Women’s Leadership & Media Project

Portfolio
Building Networks

Women & Prison 101: the forgotten sisterhood of the feminist movement a night of community, storytelling, and action.

From Left: New Yorker columnist Jennifer Gonnerman; WPA Board VP Piper Kerman; WLMP graduates, Keisha, Entrice, and Cecile; and WPA Executive Director, Georgia Lerner.

Cecile and Michael Bloomberg at the completion of Cecile's internship at Bloomberg.

WLMP graduates, Deneise and Cecile, and WPA Director of Communications, Diana McHugh, meet Senator Cory Booker at the National Black Theatre.

Poet and activist, Cleo Wade, visits the Women’s Leadership & Media Project at WPA’s Hopper Home.
Calling for Change

WLMP graduate, Kamilah, on the steps of City Hall calling for the closing of Rikers.

WLMP graduates and WPA staff on the steps of City Hall calling for alternatives to incarceration.
Courageous Conversations

WLMP graduate, Kamilah, moderates Women & Prison 103, a conversation around alternatives to incarceration.

From left, criminal justice reform activist Topeka Sam; WLMP graduate Cecile; Jamilah King of Mother Jones; Alexis Posey from the NYC Department of Health and Mental Health; and WPA’s Director of Alternatives to Incarceration, Miriam Goodman for Women & Prison 102: a conversation on race and criminal justice.

WLMP graduates, Jennifer, Kamilah, and Linda, attend a film premiere at VEDA and discuss criminal justice involvement as a barrier to employment.
Expanding the Reach

WPA takes over @ForbesWomen on Instagram for International Women’s Day featuring WLMP graduates Kamilah, Tamanika, and Keisha.

womenatforbes Happy #WomensEqualityDay! @WPA_NYC here for a #ForbesTakeover! The Women’s Prison Association (WPA) works with women at all stages of criminal justice involvement, recognizing the unique ways in which women come in contact with the criminal justice system. Join us here today to learn 4 things you probably didn’t know about women and prison – and help us advance our vision of a community where our reliance on incarceration as the default response to crime has been replaced by constructive, community-driven responses.
In the News:
Just because you made a mistake, does not mean you are the mistake.

It’s a message that took Natasha McRae a long time to learn. Two years ago she was facing prison time for a serious crime she committed under the influence of alcohol. A single mother raising two boys, she had never committed a crime before. Now she was facing four to five years.

But thanks to the intervention of the Women’s Prison Association, she’s found her voice. And she’s not letting go.

“I’m not saying what happened to me was a good thing, but in a way, I think God did that for a reason: to have me wake up,” Natasha told me on a recent afternoon. She was wearing a charcoal grey suit, and her hair pulled back, accentuating her wide smile. Her cat-eye glasses were rimmed with crystals and set off her eyes.

“Life doesn’t always owe you something, the world don’t owe you nothing,” she said. “It’s up to you to go out there and take control of your life and do what you have to do for your family.”

Natasha’s story is one of many stories the WPA (Women’s Prison Association) has helped to shape. Since 1845, the WPA has served New York City’s incarcerated women. They created the first halfway house for women in the country, and now they assist women with a variety of reentry programs including housing, health care, social services, and family reunification. The WPA currently helps about 2,000 women and 500 kids every year. With some advances in criminal justice reform, the WPA has been a leader in rejecting “band-aid” solutions, focusing instead on proactive steps that prevent the wound from opening in the first place.

Prior trauma, mental illness, the stress of being a parent, and unsafe housing are risks that weigh heavily upon women, perhaps more than men, and the WPA works to mitigate these risks within the reentry movement.

What follows is a lightly edited interview with the WPA’s executive director, Georgina Lerner, and Natasha, a graduate of the WPA’s JusticeHome program, which helps women stay in their homes with their families rather than serve time.

WOMEN’S
PRISON
ASSOCIATION

Photography by Matt Ganther
Interview by Remy Tumin
How has WPA's mission evolved from its founding in 1845?

The organization was founded for women who were coming home from being locked up, to help them have a legal way to support themselves and have a decent life without getting into trouble again. Having been in the system limits women's options, so that needs to change. We first and foremost offer help to individual women, but also work to improve the systems themselves.

And how does that translate to today?

Today we're doing the same work, except we're not only working with women after they've gotten into trouble and released from jail or prison, we also do a lot of work in diverting women from getting locked up and preventing women from committing crimes in the first place.

At WPA we never really thought jail made any sense. But the things that are getting women into trouble are made worse when they go to prison. If they're not getting appropriate mental health treatment, they're just suffering and nothing's getting better. We're not making them less likely to be driven to commit a crime when they come home. If their housing was unsafe when they went to prison, they're not even going to have housing when they get out. And the stress of feeling unsure if one can meet the social and financial needs of children is pretty overwhelming for a lot of women. That's a driver for criminal behavior.

I say this all the time, but real life is the best classroom. If there is a way we can support people in dealing with the actual issues and their real lives, it makes a whole lot more sense. There's this knee jerk reaction to punish people. But we know our approach makes a lot of sense.

How does WPA fit in the broader conversation of criminal rehabilitation in the country?

I really would like to be out of the reentry business. I would like to see no women getting locked up, because it doesn't do anything to improve public safety. I think we lead the way in terms of what makes sense for women and for families largely. The more we've learned and the more we understand about why women commit crimes, the more we have a responsibility to respond in a different way. It's not good enough to just wait until people have been locked up and try and deal with reentry issues anymore. We need to be here for people who are coming home, but what is wrong with us that we're willing to focus so much energy on what happens to people when they've already gotten into trouble and not put as much energy into preventing people from getting there in the first place?

The women who come here, they can tell you everything that's wrong with them. People have no trouble listing their flaws. But we know that change doesn't happen from feeling like we're bad. Change happens when we reinforce positive behavior.

Natasha McRae, 45, can attest to that.

How did you come to WPA? Take me back to the beginning from wherever you're comfortable sharing.

When I got there, I was a little nervous because I didn't know anyone. Every morning they gave us this questionnaire where they asked us how our week was going, and what struggles had been getting to us. I always put down why I felt that I made that stupid decision because it came from alcohol abuse. I think if I wasn't under that influence I wouldn't have made that mistake.

They offered me services to deal with my addiction, services to deal with it emotionally. They encouraged me to sit down and talk with my sons on an equal level, so we're not talking at each other but with each other.

They helped me understand how the decisions I made were not really my own rational choice, because I was under the influence. Joining WPA gave me the chance to evolve myself as far as advocacy and having a voice. I never knew that my story would have an impact on a lot of people in their daily life, if they're struggling with something. Never give up.

Your boys were 16 and 26 when you faced prison time. What do you think it meant to them for you to be able to stay home?

We have the best communication ever, ever. Now we talk more. If we disagree we don't mind because you don't always have to agree. We have a special bond now. Before it was a little distant. I didn't really know how to talk to them -- I'm raising two men, they're not boys, they are men and it is hard as a single parent. But it's ok because we're making it.

I was so proud of myself. I don't know where I would have been. That's not true — I would have been doing 4 to 5 years, that's where I would have been.

If you had advice to give other women in your situation, what would you say?

I would tell them don't give up. Don't feel as if because you made a mistake you are the mistake. There's always another door, another opportunity for you to change your life. There are people out there that really can help you, but you've got to want to help yourself. You gotta give 100 percent. I know you start at 10, 20 or 30, but at the end you'll see everything you gave was worth it.
This Art Gallery Proactively Hires Justice-Involved Women

A conversation between employer and employee on women supporting women—and social responsibility.

Pay parity, fair hiring practices, parental leave, childcare... despite great strides, women still face serious barriers to equality in the workplace. And the issues that all women face are exacerbated for those with justice involvement.

Did you know that formerly incarcerated people are 5x more likely than the general population to be unemployed and that having a criminal record reduces employer callback rates by 50%?

At WPA, we’re committed to helping women with justice involvement gain employment. Our Workforce Development program addresses women-specific barriers to employment, provides job readiness
training, and partners with companies committed to hiring justice-involved women.

We sat down with Lou Neyland, supervisor at one of WPA's partner organizations, Swiss Institute, and WPA participant Aisha, who works as a Gallery Attendant, for a discussion around women and work.

What is it like working for Swiss Institute?

Aisha: Working for SI is cool. One thing that is invaluable to me is working with visitors. That's just my thing. When they come in, I try to engage with them as much as possible. I find that rewarding because you learn so much. The other day this gentleman came in and I was fascinated. I didn't want him to leave. I learned so much about the neighborhood. He said if you look around, a lot of the buildings in the East Village are short. And he said the reason why is because it was built on marsh land. That's just one of the things that makes working here so cool; you get free education! And to meet really, really awesome people.

Lou: That's a classic Aisha move. Spending a lot of time with visitors is a huge strength of hers. It's always like they've known each other for ten years. She's able to reach something really deep in a conversation.

Do you feel that your work here at Swiss Institute has made you more attuned to art in your everyday life?

Aisha: Art is in my DNA. My grandfather was commissioned to build statues in Trinidad. And I was just looking at Veranda, a home magazine, and there was a picture of my cousin! He's a craftsmen and there he was, blow torch in hand and everything. So when I tell you that craftsmanship and art is in our DNA, it really is!

It seems Swiss Institute is pretty heavily staffed by women. What is that like?

Lou: I value the work environment at SI, which is heavily staffed by women. I love working with women. Many of our community partnerships, including WPA, were founded and are run by women.
And women play quite a big role in the non-profit world in general. Being a part of a workplace with a large presence of women has a meaningful history and context to me.

**Aisha:** One of the things women hear growing up is that working with women is difficult or having a female boss is hard. It’s this stereotype that so many people have heard but my personal experience has been to the contrary. Having a woman as a boss has meant that she understood when your kid was teething and when the babysitter was M.I.A. and you’re panicking. It made it a lot easier because half the time you didn’t even have to explain. They get it. I love working with women.

![Image of a woman and a man standing in front of a wall with bags on it](image)

**In your journey as a working woman, has there been a particular woman who's supported you?**

**Aisha:** Definitely. When I was at FIT, I was an EOP (Educational Opportunity Program) student. Basically, it just means students who are facing social or financial challenges. It’s like a built in support system. It would have been extremely difficult for me to finish school without it. And it was all women. I became really close with the woman who ran the department. Even to this day, we’re still friends. When I think about it, everyone who was really defining me in that program
was a woman. The whole group assisted me in some way with graduating. So it wasn’t just one woman, it was a whole village.

Lou: It does take a village. For me, one person that comes to mind was a teacher in college. She was a fantastic filmmaker and artist and I instantly admired her. She had a thoughtful approach to classroom dialogue—the way she led conversation. Later she hired me to be the manager of this experimental television station we had at school. I got to see how she worked with students as an employer and that was pretty interesting for me. I appreciated her style—that she was able to command the room but was never frightening and that is kind of a fine line, especially for women. Since then I’ve had other female managers and I’ve learned a lot from the techniques that resonate with me, and also from those that don’t. I think depending on their age, they probably had to respond to different sorts of obstacles that shaped them in different ways.

Aisha, what for you has been challenging about being a “justice-involved” woman and finding work?

Aisha: I think that’s why WPA is so invaluable. WPA made that so easy for me. Being a person that unfortunately was touched by the injustice system, I had so much to deal with. My plate was so full. When I came to WPA, I was literally in ten different programs. I met [my case manager] Patricia and she was so amazing. Patricia was the one who told me about Swiss Institute and then I met Lou and now this is where I am. But I have this job right now because of WPA. On my own, I definitely tried to look, but it was hard for me because I didn’t have the time or access and that was weighing on me. I was just trying to get my life back together. The way you’re treated, it’s so demoralizing. But when I met Lou, from my first phone interview, she was so cool and laid back. And I was like, please let this be how this person is. And she’s been so consistent from day one. The care that she shows for us, it’s so genuine.
Lou, what do you want other supervisors to know about hiring and supporting justice-involved women in the workplace?

Lou: I think every employee enters with their own strengths and weaknesses and justice-involved women are no exception to that. The challenges that arise are not really that different from any other employee. I think hiring in general is a huge inconvenience. It’s really hard to hire people and you want to hire the right person and it takes a lot of work. And I could sympathize with the idea that it’s already inconvenient. And then to add this other layer of maybe subconscious distrust is an additional inconvenience. But with a partnership it’s a lot easier. WPA offers a wide variety of assistance. Because there’s so much support and communication it feels a bit more unified. It’s kind of that
village feeling of like, okay, we’re all in this together, we’re all helping each other out. And it is assuring to know that there are resources through WPA when things may be a little bit more challenging in their world than in another employee’s.

[When we hired Aisha], this was a new program. We had just opened this space. We’ve never had this many staff. I’ve never managed this many people before. There were several initial challenges, some of which were of larger proportions, which WPA quickly helped to remedy. WPA has aided in smaller conversations as well, such as how to convey the nature of our partnership in a way that’s accurate but also protective of everyone’s privacy too.

And sometimes it’s inconvenient to do the right thing. There is a deep need to have programs like this and to assist those who have been put in onerous situations. And obviously the whole system is corrupt and flawed and hopefully more people are acknowledging that. But I think that there’s sort of a social responsibility to do the work.

**Aisha:** It speaks volumes to me because they don’t have to do this. Some companies, some people, they’re just very like hands off, they don’t care. And I think it’s very big of SI to say, “We’re judging you as an individual, as a person, not by what happened because we don’t know the story.”

And these days you can get arrested for anything. It seems like half the population is getting arrested just because of where they live and what they look like. And that’s why people get into this work because they’re seeing how things are unequal. By giving you a chance they are actually saying, “We don’t want to know the story, we’re hiring you based on what you’ve presented to us.” How many companies are doing that?

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The Women’s Prison Association (WPA) has been committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves and their families since 1845. Learn more at www.wpaonline.org. Join WPA on Instagram at @WPA_NYC.
Re-entering the workplace after taking time off is difficult.

I know from personal experience —though not exactly my own. My mom was a full-time stay-at-home mom for nearly 13 years when I was growing up, a decision that I learned about in depth when I interviewed her earlier this year. Stories about women defying the odds and doing the unthinkable, such as joining the workforce after unforeseen or longer-than-planned time off, is inspiring beyond words. Women are tenacious and capable of anything. And that’s exactly why, when Diana McHugh, Director of Communications at New York’s Women’s Prison Association (WPA), contacted me about interviewing women
who had been previously incarcerated to learn about their experiences reentering the workplace, I jumped at the opportunity.

At first, I was nervous to speak with these women. With a topic that is equal parts taboo and critical to discuss, I wanted to tell their stories perfectly. And then I realized—it’s not my responsibility to tell their stories, because their stories stand for themselves. Just like you and me, these women are committed to finding their dream careers and crafting a life that they’ve always envisioned.

Let's Talk About The Issue

My lack of knowledge of the criminal justice system led me to learn more about the resources out there for those looking to re-enter the workplace. WPA, for example, works with women at all stages of criminal justice involvement. They help women achieve what is most important to them—finding safe and affordable housing, preparing for job interviews, reuniting with their children, gaining peer support from other women, learning household budgeting and skills for daily life, and much more. It’s organizations and companies like WPA that are working to change the stigma.

Talking about a criminal record or previous incarceration is a taboo topic—particularly in the workplace. But with “roughly 70 million adults in this country [with] criminal records” and 10 million of those individuals returning to their communities from incarceration each year, it’s time that we change that. A recent analysis by the Prison Policy Initiative shows that “formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of over 27 percent” which is “higher than the total U.S. unemployment rate during any historical period, including the Great Depression.” Compounding the issue, while employers express an openness to hire people with criminal records, evidence shows that having a record cuts employer callback rates in half. And because that’s not enough already, the problem is worse for women of color. Previously incarcerated black women experience higher unemployment rates (37 percent higher than the general population,) than white men, who have the lowest (14 percent.)

The Interviews

I spoke with Cecile, Kamilah, and Jennifer to learn about their experiences in the workplace post-incarceration. We covered the hardships they’re overcoming, the successes they’ve achieved, and why workplace culture needs to make room for diversity. We can all learn from their stories—previously incarcerated or not—because once we start listening to each other and open our minds, we can start making real change.
When I first learned about Cecile’s recent accomplishments, I was floored. She’s completed a 16-week fellowship with Bloomberg, in which she learned the intricate ins-and-outs of the catering business, and is gearing up to start school at Hunter College to receive her Master’s in Social Work (MSW) in Clinical Social Work. All at the age of 53. And she’s not stopping there—with the dream of starting her own restaurant one day, she has her eyes set on a very bright future.

Big Dreams + Pushing Past Stigma

“The [fellowship] experience was really eye-opening. I was getting managerial experience, being hands-on in the kitchen, and making sure the customers were satisfied. I miss being in that environment because it was so fast-paced. Taking the train at 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. didn’t bother me, I just always wanted to be there. You felt wanted, like you’re a part of a real team. I still keep in touch with some of the managers as they try to connect me to other opportunities,” Cecile details. “For me, it was broadening my want to open my own restaurant. I do still have that drive to open my own restaurant, a Caribbean cuisine with different tastes from different countries.”

Before Cecile’s positive experience in her fellowship, the road wasn’t always easy. Adjusting back to the workplace after being incarcerated was difficult, and she continues to grapple with the stigma that many believe.

“There have been a lot of barriers because of the stigma with people who have criminal justice involvement. I do well in interviews, but [my criminal justice involvement] just comes out as part of my history. When I’m offered a job and they say they can no longer employ me because of my background—that, for me, is saying
that people need to be more educated,” Cecile explains. “There are so many reasons why people come into contact with the criminal justice system. And you can’t believe everything you read. I’m human, trying to make it all work. The trauma is depressing, but I’m trying to change. Can’t you see that?”

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By focusing on her unique skills and passion for engaging in her local community, Cecile is also furthering her education to explore an area that she loves: social work.

Second Chances + Social Work

“I have over 12 years of work in social work, which is why I wanted to go back to school for it. I loved that work, it comes really naturally to me. At first, I was nervous because Hunter College has a really good program, and I so eagerly wanted to get in,” Cecile recalls. “While I was in my last year of high school, my church group had a program where we would volunteer to help people in need. Assessing those need and reporting back to the agency, I loved it. I’ve held that memory with me all these years.”

Taking her experience with Bloomberg and combining that with her passion for social work, Cecile recently started a new job as a Case Manager for the Women’s Homeless Shelter. Yes, this woman does it all. “I’m so happy. This is my thing. This is what I want to do,” Cecile rejoices. “I interviewed with the director in the Brooklyn office, and what they offered me in salary wasn’t a lot. But I was willing to take whatever they offered. For me, it’s more about the opportunity to get my foot in the door and getting that second chance. This agency gave me a second chance.”

Cecile was my first interview of this series, and she truly set the bar for what real, authentic tenacity looks like in a professional woman. I think we can all wish her the best of luck as she grows in social work (and maybe anticipate trying her first dish at the restaurant).
Interviewing Kamilah hit a particular cord with me. Mere months separate us in age, yet our life experiences have been drastically different. With a sense of humor like nothing I’ve never heard before, and a unique approach to handling the trials and tribulations life has thrown her way, Kamilah is a powerful force in this world.

**Giving Back + Lifting Others Up**

She’s currently working towards her associate’s degree and has an internship she loves. Kamilah is not formerly incarcerated, but rather “justice-involved,” because she completed JusticeHome, an alternative to a traditional incarceration program run by WPA that works to keep women out of prison.

“My work at [my internship] speaks to what I want to do career-wise. I help co-facilitate summer programs, like Emerging Girls. It was the first time they’d ever done a summer program, and I was given a lot of responsibility,” Kamilah explains. “It’s all very healing-centered, since we’re working with young women who have experienced sexual harassment. I basically planned a flea market for the girls to sell their own crafts and goods in order to encourage entrepreneurship. I was their big sister, their shadow, helping them every step of the way.”

"Being a black woman in America is constantly telling my truth, and no one believing me. We feel like a nuisance. So I would encourage all women, myself included, to know your rights. Do your own research. Read your own articles. Educate yourself."
In addition to the work she was doing with the summer programs at her internship, Kamilah also coordinates Sister Circles, which are weekly meetings that create a safe space for women to connect over their experiences.

**Sister Circles + Safe Spaces**

“My Thursday nights are for Sister Circles. We pick a topic and talk about it within the group, and it’s a great group bonding experience between black women,” Kamilah explains. “I’m in charge of helping my supervisors determine the topic for the night, cook dinner, choose an activity, and find the right resources. It’s all very spiritually centered and trauma-informed—we want to make a safe space for these women to come together to talk about what unsettles them, what they’ve been through, and anything that might be useful for them.”

Kamilah’s passion for mental health and helping others is evident in her career decisions. In addition to her professional responsibilities, she is also a mother of a five-year-old son. I wanted to know if her outlook on career changed when she became a mother.

**Growth + Motherhood**

“Before my criminal justice involvement, I was studying to be a nurse. But after my involvement, I was no longer able to pursue that career. Which I’m actually pretty OK with—I started working towards my Certified Nurses Certificate while I was pregnant. And when my son came along, I would spend so much time away from him,” Kamilah recalls. “My grandmother held it down, had him every moment of the day. She is the reason I was able to work 12-hour shifts and make a living for my son. But my priorities have changed, I need to be there for my son. I went to 10 different schools in different states growing up, so I wanted to give him stability. And now that I’m a full-time student, I can give him what I didn’t have.”

With a goal to become an educator of Urban Black Psychology, Kamilah knows that “whatever [she] decides to do for permanent career choices, it’s going to be black women-centered and something in reform.” And the best way she’s going to get there? “Being a black woman in America is constantly telling my truth, and no one believing me. We feel like a nuisance. So I would encourage all women, myself included, to know your rights. Do your own research. Read your own articles. Educate yourself,” Kamilah advises.
Currently working at Home Depot, Jennifer is navigating some of the barriers to employment as a result of her incarceration, particularly when it comes to finding a full-time role in order to support her goal of being a mental health counselor.

“Right now, I’m working part-time as an Appliances Sales Associate at Home Depot. I started out as a cashier two months ago and was promoted because of my customer service skills. I’m a really hard worker and [the promotion] was a great reminder that I do have a lot to contribute, which you can forget after being away for a while,” Jennifer details. “When you get a chance to express your skills and potential, and [your employer] sees it, it’s a really great feeling.”

Chasing Dreams + Remaining Confident

In addition to her work at Home Depot, Jennifer is looking to take on even more professional responsibility. With a new Amazon warehouse opening in Staten Island, Jennifer has her eyes set on another role that she can take on to financially support her ultimate goal of becoming a mental health counselor.

“There’s a lot of opportunities to grow and climb the ladder at Amazon, which I’m excited about. But this is my first time trying to find jobs with a criminal history. It’s scary in a sense,” Jennifer explains. “I’m worried that I won’t be respected in the same way as others, and it’s like I’m reliving my crime every time I go into another interview. Before my offense, I would have gotten job offers and responses within a week or two, but now I’m waiting three weeks to a month. I just try to focus on the fact that I have over ten years of experience in customer service. That way, I can feel confident selling myself during the interview.”
"Find what gives you peace... Find something that gives you purpose, and then be vocal about your experiences. You are valuable."

Like Cecile and Kamilah, continuing her education is a big part of Jennifer’s readjustment back into the workplace. After her experience in a women’s facility, Jennifer wants to make a positive change in the mental health field.

Mental Health + Finding Peace

“I’m looking to do online schooling in psychology to get into the mental health field. That way, I can help women and men change their outlook on life. Especially now that my head is in the right place, I want to inspire people to do the same,” Jennifer says. "I would like to be a counselor in a facility, I want to change the system to give women more time with counselors. As it is, there are so many women and not enough counselors, so there’s not enough time to give and receive. Not enough time to make connections.”

Jennifer likes to say that she’s taking it “one day at a time,” which is a big piece of advice that she has to give women who are re-entering the workforce. "Find what gives you peace. Sometimes you have to put the immediate things in your life first—if you can’t automatically jump into school or the career of your choice, don’t let that hold you back,” Jennifer advises. “Find something that gives you purpose, and then be vocal about your experiences. You are valuable.”

My Key Takeaways

After each interview, each woman thanked me for taking the time to hear their story. And while I said “thank you” right back, those words weren’t enough. They barely scratched the surface of my gratitude.

Cecile, Kamilah, and Jennifer all shared very personal stories with me, with the hopes that the stigma that holds back previously incarcerated women and men will dissolve. We know it won’t happen overnight. But based on what I’ve learned from these interviews, there’s more that brings us together than pulls us apart.
How One Woman’s Sexual Abuse Resulted in Years Behind Bars

She’s just one of thousands of women caught in the sex abuse to prison pipeline.

by Yosha Gunasekera
May 11, 2018

Keisha B. was 14 years old when she reported the sexual abuse to the police. It had happened for as long as she could remember. The abuser was Keisha’s own father.

Keisha grew up in Queens, New York, in a two-parent, middle-class household. Her mother was a keyboard specialist and her father a mechanic who owned two body shops. While Keisha’s life appeared normal from the outside, her parents were alcoholics and her father regularly sexually abused Keisha and her older sister.

After going to the police, Keisha was put in foster care. But she ran away from three different foster homes to be with her mother, even though she was still with Keisha’s father. Keisha couldn’t understand why she had to live with strangers.

Her father’s case went to trial. Ultimately, he was found guilty but not sentenced to jail. He was ordered to stay away from Keisha. He did not. He returned to the home he had shared with Keisha’s mother, the one where Keisha was once again living full-time.

*To deal with the sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Keisha self-medicated with drugs that “made her forget.”*
The abuse stopped, but the psychological torture of living with her abuser drove Keisha—a once-promising student—to act out. “I was so isolated from everyone for so long when the abuse happened,” Keisha says. “Once I reported him, I felt like a caged animal being released. But then the abuse I suffered was tossed to the side, because he was still allowed to remain in the house.” Keisha began to skip class. She was sent to a truant school, but eventually stopped going altogether. She smoked weed frequently. One day, she was given weed that made her feel like nothing had ever made her feel before. It was laced with crack. An addiction was born.

To deal with the past sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Keisha self-medicated with crack cocaine. The drugs “made her forget about all the stuff [she] was going through.” Soon, everything Keisha did was because she needed money to buy drugs. She needed money to feed the addiction. She needed the addiction to numb the pain. At 18, Keisha and her friends entered a house that was being renovated. She didn’t steal anything, but the police came and she was arrested and charged with burglary. But she didn’t show up in court; instead, Keisha began to prostitute herself in order to buy drugs.

The transition from a life of abuse to a life of crime isn’t uncommon. Women are the fastest growing prison population in the United States today, with women’s imprisonment skyrocketing 834 percent over 40 years. Many of these women were sexually abused before they got there: One 2006 Oregon study found that 96 percent of juvenile female prisoners were sexually abused prior to entering prison, and according to a 2009 study out of South Carolina, 84 percent of delinquent girls reported a history of sexual violence. Women in prison are twice as likely to report childhood sexual or physical abuse than women in the general population, and, of women currently incarcerated nationwide, 37 percent say they were raped before entering state prison. It’s a phenomenon known as the sexual abuse to prison pipeline—women react to their abuse with illegal activities and, rather than receiving support to help them break the cycle of behavior, they are sentenced to jail—and its existence is contributing to the booming growth of female prisoners today.

According to a Vera Institute Study, “between 1980 and 2009, the arrest rate for drug possession or use tripled for women” (comparatively, the arrest rate for men doubled). “By the early 2000s, 50 percent of women in jails were in custody on public order [for example, prostitution, public drunkenness, or disorderly conduct] or drug charges.” For Keisha, substance abuse programs or social services to address her addiction were never an option—they were never offered to her. Fewer than half of the women in state prison who need the help of a substance abuse program actually get it, and receiving counseling for psychiatric issues is even less common. Prison isolates these women from their communities and creates obstacles so challenging that, when they finally get out, relapse feels inevitable.
Keisha’s next arrest came just a year later—for selling drugs. When she was arrested, her mother went to see her and could not believe her eyes. It was the first time she had seen Keisha in months because Keisha was living on the streets. Keisha was under 100 pounds—drastically thinner than she had ever been in her adult life. Keisha remembers her mother saying that the “spirit was sucked out of her.”

Keisha’s burglary case also caught up to her, but was downgraded from a felony to a misdemeanor trespass charge. For both cases, she was sentenced to six months of jail and five years of probation. She did her sentence and returned home to her mother...and her father. Two months later, Keisha started using again.

**Of women currently incarcerated nationwide, 37 percent say they were raped before entering state prison.**

For many women, prison time does not address underlying trauma, and in fact, only serves to exacerbate it. Women in prison face deplorable conditions. Their mental health issues are rarely addressed (32 percent of incarcerated women suffer from mental health issues, almost double the rate of men). Female prisoners are also disproportionately sexually abused; women make up one-third of all reports of abuse by prison staff, despite being just 7 percent of all inmates.

For Keisha, the trauma continued untreated and, coupled with more personal tragedies, Keisha returned and returned to prison. At 20, she had a near-death experience: After suffering from sharp stomach pains, she found out she was six-weeks pregnant and that the fetus was forming in her fallopian tube. She had emergency surgery and a blood transfusion. “I was told I could not have kids and I was told I was HIV-positive,” Keisha recalls. But no one seemed to care. “There was no counseling and no help.”

Within three weeks of the surgery, Keisha was using again. “I relapsed because I went back to what I knew would comfort me,” she says. “I felt at that point, drugs were all I had.” Keisha was arrested soon after for selling drugs and was sentenced to two to four years in prison upstate.

For the next few years, Keisha was in and out of jail for parole violations. Mostly, her urine was dirty from her drug relapses. Then, Keisha’s mother passed away. “My mother always said I could do anything I wanted. But suddenly she died. She was here today and gone tomorrow. She did not tell anyone she was sick. She was only 53. I needed her,” Keisha recalls. “My anger at the situation led me to relapse. I gave up on myself.” That year, Keisha picked up her second upstate bid, serving three to six years for prostitution.
The cycle continued: Keisha would get clean for a period, before relapsing due to job insecurity, abusive relationships, or, of course, her ever-present childhood trauma. She says was never given the opportunity for counseling or therapy. She remembers that, “there was no plan for me when I left prison. If I did not figure something out for myself, I would be back on the streets using again. Most women ended up in shelters and relapsed.” Finally she decided, “that was not going to be me.” Before leaving prison in 2010, Keisha secured services and housing for when she was released, beginning her “journey towards change,” as she calls it.

The trauma continued untreated and, coupled with more personal tragedies, Keisha returned and returned to prison.

Through a friend, Keisha found out about The Women’s Prison Association, an organization in New York City that provides services to women as they leave prison and re-enter their communities, and applied for programming on her own. Her time there was integral to her effort to kick her drug addiction and get her life back on track, she says. But the programming came late in Keisha’s journey. It was only after years of incarceration that Keisha was offered real, tangible therapy that helped her understand and cope with her trauma, counseling that helps address the specific trauma women like Keisha face. (Gender-responsive trauma-informed counseling has been shown to be successful in reducing the self-destructive behaviors women adopt in response to abuse.)

Ideally, therapy, counseling, and other services would address the trauma these women face before they become involved in the criminal justice system. Providing proper resources to Keisha in the immediate aftermath of her trauma may have prevented that first arrest—and all the rest that followed.

“As a society, we prefer punitive responses to crime over constructive, community-driven responses to harm,” says Georgia Lerner, executive director of the Women’s Prison Association. Punishment-based systems, like prison, don’t address the underlying causes of criminal activity and result in a high rate of recidivism. Even once ensnared in the system, alternatives to incarceration programs, which focus on treatment, would have been better, but Lerner says, these programs tend to be underutilized. “I’d love to see us moving away from ‘alternatives’ to incarceration and focus on front-end, pre-arrest efforts to ensure public safety,” says Lerner. “This means that we would stop criminalizing women (and men) for being poor, sick, or hurt.”

Keisha estimates she was arrested more than 15 times, but has lost count. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent to incarcerate her. What if that money had been used instead to provide Keisha and other women like her with adequate resources to deal with her trauma? Keisha believes had she had the help she needed to deal with her trauma early on, her whole life would have been rewritten. But now, Keisha has made peace with her old wounds. After decades of blaming herself for the abuse, she knows it was not her fault. After programming and therapy, Keisha is no longer using drugs. She’s in school studying computer skills, and she is thriving. “I value my freedom much more than jail,” she says. “After therapy, I learned that the pain and consequences of drugs outweighed the pleasure. I learned how to manage my feelings. I did not learn it overnight, but what is important is that I learned it. I just wish it had happened sooner.”

Yasha Gunasekera is a public defender working in New York City and an expert on criminal justice issues. Her writing has appeared on Teen Vogue, The Huffington Post, and The Hill, among others.
These stories were compiled by the Women’s Prison Association for Hello Beautiful. The Women’s Prison Association (WPA) is a service and advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice involvement realize new possibilities for themselves and their families. We utilize evidence-based, gender-specific tools designed to address the many circumstances that lead women into the criminal justice system. In doing so, we successfully provide tailored services to women and their families before, during, after, and even instead of incarceration. WPA envisions a community where our reliance on incarceration as the default response to crime has been replaced by constructive, community-driven responses.

The women featured below are graduates of WPA’s Women’s Leadership & Media Project, a training program for formerly incarcerated women who seek to achieve criminal justice reform.

Relevant statistics: 9/10 incarcerated women report having experienced severe physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes, 8/10 report having experienced serious physical or sexual violence during childhood, 75% report having suffered severe physical violence by an intimate partner during adulthood; and 37% report being raped before their incarceration. 93% percent of women convicted of killing an intimate partner were abused by an intimate partner in the past.
Kamilah

Name, age, where you’re from.

Kamilah, 23, I am of West Indian descent. 1st generation born here. Straight out of the Bronx.

What specific experience triggered your trauma?

There were quite a few. I was raped by my teenage cousin when I was 13. That's actually how I lost my virginity, but when I was about 16, I got raped by a stranger. That one cut me the deepest. We had a mutual friend on Facebook. Turned out she only knew him from Facebook, but we had built a rapport online. Strictly platonic. He invited me to a cookout and to meet his newborn. So I went to his friend's house, chilled with the baby, his mom picked up the baby and we went to his house so he could change his clothes. He got out of the shower, got dressed and started to flirt with me. When I declined his advances, he raped me and took me to the bus stop. I just cried the whole way home.

When did you become aware that you were suffering from trauma?

It took me many, many years to even call my experiences “rape.” One specific memory comes to mind: the man who raped me at lived nearby, but I never saw him again after that day. About a year or two ago, he got on a train I was on. It was packed and he was on the opposite end, but immediately my hands were shaking. My heart dropped and my legs went numb. I had sworn I’d gotten over it. Tears streamed down my face and I began texting my sister. That was a big eye-opener for me.

Have you spoken to a professional about your experience? If so, has it helped you find a way to cope with what happened? If not, do you believe medical attention unnecessary or is there a particular reason that is holding you back?

Absolutely and yes it has. It’s taught me a lot about myself and what's expected of me in society. She is teaching me to prioritize what I expect of myself instead. It’s making me a better parent and partner.

Who/What do/did you turn to in moments when you are triggered or find yourself in a negative headspace?

Back then, not much. I suffered from depression, suicidal thoughts, and anxiety for a long time. Now, I turn to my ancestors, my mom, my friends and siblings. I turn to the people that love me most. Sometimes, I call or text my therapist, but my ancestors have carried me through raging waters. They got my back. They always grant me clarity, wisdom, and peace.

What do you do to celebrate yourself in spite of what you’ve been through?

In order to celebrate myself, I smile, I laugh, I get tattoos, piercings, and elaborate nails. I have great sex with my fiancé despite my past experiences. I maintain a 3.4 GPA and I still reject respectability politics. I love on black girls because the rest of the world doesn’t. I work with organizations that want to make this world a better place. I take care of my family and put tons of effort into raising my little boy. That's how I celebrate, by living my best life in spite of everything that tried to break me.
Do you feel there is enough awareness around trauma?

Well, I think that’s only half of the problem. Historically, we as black people were taught to suffer in silence. That turned into a cultural norm. The other part is that society has dehumanized every aspect of blackness, so even when people are aware of our traumas they don’t see it as a tragedy. It’s like trying to convince people to have compassion for inanimate objects.

What do you want people to know about you as a survivor of trauma?

I want people to know that I cannot be silenced. Being a whistleblower can be a thankless job sometimes, but I will continue to speak up even as I look adversity square in the eye.

What would be the one word that describes you as a survivor of trauma?

Resilient. I have an Afro Samurai woman tattooed as a symbol of that. Also, I have a Koi fish done on my back because they swim against the current, as do I. My newest tattoo is actually in honor of sexual violence survivors. It says, “The Rose That Grew From Concrete,” that’s a poem by Tupac about the beauty of tenacity.
Tamanika

Name, age, where you’re from.

Tamanika, 41, Brooklyn

What specific experience triggered your trauma?

I have experiences all levels of trauma from being abused as a child to sexually assaulted and experiencing domestic violence. However, the one specific experience that triggered my downfall would be the murder of my brother in 2011. My brother was the oldest in our family and losing him cause me to lose myself.

When did you become aware that you were suffering from trauma?

I believe I was always aware that I was suffering from trauma but I didn’t accept that fact until I accepted that I was a drug addict and I was sent to prison. While in prison, you have a lot of thinking time and you learn a lot about yourself.

Have you spoken to a professional about your experience? If so, has it helped you find a way to cope with what happened? If not, do you believe medical attention unnecessary or is there a particular reason that is holding you back?

I have spoken with a professional about my life experiences. I find it very helpful to finally speak about things that I have been holding on to my whole life. As I speak about these things, I am able to understand why certain things happen and learn new ways of dealing with them.

Who/What do/did you turn to in moments when you are triggered or find yourself in a negative headspace?

When I find myself in a negative headspace, I first turn to God. Second, I turn to someone who I can talk to who will listen to me and not judge me. It can be my therapist or best friend or another woman who has gone through a similar experience.

What do you do to celebrate yourself in spite of what you’ve been through?

I wake up every morning, look in the mirror and I smile. I tell myself I am loved and I am beautiful.

Do you feel there is enough awareness around trauma?

I feel there is not enough awareness around trauma. When I was growing up, I never heard anything about it. I think it’s only mentioned to someone after something devastating happens to them and that is only when they are having a hard time dealing with it - someone like me who held everything in, but was not aware of what I was going through or what I needed at the time.

What do you want people to know about you as a survivor of trauma?

I want people to know I am a strong Black woman and a proud mother of four. I have a good heart and I refuse to fail at life again or be defined by my failures. I am a survivor.

What would be the one word that describes you as a survivor of trauma?

Determined.
Shawn

Name, age, where you’re from.

Shawn, 51, Brooklyn

What specific experience triggered your trauma?

Gun violence caused my trauma. I was 5 ½ months pregnant when I was shot by a stray bullet and lost my twins.

When did you become aware that you were suffering from trauma?

After losing my twins, I became very depressed and withdrawn. I found myself medicated with prescription drugs which led to illegal drugs. It took years for me to seek help and realize I was destroying my life.

Have you spoken to a professional about your experience? If so, has it helped you find a way to cope with what happened? If not, do you believe medical attention unnecessary or is there a particular reason that is holding you back?

Several years went by before I realized I needed help. I needed someone who could listen to my inner feelings and not judge me. I needed to discuss my situation without reliving it. Eventually, I found therapy which helped and has made me a better woman.

Who/What do/did you turn to in moments when you are triggered or find yourself in a negative headspace?

At first, I turned to drugs as a coping mechanism. I didn’t really understand what I was experiencing. I just knew my anger and resentment was in full force which caused me to neglect my family and my other children. It caused me to not be there for them because on the inside I was sick and suffering. It took many years, but I realized I needed help and sought that help through therapy. It allowed me to express feelings that I didn’t know even existed inside of me. It allowed me to open up about my life and not be judged for it. It gave me reason to be a better woman and mom as I tried to rebuild relationships with my family members.

What do you do to celebrate yourself in spite of what you’ve been through?

Today I celebrate life. I realize it was only luck that pulled me through my ordeal. So every day I try to live like it’s my last.

Do you feel there is enough awareness around trauma?

I don’t feel there is enough awareness around trauma because no one really knows what another person has been through unless that person shares it. People keep a lot of things inside and try to brush off the pain within. I decided to tell my story and share my pain hoping it will help someone else share their story, better said than unsaid.

What do you want people to know about you as a survivor of trauma?

I want people to know that as a survivor of trauma, it has not been easy. It was a long process but through my experience it has made me a better woman. My suffering made me stronger. I want people to know I’m not the woman I used to be. I’m a greater woman that I ever thought I could be. Just know, everything is possible to get through. Just hold on.

What would be the one word that describes you as a survivor of trauma?

Resilient.
Protest Magazine

Issue One: Mercy

A group anthology & portfolio created by marginalized women. Mercy Issue: a focus recovery & regeneration.
The prison population has lowered in the United States, but it's only due to the decline of the male population. Women are still the fastest-growing group of incarcerated people in the US. The nation's state prisons, for example, has seen an increase of 834% in the women's population over the last forty years. The women's growth rate is twice as fast as the men's growth rate. The one thing that has decreased is the disparity between black and white women incarcerated. The racial disparity was once 6 to 1, now it's 2 to 1. Many of them come from poor backgrounds, are survivors of violence, and live with disabilities and addiction. It's often a woman's means of survival that will lead her to incarceration. Think petty theft in order to support yourself and your family, sex-work, self-defense from abusers, or soliciting drugs to avoid withdrawal symptoms. The term 'low-level offense' is almost always interchangeable with the term 'survival crime.'

Back in the 70s, the police force began making examples out of low-level offenders. Politicians and city officials campaigned, rallied, and wrote dissertations affirming the tactic would discourage others from committing bigger crimes. Years later, we now know this was simply an excuse for the overpolicing and brutality of minorities and the poor. The infamous war on drugs was introduced to the public in the 1970's, too. It became another avenue for police to target minorities and poor people. The focus on villainizing minorities, low-level crimes, and illegal drugs birthed things like stop and frisk, the three-strike rule, zero-tolerance policy in schools, and the racialized archetype of the ‘welfare queen.’

The racist and patriarchal government's neglect of women and minorities also raised the likelihood of their involvement in the system. The scrutinization of black women on welfare, supposedly due to rampant cases of welfare fraud, is one example. It allowed the government to be strict when it came to providing aid to women and families in need. Funding was cut, fewer women qualified, and new policies behind welfare notoriously split up the black family household. The 'man in the house' rule meant a male presence was forbidden in the home of a woman on public assistance. The argument was two 'able-bodied' people in one home was enough to sustain, what wasn't considered is the fact that black people experience(d) employment discrimination regularly. A well paying job on the books, one that didn't exploit the vulnerability of black people, wasn't easy to come by.

Resources
Prison Policy Initiative, Vera Institute, Center for American Progress, Women’s Prison Association, The Sentencing Project
Stress from a lack of financial stability is known to initiate and exacerbate mental health issues. When seeing a healthcare professional isn't an option, self-medication becomes the next best thing. Illegal drug use is an easy and relatively inexpensive way to disconnect from the struggles of daily life. More people acknowledge sex work as a reputable profession, but women sex workers are still vilified by the government. And rarely can women forced into a life of prostitution by pimps and abusers look to the government for protection and aid. It's hard to escape the system once you're in it. After release, ex-prisoners are faced with heavy fines for both their crimes and time spent living in a facility. It's not unusual for people to leave prison with thousands of dollars in debt. Probation and parole requirements force ex-prisoners to find a job with taxable wages in order to keep up with payments. Employment and housing opportunities are scarce for ex-prisoners, but they will still be sent back to jail if they do not meet all requirements in a timely fashion as punishment.

These situations create a tough cycle thousands of black and brown women live through at any given moment—they are constantly vulnerable to abuse, homelessness, and addiction. The government expanded its reach on who and what was deemed illegal. They searched for crime and created criminals. The government's answer to problems it helped create has been to hide people away in cages, not to provide resources for people's long term growth and sustainability within the country. Grassroots and community-run organizations offer support and counsel for women involved in the judicial system, but we still have a lot of work to do in order to protect them.

The government sees things like poverty and addiction as punishable personal failures, ignoring its role in contributing to the demise of its own people. It almost feels meaningless to run through all the ways people of color have been set up for failure because we already know. We know sexism, anti-blackness, and the marginalization of minority people are real things. We all know that. I'm convinced anyone arguing that our oppression doesn't exist, doesn't even believe that themselves. They're only committed to the argument so they can continue to live in the safety of their privilege. And anyway, the judicial system targets the disenfranchised the same way it has since its formation. If it has changed at all, it's only become more sophisticated in existing as a classist, racist institution. And private prisons are run with the intent to make a profit, we can safely refer to them as capitalist corporations.

Some Keys: There are 2.3 million people incarcerated in America today. The nation's population of women in state prisons grew 834% over the last 40 years, over twice the growth rate of men. There are people held in jails indefinitely, many can not afford to post bail and/or have not been convicted of a crime and await trial.
The loss inmates and their families experience is rarely validated by society. The social norm has been to strip the humanity away from people who are (or have) served time. When their humanity is taken away, general empathy goes away, too. I want society to examine the human experience within the tyrannical, corporate machine that is the prison system. Women incarcerated are especially ignored so let's focus on them for now. Try to imagine what prison life is like for a woman of color, they're objectified even before adding prison to the equation. Black and brown women are vulnerable to dehumanization as soon as we're brought into the world. For us, objectification is an unwanted, lifelong deal with society. Combine our womanhood and skin color with anything else that others us and imagine a life in prison.

Think about the loss. Try to understand how families grieve the absence of loved ones due to incarceration. It's affecting thousands of people throughout the country. I dealt with the absence of a loved one in prison when I was a little girl and let me tell you, I had no idea I was grieving back then. Didn't have the language to voice the way I felt either. Quietly, I let the uneasy feeling rot in my stomach. I could feel it in my body. I cringe when I think of other little black girls and boys experiencing the same thing, struggling to voice their feelings or too embarrassed (there is another social norm that creates humorous tropes out of the hardships of black children) to speak up. Black kids often deal with heavy issues alone but too quickly are their signs of mental health issues co-opted as traits of a 'bad kid.'

I feel for the families separated due to prison sentences, especially when I think of the racism, classism, and overall unfairness of how it's run. So, I want us all to stay interested in the mass incarceration of women since historically women are a silenced population. Society's interest in incarceration got us talking to each other about the abuse and disparity within prisons and jails. Society's interest created a shift from the collective habit of dehumanizing people involved in the judicial system. Reading the statistics of women's prison culture is overwhelming but when I look at the people involved I start to feel grounded again. It's important we continue to talk about this so that we can provide support and advocacy to women in need.

Some Keys: 62% Of women in prisons are mothers  Black women are twice as likely to to be incarcerated than white women  Health care in prison is designed for men and do not meet basic needs for women in prison
Step one in staying interested is hearing the stories from the mouths of women who lived them. I’m grateful I got the chance to speak with Tamanika, she was released from prison about a year ago and has already been reunited with her children. When Tamanika isn’t bonding with her kids, she is busy preparing herself for the workforce through the Hour Working Women Reentry Program. There she is mentored, developed, educated on the skills needed for her future professional career. She’s committed to excelling and dedicates herself to the program every weekday. Tamanika and I share the love of writing as a form of personal therapy, it’s one of her favorite hobbies these days. Aside from crocheting and getting lost in music, of course. Tamanika speaks about her personal journey from the captivity of addiction and incarceration to a life of mental clarity in the free world below.

SJ: Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up?
T: I started out living with my grandmother. I got to a little older and asked to see my mother, like on the weekends and for summer and whatnot. And eventually I asked to go live with her, that’s when I found out she was a drug addict. She had a new baby and I didn’t understand the whole drug addict thing until I went to go live with her. I got to see little of what she was doing and it was really hard. I was like, raising my sister. So I had to deal with that

SJ: So you definitely had to grow up fast, huh?
T: I had to learn a lot of things fast, I had to be an adult when I was a child. Go pick her up, make sure her homework is done, her hair is done, you know, cook something to eat. So I learned a lot pretty young. My mom died young, she was only 35. My mother died from aids in 1992, so that was difficult. She used to give me the “no, I have this, I have that” but I knew what it was, I watched her friends die before she died, and I knew what they died from. These were the same friends she would shoot up with so I knew what it was.

SJ: So after she died, did you go back to your grandmother?
T: Well, actually I went back to stay with my grandmother before she died. Me and my sister wound up staying with my grandmother for a little while, but then my grandmother got sick and couldn’t walk anymore. So me and my sister got separated- my sister went to my aunts and I went to my father's house. So there I am dealing with my father as a teenager wanting to do teenager things and run the streets, and you know when my mom died I started drinking and smoking weed a lot. He didn’t really know how to deal with me But I did actually go to Job Corps. I don't know, I didn’t listen, I just thought I knew everything, I thought I was grown, but I was really hurting from missing my mother.

SJ: Do you still keep in touch with your dad?
T: My father actually passed away when I was 23 years old, but I was able to get my life together a little before he passed away.
SJ: I'm glad he got to see that.
T: Yeah, he got to see that I actually got a job for the state! I got the job when my son was one month old. I started working in the office of mental health in the children's psych hospital. My father said, "I want to make sure you keep this job so I know you're alright before I die," and I guess I didn't really take him seriously about dying. I didn't think he was actually gonna die. I was on probation (for work at the children's psych hospital) for a year and I took a vacation once that year was up. I didn't actually go anywhere, just took a break from work but while I was on vacation he passed away- that was his way of making sure I was okay. I wound up keeping the state job for 14 years.

SJ: Tell me a little bit about your life right before incarceration.
T: Before incarceration... my downfall started in 2011 when my brother was murdered. He was the oldest. When my brother was murdered I started getting high. At the time, I might have been working 12 years at the state job. Not too long after that, the office wound up closing, I got transferred and I lost the family I had been working with. I got transferred on top of my brother being murdered. And that was kind of like my downfall. The sad part was I thought, yeah, I'm getting high but I still have food on the table, still getting the kids to school. But I eventually wound up losing my apartment.

SJ: You got into harder drugs to cope with the loss of your brother?
T: Yeah, doing heroin is like the no pain, drug, you don't feel anything. I kinda say I was like a robot.

SJ: So when you were in prison serving time, was it difficult to keep in touch with your kids?
T: It was very difficult, I stayed on Rikers Island and ACS (Administration for Children's Services) was supposed to bring them every two weeks but a lot of times that didn't happen. Other people's kids would come running into the visiting area. Someone would be like, 'Oh they didn't tell you? They're not coming today.' So that was difficult. I wrote them a lot of letters, I always wrote them, but they would tell me 'No one gave us money for stamps and envelopes to write you back.' You know, no one encouraged them to write me back. Once I went upstate, they had to fly the kids up once a month and a lot of times they wouldn't do that and it hurt.

SJ: Tell us about the night of your arrest.
T: The night I was arrested, they [the cops] came to my job and asked for me. They said, "We just want to talk to you," and they took me down to the precinct. The kids were already in another room, I knew I was going to jail when they let me talk to my kids. I just told them: this is your older sister, listen to her, y'all stay close. What you tell your kids- you make sure you put deodorant on every day and wash your underwear out every night. I just didn't want them to be a burden on anybody. You know, I taught them a lot and I just wanted them to remember everything. I told them how much I love them and said, "I don't know when I'm going to see you again, but I will." Then the officer came in the room and said your mother will be right back and that was the last time I saw them before serving.

When I got to judge he said, 'I want to read about your life, I want to know your story.' He did just that and when I came back he actually lowered my sentence to 1 ½ to 4 ½ years, said he wanted to give me a chance to get my kids back.
SJ: What emotions and thoughts were going through your head, from the night of your arrest to arraignment?
T: I was thinking, my kids are going to be in foster care and have never been away from me, all they know is me. And my parents were gone, my sister lived in a whole other state. I was more scared for them than I was myself.

SJ: During your sentences and arraignment did they consider that you were a mother?
T: During arraignment, no, no one cares about that. I took a certain sentence, between 4-6 years, but when I got to judge he said, 'I want to read about your life, I want to know your story.' He did just that and when I came back he actually lowered my sentence to 1 ½ to 4 ½ years, said he wanted to give me a chance to get my kids back.

SJ: So when you were in prison serving time, was it difficult to keep in touch with your kids?
T: It was very difficult, I stayed on Rikers Island and ACS (Administration for Children's Services) was supposed to bring them every two weeks but a lot of times that didn't happen. Other people's kids would come running into the visiting area. Someone would be like, 'Oh they didn't tell you? They're not coming today.' So that was difficult. I wrote them a lot of letters, I always wrote them, but they would tell me 'No one gave us money for stamps and envelopes to write you back.' You know, no one encouraged them to write me back.

Once I went upstate, they had to fly the kids up once a month and a lot of times they wouldn't do that and it hurt. When I was upstate they had to be flown in. But by the time I got the judge to order that, its like I'm coming home now.

SJ: When you were serving your time were there any special programs for you within the prison?
T: I met with my counselor and they have a lot of programs I didn't qualify for because I had a career before. I took a parenting class that allowed me to see all four of my kids at one time so that felt good, and a class called Sistas Healing Old Wounds, they call it SHOW. and that was the domestic violence issue so that was very encouraging.

SJ: What were some of the hardest parts about being in prison?
T: Your freedom is gone, you're away from your children, having nobody there for you, not having support is really hard. The food is horrible, you don't make that much money. I would say I was one of the lucky ones because my job was $0.25 an hour, so after my surcharge was paid I was making like $16 every two weeks. So I tried to stretch that out and made sure I bought everything I needed.

I didn't get in trouble with the officers because I followed all rules and did what I had to do to get home, I didn't get into no trouble. You have officers who are disrespectful and sometimes you just gotta take it when you're trying to go home.

SJ: Did you have a supportive community among the women there?
T: Yeah, I had friends I was with every day. We worked together and would cook together. I made my $16, one friend made her $12 and the other made $12, we'd go food shopping together, we'd make our list together so we could make a special meal. Like, “You gotta work it like that, some of them stay way longer, some of them only there for a little while, but we still tried to work together.”
chicken this time, you get the rice, you get this and that. We just did everything together- write our kids letters, watched movies together. I made the honor dorm so it made things a little bit easier.

SJ: Did you see a lot of that sisterhood among the women?
T: Yeah, everybody had their own little crew, their own little family. You gotta work it like that, some of them stay way longer, some of them only there for a little while, but we still tried to work together. You know, stay with your crew, mind your business, you don't get in no trouble.

SJ: So now that you’re out, do you have any goals you’re trying to fulfill?
T: Well, I’ve been home about a year now. My first goal when I came home wasn’t easy, but I did everything that I had to do. I used to be in the agency before the worker even got to work. They’d be like, ‘How may I help you today?’ And I’d be like, ‘I want my kids, what do you need me to do so that I can get them back?’ I was there every day, I said, ‘You might as well give me a cubicle because I’m going to be here every day until I get my kids back.’ So I came home and did all the programs that parole wanted me to do. My son came home and then on June 27th, both of my daughters came home. So I did it and I did it in record time!

SJ: Congratulations, that’s amazing!
T: Yep! With the WPA (Women’s Prison Association) I did the Women’s Leadership & Media Project program and graduated from that. I got an award for community parent. Just been doing what I can, my goal is to get my family back together, to find a job and an apartment for us. I’m working on that now. Right now we’re in community living, so me and my kids share a room. It’s a beautiful house, has a big living room, big kitchen and dining room, big backyard. It’s alright for now until I get myself together and find an apartment.

SJ: What was the most exciting part about getting to reunite with your kids again?
T: It has not been easy, you know, we have our days. My children have mental health issues so it’s been a rollercoaster ride, but we’re doing it and I’m just so happy they’re back with me. The best part is when they tell me they’re proud of me like, ‘Mom you said you was gonna come home and bring us back and you did!’ That’s a reward in itself.

SJ: What are you most proud of yourself for?
T: I’m proud I got them back, I’m so proud of that. When I go to court, the lawyer from the agency who used to tear me up in the courtroom, said ‘You know I used to get you, but I have to tell you I’m proud of you, I saw you do what you said you were going to do.’ And it’s like oh he’s not tearing me up today and praising me and that felt real good. I’m proud that I haven’t touched drugs again. I’m so proud of that, that right there is wonderful. I’m able to handle things, don’t need to get high to get rid of bad feelings. I’m like, ‘Okay, if something happens today, go to sleep and wake up tomorrow and start again that’s all you can do.’ So I’m proud of that.

SJ: Pretty amazing, it’s not easy.
T: It’s not, but I’m doing it and it’s just like yes, I’m proud of myself for that. We got a ways to go but we gonna get there, it’s not the end of the world, we gonna get back everything we lost and have it even better.
SJ: If you could offer a woman recently sent to prison any advice or tips, what would you say?
T: Why you in there, you have to learn to love yourself. Because ain't nobody going to love you like you can. And before you can love anybody else, you gotta learn to love yourself. And when you learn to love yourself, things gonna start falling into place. While you in there, just mind your business, and know what you working toward.

You can't change the past, leave the past where it's at. As women, we gotta stop worrying about these men and you gotta put all your love on you. If you start loving a man more than you love you, you're gonna lose yourself.

SJ: So before we wrap up, any last thing you'd like to say to people?
T: If one person could listen, and I could be an inspiration to one person, it's all that matters to me.
Behind the Scenes

Keisha for NYC Lens at Columbia University.

Cecile for Six by Eight Portrait: a journalistic project housed under the McCandlish Phillips Journalism Institute at The King’s College.

Jennifer for Liza Voloshin.

Kamilah for CNN.

Tamanika practicing with a green screen (top) and experiencing behind the camera (right) with 8 Ball TV.

Linda for VEDA.
Expertise

Total WLMP Graduates: 34
WLMP Media Opportunities: 55

WLMP Graduates have lived experience & expertise in:

- Alternatives to incarceration
- Parole and probation reform
- Bail reform
- Foster care prevention
- Crime prevention/public safety
- Employment discrimination
- Decriminalizing marijuana and other non-threats to public safety
- Broken windows policing
- The NYC housing crisis
- Closing Rikers and reducing mass incarceration
- Justice involvement: the differences between men and women
- Substance use and justice involvement
- Mental health and justice involvement
- Intimate partner violence
- Sex trafficking and justice involvement
- Racism and justice involvement
- Motherhood and justice involvement

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