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## The Monster in the Closet (Collectively, The Essays)

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***“Collectively...” The Essays, Volume 1***

**By: Chanelle Burnette**

**“As She Lay”**

“It is with tremendous sadness and from unfortunate circumstances that this writing arises. However, the deceased no longer have a voice; so I will speak out of respect for the young lady that recently passed away from a drug overdose.

At the very moment I sat writing my last essay, there was a young lady in distress. Fighting for the very breath which would become her last before the age of thirty. Right here inside this physical prison. But worse, the mental prison that obviously became her entrapment for reasons unknown. Poor thing.

It is with great devastation that I disclose the following information. And even though I did not know the young lady, I feel that people out there must know the lack of regard, respect, and care in general that was shown to her. The details revealed to me from an offender housed in the same wing as the young lady brought me to tears. If this was my response in simply hearing of it, I cannot even fathom of the offenders who witnessed this whole tragedy but have felt. It had to be traumatizing for them all! It has to be a visual that will remain with the for the rest of their lives. Images like that are not easily forgotten.

I was informed that at the court proceedings, neither officer conducting the count even bothered to ask her to stand. No one even knew that she had taken her last breath already right on her prison cot. When her roommate attempted to wake her but could not, she called for an officer. Due to the hysteria of the women within the wing, the officer arrived immediately. Yet, it was too little too late for this young lady.

Other officers were called in along with the Unit Manager who pulled her off of her bunk and gave his best attempt to administer CPR and revive her, but his efforts were futile. She was already gone. The code blue call went out over the prison's PA system. But horribly, and as usual, the nurses were slow to arrive. A code blue is something that requires a rapid response, unquestionably. But I'm sure it would have taken too much breath and effort for the nurses to run and rush to her aid. But I'm almost certain that it took her more breath and effort to fight for her young life!

If the code blue call was not bad enough, what was even worse was the fact that there was no Narcan brought to help revive her! How was that forgotten? Especially since the nurses took their sweet time arriving to render help to this poor soul! So...At that point, they were forced to run all the way back to the infirmary to retrieve the Narcan. Once again, too little, too late for her.

Eventually, an ambulance was called in. Their attempts to resuscitate her proved to be in vain also. She was gone. Gone before the age of thirty. The ambulance departed. Departed without this young woman in back. She was gone.

She was gone; yet not respected enough to have a sheet cover her lifeless body. As she lay on the cold tile floor, a shower curtain was thrown over the window of the cell door. I would say for privacy for the deceased, but this is Fluvanna, so I know better. As she lay gone and uncovered, two officers sat outside of her cell, just relieved not to have to be conducting security rounds. A break for them. A little time off from being bothered. They laughed and conversed as this soul lay with the rest of her life cut off.

The Coroner was summoned who arrived to pronounce her deceased. And who also left her to lie uncovered and alone. For hours. As she lay, other offenders were released from inside

locked cells and escorted one by one to be strip-searched. Searched for drugs. Searched. As she lay. No drugs were ever found. Except for the ones in this young lady's system ending her life."

### **"Will We Ever See A Neurodemocracy?"**

"Finally it is being speculated why blameworthiness could be the wrong question to ask when a crime is committed. Finally they have arrived where the judicial system should have been too many years ago! How is one to be held accountable for their actions if the biology of their brain has been altered by some circumstances?"

The answer lies in a forward-moving brain-compatible legal system. This is defined as a Neurodemocracy. This is a fresh approach that will demonstrate that incarceration is not always the best remedy. To me it makes more sense and is something that should have been considered when we were standing face to face with some black-robed figure awaiting our fate.

His robe was as much a shadow to me as my shadowed side was to him. We knew each other not. Yet he judged me based on something he read from a sheet of paper, which may or may not have even been the truth. Sad. Who am I to him? No one then. But a criminal now. Labeled forever for a mistake! Labeled because the real me was unknown and of no significance to him at all. So here I sit, as it is with so many others, unfortunately.

No doctor nor therapist am I, so as not to be confused. I am simply a human being who has made a very costly mistake and am making the best effort to understand why we all do the things that we do. This, along with helping people get a clear glimpse of the same. And also, a desperate attempt to open the eyes of those in charge of passing judgment on us.

Though "Judge" is a job title, judgment belongs to none of us! Yet those who have been granted this authority, this power, either care not, or are oblivious about the inner workings of

the human brain. Once again, I possess no fancy title behind my name. I'm just a curious and eager individual and I am striving to help reveal what lies hidden behind the mental veil we all wear knowingly, or unknowingly.

We each are born with our own personal little three-pound computer system called the brain. This complex system is built up of billions of tiny cells called neurons and glia. They are all connected to one another and each cell sends electric signals to other cells up to hundreds of times per second which makes approximately ten-thousand connections to neighboring neurons. How amazing is that?

What is even more amazing is the way in which its biology can be altered by the least little thing. Things that, surprisingly, we would think were of no consequence and would therefore have no bearing whatsoever on our attitudes and behavior. But modern science has concluded this to be true. It has been determined that our thoughts are supported by anything physical. The state of thoughts are a direct result of the physical material. So basically, any alteration to the brain changes the types of thoughts we think.

Within our brains we possess two different mental processes, consciousness and unconsciousness. Consciousness is defined as the upper level of mental life of which a person is aware. Unconsciousness is defined as the part of one's mental life of which one is not ordinarily aware, but which is often a powerful force in influencing behavior. Two forces that are usually in opposition to one another.

Thankfully, most of what we do in our mental lives is not under our conscious control. Luckily, because our little mental computer would be on overload and short out just as a technological one does. Processes which normally go unnoticed or even taken for granted are done unconsciously. Things such as the beating of our hearts, breathing, and much more are

carried out on an unconscious level. Imagine how much trouble it would be to remember just having to breathe? Overwhelming right?

Alongside the processes of consciousness and unconsciousness, there is yet another set of opposing forces: the emotional brain and the rational brain. Both forces compete for control over the output of behavior; and emotions usually play a big part in our decision making. How many of us are guilty of allowing our emotions to override our intellect? I know I am! This is a question of which every human being should share the same answer.

This is the information bringing forth the question of blameworthiness. If there is a biological change in the functioning of a person's brain, how can they be blamed for any behavior not characteristically their own? Do we blame a child who does not yet know right from wrong? By no means am I making any attempt at all to excuse my own behavior, but the behavior of many who have been convicted of a crime. I am simply saying that "there is more to me than meets the eye."

### **"My Definition of Insanity"**

What defines "insanity," per Chanell R. Burnette, #1188812. Well, let's see...

"Insanity," as defined per offender number 1188812 began when I heard that the next thirty years of my life were being snatched away for something I didn't mean to do.

"Insanity" defined by number 188812 was not even being able to turn and see the look, the pain in my mother's eyes when my judgment was pronounced in the courtroom that day.

"Insanity" for number 1188812 is when I had my first visit with my mom and my two sons at the Roanoke City Jail behind the plexiglass, and my three-year old and and my six-

month-old children didn't understand why I couldn't kiss them or pinch their cheeks, something that always invoked their little laughter. That's "insane."

"Insanity by number 11888427...when my attorney visited me at the jail for what I thought would be a routine visit, but turned out to be anything but that.

"Insanity" deepened when she handed me pictures of my "victim" sprawled out on the cold, hard steel slab sewn back together and toe-tagged like the deceased. Was she? And at my hands? Nah, couldn't be. I didn't, did I?

"Insanity" deepened for C. Burnette #1188812 sitting in my cell alone in maximum security staring at these pictures and reading my "victim's" autopsy report for three months. Insane?

"Insanity" for number 1188812 was numerous trips on suicide watch with no real suicide attempts. Why was I forced to sleep on that steel cot with nothing but a paper gown and I hadn't slit my wrists? Yet. But would I? Should I? Never could. Never did.

"Insane for Burnette, 1188812, became finding the will, the strength to press on through the survivor's guilt and realize that I still deserve to live and that my life did have a purpose that was worth fighting for.

My "insanity" has been watching my infant and toddler grow to be young men with jobs, girlfriends and facial hair.

My "insanity" is that after almost fifteen years of hell, fifteen years, I repeat, I'm still here. Still here having gotten no further for all of my efforts [**illegible due to scan** (of?)] maintaining exceptional behavior and making wise use of my time. Is that or is that not, "insane?"

## **“A Call for Reformation”**

“I have experienced firsthand the need for criminal justice and prison reform within the state of Virginia during the fifteen years of my incarceration. Were I to list the many complaints of offenses done to us, the number would be too great. And yet they call us “the offenders.”

What of the offenses we suffer at the hands of this so-called justice system? Is it really justice? Or just-us? Just us, against them? And I speak not presently in the terms of racial injustice or inequality, for that is another matter altogether. I am speaking in terms of a justice system that seems its only prejudice is against justice itself!

Sound the battle cry! The call for reformation has been declared! Great is the need, but few are the soldiers. Many began as strong warriors but they eventually grew weary in fighting what seemed to be a perpetual war of defeat. Year after year of petitioning the governor for clemency, meetings with the parole board, even seeking presidential pardons, is enough to knock the fight out of anyone. I too have fought this fight. We are tired and we need help people!

We need help, and on a more positive note, we are now getting it. Many have begun to take a look at the debauchery suffered by those trapped inside of America’s penal system. A system which shows no mercy and which has no regard nor respect for lives turned upside down and families torn apart. No respect for individuality once a person becomes incarcerated.

We are labeled as offenders, inmates, and criminals. Felons, one who has committed a felony. While each of these words bears the weight of its own offensiveness, by far to me the stamp of offender is the most repugnant of them all. Yes we did offend someone who was affected by our crime but that term should also be applied to those in charge of our rehabilitation.

Merriam-Webster defines the word offender as one that offends. A word used too much too loosely to describe one who is still human in spite of their mistakes. There is no human on



earth who has never offended another. No human on earth who has not made a mistake. And the last time I checked none of us can ever lose our humanness. So technically, all of humanity are offenders. I suppose it's just that those of us locked behind bars are of the criminal kind.

But making headway is the realization that those of us locked down are not the only offenders, the only criminals. Gaining national attention lately is the way with which we are being mistreated, marginalized and abused.

I cannot speak for the men on the inside, but I can speak for us women who are constantly abused verbally, physically at times, and beyond the shadow of a doubt mentally and emotionally. That abuse is ongoing. It has become habitual among the majority of staff and is just as damaging, if not more so, than the abuse many of us have suffered prior to our incarceration. How does one deem that rehabilitative?

It is destructive behavior exhibited by brutes. Tyrants. Heartless, overworked and underpaid individuals whose only concerns are showing up to work and receiving a paycheck. No respect for anyone who is just as human as they are. Many fail to realize that the only differences between us and them is the uniform and the fact that they weren't caught for their offenses. In every other respect, we are all one and the same. We have feelings, families, health issues, financial difficulties, and so on. One and the same.

So what would make one treat another so inhumanely? Is my life not worth just as much as yours? If they serve us food they would themselves not eat, what makes it acceptable for us to eat it? If I have a complaint of pain, why tell me that my symptoms are psychosomatic, yet send me to an outside specialist who runs a test and finds a legitimate condition? Why address me with profanity and when I respond likewise, I am issued a disciplinary infraction? Why provide

poor quality things at outrageous costs when some of us survive off of our meager twenty seven cents per hour income? And on and on is the list.

There is much to be said, and definitely much to be changed within American's penal system. What will it really take? I would like to leave you with one final thought...Delegate Rob Bell, (R), in an interview that was published in *The News and Advance* stated, "Those policies that would make our schools more dangerous or result in the early release of violent offenders are the ones that are certainly causing the most unease among those of us who have made public safety a priority in the last few years."

I wonder if Republican Bell has any friends who are employed as Correctional Officers in one of these overcrowded prisons? I wonder that if he did, how he would refer to his buddy if after his buddy had worked his normal shift and unfortunately got drafted and was forced to work overtime, was driving home late at night tired from work, got distracted from sleepiness, took two seconds and rubbed his eyes and in that blink of the eye, hit and killed a pedestrian?

Would he call his buddy an offender? Would his buddy's accident not have offended the family of the deceased? His buddy would then become a violent offender as well. He would become one of the people being mistreated, marginalized, and abused! Sadly that should be enough proof that it is time for a change! Clearly, the justice system is no respecter of persons.

### **"From Heartache to Healing"**

"Today is October 16, 2019. What is so special about this day? Well, it is my youngest son's birthday. A bittersweet day for me indeed.

It is sweet because he has grown to be an awesome young man that I'm proud to call my son! And I cannot use the term bitter because of that, I am not. What I am, is sad that I have

missed being home to see him grow up. Instead, I made a mistake which led me to be incarcerated for fourteen years of his life.

I also have an older son that turned eighteen in May. While my oldest was three years old when I left, my baby was still just that: a baby. Only six months old! An infant and a toddler; left behind because of one bad decision. One split-second of wrong judgment would alter the course of our lives forever.

Though I am still incarcerated, I am close to the end of my journey. And although I still struggle with being separated from my boys, I would still like to try and provide some encouragement for any mother who must endure the same heartache.

When I first received my thirty-year sentence, needless to say that I was completely devastated. How would I survive being away from them for so long? How would they survive out there without their mom? And more importantly, would they ever forgive me for leaving them? Would I even forgive myself?

The answer I give to the mothers wondering the same thing is, it is possible to get through! I will not be dishonest in the least bit and tell you that it will be easy because it certainly will not. But you can make it! You must be determined to, and not allow yourself to be broken by your circumstances. You are more than your mistake! And remember that one bad choice does not define you as an individual and it is your job as a mother to ensure your children know as much.

The toughest part for me was accepting my lack of control over their lives. I wanted to be hands-on and do anything I could to make sure they were okay. I must have written dozens of letters to different organizations reaching out for help of any kind for my boys. Eventually, I had to relinquish the control that I thought I had. I had to accept what I was, as you must as well.

The best advice I am able to offer is to stay focused and don't give up hope. Stay in constant communication with your children if possible. Write them. Call them. Even if you receive no response, they will appreciate your effort. That will show them that regardless of where you sit now, your heart and your love is with them always. In having to watch my children grow from afar for the past fourteen years, they do not doubt my love for them! Mother to mother, hold on!

### **“What Do You See Through the Window?”**

“What I see when I look through the window is the person I used to be. That broken young lady pretending wholeness. Pretending there was no darkness, no sadness in the windows to my soul, my eyes.

But it was there, unfortunately. There, outweighing the light. Blotting it out. At times the darkness seemed all encompassing, engulfing me in despair. Why couldn't I just look out of my window and see the sunshine like everyone else? Why was my view so distorted?

It took me a long time to realize that I was looking in the wrong direction. Instead of daydreaming and staring out of my window, I should have been looking in my mirror. Figuring out whose face was looking back at me. Dreaming about who I wanted to see looking back at me. Certainly not someone broken. I wanted a whole image, not some shattered pieces.

My heart was fragmented because I had allowed it to be dropped and trampled upon one too many times. It took me a long time to realize that people will only treat you the way you allow them to treat you. But when you do not know your worth, you tend to be more accepting of mistreatment from others and, sadly enough, it will continue until you are tired. Tired and ready to make a change.

This is something that a person must discover on their own. They can receive the best advice from the best sources, but until they themselves are ready to make some changes for the better, it won't happen. Have you ever heard the saying that 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink?' Same principle.

Looking back, I could say that I wish I would have taken the advice given me, but then that would have made things easier and today I might not be the woman I am. Nothing worth having ever comes easy, but that just makes it all the more sweet when the victory comes! And it will come ladies. But you have to be willing to be a winner.

Ladies, to be a winner, you must change your thinking and adopt a winning mentality. You deserve more than what you've been getting, but you must want it badly, enough to stop settling. Stop accepting things as they are because you're worth more and you deserve more! You deserve to be happy and if someone isn't treating you well and you are unhappy, cut the ties and move on. Demand your respect and declare your happiness!

I did. And now what I see when I look through the window is myself walking out of these prison gates soon, as a whole woman. A woman complete. Refined and defined. I changed the direction. I was looking in and now the view is simply breathtaking!"

**“[UNTITLED]”**

“The Corona Virus, or Covid-19, what is it? For me, as well as the world, I would define it as a wake up call from God. A plague.

It is time to wake up people! God is not pleased with the wicked ways of this world. He is so disappointed with the way people have hardened their hearts toward Him. Turned their faces from Him. How painful it must be for a father to watch His children being led astray by the

clever disguises in which the serpent reveals himself. However, one Christian will recognize another [cut off in scan, word illegible, maybe “and”] his or her fruit. Pay attention and do not be deceived.

This virus, this deadly virus that seemingly appeared out of nowhere is nothing short of a plague. Fellow believers, is it not? For those who do not read the Bible, you already know the ways in which our God will utilize to get our attention. My fellow Christians know what I’m talking about.

And for those of you who do not, I suggest that you learn. Take some time to read the Bible and get to know the One True Creator. That is honestly the best thing a person can do for themselves as we are living in these last days. Once again, my fellow believers are all aware of this truth.

As I look around at the world in which we now live, I barely recognize it. I am saddened. Disheartened by what I see. And so I pray. Ultimately, that is how we will be delivered from this plague. God wants his children to come to Him! But he won’t help if we don’t call and depend on Him.

This is it people! How many more must perish before this world turns from their wicked ways and learns to embrace The Only One who has the power to save them? It’s not too late to repent and accept him as your savior, but one day it will be too late. I beseech you turn to Him! I can personally guarantee anyone that it will be the best decision they can ever make and one that they will never regret!

Don’t wait around! Do it now because tomorrow is not promised to anyone. Pray this prayer of salvation right now, (out loud), and accept him as your Savior:

“Heavenly Father, I come to You now in the name of Your Son Jesus Christ. I confess that I am a sinner and that I have sinned against you. I ask you to forgive me for my sins and I choose to follow and obey and accept Your Son Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I believe in my heart that you send Your Son Jesus Christ to die for my sins on the cross at Calvary. I believe that Your Son Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified and died on the cross at Calvary for me and the sins of all others. I believe that after three days He was raised from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and is alive today. I ask you Jesus Christ to be the Lord of my life and to be my Savior. I receive you now as my Lord and Savior with all of my heart. I believe that Jesus Christ is alive in me, and I declare that Jesus Christ is the “Lord of my life.”

People, if you just prayed that prayer, you are saved! Arise from the slumber that Satan has craftily placed you under. Wake up and stay woke; for the hour is near!”

### **“The Monster in the Closet”**

“How many women have had to be afraid and hide from the monster in the closet? Who is this monster, you ask? None other than their domestic abuser. I, myself, was once afraid of the monster. Cowering from a coward.

Domestic violence affects lives at a staggering rate. Some women become survivors; yet sadly, too many become just another victim. Labeled as a violent offender and given a state identification number with seven digits and the stigma of a criminal. Regardless of your history, your standing within the community, you are now just a number. A number with a past if you should stand up to your monster and protect yourself.

Where in the state of Virginia are the laws to protect women from our monsters? Oh right, they do not exist, unfortunately. In my experience with my own monster, I can definitely

say that there should be laws implemented for our protection as well laws to assist in cases of self-defense.

And why is it that these laws do not exist in this state? The answer remains to be seen. I had the honor of speaking to a survivor the other day. Her story ended in tragedy like so many other women I have met along my journey of incarceration. This brave soul had to stand in front of the judge, broken on the inside from years of domestic abuse, and await an undeserved fate. Five years of confinement in a Virginia correctional facility. Had laws been in place to protect her, our paths would never have crossed because she would not be sitting here with me in Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where she does not belong.

What is astounding to me are the words she told me that were spoken by her judge. This merciful human being informed her that if there was a self-defense law in the state of Virginia, that she would not have received any time to serve at all. Wow! Yet here she is, trying to heal emotionally in a system secretly designed to perpetuate brokenness. Oh yes, they will tell you that prison is about rehabilitation. However, from the inside witnessing it firsthand, I beg to differ. There is no help for us, but us. If we do not help ourselves and each other, the system certainly will not. It is the same system which has failed us already.

It failed us thrice. The first failure was when we were being beaten within inches of our lives and called the police. They showed up and what did they do? Instruct us both, my abuser and me, to calm down or else we'd both be hauled off to jail. What? The second failure was in the courtroom where we women stood face to face with someone ready to tell us the outcome of our future like a fortune-teller. Only in our cases, it became our misfortune. The third failure was our punishment. If we were forced to serve time in prison, we got stuck inside the belly of a different type of monster, disconsolately.



This monster called Domestic Violence has dug its claws deep into the souls of many women and ripped it to shreds. We became torn. Torn into wanting liberation; and torn because of the fear to leave. Too many of us stayed. I did. Out of fear. Out of love. Out of the desperation of thinking he'll change. Wanting him to change. Wanting him to find help. But in the process, slowly losing ourselves.

I questioned everything about myself as I went through this ordeal. Was I ugly? Was I fat? Was I stupid? Why was I not enough to make him happy? What could I possibly do differently to make him love me and stop hitting me? Little did I know the problem was not with me, but something broken inside of him that only he could fix. But before I figured this out, I had already had enough and decided to defend myself. Take the law into my own hands and protect myself.

Being a law-abiding citizen, I should never have been forced to act as an officer of the law and protect myself. But I did. This resulted in a felony offense. I was the victim, but became a villain when I was forced to do the job of the law.

### **“A Generation Misguided”**

“When I look around at the present prison population here at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, it saddens me so much. So many lost young women. Misguided, and therefore, misjudged.

I arrived at this institution back in 2006 when things were a lot better, if I may utilize that word in regards to a prison. There was more structure. More discipline. There were incentives for us mothers like the M.I.L.K. program. M.I.L.K. stands for Mothers Inside Loving Kids and was an outstanding way for us to remain bonded with our children. I have been a member since 2008,

but sadly, currently our program is non-existent; and was so even before the Corona Virus pandemic.

So with no punishment and no incentive to want to do the right thing, many simply do not. And not only has the prison population gotten younger, but so has the staff that governs us. Unfortunately the common denominator seems to be the lack of respect for one another; because as we all now, respect is a two-way street. It must be given in order to be received.

Young people should never disrespect their elders! At least that is the way I was raised. But as I said, many have been misguided; or have had no guidance at all and their actions and behavior are a direct reflection of such.

Many have unresolved anger and so ....

**[NEXT PAGE A NON-SEQUITOR, PART OF ANOTHER PIECE?]**

Which an older white man hit and killed a woman, a black woman, with his vehicle, left the scene in a state of intoxication, yet only received a sentence of twenty-four months to serve? Not twenty-two years like myself. But only twenty-four months. If the Governor decides not to grant my pardon, that man the habitual sex offender that he is, will serve out his twenty-four months in a city jail and then return home to go on with his life and I'll still be sitting in prison.

Sitting in prison praying for the freedom to go home and be with my two sons who are now young men. One at nineteen, and the youngest at fifteen. These two awesome young men were only six months old and three years old when I was snatched away from them for something that I never meant to happen. A tragedy that we will all continue to try to heal from for the rest of our lives. Something that no amount of incarceration can fix. Broken hearts.

My point in sharing my story is to communicate how unfair the judicial system is in the state of Virginia. How is it that two individuals from different walks of life commit the same offense and receive such different punishments. In the very same state? Oh, why yes, because Virginia is a commonwealth state which in all actuality just means that they can do whatever they want to people. No regard for people's situation or their lives, period.

The Merriam-Webster's dictionary and Thesaurus defines the term commonwealth as: 1- the body of some people politically organized into a state 2- A state especially conceived as a body politic founded on law and united by compact or by tacit agreement of the people for the common good, also an association or federation of autonomous states.

My question is what common good is done if the law isn't applied impartially? What makes that gentleman's life more deserving to be lived in freedom sooner than mine when, in common, we both share a deceased black woman? We have in common, he and I, a person, a victim, who lost their life by our hands accidentally, (though he was inebriated and I was not). Our common denominator: someone is dead. Gone forever.

Does that gentleman even care? Does he dream of his victim as I did for years? Shed a tear for her? Struggle to see the good in himself? Wonder why he survived and she did not? Does he even think of her family and want their forgiveness? I do, and I have for the past fifteen years. It has taken me eleven out of my fifteen years of incarceration to even forgive myself for what I did. My victim, my guardian angel, was someone very close to me. Though his may not have been, I am certain that woman's life had meaning, as all of ours do.

Each of our lives serve some purpose in the greater scheme of things. It is just baffling to see the way in which judges in this Commonwealth of Virginia seem to disregard this. I could be angry, but I'm not. Only disgusted. Disgusted yet beholden. Beholden because without the

insight of the inside, I would not be so capable of vocalizing what is not so common here in this Commonwealth of Virginia.”

### **“The Red, Unfortunate, and Blue”**

“Today my Eighth Amendment Rights were violated by a healthcare provider. Here I am, unable to utilize the word “professional” because her conduct was anything but that. The word “provider” is inappropriate as well, as her actions were cruel and unusual.

The two operative words health and care, are combined for a reason. However, Nurse Practitioner Carson had no regard for my health, and no care for what I feel on a daily basis.

I suffer from Fibromyalgia amongst other chronic disorders, all of which produce pain. This callous, obdurate woman stated that plenty of people have pain but that they ‘just deal with it.’

I am certain that the people she refers to are not incarcerated and sleep well on comfortable mattresses of their choosing and have other ways they alleviate their pain. However, Us who are unfortunately incarcerated, are working only with limited options. And what happens when our limited options do not work? How are we to just deal with it? What should we do? Self-medicate like too many others I see when I look around? That is partially, or maybe even wholly, the reason we are in the predicament we are in currently. Or maybe these people were told to ‘just deal with it’, and so they are in their own way.

In this facility, medical personnel such as doctors the nurse practitioners who evaluate us for treatment are split into two teams: The Red Team and the Blue Team. If your last name begins with the letters of A-K, you are a patient of the Red Team. If your last name begins with the letters of L-Z, the Blue Team.

The unfortunate?...The Red Team of course, of which I am a patient. What must I do to receive better healthcare; marry? Change my last name? What I should not have to do is even think along those lines. Though I am being somewhat facetitious, this is no joking matter. We are suffering here. Meanwhile, the patients of the Blue Team are receiving adequate healthcare.

As offenders, we do not have the right to select our healthcare provider, unfortunately. And we also do not have the luxury of being guaranteed to see the same one each time no matter how awful or wonderful they may be. We may go for an appointment and meet with someone who has not even taken the time to read our chart. Someone else to whom we must explain our condition. Someone else who may or may not have compassion. Someone else who may or may not just be here for a paycheck.

So if that is the case, why is it that we cannot change teams on a rotating basis? If they are not our regular healthcare provider anyway, and may or may not even be familiar with our issues and conditions, why can we not switch teams every so often so that we all are allowed the opportunity to receive adequate healthcare? Though I may not know the inner-workings of the system utilized by the medical department, what I do know is that there has been much negligence and malpractice occurring throughout my fourteen years of being housed at this facility. A lot of women have died senselessly at the hands of this medical department over the years. And sadly, all of this with no positive changes. No better healthcare, no improvement in the morale of the medical staff.

Haplessly, the man in charge of them all, Dr. Paul Targonski, MD, PhD, Director for Clinical Research, Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Virginia, is no different. Only he holds more titles behind his name. His treatment of us is no different, no better than some of the staff beneath him. I was told by one of the doctors that Dr. Targonski is here to

simply fill the space. So, in other words, he does not really care about us. Just here for his annual salary; never mind our needs.

And for the medical personnel who do really care, eventually they are fired for basically being too helpful. It seems as if one of the requirements for employment in this facility is apathy. That stands not only for medical, but for correctional staff as well. If you have no heart, you're hired!"

### **“The Red, Unfortunate and Blue: Part Two”**

“For those of you who read my essay, The Red, Unfortunate, and Blue, thank you so much! This essay will be part two of such, in which I will repeat the results of a survey I conducted here at the prison about the medical care we receive: The Red Team vs. the Blue Team.

I will begin by listing the comments a few people made. All choose to remain anonymous, except one person a Mrs. Andrea Petrosky, patient of the ‘Blue Team,’ who stated,

-‘I do find some medical staff helpful, but their hands are tied. There’s only so much they can do.’

Others stated:

-‘Ms. Carson shouldn’t have a job. She has lack of concern or compassion for you but she’s in the medical field.’

-‘There are some providers who really care and they try to help but they are extremely limited by the Department of Corrections. If I were taken care of properly, I may not be in a wheelchair today. I used to visit medical frequently, but not now.’

-‘The only comment I have is the treatment team needs to be more efficient and concerned about what they do.’

Okay, let me clarify; the treatment team is the team of medical personnel who treats us for our everyday medical needs. For example, if an offender has undergone a surgery in which a bandage has been applied to a wound and must be changed daily, the treatment team would assist with such an issue. The preceding comments are all from patients of the Blue Team. Now, the Red Team’s comments:

-‘I believe that people on the Blue Team receive the medications they need and the Red Team is treated poorly. I am told one thing and then forgotten. My allergies are also downplayed.

-‘I feel that the medical staff (some, not all) don’t give the professional care to us because we are incarcerated. I can’t imagine that they do their job that way in the free world.’

-‘Just because I’m incarcerated, I should not be treated any different than I was on the outside. It’s cruel and unusual punishment and still deserve medical care.’

-‘I feel medical is poor at helping us sometimes.’

-‘All these questions depend on the nurses and doctors who help you.’

Yes, this last comment was very true. The survey consisted of the following questions:

- 1.- How much interaction do you have with the medical department?
- 2.- Are you a patient of the Red Team or Blue Team?
- 3.-What is your ethnicity?
- 4.-Do you feel that you are treated fairly by the medical department?
- 5.-Do you feel that they listen, care, and do their best for you?
- 6.-Do you feel that others receive more help than you?
- 7.-Do you get the medications you need or request?

8.-Do you feel that medical staff is knowledgeable about your condition or concerns?

9.-Do you feel that you would be treated differently if you were not incarcerated?

I myself, am in total agreement with each of the comments because we all pretty much feel the same. Only one person on the Red Team, when asked if they feel they are treated fairly, answered yes. One person. Four people on the Blue Team answered yes to this question. There was a total of eighteen surveys taken.

When asked question number five, eight offenders on the Red Team answered no. Three on the Blue Team answered no. Question number six, there were eight on the Red Team who answered yes and four on the Blue Team that answered likewise. As for question number seven, on the Red Team, six people answered no, while on the Blue Team, eight also answered likewise. So, no help there. And question number eight, of the Red Team, there were seven who answered no and four who answered yes.

And lastly, question number nine, I feel that we are all in agreement with our treatment as offenders whether we are on the Red Team or the Blue Team because all these providers see is our uniforms. A uniform, which to the majority of them signifies that we are nobodies; no longer human beings who deserve the same healthcare as they do. They no longer see us as people, but as problems. Pests to rid themselves of as quickly as possible. So whether we're Red Team or Blue Team, it's equal opportunity mistreatment.

### **“The Agony of Defeat”**

“How many have ever had feelings of despondency? Defenseless? Vulnerability? Well those feelings are not at all uncommon amongst prisoners. We are all too familiar with them unfortunately.



These feelings have solidified into a harsh reality for those of us within these concrete walls. However great our needs may be, we are brushed aside and our needs made microscopic, or even invisible altogether. We no longer matter. As all we have become is a seven-digit number to the administration. They do not look at us, but through us it seems. As I said, invisible.

And speaking from years of experience, to cry out and be ignored, creates the sensation of sheer defeat. And defeatism is, well, a feeling indescribable. I cannot tell you how many tears I have shed as a result of such. It is so hurtful when another human being can look you square into your eyes and still not see you. Not see you as a human being as well with needs and feelings, but rather as a nuisance instead. It is dehumanizing to say the least.

Do we live in a hurried world? Yes. Do prison officials have heavy workloads? Absolutely! However, the ultimate goal of prison is reformation and rehabilitation. I am sad to say that that is not what is taking place here in Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. In fact, the complete opposite is true. People have lost themselves in a system of injustice, abuse, and corruption.

People whom have experienced drug addiction have fallen back into the lifestyle. People who have health conditions have become debilitated. People with mental health disorders have attempted suicide. All while the administration appeases us by offering the response they thing we want. No. What we want is to be heard and taken seriously! What we want is our concerns addressed, investigated, and rectified in a timely manner! What we want is to be treated like the human beings that we still are in spite of our mistakes! Is that too much to ask from a system designed to reform us? I don't think so.

So what can we do to make ourselves visible? The answer remains to be seen. But what I do see, yet understand not, is how the most problematic offenders receive the attention and help while us quiet, respectful offenders are waved off, (literally), and shooed away like a bothersome insect. It is so bass-akwards! But I pout and throw a tantrum like a two-year old toddler to get my way? It seems to work for others, yet it is not my nature to do so; and so, I continue to be ignored. Invisible, unseen, and unheard. Defeated.”

### **“Parenting from the Inside”**

“One of the most challenging things I have ever had to do was to be a parent from behind these prison walls. And not just a parent, but an effective parent! One to set a positive example and to be the type of role model that my children would take pride in following.

Is it easy? Not at all. Can it be done? Absolutely! And my two children are the living proof. Do they always listen and do what they know to be right? Not at all. But what is important is the fact that they do make a conscious effort to do so. I know this is because when they talk, I listen. What I did not know at first was that when I was talking, they were listening too! And now as I listen to them, I hear what I have taught them reflected back at me. And to me, there is nothing more rewarding than that!

Not any one of us is the picture of perfection. But as a parent, it is your responsibility to shape and mold your child into the best person they can be and help them live up to their true potential. I strive to be the driving force behind all that my children do, and unbeknownst to them, they do the very same for me. It is my wish that they will do better and go further than I

ever will. The sky is the limit for our children! And as parents, we must be the wind beneath their wings, pushing them to soar to new heights.

The task of parenting successfully from within these walls can be done in many different ways. And whether you're miles away from your children or not, there are still ways to remain close to them in heart. Though we are limited in many ways, we are not not altogether helpless. There are things we can do. All that is needed is a little creativity on our behalf.

Letters to schools about our children's grades. Good relationships and communication with their caregivers. Sending cards and gifts that have been handmade. All of these examples are things that I have personally done to show my children how much they are loved, adored, and deeply missed.

Even if you have infrequent visitation with your children, or no visitation at all, do not hesitate to at least pick up a pen! During my fifteen-year period of incarceration, I have written to my boys every single week. Lots of letters with many that may not have even been read; but that will never stop me from sending them each week! Whether they do or not at the moment, they will appreciate your effort and dedication as they grow older.

And this bit of information was related to me by older inmates whom have watched their children reach adulthood during their incarceration. And believe it or not, our children save the letters that we write to them! Now, how sweet is that? If it is only one sheet of paper to utter the three words "I love you," that can make all the difference in the world of your child who is missing you just as much as you are missing them! It is so important to let them know just how much they are loved regardless of our current circumstances.

It is also important to show them that it is not about how you fall, but how you get back up! Our mistakes and/or bad choices do not define us as individuals; and we must make this

visible to them. How do we do this? By making wise use of our time during our incarceration and leading by example. Any negative situation can be turned into a positive one if the proper time and effort are invested. Your children need to see what you are doing behind these walls.

Many prisons offer a variety of classes. Some are educational courses, and some are self-help groups. What is important is the example we set for our children. Due to our past mistakes, we must work even harder to show them that much good can arise out of a bad situation, and any situation is the sum of what you make it.

Are you being productive or are you are wasting your time? Are you taking advantage of the opportunities provided for you? Or are you sitting around in a state of perpetual complacency and stagnation?

Life is all about choices and your children need to see you making ones that are better than those that led you down the path to incarceration. Being an incarcerated mother is one of the biggest challenges I have ever faced. Incarceration in itself is enough of a challenge, and certainly something that no parent would ever want their children to have to endure. So, it is up to us to guide them in a direction opposite of the one we chose.

Many things can lead a person to incarceration. It could be a lifestyle choice, a life or death situation, a one time bad choice, or even something in which one had to do to escape poverty's clutch. Whatever an individual's situation, choice, or mistake, it is left up to us to try and show your children a different route. We never want to see our children make the same mistakes we did; but instead to learn from them and to make better choices than we did.

The purpose of incarceration is reformation and rehabilitation and if not taken seriously and we leave out in the same condition in which we entered the system, well then, it was all in vain; was it not? Why allow it to be if all we have is time? Time to reflect on what inevitably led

us to prison in the first place. And time to grow and empower ourselves so that we will be ready and more than capable of making better decisions. Decisions that lead to a brighter future for you and your children. Once secure with the promise of togetherness and creating new memories.

Throughout my journey, since 2008, until there was no more, I have been an active mother in a program here at the facility called M.I.L.K. That is an acronym for Mothers Inside Loving Kids. This program has truly been a blessing to me and my family because it has helped us stay connected with one another in a way that would not have been possible if I had not been in the program.

I will be forever grateful to Counselor Dunn and Girl Scouts of America for the opportunity to be a part of something so life-sustaining during my incarceration. My membership and participation in the M.I.L.K. program were what has helped me to motivate me to become a better mother. In this program I learned how to parent effectively from the inside because honestly upon my arrival to prison, I was not only devastated, but completely and utterly lost about how I would make it through this time of being separated from my children. I thought that I would just die of a broken heart. Never had I ever been apart from my boys for any extended period of time. So to be snatched away so quickly, and for such a long period of time, I thought for sure would stop the beating of my heart! How could it beat without my children when they're the sole reason for my heartbeat?

The good news is that indeed my heart did continue its beating and I am nearing the end of my journey; finally. I say that to say to my incarcerated parent, that it is certainly possible to make it through to the other side and come out stronger, wiser and better than ever before! I am not saying it will be easy and that there won't be tears, because I have undeniably shed my fair

share. Out of sadness, desperation, helplessness, hopefulness and uncertainty of a potential outcome. And yet: HERE I STILL STAND! I am still here today.

My journey began in 2005 and instead of allowing it to break me, I turned it around into what would strengthen me. It is what would turn me into the mature woman and mother I am today and I am so grateful for this experience because it has shaped me into who I am. I can honestly admit that I do not know who or where I would even be without it. Many view their incarceration as a hindrance. I see it as a help! It is up to each of us what we see. A glass half full or half empty.

A final thought to ponder on. If your children could observe your behavior as any given moment, what would you want them to see?

### **The New Age**

“Ouch,” I think as I roll over to shut off my alarm clock that awakens me at 2:15 a.m. on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings on my prison bunk. I awake before the sun shines to do my job; other people’s laundry. Sounds disgusting but I’m just grateful to have a job, and an easy one at that!

The ouch was the ache in my arm from it going numb. You wonder if it’s numb then how deep does it hurt? Unexplained. All I know is that my body has most definitely changed as I have aged here in prison!

When I became incarcerated, I was a fresh twenty-five year old mother of two. Full of life and energy. No aches and pains. Nothing. Now at forty-one years of age, I can tell just how unkind these prison walls have been to this once vibrant body of mine. Sometimes I move slower. At times I even limp. The good thing is, my mind is still as sharp as a tack, even through

the trauma of my situation. We'd do well to recognize and count our blessings in everything and that is definitely one of them.

And with this clarity of mind, I have gained much wisdom, much insight. I have developed patience and built up a spirit of endurance. Maturation. Tolerance; when in my youth I would have had none for certain things. But on the flip side of that same coin, for certain things I have zero tolerance: ignorance and disrespect.

At times I have to simply laugh at myself when I get annoyed with the younger generation for their lack of respect to others. I pause and think to myself "Am I just being old-fashioned?" But what I was raised on is a system of good morals and values; and for this I am so grateful to my parents! After I think of how blessed that makes me, I correct the young woman and give silent thanks to God for my parents. No, I'm not being old-fashioned at all. I'm acting the way a lady should act. I'm acting my age.

### **"To Whom It May Concern"**

My name is Chanell Burnette and I am currently an offender at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women.

I write to you in regards to the inadequate medical care that we women are receiving here at this institution.

I have been housed at this facility since 2006 and am aware of the class action lawsuit filed against this facility: and to date have seen no improvement in the quality of care that we have been receiving. For some of us this has only gotten worse. I, for one, can validate this claim.

Many of us suffer from chronic and debilitating conditions that are not being treated properly. Some of us experience severe pain and are not being administered adequate pain management. The doctors are minimizing our complaints regarding our pain levels. They are misdiagnosing our conditions and withholding vital information that could prevent detrimental effects on our health, or as even in numerous cases, our deaths.

This facility contracts with the with the healthcare provider Armor Correctional Health Services, Inc. This corporation has failed us continuously and has contributed to the loss of lives of countless women here at this institution. Too many of them have met their untimely demise due to the negligence of medical staff members. Can you fathom having to make the call to a family member to inform them that their loved one has died inside of these cold, lonely walls? All because someone did not care enough to take the time to listen and render the help that was needed.

In addition to the class action lawsuit, several civil suits are pending as a result of the negligence and treatment that continues to occur here at this institution. This facility has been the subject of numerous television news reports. Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women has been in a negative limelight for a number of years.

To represent our concerns, a compliance monitor was elected, Sr. Nicholas Scharff, MD. He reports directly to the Department of Corrections. Dr. Scharff visits the institution regularly to note our questions and concerns. However, I have yet to hear of any responses to the questions voiced at the forums we attend.

I submit this to you on behalf of all women that are suffering in this institution. I am only one, but strongly feel that our voices need to be heard. We are human beings before we are offenders and should still be treated as equal. Should we not be offered the very same healthcare



as someone who has not made a mistake? None of us are perfect, and this should be kept in the forefront of the minds of those whom took an oath to care for us.

This facility is deemed the “medical facility.” Some women have been shipped here as a result of a medical condition which requires continuous care. Some of our conditions are deteriorating, but somehow fail to meet the criteria to be classified as a “chronic case” condition. Therefore, we are not able to be provided with charge-free medical provider visits. The medical co-pay charge is \$5.00. Some offenders are indigent and do not have the funds to pay for a sick call triage visit. So this, in turn, results in them acquiring a debt to the State of Virginia. For those are able to pay, this results in an enormous amount of money spent on healthcare which has proven to be ineffective.

As of recently, we are no longer charged for our medication. In the past, the cost was \$2.00 per prescription, ordered, excluding mental health medication.

The re-ordering and renewal of medication has proven to be a serious issue as well. Several incidents have occurred as a result of this form of negligence. Instead of re-ordering medication when it gets low, medical staff allows the prescription to run completely out before it is re-ordered. The same goes for the renewals of medication. Instead of alerting offenders when a medication needs to be renewed so we are able to submit a sick call, once again, they allow the medication to run out completely.

As a result of this, several devastating incidents have occurred. Some as devastating as the unnecessary suicides of women reaching out for help. No medication should lapse, be it for a medical condition or a mental health condition. Apparently the condition is severe enough to warrant medication; so why does this continue to subsist.

Instead of being respected as an individual and not just a ward of the state with a seven digit number, we are not even being provided for sufficiently. Even down to the issuing of items as miniscule as sanitary napkins and toilet paper, we continue to be deprived of necessities essential to our womanhood. As citizens on the other side of these diabolical gates, our families pay taxes for items such as these to be furnished. Once again, why does this continue to subsist?

In a facility specially designed for medical care, the doctors are incompetent and unsympathetic. Many are specialists in a specified area; yet they are operating in a sphere outside of their expertise. How can one advise about a condition they are not fully knowledgeable about? This leads to the misdiagnosing of conditions and the delay of treatment, which in turn leads to unnecessary surgeries to rectify these conditions.

This institution has been under several different administrators. With each new warden, the promise of better healthcare has yet to transpire. The turnover rate for medical staff is astounding! There are funds being allocated for unnecessary things such as new doors for the chow hall, and white lines on the concrete to confine offenders to a single file line during walking recreation. To me, this is a misappropriation of funds. If funds can be spent on such insignificant things, why can't funds be utilized to hire a competent medical staff to ensure that we offenders are awarded our rights to the adequate healthcare we are entitled to by law? Possibly, this could prevent direct violations of our 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment Rights and could obviate the number of civil suits that will ensue from the effects of acts and negligence and malpractice.

Response times to medical emergencies poses a risk factor as well. When emergencies are not responded to in a timely manner, life-threatening instances emanate. Instead of rushing to the aid of an individual in need, medical staff is slow to arrive, and quick to depart without even a second thought regarding how to help someone in distress. Emergency response times have

also been the cause of several catastrophic events. Unfortunately, death seems to always be the end result in this situation, sadly.

Another concern plaguing us is the admission to the infirmary. I myself can speak from personal experience. The majority of nurses are employed through different agencies. As unfortunate as it is, many are not trained in simple procedures. Even down to the transferring of a patient from a stretcher to a bed, produced an iniquitous episode.

I am also aware that when someone is admitted to the infirmary, regardless of how long the stay, they are constantly ignored and neglected. The officers, as well as the nurses are ignoring the call buttons when people need assistance. Scheduled medication times are being missed as nurses nap during the night. This is totally unacceptable!

Something else which has become problematic is the charge for submitting an Emergency Grievance. Since when does our right to file paperwork come with a cost? Especially when the majority of the Emergency Grievances submitted are in regards to issues related to medical care.

Speaking from personal experience, I submitted an Emergency Grievance due to my medication not being available. I was told for four days that it had to be re-ordered. The new “policy” is that when an Emergency Grievance is submitted, you are escorted to the infirmary for a triage visit. Women have stated that when they filed the Emergency Grievance, not only were they charged the \$5,00 for filing the paperwork, they got no results from this triage visit, and were told to submit a sick call slip, another \$5.00 charge.

I spoke with Assistant Warden Snoddy regarding this issue. He stated that we would be charged if medical staff deemed that our plight was not an emergency. What qualifies any medical staff to “deem” what is or is not an emergency? What if it were one of their pain

medications? Would that not be “deemed” an emergency to them? Is our pain no more important than theirs because we are offenders?

Thank you for taking the time out to read my letter. I am just striving to let the public know the things that ail us on a daily basis. I hope that you will inform others in an attempt to get the attention of anyone willing to assist us in our fight.

## **A Letter to My Son**

My Dearest Son,

There are so many things I have to tell you. So much I need you to know. So many emotions that words can never express.

The strongest emotion I have felt for the past fifteen years is longing. A deeply rooted longing to be with you. At times this feeling so suffocating. That is the only word which comes to mind even remotely close in description to the feeling I have when I think of how badly I want to be with you again.

Do you remember me coming into your room each morning to wake you for daycare by singing our special little song? I do. I do and I miss it dearly. Though you’re a young man now, you’re still my little boy and when I get there, at least once, I must awaken you for work with our special little song. Don’t be mad. That’s just the mother in me attempting to re-create old times.

Times when things were too simple to appreciate. Times that I cherished, yet never should have taken for granted. Look at us now. Ungratefulness will get you nowhere my son, my Young King. So be grateful for everything because if not, life has a way of teaching you humility. Let me teach you first so that life won’t have to give you such a hard lesson.

I hope I have given you the biggest lesson of what not to do to end up in a

**[PAGES MISSING]...**

at the site of the injection. Thankfully, that was the only side effect I experienced. That was pretty much the extent of it with only one person reporting symptoms of the virus after the injections. The next day we were tested and she was positive for COVID-19 and moved to a different housing unit designated for those with the virus.

Almost simultaneously, four others also tested positive and were moved as well. It then seemed as if each time we were tested, someone else was positive and moved away. Each time we are tested, it is usually the rapid test. We are all tested and we just stand at our cell door in anticipation. Hoping against hope that a nurse does not walk in your direction. If they do, they will inform you that you have tested positive and to pack your belongings to be moved into a “Red Zone,” is at it is called.

We await test results holding our breath. Me? Praying that it continues to skip over me. I, and the group of ladies who received our vaccinations that day are due for our second injection on February 22, 2021. I can only hope that thing will still occur on that day since we all have been moved around yet again. From one building another, senselessly. The only constant in Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women is change itself.

Troubling.

**“Listen to Me”**

Dear Young Chanell,

Hello beautiful – yes, beautiful, for that is what you are and do not ever allow another soul to tell you otherwise. You are beautiful inside and out and I need for you to know that!

Who is speaking to you, you may wonder? Well this is your older self. The woman you endured each life experience in order to become. Yes, it is I, and I would love the opportunity to tell you a few important things.

First and foremost, you are a beloved daughter of the Most High God, and He loves you more than you could ever imagine! And secondly, though in your life you will be loved by many, you must first love yourself. You can love no one else without loving you first! It is in this way that you will learn to honor yourself and teach others to honor you as well.

You are a rare treasure. To be valued and cherished. There is no one else like you on this earth! Now that you know that you must be ready for what you will go through in order to be the person you see staring back at you now from the mirror. I must warn you that it will not be easy; but it is necessary to ensure that you step into the destiny that God has planned for you.

There will be many challenges you must face. Don't be discouraged. Hidden inside the core of you is a reservoir of untapped strength. Tap into it. Pray. Pray hard without ceasing knowing that all you really need is God. The same God whose spirit dwells within you. Remember, if God be for you, then who can be against you?

And if God be for you, you never have to be afraid. Afraid of anything for any reason. God being for you means not being afraid to stand up for yourself. Say what you mean and mean what you say. God for you is, in essence also, God with you at all times. So when you come to your first abusive relationship listen to that still, small voice in your heart telling you to walk away, don't look back, and never allow another man to hit you again. You're worth more and you deserve much better than that. So don't settle for anything less.

Always remember that people will only treat you the way that you allow them to treat you. So if you allow someone to treat you badly, that is what they will do because you are silently telling them that it is ok to treat you this way. I am here to tell you that it is not! It is never acceptable for someone to mistreat you. That is not love, and it is not loving yourself. Remember if you don't love you, you cannot expect anyone else to.

In loving yourself, love yourself enough to be patient with yourself as you learn, grow, and change. Growth is a slow course. Nothing lasting happens overnight. The process occurs gradually. You will make many mistakes along the way. But those mistakes do not define you as an individual. They only act as aids to assist you on your journey to developing into the woman you will become.

You must utilize the tools you are given young one. View each experience as an opportunity. An advantageous opportunity to extract what you can from a person or situation to foster your growth. Everything is a learning experience. It's all in how you regard it! You can see a glass as half full or half empty. So be optimistic! Negative energy only breeds more negative energy, so always look for the blessing in an occurrence.

In using your experiences to shape and mold you, know that life is about choices. You must apply what you learned through those trials to make the wisest choices. Not all of them will be the wisest nor the best decision sometimes. That is simply the way life is designed. We must grow somehow, and so we learn by doing. If you make a mistake and you fall, remember that it is not about how you fall, but how you get back up that matters. Do not live in regret. It will profit nothing. Square your shoulders, lift your head, and try again. No need to be ashamed at your choices. Just do better next time. No excuses.

The path I chose was one with many pitfalls, but also with many solid stepping stones as well. So before I let you fall into one, this is me reaching out my hand to catch you before you stumble. I love you!

Sincerely,

Your Older, Wiser Self

### **“Who’s Free?”**

How do we approach and eradicate mass incarceration? It is a problem that requires all hands on deck to engage in a battle which has become an all out war on the American people.

But only certain American people. Honestly, having learned what I have here recently, I must admit, my disappointment in this country is great. The things I was made aware of made me ashamed to admit that I am an American, sadly.

They call it the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. But who is really free? Who is free when we make up 5 percent of the world’s entire population, yet 25 percent sit behind these concrete walls?

I read a book recently which outlined mass incarceration beginning at its roots and up until its present day struggle. There were times when I had to put the book down as disgust rose in my heart and bile in my throat. It is a sickening feeling to learn what has really been done to you when all you did was to be born Black or Latino/a and make a wrong choice. It hurts. And all for the sake of fear and a dollar. That is simply what it comes to.

Fear and greed and America has no doubt found a way to capitalize on such. How dare they? How dare you treat me inhumanely because you are really afraid of me. Afraid that I may



be a threat to your American dream. Afraid that I may know a little bit more than you. Or afraid that because I know more, I can do more and then make more money than you? America, wake up, as money is the root of all evil. Look what you have done to us in pursuit of this unnecessary evil.

You have dehumanized people who are just as human as you are. You have destroyed lives. Torn families apart. Oppressed us. Enough! There has to be a better way.

A better way to return to the goal of reformation and away from punishment. Away from the allowance of slavery for the convicted by the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment. There must be a way to rehabilitate people which does not demand incarceration as the only option. Especially since being incarcerated these days where no help is offered to people who need reform. While it is true that change must come from within, some people need tools to assist them in their endeavors. But unfortunately, none are being provided.

All that is being provided is injustice. Punishment, cruel and unusual. A system that is breeding a class of people set up for failure. A class of people who do not stand a chance on the opposite side of the gates because they have not been given the instruments with which to work.

If we had a half of a chance on the inside, then maybe just maybe, we could come out a whole. A class of people that are ready to reenter society and become productive members and contribute to the communities they have wronged.

Instead, prisons are overrun with drugs and no opportunity at rehabilitation. From the “home” wings to the “college” wings, drugs are running rampant. It was problematic prior to the pandemic but has increased greatly because we have nothing to do. No doubt, the pandemic has negatively affected us all in some way. And some choose to self-medicate to escape. It may have begun as a coping mechanism, but eventually became a bad habit for far too many. Everywhere

they turn, there are drugs, so what used to provide the escape came what they could not escape. Poor things. What chance do they have? Any at all?

So with the drug infestation and limited educational opportunities, how does one survive in such an environment? Thrive enough o walk out of these gates better than they were upon arrival? So we too can have our shot at living the American Dream? Do we get to live it? Or is America too great for us?

### **“My Voice”**

My voice is all I have and my words?...Well, my words are my power and the weapon I use with which to shape my destiny.

My words I choose very carefully so as to impact those who read them. My voice is all I have and I have recently begun to lift it up and share my journey through these past 16 years of incarceration with others. I share my peregrination in hopes of providing insight into this experience. The REAL experience; not the mild version; but the pain, the heartache, the desperation of the experience. You know, the part of the story often left untold.

As I look around at the current state of Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, I am deeply troubled by the things that I see. It now seems like foreign soil compared to the atmosphere it once was.

This change is in part because the prison population has grown years younger. These people are incarcerating babies! They are locking away our children. While it is true that much of the youth today have sadly been misguided, this is not taken into consideration when they face that judge and he or she throws their young life away. Doomed to spend a nonsensical amount of time trapped behind bars. Children with no future.

Children whom may have lost parents to the carceral system. Some for decades. Many of these children too, end up in the penal system unintentionally. But because they are lost. Forced to grow up without parents. That is difficult for a child. Traumatizing, and many do not share their experiences with others. Instead keeping it bottled up inside until the fateful day it explodes resulting in their own encounter with the justice system. Poor kids; mine included. How do we fix it? Well, the answer to that remains to be seen.

But it could start with a little bit of compassion. Those placed in a position of authority over us, the incarcerated population, are to lead by example. Detrimentially, this is not what is occurring behind these walls. If those in charge display that they do not care about us, then how can they expect us to care for one another? The sad reality is that they do not care if we care for one another either. Our lives do not matter to the administration. This attitude, this blatant disregard for the welfare of others, trickles down the line right into the inmate population distressingly.

I find myself severely disturbed by the things that I witness on a daily basis. It is most difficult to be a beacon of light when you're encompassed in the thickest darkness and seem to be the only light shining. I have learned that you cannot help those who will not first help themselves. You cannot save those that do not wish to be saved. It is impossible.

It is true that incarceration is an uphill battle and only the strong survive. It is literally, survival of the fittest! You can allow it to make or break you. The choice is yours. But, a choice, it is. You can view it as a help or a hindrance and make of the situation what you will.

You can grow bitter and angry and fight all the time. Emit such negative energy that people do not desire your presence. Or you can be a role model for those who are lost to follow.

Be that guiding light they look for when they are drowning in the woes of prison life. A lifeguard to grab onto because it is sink or swim.

Too many are sinking all around me. I chose to swim because I have two wonderful sons, my two Young Kings I call them, to set the example for. Growing up without me has been devastating enough. So I chose to turn this whole experience around into something for the betterment of us all. I chose to show them that it is possible for good to arise out of a bad situation. Disappointing them or my awesome family again is simply not an option. I cannot do that to them because they do not deserve it.

Society already categorizes those of us who have been to prison. I don't ever want my children or my family to be weighed down with the title society will place on me. Ex-con, ex-felon. No. I am so much more than that and I strive hard each day so that my family will not continue to bear the brunt of my mistake.

Not that I need to, but I also would like to prove to society that just because we have made iniquitous choices, our mistakes do not define us as individuals. Many of the world's most talented individuals are trapped inside these cinderblock walls. Yearning to show the world just what they are made of if only awarded the opportunity. But instead we remain oppressed. Depressed. Marginalized and ostracized sadly.

When will our voices be heard? Unfortunately, women are too divided to allow ourselves to be heard collectively. I am only one person. One voice elevated and resonating through the silence. I am constantly trying to encourage others to join in the fight for our justice. But sadly, far too many are self-absorbed. And so I stand alone. Solidified in my position to bring awareness to those on the outside around the globe of the injustice suffered by us on the inside.

Incarcerated persons endure much. Many hardships and obstacles to overcome. Many barriers to break through. The good thing is that it can be done.

The determining factor is the mindset of the individual. True change must come from a hunger within. A desire to win; to overcome. To rise above your circumstances and the stigma attached to you.

The only title I will have behind my name is one I have gone to school to earn. I am not who “they” say I am! Period.

### **[UNTITLED]**

Life teaches us lessons. Being an incarcerated mother has taught me many as well.

The most important lesson came just days ago: be ready to hear the unexpected! I was totally unprepared for what my firstborn son confided I me. Thankfully, I was able to put into practice a technique that I learned in a class I took during my incarceration called Mindful Meditation. I paused and took the long and cleansing deep breath to slow the adrenaline that had begun racing through my veins. In that breath I was able to calm my fight-or-flight response, step out of the situation as an overbearing mom and provide the best advice I could offer as someone who had walked down the path in which my Young King now finds himself wandering aimlessly. But, I did it!

That was one of the hardest moments I have ever faced throughout this journey. As an incarcerated parent, the most difficult feeling is one of helplessness when you know your child needs you and you are unable to be there to provide the solace they need. It could be as small as a hug, or as big as an organ donation; but when you are unable to give it, despair unlike anything one has ever felt grips your heart and won't let go.

It is difficult enough being an incarcerated parent, but when your child is struggling with something, it makes it that much harder to contend with when you must stand by and watch from afar. Especially if you are a mother who is very well connected with her children, like myself. I can tell when my children are hurting and I knew my child was battling something. I am just glad that I was capable of stepping outside the scope of parenthood and into the adulthood arena and help him combat his problem as an objective ally instead of a protective and subjective mom.

Being an incarcerated parents is no easy feat if it is to be done effectively. I learned that being absent physically was the only absence I would allow. I vowed to stay as close to my children emotionally as possible. And I have. I have a great relationship with both of my children, my two Young Kings, and it is because I have made such an effort to do so. I always tell them that I'm far but not far. They know that wherever their heart is, there is mom also.

### **“Humanity”**

I wonder at what point did humanity lose its humanness, because clearly it has lost anything resembling the ability to empathize and sympathize with its fellow human being. No one cares anymore.

As I look around at the inmate population, I feel so sad for what humanity has become. I am no better than any of them; but I am different; thankfully. A bit eccentric I am, I must admit. But this is what makes me who I am.

What happened to the days when people actually gave a damn? Excuse my brazenness, but I must state the facts as they are. The truth as I see it. As troubling as this truth may be, it is now the world we live in.

Everywhere I turn I hear profanity. Women referring to one another as “bitches” instead of “sisters.” People being blatantly and unnecessarily rude to one another. People walking by others seeing them hurt and remaining unaffected by their plight. No one lending a helping hand to another in need.

Humanity, what has happened to us? When did we lose what elevated us above the level of beasts? Compassion, understanding, love, and just an all-around sense of decency are things which seem to have ceased to exist within our society. And why? How can we get it back? Can we get it back or are we simply doomed? Generations lost in a space of time that is running out fast.

We are living in a fallen world in the last days. Do you want to be among the fallen, or one who stands firm with only a few beside you, but whom are the changemakers of our world? Think about it. The choice is yours.

### **“What Does Family Mean To Me?”**

If every prisoner had a family like mine, I think serving time would be a lot more tolerable.

I tell people always how wonderful my family is. Without their support along this sixteen years of incarceration, I may not have been able to maintain my sanity. My family is my comfort, my shield, the people I know I can count on beyond the shadow of a doubt. Sadly though, not many inmates have such strong family ties.

It is reassuring to know that when I have a tough day, that I can pick up the phone and call any one of my family members. Not only will they answer, but they will have a word in

**season [partly illegible]** to edify and exhort me. Just what I need at just the right time and that means the world to me.

Family is of the utmost importance to me. Other people may enter your life and stay for a season. Your family is your family forever. Whether you are estranged or not, they are linked to you for life. Woven into the very fabric of your DNA.

You only get one family so it is imperative that you recognize this and not take it for granted. Not any one of us has tomorrow promised to us and so we must cherish those we are connected to and hold on for dear life. My family is my life and I will continue to be a thread in the quilt that binds us all together.

#### **[UNTITLED]**

There are so many times I have not been treated like a woman in a women's prison. Times when I have felt less than a woman. Times when my womanhood seemed more like a curse than a blessing.

I have been serving time for the past sixteen years of my life. Though it has actually sped by, some of the experiences I have had have made it feel long and arduous. But I count it all joy because this entire ordeal has helped shape me into the woman I am today.

I spent one year in my city jail and was then transported here in 2006 to begin what seemed like a sentence that would last forever. Upon my arrival to Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, I felt relieved to be able to move about more and to be allowed to purchase items from the vendors, which have since been eradicated.

At one point we were able to purchase items from Victoria's Secret, Garden of Fragrance, Sally's Beauty Supply, Hanes, and Walkenhorst to name a few. Boy were we in Heaven! We



were able to feel like women, look like ourselves as we look at home, or close to it, and as women, when we feel good about ourselves, we in turn, want to do good. But sadly, our womanhood has been diminished by an administrative policy. They do not want us to feel like the beautiful creatures that we are. We are made to feel like foreigners in our own bodies.

Our **Keefe [possible spelling error, somewhat illegible]** does sell a few feminine items. Women's Levi jeans in addition to the Men's Levi jeans they sell, a very limited variety of make-up with none geared toward African-American women. And of course bras and panties. But now they have begun to sell boxers on property as well for the gender-sensitive I suppose. Our products are more male oriented surprisingly. Yes, in a women's facility for whatever reason this continues to subsist, it is disturbing.

Even more disturbing is the way in which I have personally witnessed some women handled by male staff. I have never had such an encounter, but have seen things that I will never forget. Images that will remain etched in my memory forever. Excessive force utilized when women were either fighting, or causing a disturbance of some sort. Men are typically stronger than women naturally, so there is no need for any man to apply that much force when restraining a woman. It borderlines abuse. Physical abuse administered to and in the presence of those whom may have been victims of domestic violence like myself. That is a traumatizing sight.

I was once referred to as "the new bitch" by a male correctional officer. When they discovered that I had heard what he said, to say they were embarrassed would be an understatement. As angry as I was, I humbled myself and pardoned his cowardice. But I let him know that I heard him. Made him look this "new bitch" in the eyes.

There were plenty o times when the building would run out of sanitary napkins. Yes, this has occurred in a facility full of women! When I pressed the intercom button to ask what I should

do, I was told "I don't know," by a male staff member who then very rudely disconnected the intercom communication between us. He was so disrespectful for no apparent reason and here I was, the one with the issue, not him. Oh, I was disturbing him, I suppose. God forbid you need anything. Pardon me for being born a woman. Sorry.

It can be tough being female at times. We endure a lot. Our bodies go through many changes. To be an incarcerated woman is a challenge in itself. Many of us are mothers whom have left our children behind unfortunately and distressingly. This creates a pain unlike any other I have ever known. And to be mistreated or demeaned in any other way is an extra burden imposed on an already broken soul. A mother eagle who has to leave her young eaglets in the nest with their beaks up waiting to be fed. What else could be worse?

### **"Now Who's To Blame?"**

So now since there has been no contact visitation here at FCCW for one year, who is to blame for the prison being flooded with drugs? Seems to me like those of us incarcerated aren't the only criminals here.

We never really were, but now this truth is more evident than ever before as drug usage surges through these concrete walls. In every direction I turn, there is someone under the influence of some substance. If you're not a user, or dealer, you've become a minority. I'm a minority. Surrounded by many lost souls and people broken by their circumstances sadly.

And the saddest part of it all is the fact that this is supposed to be a place of correction. But what or who is being corrected? Nothing and no one at all. Behavior of any kind is accepted with no consequences, so this has become an environment of chaos instead of correction. Hindrance instead of help. The only help provided is self-initiated, and carried out individually.

If one is not pro-active in their own healing, they definitely cannot rely on the carceral system for help.

This system is one in which is based solely on punishment instead of the rehabilitation of America's community members, because in short, that is what we were prior to becoming a seven digit number. We were your neighbors, and believe it or not, not all of us are bad people.

We are not all criminally-minded. One only has to take a gander around a prison to make that assurance for themselves. The only difference in some of them, (staff), and some of us is the uniforms. And if they are not careful enough with their own activity, their uniforms will change and they will trade those bars for cell bars. It has happened before so not any one of them should feel any superiority over us. We are all human beings. Only we were caught for our iniquities, but their day has yet to come. The line to be crossed is a thin one and it would behoove them to be mindful of such as they treat us as less than human.

### **“Prison Labor”**

On this Friday April 9, 2021, I will have been incarcerated for 16 years of my life. And throughout this journey I have remained employed. From tasks that were menial, such as housekeeping, to tasks that were meaningful, such as tutoring.

None of the employment I have maintained has earned me what I feel I deserve and at times I do wish I had a side hustle. But, I feel that all the little good things I do for people out of the kindness of my heart will enable me to reap good benefits later.

Though I feel that all of us prisoners working for literally, pennies on the dollar, are exploited, I have learned some very useful skills in the process. Through my menial tasks I developed a real sense of humanity and built strong work ethics.

I have mixed feelings about the work I have put in for this common wealth state of Virginia. Negative feelings because there have been times when I have felt as used as my ancestors who were slaves. In essence, it really is nothing short of slave labor.

One particular time, the head of the enterprise I worked for in Document Conversion came in to congratulate us on all of our hard work. I will never forget the words he had the audacity to utter...”Ladies, you’ve done a great job this year. You made us \$2 million dollars! Keep up the great work and keep me living in the lifestyle I’m accustomed to.” What? Was he serious. Sadly, he was. He meant every single word he proudly stated. I have never in my life felt as low as I did that very moment. Some things in your life you will just never forget. Well, that was one of those moments for me.

While prison life with all its slave labor tends to produce negativity, one must also consider the positive aspect of it. I have learned lots of valuable skills along the way from my prison labor as well as my schooling.

The job I most enjoyed was tutoring in Press Operations. I was first a student in the Desktop Publishing and Print Productions class and went on to complete the advance part of the class as well. During which, my teacher found me to be quite the Press Operator and hired me as a tutor.

Since I possess a natural love for books, I found it most rewarding to see the process from beginning to end. And this certification is the one I cherish most and intend to apply in the business I aim to own: my own publishing company.

I am currently employed as a Laundry Technician in my housing unit. I actually enjoy this position because it does not require a lot of manual labor and I make my own schedule. I

begin work in the early morning hours when all of the world is sleeping, and this allows me to focus on my correspondence schoolwork.

It's a win-win scenario for me because as I make my pennies on the dollar, I'm also working towards earning some real dollars.

### **“Health and Fitness on the Inside”**

The struggle we women endure to stay fit is most definitely REAL. And it has been that much harder during this pandemic.

I look around at our population here at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, and I see many who, including myself, have gained the “Quarantine 15.” If you don't know what that is, it refers to the extra 15 pounds many people have packed on during the pandemic.

While it has been hard on everyone, it has been especially hard on those of us who are incarcerated because we have basically been forced to stay stuck in our housing units with little or no recreation and no access to the exercise equipment because it is located in the gymnasium.

What also became problematic for us women was the COVID-19 menu we were fed when the virus when the positivity rate was at its peak in the facility. Along with our vegetables and entrées, we were consistently served a bag of chips at lunch and dinner times. Some mornings breakfast included a Bear Claw pastry as the entrée. To add insult to injury, each week we were given an entire loaf of white bread! How could they expect us to maintain good health and weight by being fed in such a way? It was impossible! So as the virus spread, so did our waistlines.

Our facility has a series of channels that show movies for our entertainment. Oftentimes exercise videos are listed to be played. But for some reason when COVID-19 was at its worst

here in FCCW, those videos were not being aired. That was the time we needed the benefits of exercise tremendously! But sadly, the videos were unavailable to us.

So we continued to sit around. Eating out of boredom. Eating out of stress and depression. Just eating. Eating and gaining weight with no way to work it off. And so it stuck.

Unfortunately for those inmates who are not able to afford commissary, they are basically forced to eat what the kitchen serves us. For those who are able to purchase food from the commissary, selections are still mostly unhealthy. The healthy foods they do sell are more costly, and you are permitted to order less than the unhealthy foods. For example, we can order 10 Honey Buns, but only six bags of Health Mix. Honey Buns are priced at .78 cents while a bag of Health Mix costs \$1.30! Where is the logic in such a thing? Absurd!

As women age, it becomes harder to lose our weight and keep it off, painstakingly. Our bodies develop and go through many different changes as we mature. Which in turn means we must work that much harder to get and keep it off.

Motivation is also a hindrance for some people. Many want to lose the “Quarantine 15,” but simply cannot motivate themselves to do it. When you’ve become accustomed to a sedentary lifestyle, getting up and moving can seem insurmountable. We’ve been sitting far too long now. It’s time to get up. Nothing to do but to do it!

## **[UNTITLED]**

Love can be defined as many things to many people, but one thing it should never be is painful. It should never hurt.

But sadly, at one point and time, many of us have experienced the pain associated with love. We love and we love hard and as a result of things going sour in our relationship, it may feel as if we have lost a chunk of ourselves. A part of us is now missing.

While it is normal to be saddened over a failed relationship, we must not let the loss be to our detriment. Entering into a relationship, one should be complete within themselves so as to not be co-dependant and not to tolerate any mistreatment from another. We must love and value ourselves enough not to accept anything less than what we deserve or offer our significant other. A person will only treat you the way you allow them to.

When love begins to hurt, this is a clear indication that you are not being treated fairly. It is also an indication that you must evaluate and take inventory of the dynamics of your relationships. It is important to identify the root cause of the problem so that you may

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continues to hurt, it then becomes decision making time. To end the relationship, or stay and try to salvage what you have. This is a tough question for many and one that requires personal attention, which I cannot offer.

What I can offer is a word of advice: life is much too short to live if unhappy or unfulfilled. If you've given your partner a chance for change and they haven't taken it, more often than not, they will not. Why should you continue to offer up what will not be reciprocated? This is painful. It hurts and it is unfair to you. Don't do this to yourself!

And in matters where domestic violence is present, there should be no question, walk away from that relationship! Get out while you still can, lest you end up losing more than you bargained for.

No one should physically abuse another in any form! It is wrong! Having been a victim of domestic violence myself, I know firsthand devastation it caused in my life. I became a shell of myself. Don't let this happen to you!

When love hurts, you must know who is more important to you, yourself or that person. The answer should always be you! You must love yourself enough to know that you deserve to be happy and that ultimately, you create your own happiness. Never allow another person to dictate your happiness.

Be comfortable enough with yourself to be alone rather than be mistreated. There may be parts of you unexplored and undiscovered. Parts of you which when unearthed, will aid you in your next relationship to recognize immediately what to do when love hurts.

### **“Positivity in Prison”**

It has been most difficult watching my children grow up from inside these cold, concrete walls. But it has also been most rewarding being involved in something that helped me to maintain my familiar bonds.

From 2008 until 2018, I was a member of a program called M.I.L.K., which is an acronym for Mothers Inside Loving Kids. M.I.L.K. was an excellent way for us mothers to stay connected to our children that would never have been possible through regular visitation.

Our visits were special in that we had six all-day visits with our children and families. In the beginning when I first became a member, M.I.L.K. visits were from 8:15a.m. until 2:15p.m. and were located in our facility's gymnasium.

During these visits, mothers were permitted to play games with our children, do arts and crafts, eat together, and just spend the quality time that we so desperately missed spending with



our children. Some of the best and most memorable times in my entire 16 year period of incarceration, have occurred during these visits.

It was through M.I.L.K. that I was able to watch my two boys grow from boys into young men more closely. M.I.L.K. allowed me to be more involved and hands-on with them instead of simply watching from behind the scenes like many mothers who were not a member of our program have had to do.

At our visits we were able to interact with our children on a level that is not possible through regular visitation. We watched our children run and play and form bonds of their own with other M.I.L.K. children. It was comforting as a mother just to see the smiles on the faces of our children when they walked in and embraced their moms. We knew our children were happy to attend these visits because they were allowed to be children instead of being made to sit still like at regular visitation.

M.I.L.K. also provided an outlet for our children to be comfortable because they were surrounded by other children just like themselves who also had a mom in prison. This is traumatic for our children, so it enabled them to feel safe. We all became one big happy family.

In addition to a relaxed atmosphere, our children saw their mothers engaged in leadership as we each had a duty to perform, or an activity to lead. This was good for our children as it may assist in the development their very own leadership capabilities, which is imperative in our children reaching the greatness for which they are destined.

In conclusion, I will say that this program has heavily impacted the way I parent my children and the amazing relationships that I have with each of them. Without the M.I.L.K. program I am uncertain of just how strong our bonds would be now had we not had the opportunity to enjoy one another uninhibited. So while it was a prison visit, it felt like a little

slice of home because we were allowed to interact with our children on that level. For this, I am grateful!

### **“If I Had Only Known”**

At 5:05 on May 7, 2001, I gave birth to a big, healthy baby boy. Born by cesarean section, my son weight 8lbs., 14oz. and instantly became the love of my life when I awoke only long enough to lay eyes on him before falling back asleep from the morphine and epidural medication entered intravenously.

The entire ordeal kept me hospitalized for five whole days. The days after giving birth, I was so sick from the morphine that I vomited continuously and was unable to eat solid foods.

Upon my improvement and discharge from the hospital, I went home to my parents house with my brand new bundle of joy and 15 staples in the bikini-line incision in my stomach. The after effects of my surgery were unbearable! The burning sensation in my belly was seemingly equivalent to someone holding a blow torch against my skin.

For the first few nights, my newborn baby slept nestled in between my parents as I had to sleep with a pillow in between my legs to that my stomach would not pull and stretch my scar as I lay on my side. This was the absolute worst pain I had ever endured in my 21 years of life!

Unable to cope any longer, I decided to take one of the pain medications prescribed to me upon my release from the hospital. I had approximately five to choose from. I just picked a bottle and dumped a pill in my hand. I had a fear of swallowing pills and also did not know the effects of the medication I chose, so I decided to break the pill in half and take only half at a time.

I ended up choosing the Percocet. Prior to my surgery, I never as much as took a Tylenol for a headache for my fear of medication. Altogether. But that day I was so determined to be pain

free that I was willing to try the medication. Not only did it eradicate all of the pain almost instantly, the euphoric feeling it gave me honestly actually felt pretty good after the ordeal I had just been through.

It started with me only taking them to relieve the pain searing through my belly. Then it graduated into me taking one just to relax from a long day of the stress of being a young and single mother. Eventually, I went to reach for a bottle that was now empty. I had taken 30 pills already! Not good. I knew I had a problem when I was no longer in pain but called the doctor anyway and said that I was just to get a refill on my prescription. That was the moment I realized I was addicted. Addicted to something I had no idea could even be addictive. If I had only known.

This resulted in a years long struggle with addiction to pain pills; especially since I was a single and working mom and had moved out on my own with my infant son. The pills were a way to take the edge off after a hard day of working and then caring for an infant all alone. Who knew life as a single mom would prove to be so overwhelming? I thought I needed a way to unwind. Innocent enough right? Wrong.

If I had only known the dangerous side effects of this particular medication, I would never have considered taking it. My life spiraled out of control as a result of me ingesting that one half of a Percocet innocently in a moment of agony.

### **“Dear World”**

As a voice crying out from the darkness on the inside for the past 16 years, I testify that there is so much which must be illuminated in our justice system here in America. If ever positive change is to occur, our voices must be heard and echoed through the masses outwardly.

Being incarcerated in Fluvanna Correctional Center in Virginia, in a state which abolished parole, has been very discouraging to say the least. A lot of hard work and effort have gone into reforming myself and transforming myself into the woman I am today. I am no longer that damaged young lady I was when upon entering a carceral system designed to keep me broken. I am who I am because I chose to help myself; not because I was offered the tools with which to work. I choose to turn a bad situation around for the betterment of myself and my children, and now, my grandson.

The inside of America's prisons are not what you may have watched on the television shows. No. There's much more that people don't see. They don't see the real struggle. What is publicized is not our pain, our tears, our worries or our fears. What seems to be publicized is always a bunch of tough guys fighting in male facilities.

But what about us women? The mothers? Us mothers, with tears streaming down our faces in fear for our young black male children out there in the midst of all the gun violence? The mothers with little girls out there who may be searching for love in the wrong places?

What about us women who were victims of domestic violence and are guarded by men with egos to maintain and a disdain for the opposite sex?

What has been omitted from the news is the treatment we women receive inside these walls. What has been withheld is our stories. What has been excluded from my personal experience is the eleven years of suffering I endured because I could not forgive myself for the crime I committed. Shrouded in secrecy is my pain. Encased in this small cell is the woman with a past that a strange in a robe did not care to see.

I need the world to know that these institutions that confine us do not define us! This seemingly invisible opponent, mass incarceration, is a savage. From jails to prisons, to probation

and parole, once it sinks its fangs in you, this beast devours; leaving nothing in its wake except a ghost of the person you were before you became just a number.

## **[UNTITLED]**

When a mother fails, a child cries. Whether silently inside or open and outwardly, the child suffers. Right now my child suffers as a result of my absence in his life, an epic failure.

As my child sits in his jail cell, I sit in my prison cell. He's scared for his future and I'm ashamed of my past. He's thinking of what he should have done right. I'm thinking of all the things I have done wrong. Our thoughts are mirrored as we reflect on opposite sides of the wall.

I don't know what judgment may befall my son, whether he will be treated fairly or unjustly. What I do know is that he is sitting alone in a cell because of my bad judgment. Although he is an adult, I cannot escape the thought of maybe how differently things would be had I been there to raise him.

When you're a mother trapped on the inside of these walls and your child faces a dilemma of any kind, a sense of helplessness sets in. The deepest despair a mother can ever face is knowing that her child needs to help. That is the single and absolute worst feeling one could ever experience.

My tears stream as I write from the pain in my heart, the ache in my soul for my child. If I could switch places with him and suffer what awaits him, I would let him go free to live his young life. I would serve day for day as I have already served 16 years. I know this life, he does not; nor should he have to know it. Unfortunately, we must each face the consequences of our actions.

My son has advantages in this dilemma in that he is highly intelligent and wise beyond his years. He also has the insight from someone who has lived this life for most of his. Who better to guide him should he be led to make the same journey?

### **“My Grandson”**

Throughout my incarceration, I have faced many things, especially since I am a mother who has been separated from her children for 16 years.

I have watched through these bars as my boys grew from infants to young men, painfully, I might add. It is such a heartwrenching feeling to see your children grow up without you.

Missed milestones and birthdays. Christmas mornings filled with cards and prison-made presents. It is hard to sit on the sidelines and coach rather than to be there in person to referee in their game of life.

I have watched my oldest, who was a toddler at the beginning of my incarceration; go from playing with his toys to now buying toys for his own son. Yes, I am now a very proud Grandmother!

When I found out that my baby, because that is still how I see him, was having his own baby, a barrage of emotions swept over me like a tidal wave. I remained in a state of shock for quite some time.

Eventually I grew to accept it and the further along the pregnancy went, the more my excitement grew! Another little version of my firstborn son? What could be better? That's another generation extended of myself. How amazing!

My third little Young King, which is what I call my sons, was born in February. My precious Grandson. I fell in love instantly! When I received the first picture of him, I was

overwhelmed with such love, joy, and peace It felt as if God had provided me another opportunity to be a part of my son's life in a different way, as my release date is fast approaching!

Now I will get to watch my grandson grow up with me by his side instead of from afar through visitation. I will be there to help guide him in the right direction and teach him the life skills I have acquired in hopes that he will grow into the greatness for which he is destined.

I can already see that he will as he is highly intelligent and very advanced for his four months of age. He is an amazing little guy and the happiest baby I have ever seen, which warms my heart beyond measure. It brightens my day to hear him babble to me over the phone and to see his big smile and bright eyes in the pictures they send to me.

So while it was difficult to accept initially, and even more difficult not being there for the happiest day of my son's life, I am at peace in knowing that my Grandson has good parents and is well taken care of at all times.

And though it has been a life-changing experience for me just like my own son's, I could not imagine my life without the little guy! Thank you Lord!