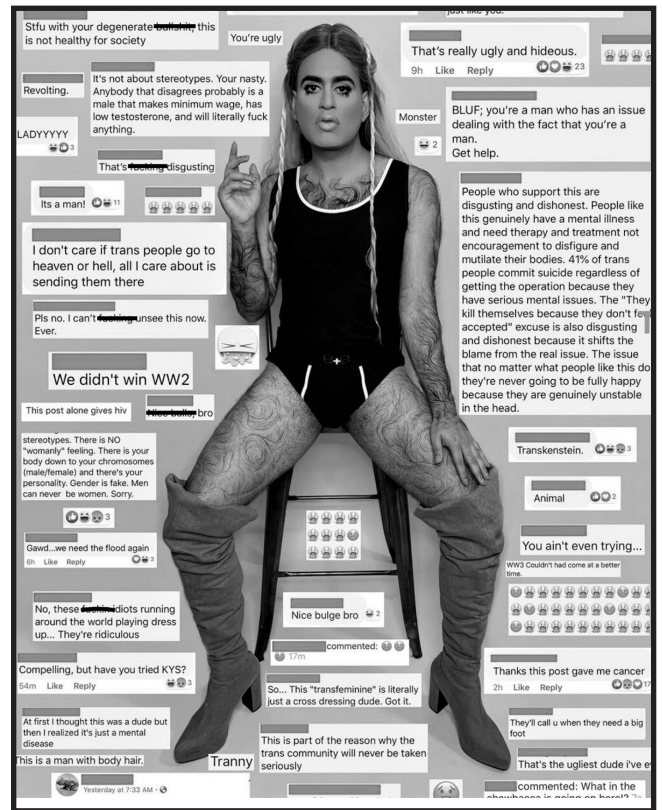
One thing is for sure, ALOK is changing the way we see, think, and talk about gender, all with glittering style, poetic vulnerability, and a sense of humor. ALOK is funny! Take this hashtag they coined:

#NothingWrongHair

One of the many things that I admire about ALOK is their ability to respond with love to the onslaught of hateful comments they receive online. Instagram is a social media platform where people post pictures that are often accompanied by lengthy captions and a hashtag or twelve. Underneath the author's caption people can write comments. ALOK receives a lot of love in the comments, but also way too much hate. In one collage, ALOK created a picture of themselves that has hateful comments cut and pasted on top of their portrait. It's hard to read, and I try to imagine what it might feel like to post a picture of yourself and then have a bunch of people tell you that you are not who you are and that you don't deserve to live.

I have started to use ALOK's name as a verb, when people share stories of haters, I respond, "Did you ALOK them?" or "They need an ALOKING to." And what, pray tell, do I mean exactly? I mean, respond to the haters like ALOK would, with unwavering compassion that holds firm to everyone's dignity. It means don't take no shit from anyone but do it

with astute systemic insight and thoughtful grace. It means ALOK does not throw the haters away. I don't know if ALOK identifies as an abolitionist but the way they respond screams freedom to me.



So I wanted to share ALOK's writings and love mail with you because I want to live in a world where people can be free. Without any further ado, I give you, ALOK. *(hip hop bullhorn hip hop bullhorn, crowd goes wild)*

The following are reprinted with permission from ALOK's website and Instagram page:

I don't want to be a woman,
I just want to be me.
I don't want to be a man,
I just want to be free.

My name is ALOK. My life is the greatest poem I've ever written. I am a rough draft, in a constant state of unbecoming. I decided to live in a society that sought to make that impossible. I learned it is possible to live impossible lives. I come from a sacred legacy of trancers who thrived outside of the western gender binary. They lived as if they were already free (because they were). So I do, too. (Because I am.)

The world says that people like me don't exist. But here we are, breathing. Then: maybe it's not us, maybe it's the world. I am not interested in being part of that alternate reality: one upheld by nihilism, sutured together by ritualized repression. I need something more durable than fear. Like care.

Because I care: every day I choose love over fear. Joy over shame. Vulnerability over isolation. Abundance over scarcity. I refuse dichotomies. Hold multiple truths. I read, therefore I am. I write, therefore I am. I feel, therefore I am.

I spent the first part of my life living a fantasy of what other people wanted me to be. I mistook desensitizing myself as having a personality. I almost died from it. I started to write about pain and it became something else. If you zoom in close enough, nothing in the world is stagnant. Like the wind, like the water, like the seasons, I moved accordingly. I rewrote myself.

Metamorphosis is homeostasis. I alchemized self-hatred into radiant beauty, grief into gratitude, fear into forgiveness. I embraced my tangled mess of organs, muscles, and dreams. I decided to never compromise my authenticity for comfort again.

My hope is that when I die I will have known the resonance of my laughter as much as I do my anguish.

That I will be as well versed in beauty as tragedy. That I will have left evidence: that despite everything I had the audacity to love. My name is ALOK (they/them). There are a lot of words used to describe me, but the only one I've chosen myself is "artist." Poetry is not just a genre, it is a way of being: finding beauty outside of standard grammar, following the feeling wherever it takes you. Less form, more flow.

My artistic project is living, not just being alive. I perform on stages – yes – but let's go out for soy hot chocolate & watch me in my element. I have lived all over the world, but I have never felt more at home than in a good conversation. I hate small talk. I am trying my best to end the international crisis of loneliness. I would rather be honest: that I am alive (& it hurts), that I need you (the 'individual' is a ghost story). Trying to choose love over fear. To cherish infinity, surrender to the multiplicity of truth. To experience riotous joy, be as well versed in the windchime of my laugh as I am the deep belly of my grief.



Anzaldua once wrote: "Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads." She was right. I believe that humanity is that which exceeds the confinement of categorization. To remember that, we have to emancipate ourselves from the straightjacket eugenics has placed on our imagination.

I imagine a world beyond the gender binary where people matter for who they are, not what they should be. Some would say this is unrealistic, purely utopic. But here I am breathing. A quiet utopia. There you are living. A quiet revolution. I believe miracles happen every day (if you take the time to notice them).

I didn't come out of a closet, I came out of a library. I study the human condition. I have read thousands of books & written two (online store link in bio) to figure out why we are the way we are. I still don't know. I'm learning that the best questions have no answers. It's more about being able to live with the question. To find beauty, there, in the unknowability of things. "My name is ALOK. I don't know, therefore I am." 8

my beauty, it blooms | 12.24.20

by ALOK | the amazing love mail of ALOK

At 8 years old I developed an acute case of trichotillomania: a compulsive urge to pull out my body hair. I would sit in class plucking out each individual arm hair like it was my job. One time my teacher noticed and asked me to stop. How curious it was that she asked me to cease, not the kids in my class who told me I looked like a monkey.



A few years later I began to use my sister's razors and shave off all of my body hair: my body became one prolonged razor burn.

A few years after that my classmates started to call me a "terrorist" because I was brown and had facial hair. I begged my father every day to let me shave my face. On my 13th birthday he gifted me a razor. That first shave – there were no visible cuts (but that doesn't mean they weren't still there).

I looked in the mirror and I remember thinking: I look beautiful (by which I meant – I look more white). A few years later I learned about a movement called "Beards for Peace," to protest the war. I did

not shave for a year – my beard, it was the run-on sentence that taught me poetry – finding beauty outside standard grammar, creating my own definition.

A decade later when I started my gender transition, so many people told me that I would be more "believable" if I "just shaved." I had spent so many years coming into myself and yet here I was, once again, being told that I was the problem.

I remembered my sister and mom being told that they were "mannish" for having arm hair and a slight mustache. I remembered all of the brown women I knew who were made to feel like they were never feminine enough. I resolved then and there not to remove my body hair because I believed in the femininity of my hairy brown foremothers.

Why should we have to look like what white men have told white women to be in order to be regarded as feminine? I would rather be my own kind of beautiful.

Their beauty is a razor. It disappears. My beauty, it blooms.



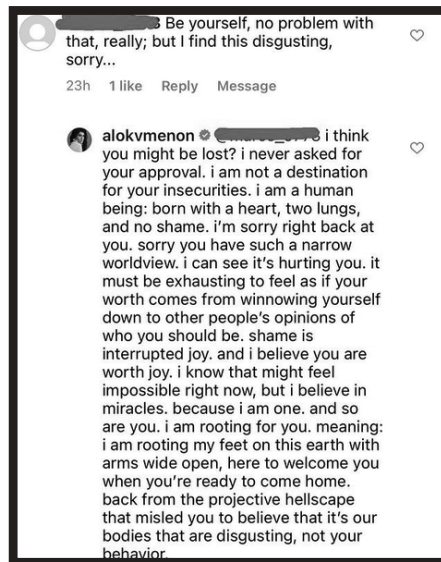
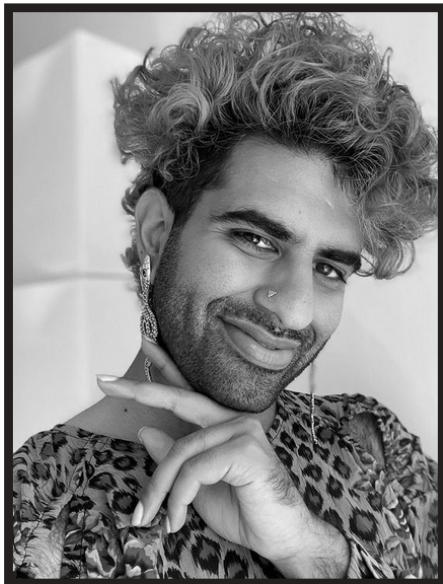
i don't see trolls | 1.10.2020

by ALOK | the amazing love mail of ALOK

i don't see trolls. i see neighbors, lawyers, politicians, news anchors. i don't see trolls. i see relatives, teachers, business people. i don't see trolls i see engineers, students, architects. i don't see trolls i see shopkeepers, journalists, curators. i don't see trolls i see "feminists," gay men, conservatives, liberals. i don't see trolls i see terror. i feel terror. there is an ongoing state of emergency against gender non-conforming people. at every level – judicially, legislatively, socially, politically, culturally, economically, epistemologically, ontologically – we are being targeted. do not diminish the persecution

we face as "a few bad apples," it is, rather, the roots of the tree itself. violence against us is the foundation of modern gender. i do not deserve this wrath. no one does. it's not that i am inadequate, it's that they are indoctrinated. it's not that i am brave, it's that they are complicit. there's a difference.

oh dear: people are still more concerned that humans have body hair than the fact that the us government isn't giving federal relief to people during a once in a century global pandemic. get your priorities queer. #NothingWrongHair



Wanted to leave you with some of the many loving comments people leave in ALOK's feed:

- We love u and we need u!!! Obsessed with you
- Alok, you are such an inspiration. Thank you for continuing to fight and to put love into the world every single day.
- Yes to this whole outfit!!!!
- Thank you for living your true, gorgeous, colorful self! You frequently help me on my gender journey :)
- FIERCE
- I've been reading Beyond the Gender Binary and it feels like freedom. I think what I didn't realize before reading it is that everyone needs this, the permission to be and that is something sacred and to be protected for all by all.
- You make the most amount of sense.

Let's Get Free will buy you one of ALOK's books if you want. Just write to us and ask.

**Let's Get Free
460 Melwood #300
Pittsburgh, PA 15213**

Folks on the outside: check out more from ALOK at linktr.ee/alokvmenon

support our supporters

by Larry Stephenson (SCI-Phoenix)

As a concerned life-sentenced prisoner with over 47 years served and 72 years of age (with very little hope of ever going home alive again) I know the importance of having support from outside organizations to keep our dire situation for freedom in the forefront.

For decades organizations like the Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration (CADBI), Decarcerate PA, The Pennsylvania Prison Society, Human Rights Coalition, Let's Get Free, Amistad Law Center, and a few more groups have been soldiering consistently for our release with very little financial support; lifers would virtually be forgotten and that's a fact!

It is an absolute truth that politics play a huge part with keeping lifers under the burden of "Death by Incarceration (DBI)." All political organizations in this nation have "Political Action Committees (PAC)." The duties of PACs is to raise funds under what's called a "war chest" to influence legislators to personally promote their agenda.

The organizations that fight the "powers that be" on behalf of prisoners (specifically lifers) have no PAC or "War Chest" of money. That's unacceptable

and totally unintelligent on our (prisoners) behalf! However, we can correct this oversight.

With over 5,200 people serving DBI in PA, we are known in politics as a "Special Interest Group", or SIG. SIGs are formed when a multitude of people are directly affected by a common purpose and cause. Due to our DBI sentences and no way of recourse from that injustice, except through the delicate and often unfair political policies of commutation, we have no way out. We must establish our PAC and "war chest" now!

Here's how: With 5200 lifers donating, \$5 each month, for one year, we can build a powerful and effective PAC and "war chest," consisting of a total of: \$302,000!!! Here's the equation: 5200 lifers donating \$5 each month = \$26,000 x 12 months = \$302,000. Our support groups will work miracles for us with that powerful financial sum! Just think about this: Eliminate a few candy bars and some potato chips from our weekly or monthly budget and make the supreme sacrifice for our freedom. I believe we can accomplish this serious mission. With that said, let's circle our wagons and get our freedom!!!



Playlist Title: Oldies But Goodies

- ZOOM | *The Commodores*
- YOU'RE MY EVERYTHING | *The Temptations*
- YOU WILL KNOW | *Stevie Wonder*
- UNTIL YOU COME BACK TO ME | *Aretha Franklin*
- THERE'S NOTHING BETTER THAN LOVE | *Luther Vandross & Gregory Hines*

- ALL MY LIFE | *KC & JoJo*
- THE BOY IS MINE | *Brandy & Monica*
- BREATHE AGAIN | *Toni Braxton*
- CARAVAN OF LOVE | *The Isley Brothers*
- CHANGE CLOTHES | *Jay-Z*
- THE CLOSER I GET TO YOU | *Roberta Flack*
- DIFFERENCES | *Ginuwine*
- DON'T DISTURB THIS GROOVE | *The System*
- FOR YOU I WILL | *Monica*
- A HEART IS A HOUSE FOR LOVE | *The Dells*
- HEAVEN MUST BE LIKE THIS | *Ohio Players*
- HOW DEEP IS YOUR LOVE | *The Bee Gees*
- MY, MY, MY | *Johnny Gill*
- WE BELONG TOGETHER | *Mariah Carey*
- OFF ON YOUR OWN | *Al B. Sure!*
- I MISS YOU | *Aaron Hall*
- RIBBON IN THE SKY | *Stevie Wonder*
- LOVE IS A HOUSE | *Force MDs*
- YOU ARE MY LADY | *Freddie Jackson*
- LOVE BALLAD | *L.T.D.*

report: june commutation hearings

by Elaine Selan

There were six individuals who had open hearings for their application of commutation on Thursday, June 24. Decisions were announced the following day. To note, one of the six applicants is not serving a life sentence, Andre Davis, is serving what is called a “virtual life sentence”; that is, a term sentence that would typically exceed one’s natural life [i.e., 50-100 years]. Because he is not serving a life without parole sentence:

1. His request for commutation means he is seeking to have his minimum sentence commuted,
2. He only needs a 3-2 vote from the Board in order to be recommended for commutation, and
3. If and when the Governor signs his commutation, Andre will have the additional hurdle of meeting the Parole Board’s approval, a process that can take a number of months. He will remain incarcerated until this Board’s approval. However, he is not required to reside in a halfway house for one year; he can transition to his home plan immediately upon his paroled release.

Three men were recommended for commutation: Andre Davis, Jamie Faust, and James Miller. Together, they have served 116 years of confinement. Two applicants were denied: Denise Crump and Wayne Covington. Denise had received a unanimous [5-0] merit review vote and it was

thought that she would receive the same outcome in the open hearing. Instead she only received one affirmative vote from the Board’s Chair, Lieutenant Governor John Fetterman. Denise has served 33 years in prison. Wayne Covington was also denied with the same voting outcome [1-4]; he has served 51 years. In both those cases, family members of the victim spoke at the hearing in opposing commutation. It is thought this was a compelling reason for the Board’s vote.

The final applicant, Kennard Scott, had his case held under advisement so that health-related concerns could be further evaluated.

Three individuals scheduled for the Board’s reconsideration of their unsuccessful application for commutation failed to get beyond the initial motion stage that is required before the Board determines if they will entertain the individual’s request. Edwin DeJesus, Richard Marra, and Felix [Phill] Rosado all lost their appeals.

Cynthia Gonzalez, who is serving a life sentence, has had her application held under advisement for about two years. She has served 36 years. In their final vote on this hearing day, the Board voted 2-3 to deny her application for commutation.

we need more from the board of pardons

by Amistad Law Project

Today, the Board of Pardons voted to recommend three out of six commutation applications to Governor Wolf for his approval. We are elated for Amistad Law Project client Andre Davis, as well as lifers Jesse Faust and James Miller. Governor Wolf should sign their applications with haste so that they can be reunited with their families after decades of incarceration and our communities can benefit from their presence. Each person’s freedom represents a step in the right direction.

While we celebrate those who are bound for freedom, we are deeply troubled by the Board’s decision to deny Denise Crump and Wayne Covington’s applications for commutation, as well

as Richie Marra’s application for reconsideration. All three of these candidates were unequivocally supported by the administrations of the prisons in which they have been incarcerated for decades. In each of these cases, the Board blocked the applicant’s release because family members of the victim opposed their release. Family members of victims deserve a safe place to express themselves, and abundant resources to navigate their grief. However, the question of whether someone is rehabilitated and should be released is necessarily separate from affirming a victim’s pain. The Board’s role is to answer the question of rehabilitation. In the cases of Denise Crump, Wayne Covington, and Richie Marra, the 12

Board absolutely failed in its duty, ignoring the current realities of the applicant's life and their transformative journey over the course of decades.

The Board has also completely failed in regard to Felix Rosado's application. Mr. Rosado is an exemplary person who, after being sentenced to life without parole when he was eighteen years old, has earned a bachelor's degree from Villanova and co-founded a restorative justice program. He is deeply remorseful for his crime and a community leader both inside and outside of prison. Many have spoken up about the positive impact that Mr. Rosado will have in our communities as a mentor upon his release. Mr. Rosado's continued incarceration is simply devastating for many of us on the outside as well as the communities to which he could offer positive contributions.

perspective on commutation from michigan

by Willis X. Harris

INTRODUCTION: Mr. Willis X. Harris entered the prison system at age 17 in 1956, and he served 23.5 years on a life sentence before being commuted on June 4, 1980. He has been free now for 41 years and is 81.5 years old. Throughout his 41 years of freedom Mr. Harris speaks and visits both men and women in correctional facilities speaking on behalf of lifers during their public hearings and advocating for the injustices of systemic racism working on community correction. He is the president of the Michigan Lifers Association.

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Cure Lifelong Inc.
4417 Second Avenue Suite 211
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Cure is looking for female writers to write about their experience in prison.

- **Why are you requesting commutation/parole?**
- **Why should you be granted commutation/ parole?"**

The above two questions are asked to each LWOP and Parolable Lifer when his or her opportunity to speak arrives during the public hearing. At some public hearings, the lifer is questioned intensely and thoroughly with these questions

At its core, commutation is about mercy. It exists in response to the basic truth that all people are capable of change, and that over the course of time, many people reflect and grow and want to make up for the harm they have caused. Our movements are continuing to carve out a righteous path forward towards a PA where people are not judged by the worst mistake they have made, and the architects of mass incarceration aren't stealing the resources and reformed mentors our communities need to be safe, healthy, and thriving. We need Board of Pardons members who believe in this vision. As of now they are failing on most counts, but we will continue to hold them accountable and push this process forward. Our humanity and the future of our communities depend upon it.

at the beginning of the hearing. While at others, he or she is the last to speak or address these questions to the satisfaction of the parole board members and the Attorney General of the State or the designated assistant. The lead questions may be: Mr. Culpepper, would you kindly explain the circumstances surrounding your offense? What did you do or what was the role you had in the commission of the offense? The lead question sets the stage for what is to follow.

In the twenty public hearings I have attended and spoken at on behalf of lifers, I saw both set-ups. Let's talk about the last set-up where victims and relatives speak about how the lifer's crime has affected/impacted their family and the hurt and pain they have suffered and how they continue to experience hardships after twenty or more years post-conviction of the lifer. I have seen people cry. Some of the testimonies by victims' family or friends have caused me to shed tears openly, making it difficult for me to support the lifer, especially when some factors were revealed that occurred during the commission of the offense and which were unknown to the parole board and me and were not in the pre-sentence investigation report.

After all the victim's family members and their supporters had given their damaging testimonies, supporters of the lifer were called upon to testify. I

noticed that after the victim's family and supporters testified - plus the newly revealed information the lifer had kept hidden and which was not in the pre-sentence investigation report, some of the lifer's support refused to give supporting testimony.

The parole board members and the Attorney General or Assistant Attorney General questioned both the victim's family and supporters as well as the lifer's family (if any) and supporters. Let it be known that the Attorney General or Assistant Attorney General prepared a transcript of the public hearing for the AG's file.

It was now time for the lifer (LWOP or Parole) to speak and support his or her reasons relative to the most important questions in the title of this article to the satisfaction of the parole board members and the Attorney General or Assistant Attorney General. Each lifer must be very careful how these questions are answered and be self-controlled. Hostile and aggressive answers to questions count against the lifer and show that he or she may still be a potential risk to public safety.

Any contradictions or challenges to the pre-sentence investigation report in an emotional way during the public hearing and in the presence of supporters on both sides of the aisle raises a red flag (alert, caution). If the truth was initially and completely told, the presentence investigation report will support the lifer's statements during the hearing.

Keep in mind, when on-the-scene witnesses testify what they saw, heard, and watched the lifer do during the onset and commission of the offense(s), what the lifer says during the hearing must corroborate what those witnesses have said. In addition, that collaboration should be on your application for commutation of sentence. Again, what the witnesses say at the public hearing will validate/confirm or invalidate/refute the lifer's testimony.

If the set-up has been that witnesses speak first, then the last two questions the parole board members will ask the lifer are: "Why are you requesting a commutation or a parole? And, why should you be granted a commutation of sentence or a parole?"

Most lifers I have seen tremble, become nervous, and fidget when face-to-face with parole board members and then asked those questions. Too many lifers have not considered prior planning for the hearing and what to say during the hearing, which shows

that they were ill-prepared for the public hearing and, therefore, may not be qualified for release.

A public hearing is no guarantee the lifer will be recommended to the Governor for commutation of sentence or be paroled. There must be some outstanding accomplishments or meritorious services rendered by the lifer beyond normal or average undertakings to get a unanimous vote from the parole board. In Michigan, there are ten parole board members. The LWOP and/or parolable lifer needs six or more favorable votes for a public hearing or parole.

Any lifer anticipating filing an application for commutation should carefully read this article and have prepared his or her paperwork, meritorious accomplishments, and well-thought answers to these two major questions. How will you answer them on the application and in-person if granted a public hearing?

Editor's Note: In addition to the sage advice given by Willis X. Harris in this article, in Massachusetts, the parole board is very concerned with the programs a lifer has completed. It is not, however, sufficient to simply list a plethora of programs hoping the parole board favors quantity over quality. That is a mistake. What the parole board is looking for are programs which the parole board believes address the needs of the lifer. If for instance, a lifer has a history of drug or alcohol use or abuse, then the parole board looks for participation in programs which the parole board believes address the needs of the lifer. And the parole board goes beyond mere participation. The parole board members will ask what the lifer learned from those programs and how he or she will apply that knowledge if paroled to be a productive member of society. If a lifer cannot answer what he or she has learned, parole will be denied. In one instance, a lifer had indicated that he had completed The Twelve Step Program. A parole board member then asked: What is your favorite step? The lifer was unable to name one step, let alone his favorite. Not surprisingly, he was denied parole.

Furthermore, in Massachusetts, parole board members look for inconsistencies in a lifer's testimony from the facts of the case as presented by the District Attorney's Office or from prior testimony given by the lifer at a previous parole hearing. Lifers often forget that the parole board has full access to all the lifer's institutional records and police reports. Parole board members review those files prior to a hearing. One recurring problem is when lifers with a parole option have appealed their convictions on the grounds of innocence, particularly if the lifer had taken a guilty plea in order to have a chance at parole after fifteen years. The parole board views any appeals as not taking responsibility for one's actions, even though everyone has a right to appeal. Maintaining that appealing one's case because one has the right to do so is not convincing for the parole board, who will deny parole on the basis of lying or not accepting full responsibility for one's crime.

green-eyed

by Sheena' King

Throughout almost 30 years of incarceration, I have noticed a curiously disheartening thing made more prevalent during the last 3 years: women are not celebrating each other as we should.

How many meetings and groups have you attended and heard, "Women need to stick together," or "We're going to have each other's back," and from some mouths those words are just as empty as political promises.

What I am talking about is deeper than empty platitudes or words to fill silent spaces. I am talking about those hidden things nestled deep in some hearts. I am not talking about all of us, just some, and some is enough to take notice because some of us is too many of us. What I have seen is the smile that is merely a stretching of the lips and eyes that don't sparkle in sincere joy at the good news of our sisters. To witness the facade that barely conceals the jealousy and envy of some hearts is actually more painful than a denial from the Board of Pardons. Okay, maybe not that painful, but it's



a close second. With the Board of Pardons you know it can go either way but with your sisters, it's completely unexpected. I have seen sisters hugging each other and have heard their words of wellwishes and congratulations as their

? eyes dull and in their hearts they wished it wasn't her. They have filled their minds with reasons of why it shouldn't be her. They've whispered conspiratorially to other sisters who have agreed that she is every kind of evil, every type of ugly, everyday a fraud - it shouldn't be her. No - it shouldn't be you because what is in your heart became your thoughts and are now your words. Envy has become you and has prevented you from genuinely celebrating the good fortune of your sister.

There is nothing wrong with admitting, "I wish it was me TOO." There is everything wrong in wishing it was you instead of her.

Don't jealously desire your sister's blessing and bring a curse on yourself. God is gracious enough to bless us all if we are gracious.

don't you get jealous?

excerpt from *Opening Up: A guide to Creating Sustainable Open Relationships* by Tristan Taormino

Some people believe that jealousy is "natural," but I think it's more a learned, nearly universal behavior. It is a key emotion that almost everyone has felt at some point. Jealousy drives the plot of ancient myths, classical and modern literature, drama, and opera.

Jealousy is really an umbrella term for a constellation of feelings: envy, competitiveness, insecurity, inadequacy, possessiveness, fear of abandonment, feeling unloved, and feeling left out. To say simply "I am jealous", is far too vague, since it means different things to different people and it manifests itself in many diverse ways.

It's more useful to think of jealousy as a sign that something is not right. Try to figure out exactly what you're feeling, the root(s) of the feeling, and what you need to feel better. Digging around can open up a Pandora's box, but until you realize why you're jealous you will not be able to resolve the issues causing the feeling. Once you identify the source of the jealousy you will be able to better cope with it, feel less controlled and motivated by it, and you may be able to let go of it altogether. Below I discuss the four specific emotions as the components of jealousy: envy, insecurity, possessiveness, and feeling excluded.

Envy

When you experience envy, you want something that someone else has. The grass is greener on the other side of the fence, you feel that you're not as good as someone else, what you have is not as good as what they have. Envy is the voice inside your head that talks a lot of smack.

Competitiveness can be a part of envy. Envious thoughts can be fleeting, easily acknowledged and dismissed, or they can be excessive and overwhelming.

When you are content with who you are and feel secure and satisfied in your relationship, it greatly lessens your envy of others. Value yourself and be grateful for what you have. If you see something that you really want, and it is attainable, take steps to get it by changing something about yourself. Otherwise, it's best to work on your own self-worth and securities to lessen or eliminate the envy.

Insecurity

Insecurity or low self-esteem is intertwined with envy and is at the heart of most jealous feelings. It may take the form of self-doubt, self-judgment, constant comparisons to others or not feeling good enough. Like envy, insecurity is the voice inside your head that taunts you.

Insecurity can come from many sources and manifest itself in many ways; it is a complex problem to deal with.

Possessiveness

Sometimes you can experience jealousy as a desire to possess for control your partner. At the core of possessiveness are two beliefs: that a person can be of possession, and there's not enough of them to be shared. In other words, how dare you take something that belongs to me or take their time away for me. Both beliefs are problematic. People cannot be owned, in being someone's partner doesn't mean you're entitled to all of their time, energy and love. The opposite of possessiveness is generosity.

As Raven Kaldera writes: "If you are being generous, it means you have enough to share. You

can give plenty away and still not be impoverished it's that feeling of pure abundance when you know you got enough of whatever it is that you can give it out by the handfuls and still be knee-deep in it.

Feeling Excluded

When some people say they feel jealous, what they feel is left out.

Coping with Jealousy

If you are a person who feels jealous, the first step is to let yourself feel jealous. Even if you know intellectually that your emotion is irrational you can still experience jealousy as real, visceral, and overwhelming. So let yourself feel it- validate and own the feeling.

Don't criticize yourself or pile shame and judgment on top of it- that will just make you feel worse. Remember, too, that jealousy can be a learned reaction, one receives represented and reinforced all around us. Remind yourself that you may be reacting unconsciously in no way you think you should react.

When you feel any kind of jealousy, first ask yourself what's underneath the feeling. Do you feel left out, possessive, envious? Are you comparing yourself to someone else? Do you feel threatened, disrespected, angry? Did something specific happen to trigger your jealousy? Remember that we often can't predict whether something will bother us until it happens and we get upset.

Next, seek support from friends, family or a therapist. Your support system will help you assess the reality of the situation as well as any suspicions or fear you may have. Figure out what you need to feel better. Self-care, which is simply being able to soothe, reassure, and take care of yourself when you're feeling bad, is a necessary skill when struggling with jealousy. This can include meditating, writing in the journal, spending time with friends, exercising, doing something creative, or pampering yourself. Other people need to share their feelings with their partner in order to help resolve them. When expressing yourself take responsibility for how you feel. Your feelings are yours, don't project them onto the other person.

Steps of a good man or woman are ordered by the Lord. | In our earnestness for mercy from our confinements, we can sometimes selfishly tire of hearing about the outside rallies, prison projects, and campaigns; longing for nothing more than to return home to loved ones and escape the suffocation of our incarceration. We tend to give little thought of the work and perseverance it takes to muster up forces to renew an effort towards change. The growing number of people who support parole for lifers is growing steadily.

Without the persistence of great humanitarians that don't take NO for an answer and despite their personal life issues, they use their resources to summon up strength and courage to chip away at the injustices of Death By Incarceration.

To all who make up the multitudes that are criminal justice reformation we THANK YOU and appreciate you all. However, Daughters would like to pay homage to three resplendent surpassing women: etta cetera, Patricia Vickers, and Ava Nishita-Hawkinson. We sincerely thank them for sharing a piece of their lives with us, through *Daughters*.

*Irrefutably brazen, co-founder of Daughters, a brawler for the people her voice thunders. Two decades strong against the inequities and unfairness afflicted upon those in confinement, condemned to die. She is the influence and driving force behind the Let's Get Free publication. Nevertheless, a warrior her gallantry is enfolded with compassion that is felt by her nurturing spirit: she is **etta cetera**.*

Sarita: Hello etta, some of our readers know little about the city of Pittsburgh besides the iconic football team, the Steelers. Can you tell us a little about your city and why you call it home?

etta: Pittsburgh. This land was originally stewarded by people called the Adina, the Osage, the Monongahela, and so many more. I always say I tripped and fell in love and that the city stole my heart. I came to Pittsburgh from the deep, deep suburbs, known as Baltimore, Annapolis and Washington DC. Moved here from Maryland, lands of the Piscataway, when I was 23. Pittsburgh is where I really came into consciousness, where i came alive. Pittsburgh is gorgeous. It has more trees than any other city I think I've ever been - quite the opposite of the cloud cover steel town in my imagination. It's so green, the city of three rivers. And it has the most bridges of any city next to Venice. There are enchanting city steps that link streets in different neighborhoods and there's pockets of country in the city. The little neighborhood block I live on, we call Lil' West Virginia because it's a group of five houses



daughters

SP

Matriarchs: Queens of the Movement

together and there's trees on all sides and it just feels like a little piece of beautiful country. Turkeys and deer literally walk down the street. So with love and affection, we call it little West Virginia.

That said, Pittsburgh suffers from racial segregation, and institutional white supremacy and I would say certain elements of a sleepy town. You can often hear me saying "you can't take a shit in this town without somebody hearing about it" and that gets shortened to me just sayin' "you can't take a shit." LOL. So that means there can be infighting in justice organizations and perhaps it's more painful maybe than a larger city because there aren't a bunch of groups, there's just a few and it can feel really really sad when there is that fractionalization and infighting. And

simultaneously Pittsburgh is chock-full of giant hearted, justice committed, freedom fighters that I am proud to call my community.

Sarita: Your uncritical devotion towards human rights spans over 20 years. Please tell our readers how you began this amazingly heroic journey?

etta: Hey Sarita, it's sweet of you to call my journey a heroic one but I feel shy to read those words. The path that I have chosen I have chosen because I didn't see any other way to be. Fighting for collective liberation is me living my best life.

ers

reak

ent | Interviews by Sarita Miller, editor of *Daughters*

I could have fallen into any issue really because it honestly doesn't matter what issue you choose, whether that is working with children, the environment, labor issues, food, housing, etc. It's all connected and it just so happened that the issues surrounding criminal punishment, white supremacy & mass incarceration chose me.

In 1999 I became penpals with a person incarcerated in Texas who wrote an ad in a mail art magazine. Through our friendship I learned about the day-to-day injustice of being incarcerated, including that you could not just send your friend a book if you wanted to. So a friend named Neo Havoc, now known as Athena, and I started Pittsburgh's books to prisoner program called Book 'Em. Simultaneously I learned about Mumia Abu-Jamal.

(Today I was on social media and heard he is having heart surgery!! My whole entire heart is wishing you well Mumia!) At that time he was sentenced to death, the movement to stop his execution and to demand his freedom was very active. There were huge community meetings in Pittsburgh where 30 or more people would gather strategizing for justice. It was through Mumia's freedom struggle that I was able to learn about the historical silencing of black radicals, state violence, and the systematic realities of mass incarceration.

I was raised by Critical Resistance, a national organization that held regional conferences gathering people to sharpen their skills and strengthen their strategy to dismantle the prison industrial complex. I came to consciousness by reading thousands and thousands of letters written by people in prison through the books to prisoner program, the prison poster project, the Human Rights Coalition, through fight for lifers...

Then, you can't learn about prison without "coming to Jesus" about the historical legacy of racialized violence and so began an intentional unlearning of racism, self reflection, study of history and active participation in anti-racism, specifically challenging and supporting white people to work for racial justice. Lots of work to do on that front. (Any white people reading who want to study unlearning racism and reflect on the role of white people in the racial justice movement or just on earth, hit me up:)

It is important to note that I have done nothing on my own. There have always been amazing people in prison and out of prison, by my side. William Goldsby for one really paved the way for all of us in the movement to End Death by Incarceration. I appreciate his mentorship and friendship beyond words. Let us remember all the freedom fighters and movement matriarchs that came before, building those muscled shoulders on which we stand. Today i'm thinking of all the meeting goers, the phone callers, the email writers, the bookkeepers and letter mailers. The opinion givers. The participaters. The hope stokers. The artists. I'm thinking of the healers, the food preppers, dish doers, the babysitters, ride givers and event welcomers. The tech support. The ones who send a follow up texts to make sure you're ok when things are hard. So many hands and so many hearts... 18

Sarita: As a black woman serving a life sentence it dismays me to know that out of 5,467 people serving life in Pennsylvania people of color make up 70% of the lifer population. Please open up with your views on systematic racism.

etta: Well Sarita, I think systemic racism is a core problem. One of the pillars that Martin Luther King talked about - capitalism, militarism, and racism. (I would add the patriarchy to that list too...) As my good friend Big Rick Olds says, "Africans were kidnapped from Africa and mass incarcerated into the country. There is nothing new about mass incarceration." It's been said that the United States is the only country that was born racist. (also, born homophobic and transphobic - read *Queer Injustice*) It's no surprise that racial injustice is reflected in sentencing people to die in prison.

I believe a key to opening the fearful hearts of people of European descent - a key to gathering the strength that white people need in order to bear the weight of responsibility of repairing historical violence - can be revealed in the process of shifting from our modern day punishment paradigm to one of transformative justice. And I make this connection tangible through the struggle to abolish life without parole. To reckon with the harm my ancestors caused is to ask the same questions our movement is asking. How do we heal from violence? How do we survive? What is forgiveness and what is its role? How do we repair the harm that was caused?

Sarita: The fight for criminal justice reform and equality is spreading across the nation as more and more people are becoming aware of the need for change in the US prison systems. Can you share with our readers the one thing that you are most passionate about in regards to the movement for reform.

etta: I am excited that abolition is a household word and in 2021 it means something different. I'm excited that we are striving to dismantle the victim offender binaries that exist within our hearts and our minds; that we are challenging our communities to not cast people away when a trespass occurs. I am excited that the movement to end death by incarceration seems to grow each year AND OUR PEOPLE ARE COMING HOME and
19 that we have built a loving family of comrades

and community members on both sides of the walls that are really in it together and the love is real - family fights and all and we still show up. The journey IS the destination and how we get anywhere you know, so democracy is a process right, the criminal punishment system is a process right, so how we choose to move through the world together is a process and figuring that out collectively is my jam. I'm a process queen. Challenging the non profit industrial complex - here for it. Challenging grant making machines - here for it. Challenging capitalism - all day everyday, from my insides out, persisting when it gets hard because there's nothing slow or easy about abolishing life without parole. There is nothing fast or easy about abolition or shifting paradigms. Understanding the greatness of the task is a relief in some ways. We don't have to have all the answers. (Thank goddess.) I'm super excited about all of the end cash bail projects all across the country. I love creative resistance. I'm super excited about mutual aid projects across the country. And I'm always jazzed to think about the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls - that's one of my favorite organizations in the country bringing so many people together - led by phenomenal women who were formerly incarcerated.

Sarita: It is a known fact that the road can be tough for a returning citizen, not everyone is waiting with open generosity. Please inform our readers about the different programs and agencies who are willing to help those returning to Pittsburgh or may be interested in relocating to this city?

etta: One of the first things that Avis Lee has been working on since her return to the city of Pittsburgh is creating a resource guide for people returning to Allegheny County. She is doing incredible work, calling all the different resources, finding out who is eligible for them, experiencing herself what they have to offer. Let's Get Free will have an Allegheny County resource guide soon. There IS a resource guide for finding jobs in Allegheny County that our friend Jude put together, that I can share with people. It's HUGE. You can find it online or write to LGF. Again, it's Allegheny County-centric but there is a ton of helpful info for anyone coming home (go to returningcitizensjobsearch.wordpress.com). I have been working on amassing reentry resources for different counties so if you write I can share what I have.

The PO's I have heard about don't bend over backwards to find resources for you or even tell you about them. One here and there are gems for real (I see you, Ms. Steele), but few and far between. So ask! And if the PO won't answer your question, ask someone else. You must be your own advocate. Don't take no for an answer. They might hand you a piece of paper or tell you about a program but it's really up to you to make the phone calls and get yourself into programs and advocate for your own resources.

Sarita: etta, whenever returning citizens are blessed to get that second chance it seems your smiling face and embracing warmth can be seen throughout the footage of these joyous occasions. How does it make you feel personally to see people regain their freedom after having done decades behind bars?

etta: It's emotional. I'm remembering when Terrell Johnson came home after 17 years of wrongful conviction. I was so happy for Sandra and the whole family and then Saleem. It's amazing and tearful. Avis was one of my closest friends to really get out of prison and that just happened about two months ago. It was surreal! Waiting all this time, of course I was waiting outside of prison with full time fridge access. It was a flurry of excitement when I heard the news that the Govs finally signed on. I was surprisingly very distracted, I was frazzled- didn't really know what to do with myself. I wanted everything to be just right. Host anxiety!

One of the things is that nothing really went the way that Avis or I imagined it and it's always really hard to make plans when the prison or the corrections center won't tell you what's happening. (Psychological torture is what it is, the way the prisons never tell you what's happening.) So, I thought I was going to get to hang out with Avis the day she got to Pittsburgh-- instead I was allowed to bring her groceries and a phone and clothes and things, but I wasn't allowed to see her because she went straight to quarantine for 14 days. She was now so close - a 10 minute drive away - but we still couldn't hang out.

But it's been about two months now and Avis and I get to hang out almost every day because we work together. Sometimes I just can't believe that I can lean over the back of my chair and ask Avis a question when before I would have to wait for her to call or wait for her to get a connect network or a snail mail... Sometimes it just feels kind of normal

like we've been together forever. And other times it feels like we are just starting to get to know each other.

Every time somebody gets out, it truly is a win for everyone and it keeps the wind beneath the sails of all of us on the outside to persevere and to never give up and to know that that could be our loved ones smiling in those pictures, hugging their family. You hear me readers, one day it's gonna be you in those pictures!

Sarita: Do we see you slowing down in the future or are you just getting warm?

etta: Well I like to say I'm pushing 50 right now. My birthday is soon. I'm actually going to be 47 but I'm joking that I'm close enough to 50 to claim it and I can't wear hard pants anymore (CUZ I'M 50) I can only wear soft pants. Soft pants forever! Hard pants never! (A covid meme). Soft pants and early nights aside, I will continue to fight for justice as long as there's a breath in my body - to my body's capacity. I'm not trying to wear myself out. I do believe in taking breaks and enjoying my relationships and enjoying the earth and I am a dog person now--I always thought I was a cat person because I had cats when I was little but I understand that at this point in my life I'm a dog person and I take care of my friends dogs because I can't really handle the responsibility of having my own dog. Can anyone truly "have" a dog? It's the dogs that have us. I understand that I'm reinforcing the dog person cat person binary and it is possible to be both a cat and dog person. I'm just letting you know that I'm not going anywhere, and not without my sense of humor:) I do think it's healthy for organizations to intentionally transition leadership. It is my hope that Let's Get Free will continue to thrive without me in 5 years, goddess willing. Not saying I'm leaving but am planning to shift my role.

It's also ok for organizations to end. It is, afterall, the organizer's job to replace themselves and put themselves out of business. Won't need a prison advocacy organization once prisons and the punishment paradigm are no longer in practice. You catchin' my drift? You smellin' what i'm steppin' in?

Sarita: You know I'm truly appreciative to you for opening yourself up for our readers, I'm so extolled. Thank you, much love. 20

Her accreditation brings validity by her actions that have proven her passion and love for humanity. She is a defender against prison exploitation and the dehumanization of her communities. Her characteristics set a platform for strong, black graceful femininity.

*She is the backbone of the proclaimed news magazine "The Movement." She is one of the many dedicated activists that make up The Human Rights Coalition for the union of prisoners. Ms. Patricia Vickers lovingly known as **mama patt**.*



Sarita: Hey Mama Patt, so excited and humbled that you have agreed to this interview, so let's dive right in. Were you born and raised in Philadelphia?

Mama Patt: Hi Sarita. First, I thank you for allowing me to be a part of your newsletter, and second, I want you all to know that I'm accustomed to being a background person. I'm shy and not comfortable being on the front page of anything. With that said, I was born and raised in West Philadelphia.

Sarita: I'm from Philly also and despite the bad reputation our city seems to have, I'm a city girl and have lived all over Philadelphia. What other sections of the city have you lived in?

Mama Patt: Literally, I was born and raised in West Philly. Never stepped foot in South Philly or North Philly or Germantown until I was in my thirties. That's so funny to me when I think back on it. I guess I had a sheltered childhood.

Sarita: Mama Patt, there are some women within the prison system who are unaware of your many credentials and contributions in the fight for criminal justice reform. Would you care to share with our readers how you got started in activism and became a member of the Human Rights Coalition (HRC)?

Mama Patt: I always say I got started in this work for selfish reasons. My reason was to protect my young son who was sentenced to life in prison at the age of 17. As a mother my mission was to figure out how to protect my son in a prison full of grown men, I imagined the worst. I was afraid for
21 him. I felt helpless, I felt nobody cared about

his young life, I felt that I failed as a mother. None of my life experiences had taught me how to deal with this, not college, not years of working as a supervisor or manager, looking back, I'd only been taught to follow the rules not question the rules.

In 2001 my son asked me to attend Human Rights Coalition (HRC) meetings, a grassroots organization that he, Maroon Shoatz, and others had started. I went to my first HRC meeting and found that here were other mothers and wives just like me. We each saw our loved ones as a human BEING, a person, a child, husband, father or brother. We bonded around the fact that our loved ones were more than a lost cause, an enemy of the state, worthless or any of the names they were given.

We supported each other and I realized that I was not alone. This was my new family, and their children were my children because we were all going through the same ordeal; we were all fighting for the humanity of our loved ones. I realized that everyone in prison deserved to be treated like a human being. I learned that together we had power and we could say no not my child. And the next thing I knew it was twenty years later and I'm fighting for everyone who is victim of perpetual punishment and I've become Mama Patt, the activist.

Sarita: Mama Patt, I so feel you on that. I have two grown sons and my biggest fear is them being incarcerated. Since the blessed release of many of Pennsylvania's juvenile lifer population, freedom for the remaining men and women serving life sentences has taken a popular forefront. However, there are so many other injustices within the Department of Corrections that demand attention. Can you please enlighten our readers who may not be aware of the battle against solitary confinement and how it affects those who have to endure it?

Mama Patt: You're right, freedom for men and women serving life sentences has, I'm excited to say, taken the forefront and you're right, there are so many injustices that continue within the DOC, so we cannot forget the men and women left behind in prison. Fighting for the rights of people in prison is what we at HRC do. For years we've received letters from people telling horrific stories about physical and mental abuse in prison, mostly in the bowels of solitary confinement where there

are little to no witnesses. Think of the police officer holding his knee on George Floyd's neck and multiply that to the tenth degree of every single day, that's how it is with people in prison. It is punitive at every turn. I'm not saying that every prison guard is bad, just like every policeman is not bad but there are those who are bad, and the administration chooses to look the other way. The way they treat our loved ones in prison reminds me of the old slave masters who felt entitled and justified to do what they wanted, when they wanted, and how they wanted, to a slave; a person. For example: Slaves had no rights; prisoners

have no rights. Dehumanizing is the norm in US prisons. The guards are supported in whatever they want to do to a prisoner in the name of safety. The guard's word is believed over any prisoner. Slaves had no ownership of their body, they were forced to be examined naked at any time the master felt it to be necessary among other things; prisoners (this happens to both male and female) are forced to be examined naked anytime the guards feel it is necessary for example, stopped in the corridor, watched while showering using

the toilet, and before and after every visit with family which continues even with the new body scanners that are supposed to see inside your body - if a prisoner disobeys they may be beaten and or thrown into solitary confinement: a female refused to be searched and simply asked for a female guard to search her and she was thrown into solitary confinement. Slaves could not speak freely to a slave master; prisoners are not allowed to speak freely to the guards; a person in prison recently told a guard that he should have a mask on and was thrown into solitary confinement. Slaves could not disobey their masters; prisoners cannot disobey the guards if a person in prison is told to do anything right or wrong the order must be obeyed or they will be beaten and/or thrown in solitary confinement: a person in prison recently refused to go into a cell with a person who had COVID and she was thrown into solitary confinement. Slaves could not show any defiance no matter how slight; prisoners are retaliated against when they file grievances, when they file lawsuits, when they tell the outside world what is happening on the inside.



Mama Patt, son, Shakaboona, & LT

In prison retaliation comes in the form of losing mail, denying phone calls, shouting obscenities and threats, denying your visits, coming into your cell and destroying what little sentimental items you are allowed - like photos, tablet, typewriter, clothing - like denying you food, denying you heat in the winter, sexual abuse, labeling you as a threat, or mentally ill, and putting that information in your file so that it follows you wherever you go within the prison system. As in slave days, they have complete control over your person.

Slaves were separated from their families; prisoners are often sent to facilities far (3-8 hours by car from their loved ones) and families are treated accusingly, judgmentally, and disrespectfully when they visit; they are denied a visit after traveling for hours for minor reasons without a bit of concern. I could go on and on with the comparisons, but I think you get my point.

And the injustices are so ingrained it feels normal to the DOC Administration. We had to fight to allow women to not be handcuffed and shackled

while delivering the babies. We are fighting against the use of the restraint chair. We've fought to shut down prisons where the foul treatment of prisoners were exposed like SCI-Cresson. We are fighting to shut down prisons built on the toxic coal ash like SCI-Fayette. We are fighting against people being in the dungeons of solitary confinement for decades! I see people as victims; helping them is no-brainer. I feel like people out here, well they show more concern about the weather.

Sarita: There has always been much propaganda within the female prison population that male prisoners are more proactive in the fight for reform, in the jist of things there may be some legitimacy to this sort of thinking amongst the female population. What advice would you give to the women who may be intimidated by prison authority that may encourage them to get more involved in reform while incarcerated?

Mama Patt: My suggestion would be to let the outside world - HRC, family, friends - know what's 22

going on, and have witnesses and evidence to back you (grievances, dates, times, name of guard; etc.) I understand that it is frightening because of retaliation by the guards; if I was in prison I know for a fact I would not make it! But for those who have strength we at HRC will make your issues public and will only use your name if you say it's okay.

Sarita: As a woman serving a life sentence since 2004 I know that things have changed considerably in my city and community as a whole. What changes do you think are a plus to returning citizens after decades of incarceration, and what do you feel would be our biggest challenges?

Mama Patt: That's a good question. I often ask people returning home from prison these same questions because I see the changes minute-to-minute and day-to-day, so the full change is not as surprising to me. But we've done interviews on people recently returning home in our news magazine *The Movement*, trying to share just this type of information with the folks on the inside. Changes that I think are a plus for people returning home would be that juvenile lifers who came home have become role models. They've shown society that it is not a risk to release lifers back into the community; there has been a less than 1% rate of recidivism.

They are getting jobs and no matter how small the pay they are not too proud to work. Some are going back to school, getting degrees, some getting married, some having children for the first time and some are doing the work of reaching back trying to help those they've left behind. I got to tell you I feel like a proud mama, but I know I had nothing to do with it; it is all of their hard work and commitment to create a positive life for themselves and those they care about. As for challenges again I couldn't tell you personally but I've heard that technology is a challenge: computers, laptop, ipad, email, Instagram, online ordering, online bill paying, getting used to Zoom meetings.

I've also heard that trying to figure out where you fit within your family since being in prison, family dynamics change such as the youngest may now be the head of the family and younger family members may not know you at all, in some cases you return home as a stranger. Old neighborhoods have changed and the city is going to look a lot different than you remember, so don't be too proud to ask family to go out with you the first few times you go out. I've heard stores are overwhelming for most since

they have about 10-20 different types of Dove soap, coffee, toothpaste, toilet tissue, cereal, deodorant, mouthwash, ice cream, and etc. I've personally stood in the greeting card aisle for an hour trying to pick out one card, imagine trying to do that for each item you want to buy.

Sarita: Sounds like all the things I look forward to. Personally it means FREEDOM. Mama Patt this interview was amazing for me and I just have one last question. Do you see yourself ever retiring from the struggle?

Mama Patt: I've got to be realistic, I'm getting old and this struggle will be here long after I am gone. But while I'm living and breathing I'll never give up. I've learned that every little success helps not just a few but everyone on the inside. My son Shakaboona Marshall, a juvenile lifer, got big plans and is itching to get out here to break down this punitive inhumane injustice system; and guess what? I plan to be by his side doing my small part - clearing the way, taking names and making calls, holding the callous accountable, blasting them in the news media, rallying, protesting, closing prisons, and saving lives.

Sarita: Thank you so much Mama Patt.

Young, vibrant, standing firm for the cause of justice. Open-minded, sensitive and caring, unafraid to speak up. She is diligent in working with those who are limited in helping themselves. An example to be admired by her peers, poster child for the next generation. Welcome
ava nishita-hawkinson.



Sarita: Ava thank you for your participation in our second issue of Daughters. You are the youngest of the matriarchs but no less, one of the Queens Behind The Movement, can you please tell us who Ava Nishita-Hawkinson is.

Ava: I just want to say how honored I am to be in such incredible company. I wouldn't say that I'm a matriarch, but a learner in all of this, learning from folks inside and outside of prison who are fighting for people to come home. There's so much wisdom and love within this movement, and I'm just grateful to be surrounded by such good people.

Sarita: Most women here at SCI Muncy are familiar with Let's Get Free and The Human Rights Coalition who are famous for The Movement publication; however, some are not aware of the marvelous work you all do now; or of the tremendous impact Right 2 Redemption (R2R) has within the prison community. How did you become affiliated with R2R and what is your position in this criminal justice organization?

Ava: In 2015, I became friends with someone who is a part of CADBI and she introduced me to the members of Right 2 Redemption. R2R is a coalition of people who are sentenced to die in prison and who are fighting to end Death By Incarceration sentences in Pennsylvania. I supported R2R through co-managing their website and social media. These online platforms are crucial to R2R's mission because they're places for R2R members to share their stories, insights, and messages. Death by Incarceration sentencing won't change unless the narratives that surround people in prison change, and prisons do so much to obscure the humanity of the people inside of them. R2R knows this and works against it through storytelling. My goal is to make R2R member's narratives clear and accessible.

Sarita: As an advocate for and sometimes against our criminal justice system, what are some of the hardest things you have come across in the struggle for change and what is most rewarding in working with prisoners?

Ava: The most rewarding thing is when people come home, that is just the biggest joy in the world. After supporting R2R's work for a few years now I also think of many of the members not just as comrades, but also as friends. It's honestly just rewarding to be a part of their lives and to know them. Prisons do so much to make people on the outside forget that inherently precious and important people are locked away from us sometimes with no hope of leaving in the current legal system. And not only that -- prisons work to hide from us how much we need people to come home. We need people to come home so badly! One of the hardest things has been COVID. The prison safety protocols are based in isolation and deprivation, not in effectiveness; people are medically very vulnerable and entirely unable to social distance. I've been so afraid that people will die because the DOC is not even doing the bare minimum to keep people safe.

Sarita: R2R is known for its social media and website development. Can you tell our readers how that pertains to any services for incarcerated individuals?

Ava: I spoke about this a little bit earlier, but one of R2R's goals is to change the narrative related to people sentenced to die in prison and to show how critical folks in prison are to true healing in communities, cities, our country, and the whole world. The social media and website are meant to make space for R2R voices and their insight and knowledge. Supporting R2R for me has also meant facilitating communication between members inside and groups/projects on the outside so that R2R can connect more with others and push for change. Some people also don't know that R2R has been organizing for many, many years; they created CADBI, and of course they've been critical to call for change in legislation, elect just policy makers and bring communities and different groups together in the fight for liberation.

Sarita: As a young woman who has graduated from college, congratulations to you Ava! You are now working in your field of study full time. How do you manage to juggle all that responsibility and still be a part of R2R?

Ava: R2R has been a big part of my education when I was taking a class organizing. One R2R member Saadiq called in to our class and gave a whole lesson on coalition-building to me and my classmates. I've also often asked members for their input on projects and papers. It's a juggle managing all of it but working with others means I'm never juggling it alone.

Sarita: Ava it's been a pleasure doing this interview with you and of course your wealth of information was a sure enough plus! Is there anything else you would share with our readers before we close?

Ava: I guess I'd just want readers to know and to think about who stands to benefit from ending Death By Incarceration sentences and bringing people HOME! In my opinion, it is all of US. Instead of perpetuating harm by keeping people away from their families and communities; people need to be home to address harm and work toward healing for ALL of us. I think the relationships I've built with R2R members have been a model to me of what community and healing could look like if we didn't lock people away. We could be working for liberation without prison walls in our way.

Sarita: Ava, my friend I have to let all our readers know that this journey I have undertaken all started with a simple invitation to join R2R and reach out to you and submit an article. Thank you Ava, your responses were educational and refreshing.

my mental health journey

by Sarita Miller

"There is nothing wrong with me!"

"I have the right to be this way!"

*"So what I don't give a fu*k!"*

"Look what they did to me!"

"The world owes me!"

I could have gone on and on back then making up excuses for my atrocious former behaviors. Now that I look back on things I definitely had obvious symptoms relating to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), clinical depression and obsessive compulsive disorders. Although I didn't know this back then, it showed in my actions each and every millionth time I would stuff my crack-pipe to the brim. How many people reading this article thus far, can already connect with the few words I have written? Let me take you back a little further. My mother passed away when she was 19 years of age. I was only three at the time and I have no memory of her, except what I have created through pictures and daydreams. My childhood was abusive, plain and simple. Children don't come into the world knowing that their lives are valuable or that they have worth. That must be taught through the parents by showing love, attention, patience, and nurturing. I had none of that. I was raised by a father who believed in corporal punishment and at times it seemed to me, he took sadistic pleasure in torturing his baby girl. Locked away in the dark and coldness of my room, when my father grew tired of beating the pigment from my skin, he often would scream obscenities of how worthless I was going to be "a whore, useless." My eight-year-old mind absorbed every experience with my father like a sponge dropped into the ocean. My only outlet was into the den of a pedophile protected by grandmother who turned a blind eye to every single thing that was happening. Needless to say as I grew into a young woman my concept of normal was completely twisted and sick. I found solace in one abusive relationship after another, losing count!

Pregnant by 16 and a chronic pipe smoker by 19, my life was totally disastrous. However, I do recall a period of time where I mustered the strength to
25 leave my love affair with darkness. I stopped

using drugs, started to attend school, graduated, started to work in the field of my choice, moved out the hood leaving every bad thing behind, or so I thought. No matter how I tried, how hard I fought, I lost the battle to every stereotype of the unbalanced caricature that defines a junkie. Neglectful mother, hypersexed Jezebel, selfish, diseased and worthless. Relapsing solidified every evil word pounded into that 8-year-old little girl. Tired of fighting what I thought was the inevitable, I embraced my out of control life, dissociating myself with any sense of reality. Dragging anyone into my hell who dared to love me. I was a mess! When I rationalized and totally embraced my demons, it led me down a path I never saw coming: HOMICIDE. Now I sit 17 years on a life sentence. Before you cry for me, let me tell you about the tremendous journey I have taken to recovery and how God forms beauty out of SCARS. When I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior He began to teach me how to be brave and face MYSELF. Dealing with me and admitting my wrongs and that I needed mental help was one of the best and hardest things I could have done for myself. I had to learn through many years of failures, ups and downs that I was worthy of love, respect, peace, and fulfillment and I didn't have to settle for less. Through prayer and God's guidance I started to seek out by reaching out to the prison psych department and reading medical books pertaining to my situation. I was tired of being sick and no longer would I allow fear or embarrassment to hinder me. One day while at the library I came across a book called "What the Blues is All About" by Angela Mitchell and Kennise Herring Ph.D. One narrative of this amazing book really struck my heart and I would like to share it with our readers:

"In unhealthy relationships women develop negative or unproductive senses of self and negative unproductive self images are reinforced. We develop views of ourselves as lovable or unlovable, as able to give or receive love or unable as a result of our interactions with others. So when we are *used* to being mistreated, abused, ignored, belittled or betrayed, we may get a message that we *deserve* this treatment. Especially if we have always been treated this way. Poor treatment

by the ones we love sets us up to expect and accept continuing poor treatment and this destroys our self esteem.

Sisters, we no longer have to be somebody's side piece, booty call, bottom bitch, or punching bag. Low self-esteem is a vicious cycle that is linked to mental health more than likely due to some sort of trauma in our lives. And please know that no matter how bad our lives have been we can always take refuge in knowing that GOD LOVES HIS DAUGHTERS. This is the very reason I named this publication *Daughters*: because God wants you to know He is waiting on you! When we take time to search His word and call on Him He will point us in the right direction, put the right people in our path,

and provide us with the right resources. However ladies, it's so up to us to make a choice, through courage to want to get help. And I'm not talking about medication but sheer will power to face ourselves. Most of us aren't that far gone, there is redemption for us! Please make a conscious decision to break free from our past so we will no longer fill these prisons. Never give up!

**Note from the Editor: Mental health issues are real and millions of people suffer in silence. No longer are the days when mental health issues are placed on a shelf. There are numerous public resources, foundations, hotlines, and crisis centers that are available. Please reach out.*

SHE

Born without, motherless, never knew, poverty becomes her, isolated, darkness, cold, sunrays struggle to illuminate. Young skin worn away slashed ... WHY?

SHE ... Brutalized emotionally shattered. First male encounter, DADDY ... WHY? Who are you? Nothing ... clothed in worthlessness, you wear it well. Slave to white rocks, back turned to children, searching, abusive, one after another. Will you love me ... this time: Who are you? Trauma ... What if ... maybe you could see ... my mind.

I am SHE ... We are SHE ...



poem by Sarita Miller
illustration by Keisha Barnes

stop the stigma on mental health

by Kimberly Porter-Douglas

Stigma by definition is a mark of disgrace or reproach. While I believe, in recent years, there has been more awareness brought to mental health, there is still a stigma attached to admitting I have mental health issues. I am a 37 year old woman who, looking back, has suffered from mental health issues since my pre-adolescent years. I was raised in a home where "family business" was not ever to be dealt with, or by outsiders in any capacity, so when at 13 years old I was running away, using heroin, contemplating suicide, and being arrested. I'd say it was evident I was in need of some help around that time. The juvenile "justice" system offered mental health services to me and my family; however, there was no follow up by the system (that was supposed to protect me), when my family politely declined the help. "She's bad, not crazy" was their response.

I learned quickly by the looks my family gave that the phrase "mental health issues" came with a negative connotation. It was embarrassing and even shameful. There began my learned behavior and continuation of the cycle to stigmatize mental health issues. The result of not just simply accepting help from "go" was spending the next 20 years in my own personal Hell. This personal hell I refer to would consume all areas and relationships in my life. I believed by mental health issues and result of a chemical imbalance mixed with external factors such as sexual abuse, being the child of an alcoholic, and years of life in active addiction by not initially seeking help at first sign of symptoms, I continued to compile a laundry list of emotional, behavioral, and mental health issues. Looking back it seems kind of ridiculous that

I was willing to seek treatment for using drugs, an eye doctor to get glasses, a dentist to fix my teeth but never a specialist to treat the depression bipolar, low self-esteem, anxiety, ADD, or any member of other mental health issues I was struggling with upon arriving to SCI-Muncy. I initially denied having these issues due to the stigma attached, but also because I believed reporting them would be another roadblock to being granted parole upon reaching my minimum. I smiled and said "I'm fine," while inside of myself I was dying. Since then I've gained insight as to what works for me. I needed help and a lot of it. The chemicals and the streets were removed but now what? My first piece of peace came from my faith, praying for clarity and guidance. As a woman in prison, finding individualized treatment can be difficult, to put it mildly. At first mention of any issues (in my opinion) medication was too quickly offered and with such large caseloads and cases more severe than mine being the priority. I felt stuck; however, I wasn't willing to continue to ignore myself and my needs in order to be successful any longer. I was fortunate enough to find some women in prison who are on the same journey I am. We made it our business to educate ourselves and share ways to help ourselves. In an environment where nobody wants to be viewed as weak and it's easier to turn away when you recognize the pain in another human being. I encourage all of us -- help your sister up. I don't care about the details that make us different, the pain is the same for all of us. Mental health issues are real and it's okay to not be okay. I encourage you to seek help if you need it. I wish and pray for the healing that all of us deserve.

there has to be a better way

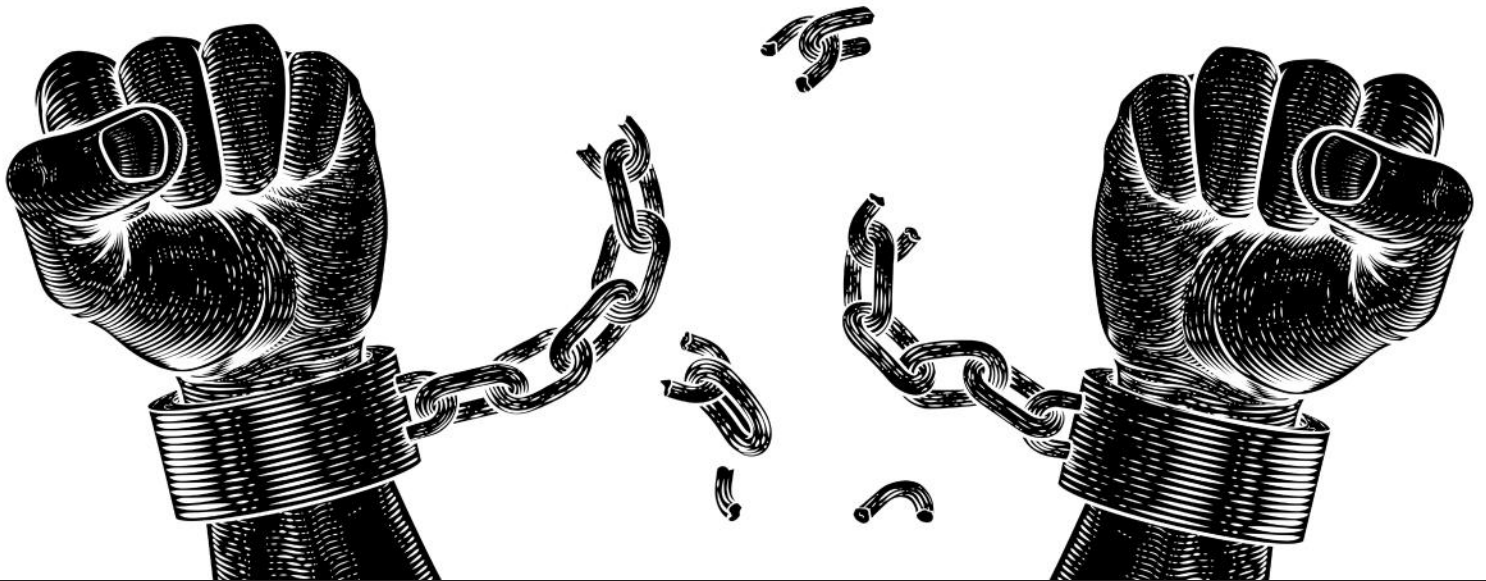
by Brenda Watkins

There has to be a better way of dealing with our mental health, comrades. I was put into a cell with an aggressive, belligerent, mentally ill person. Yes! You guessed it, the inevitable happened. I was attacked. I don't blame this person for what happened because this person is sick and in need of professional help; I'm angry because I had to defend myself and by defending myself I lost everything that I worked so hard for. I believe this all could have been avoided if someone had paid attention, the

signs were there! So how does one convince the Board of Pardons that they are a changed person when you're stuck in between a rock and hard place? What could I have done differently when no one came to my aid? If it weren't for my neighbor the situation would have been much worse. Was I supposed to just lay down and let this person beat and kick me to death to prove that I'm a changed person? Having to defend myself shouldn't be a strike against me.

faith's cornerstone

by Sarita Miller



I HEAR THE PRISONER'S CRY

Scripture Reading:

"Let the sighing of the prisoner come before thee; according to the greatness of thy power preserve thou those that are appointed to die." (Psalm 79:11)

I hear even the weakest sigh. When the prisoner calls out to ME, I am listening for I was a prisoner once also (*Isaiah 53:8*). I have known the anguish, the terror, the hate, the cruelty, the hopelessness of the prisoner who is condemned to death. Neither does it make any difference whether the prisoner is guilty or innocent. I will help the guilty prisoner bowed down with care, the erring child, the worst of the worst, if he cries unto ME - just as readily as I will hear the child of mine who lives in a Siberian prison camp for MY NAME's sake. I stand with the accused, the guilty, for I died for that one also. But

they need to sigh to ME. They need to turn to ME with all their hearts. I call you to love the prisoner and be merciful unto him in the same way as I love him. You need to feel his agony for a while so that you can understand him. For many the only way they can be released from their sentence is by the door of death. There are those who have been sentenced to death - some justly and some unjustly. But if they cry out unto ME and I can see a reason to prolong their life, then I can preserve those who are appointed to die. Do not despair, Man's verdict is not MY VERDICT. I can intervene and deliver the prisoner from the most secure prison known to man. Did I not? deliver Paul and Silas and Peter? My angels still open prison doors today. (*Acts 5:17, Acts 12:4-10, Acts 16:25-28*)

Devotional taken from Gwen R Shaw's book *DAY by DAY: A Daily Praise of Offering*

living healthily: breaking away from codependency

excerpt from the introduction | by Marie Scott

This workbook is for women in prison who are codependent and how we live out our lives with these behaviors, some of which brought us to prison in the first place. If you are a female in prison, take a look at what happens while you are in here. If you experience similar situations, chances are, you need help with codependency.

A large number of women who enter prison suffer from codependency. Women are defeated from the door with society's gender scripts and how they should behave. Men are fixers, whereas women are care-takers of the family unit. Often codependent behaviors lead women to prison, where they continue these behaviors with other women while serving out their sentences.

A lot of us who enter prison, create these same family structures with other women, (i.e. fathers, sisters, husbands, children). Some of us have been taking care of things and people for so long that it has become second nature to us, causing us to continue as care-takers. And sometimes, that care-taking leads to breaking laws. Care-taking, coupled with the need to please others, is why many of us are in prison today.

Some of us continue to care-take, people please and try to fix others' situations. We will care-take our girlfriend relationships in prison and try to fix any problems that arise.

Some codependent women constantly worry if they are upsetting another inmate and the only way to feel any type of relief from that frustration/fear is to help someone by fixing their problems, be it financial, social, etc. We believe that we are so good at taking on other people's problems and feelings, that sometimes we forget it's not our problem! And we will become more upset over the problem than the original owner of it.

Some will act out impulsively, trying to please their mate or others by choosing to engage in illegal activities while serving out their sentences.

29 Sometimes a codependent's need to please

becomes more important than their freedom. Others are so controlling that when someone or something threatens that control, they become violent.

Some women have never set a boundary in their life! The word 'No' is just not in our vocabulary. We have a hard time asking for help. Others worry themselves senselessly trying to help everyone but themselves. We are so busy worrying about what other inmates are saying about us or how they feel about us that it tears at the very fabric of our self-worth, leaving us depleted of any self-esteem.

Other women who are still in the throes of codependency will risk not only their recovery, but their freedom. They continue the codependent behaviors of lending and borrowing, well aware it is against the rules. They will risk getting discharged from programs and getting a setback from the parole board for failure to complete institutional programming, all for the sake of sneaking commissary to someone out in the yard. All of these negative behaviors of the codependent female in prison drain them emotionally, physically and spiritually - and tend to block any positive progress.

Some codependent women in prison cannot deal with being alone. This kind of fear-based rationale makes them believe they 'must' have a woman or a man (a boyish girl) while in prison. Some do not even know their own identity, so they become chameleons in prison by becoming anyone someone else wants them to be—a guy, a servant, a sugar momma, etc. As long as they are getting attention, it matters not who they portray. They will put their entire lives on hold just to satisfy others' needs. These women are taken advantage of financially by other inmates with self-serving motives.

Sometimes the need for attention can be so strong in codependent women, that it will not matter the kind of attention they receive, (e.g., being beaten up by another inmate they think they are in love with). Instead of taking care of themselves financially, they will spend their family's money on everyone in their cell, cube or dorm, causing their family to use money

they may not have.

Some women will see a friend who is in a negative relationship and exert their power and control over the situation in order to rescue their friend, not recognizing that they are being controlling in someone else's business.

Some codependent women feel as though 'protecting their man' by taking the 'fall' for them is what loyalty is all about. Just take a look at the television series 'For My Man!' These women are what I call 'fixers'. At this point, their own morals and values are already compromised. Some women inmates were never taught any virtues. How can we as women expect to have any virtues when these types of behaviors are in the forefront of our lives?

Because I believe codependency is like any addiction, (meaning, we never rid ourselves of it), it will always try to pay us another visit. Maintaining recovery from codependency has all the pitfalls of recovering from any addiction.

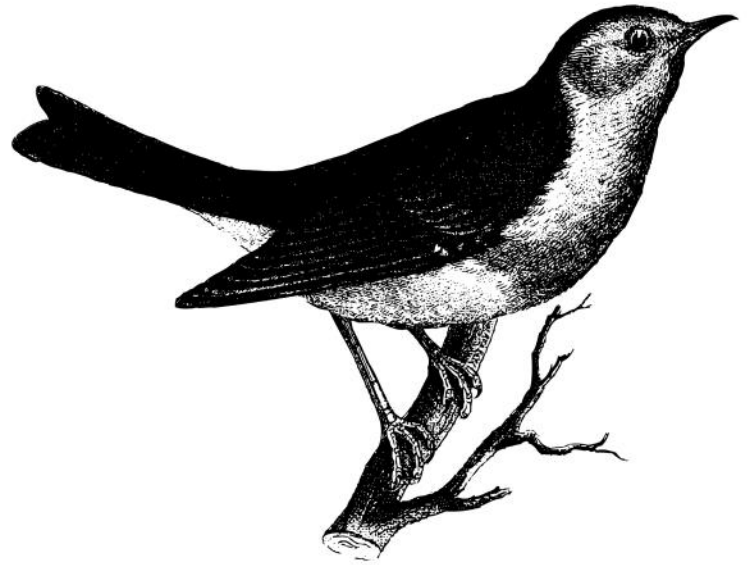
Codependency is a broad topic. Therefore, this workshop series will concentrate on the three most common traits that most of us in prison suffer from while serving out our sentences, namely care-taking, controlling and dependency.

These sessions will cover each behavior, with stories from prison involving the behavior and ways to break the cycle by changing our core beliefs. Once our core beliefs about ourselves change, our behaviors will change as well.

This 58-page curriculum manual is designed by Marie "Mechie" Scott, a women sentenced to life without parole whose codependency caused her to take the life of an innocent human being.

If you would like a FREE copy of this workbook please write to:

**Let's Get Free
460 Melwood #300
Pittsburgh, PA 15213**



my lucky peepers

by Loni Krick

I had been in prison for 24 years, and we are never allowed pets. But as I walked down a sidewalk, I saw a tiny baby robin lying on the ground. Three feral cats were circling him. I walked over, scooped him up and put him in my pocket. He could not even lift his head, and was so frail and weak.

When I brought him to my cell, I made a little oatmeal and put peanut butter in it. I used the top of a pen cap to feed him. I used a bottle from eye drops to be his water bottle. I named him Lucky Peepers, and spent days cuddling and encouraging him.

As Lucky Peepers grew, I used my shoes and boxes to help him learn how to grasp things and get higher. In just one week, he had doubled in size, learned to eat and drink on his own, and learned to fly. I promised him that when he could fly to my top bunk, I'd let him go.

Every day, when I came in the room, Lucky Peepers would greet me with chirping and fly to my shoulder. One day, when I came in the room, he was on my top bunk. As I sat down, he landed on my head and sat there chirping away. So, I knew it was time to set him free.

Later that day, I put Lucky Peepers in my pocket and took him with me to the chapel. I had him on my finger, emotionally saying goodbye. I tossed him in the air, and up to the top of the chapel he flew. In all my years here, Lucky Peepers was my best companion. I could never forget him.

the wrong road

by Denise Crump

I've been thinking about my past life and the road I traveled on. It was like driving a car. I was in my own world where there were no rules. I did what I wanted to do and if people got hurt along the way, I didn't care. One day I was bored and didn't know what to do, so I decided to take a journey. I opened the door to where I was living and walked down the street. I saw a car lot with all kinds of cars in it. The cars were used and didn't cost that much. I knew one of the guys buying a car. I stopped to talk to him. I told him that I needed to get away from here. He showed me several roads. I chose the road where I thought I would fit in. I got in the car with him and we rode down a very wide road. There were too many cars to count. I liked the ride; it was enjoyable, to the point where I wanted to drive. I asked the guy if I could drive? He got out and walked to the passenger's side. I moved over to the driver's side. He got in and I began to drive. We rode a distance on this road. My journey has just begun. We met people who were like us and we got along. We all stayed in motion, there was no time for sitting still. Without knowing I made a wrong turn. It was dark out and I couldn't see that well. Before I knew it, I hit something ahead. It was a dead end. I stopped driving and opened the door to get out and I couldn't go any further. I ended up on a dead end road. My journey was over but it wasn't supposed to end this way. Suddenly I began to see clearly. I started asking myself questions:

1. What did I do?
2. Why did I do it?
3. Why did I allow myself to go this far?
4. What do I do now?

This situation could have been avoided. I chose to get behind a wheel without a license. I didn't know any of the rules for driving. I didn't have a permit. My friend trusted me to come along with him; he knew I didn't know how to drive. I can't blame him. I decided to do this. I must take responsibility for my decisions, as well as, my actions. Now I will face the consequences.

Don't let this be you. Always think things through because after everything is done and over with, you can't change what happened. Try not to beat yourself up over your past life. The best thing for you to do is face forward and reach out to others who can be a positive influence in your present life. Everybody needs somebody. You can't do it alone.



"Your legacy will live on and you are breaking through those walls"
- *Ronna Davis Moore Lead organizer*

Dignity Act Now Collective (DANC) teamed up with State Representative Summer Lee to create Trauma-informed care House Bill 1014. This bill would require correctional staff (including COs and medical staff) to have at least four hours of training related to trauma-informed care.

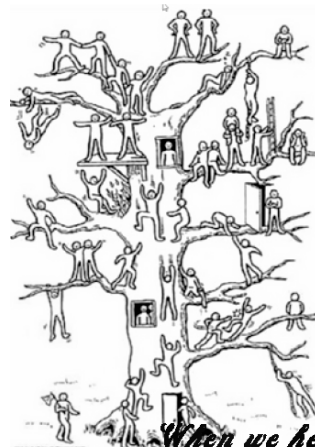
Trauma-Informed Care is a strengths-based approach to service delivery and organizational structure grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the widespread impact of trauma, including historical and identity-based trauma, that: recognizes the symptoms of trauma and its effects on individuals, families, communities, and those who provide services or work in care settings, understands multiple, complex paths to recovery, emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for providers, survivors, and their families, creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of safety, control, and empowerment, responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma and recovery into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively prevent re-traumatization.

DANC's Lead Organizer Racheal Santiago states in her Self play, "As I hear this woman degrade me disrespect me, I am in shock hurt scare angry. I didn't need this shit right now my son needs me. Every word that came out this women mouth sliced my face like a blade my stomach hurts as if it was being punched and kick. Her tone was hating for me, as if she wanted me dead on the spot."

Trauma-informed care House Bill 1014 helps to acknowledge an individual's history of trauma, understand their responses to trauma, and recognize the pathways survivors take in navigating safety and recovery.

Contact Us
412 437 1796

Blob tree Check In Activity



Take your time observing each of the blobs in and around the tree.

Then Choose one that sticks out to you

What do you notice about this blob's position, posture and or body language?

What do you notice about this blob's relationship to the tree and other blobs?

Why do you think this blob stuck out to you today?

When we heal together. We can Build together

PILP files lawsuit against DOC officials on behalf of transgender woman denied healthcare, surgery

On December 15, 2020, the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project filed a lawsuit on behalf of Dawn Guthrie, a transgender woman who says she is being denied vital healthcare, including gender affirmation surgery by the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC). The lawsuit alleges that plaintiff, a 46-year-old transgender woman currently incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution at Mahanoy, has suffered extreme distress and suicidal ideation, including instances of self harm, since her diagnosis of gender dysphoria in 1998.

"It's well known that transgender individuals are at a greater risk of harm in prisons," said Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz, Managing Attorney of the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project. "That risk only becomes greater when DOC officials continue to deny them the essential healthcare they need."

The plaintiff has lived fully as a woman since 2016, and she has been on hormone therapy since May of 2017. However, she still experiences severe gender dysphoria related distress and requires additional treatment through, among other accommodations, gender affirmation surgery. Medical and psychology personnel in the DOC have consistently approved and recommended the plaintiff's gender affirmation surgery but a central office committee has denied it.

"The DOC's actions of denying my surgery without medical reason, it's inexcusable. I think about suicide a lot," said Dawn Guthrie. "I've had doctors who have said my gender dysphoria will not be relieved without surgery, but the DOC's panel without any medical experience have just ignored that. Every day is a struggle living with gender dysphoria. The simplest daily chore such as showering or undressing causes severe emotional pain. Not all transgender individuals suffer from (GD) but those who do will tell you that it is not a choice to have this condition. This condition causes emotional pain that no person should wish on anyone."

According to the suit the DOC has violated her Eighth Amendment rights by refusing to provide adequate

healthcare for her gender dysphoria, including gender affirming surgery, despite recommendations from their medical staff. The DOC's refusal to provide her with this medically necessary care has caused her severe pain and anguish and places her at a substantial risk of future injury.

The lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania. Named as defendants in the lawsuit are Secretary John Wetzel, Dr. Paul Noel, Dr. Arlene Seid and Dr. Paluki Reddy. The plaintiff is represented by Alexandra Morgan-Kurtz and Amy Ernst of the Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project. Case number 1:20-CV-2351



Dawn Guthrie, April 2021

resource list

Please do not send unsolicited legal or case material to any organization.

Abolitionist Law Center
P.O. Box 8654
Pittsburgh, PA 15221
Webiste: abolitionistlawcenter.org

Amistad Law Project
5036 Locust Street 2nd Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19139
Phone: (267) 225-5884
Webiste: amistadlaw.org

Juvenile Law Center
The Philadelphia Building
1315 Walnut Street, 4th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19107
Local: (215) 625-0551
Toll-free: 1-800-875-8887
Webiste: jlc.org
Juvenile Law Center advocates for rights, dignity, equity and opportunity for youth in the child welfare and justice systems.

PA Prison Society
230 South Broad St., Suite 605
Philadelphia, PA 19102
Phone: 215-564-4775
Fax: 215-564-1830
Webiste: prisonsociety.org
You can request an official visit and report unjust conditions here.

PA Institutional Law Project
EASTERN/STATEWIDE ISSUES
The Cast Iron Building
718 Arch Street, Suite 304 South
Philadelphia, PA 19106
Phone: 215-925-2966
Website: pailp.org
**NOTE: The PAILPs only work on cases against the Institution (i.e. if your human rights have been violated) but may have more resources for your specific situation.*

Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project
PITTSBURGH
Diamond Building
100 Fifth Ave #900
Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Lewisburg Prison Project
CENTRAL/FEDERAL PRISON ISSUES
PO Box 128
Lewisburg, PA 17837-0128
Phone: 570-523-1104
Fax: 570-523-3944
Website: lewisburgprisonproject.org

Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE)
111 S. 38th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19104
PLSE seeks a more equitable social environment for those seeking pardons from the Governor.

Human Rights Coalition
4134 Lancaster Ave
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Phone: 267-293-9169
Webiste: hrcoalition.org
Advocates for people in prison who have their human rights violated. Special focus on solitary confinement. Publishes The Movement Magazine.

National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women
990 Spring Garden Street, Suite 703
Philadelphia, PA 19123-2606
Phone: 215-763-1144
Website: ncdbw.org

PA Innocence Project
Philly: 1515 Market St, Suite 300
Philadelphia, PA 19102
Pittsburgh: 914 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
The letter should briefly state your conviction, sentence and claim of innocence. Do not send any additional documents.

Let's Get Free
460 Melwood Ave., Suite 300
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
Website: letsgetfree.info
Write for commutation support kits, Allegheny County resources for returning citizens.

Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration (CADBI)
c/o Decarcerate PA
P.O. Box 40764
Philadelphia, PA 19107
**NOTE: Right to Redemption (R2R) uses the same address as CADBI.*
Webiste: decarceratepa.info/CADBI

Free the Ballot
PO Box 30820
Philadelphia, PA 19104
Website: freetheballot.org

Christian 12 Steps Ministry
PO Box 4321
Ocala, FL 34478-4321
Phone: (352) 732-0877
Christian 12 Steps Ministry is a Christian, bible-based study guide for use in recovery from addiction to substance abuse, emotional strongholds, and codependency.
Website: christian12step.org

on the day they come home

Former life-sentenced women dream of the day when women serving life come home

On the Day They Come Home is an ongoing collaborative project that amplifies the voices of formerly life sentenced women, and family members of those serving life sentences in Pennsylvania. The project includes poetry, audio pieces, billboards, interactive photography installations, and films co-created by Tamika Bell, Paulette Carrington, Starr Granger, Ivy Lenore Johnson and Yvonne Newkirk in collaboration with Mark Strandquist and Courtney Bowles.

The project is currently part of Monument Lab's new exhibition, *Staying Power*. When we consider the idea of staying power, we first ask: Who is missing? Who has been displaced? Who is fighting to help them return?

In North Philadelphia, the extreme of displacement is being permanently removed through life imprisonment. There are 200 women serving life in Pennsylvania. 54 of them are from Philadelphia.

On the Day They Come Home is both a monument and a memorial. As a monument, the installation celebrates the resiliency and power of former long-term and life-sentenced women, and those with impacted family members, through larger-than-life portraits, poetry carved out of charred wood, and interactive audio portals that amplify the stories behind the sculpture. Around each woman's portrait is a wreath of flowers that symbolize a core tenet of the abolitionist world the women advocate for: healing, resistance, resiliency, counter-narratives, and love.

As a memorial, the currently sentenced undeniably visible of animated lights sculpture), while and activism of life-died before gaining

The installation of the present, day when all women As a structure, the image of a prison chain and unified formation celebrate their power, and future for which these

Pennsylvania sentenced prison than any other is responsible for to Life Without Parole the United States. It's and bring our mothers, ones home!



installation makes those to life in Pennsylvania (through the hundreds suspended above the commemorating the lives sentenced women who their freedom.

highlights the struggles while imagining the serving life are set free. installation inverts the gang by creating a circular that hints at a crown to a stage to celebrate the women are fighting.

more teenagers to die in state, while Philadelphia sentencing more Juveniles than any other county in time to end life sentences sisters, grandmas, and loved

on the day they come home

Collective poem by Tamika Bell, Paulette Carrington, Starr Granger, Ivy Johnson and Yvonne Newkirk

On the day they come home,
we're gonna be there and it's gonna be beautiful.

The sun is shining
and there's a rainbow in the sky,
The clouds will form into a hand like it's releasing everyone,
then into a smile that's smiling down on everyone.
The air smells fresh, smells like flowers.

Everybody is real colorful, you know, bright and smiles.
We're clapping and hugging;
people in wheelchairs, people with canes and crutches,
we've aged while waiting for our loved ones to come home.

And then we see them coming towards the gate,
but they're not walking, they're running.

They're so happy to leave.
They're running out.
Screaming, we finally made it!

We're all standing there at the gate, like an assembly line,
hugging each and every last one of them.
People will see their grandmas, sisters, mothers, and
friends
who they never, ever thought they would see on the
outside.
And we're all out there, saying Welcome Home.

They'll feel the sun on their face like it's the first time.
They'll breathe in that air.
I think the earth is gonna shake.

As they walk through the gates,
Their brown uniforms will turn into whatever they
want to be wearing.
In there, they make us wear the most industrial color,
cocoa brown.
It's another way jail tries to strip away our femininity...
On that day, we would have a browns burning ceremony.
Burn those brown clothes, burn them!
We'll have a fire and roast marshmallows on them.
I don't even like marshmallows, but I'd like them that day.

Peachie, would appear.
She was our go-to,
she worked so hard to help us get our freedom.
It makes me think about slavery.
Like thinking you're always gonna live like this,
never get to be free.
It saddens me that she passed not knowing that it really
happened.

Peachie's there, hugging everybody, kissing everybody
and saying,
I told y'all! I knew it yet.
She could see that all her talking to us, all her hard work,
everything finally came true.
Witness and see it with her own eyes, that it really did
happen.
We're free.
This is real.
We're home.

A fleet of limousines is waiting for them.
There'll be flowers, and parades, and a family reunion like
you've never seen before.
There'll be music; people performing all kinds of music
Music sounds sweeter on the outside.
And food! You've never imagined such a feast!

People were always saying you're never getting out, the
law will never change.
We heard that for 24, 35, 40 years.

And here we are. Here we are.
The impossible is what we do.

So that day will come for all women serving life.
And when it comes, we'll call it the Day of the Flower,
because flowers are beautiful and they grow.
We want these ladies to grow and bloom
and we're here to support them every step of the way.

Let's Get Free
460 Melwood Ave #300
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

If you wish to be removed from this mailing list, please let us know by emailing letsgetfreepa@gmail.com.



L to R: JAMES GLOVER AKA MR. FOX, BIG RICK OLDS
(FREEDOM DAY: FEBRUARY 22, 2017), STEVE ADDEO, ATIL FINNEY AKA A.J.



BL SHIRILLE, JULY 2021
@ Women Against Mass Incarceration event
FREEDOM DAY: DECEMBER 10, 2015



DEBBIE & MIKE AFRICA
FREEDOM DAYS: JUNE 16, 2018 & OCTOBER 23, 2018