

## **JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND DESISTANCE: A PERSONAL JOURNEY**

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I have looked at my own story from the qualitative research perspective many times and I have come to several conclusions. First, my story is not that unique from most other girls who go through the juvenile or criminal justice system, at least from the beginning, and like others, there has been a combination of factors that led to my experiences, both growing up, during adolescence, and as a young adult trying to find my way in this world. Really, my story is not that unique at all. Maybe this is why I have such a deep appreciation for the study of criminology in general, because we as human beings are all so similar, yet our experiences with the systems that shape society invariably differ. Research describing the variables that shape this process still fascinates me immensely.

When I took my first Juvenile Delinquency course at the age of 24, while still trying to break free from the cycle of crime that had been my own life, I read research on girls in the juvenile justice system describing the levels of previous abuse that they self-reported. Looking at my own life I could see that trauma had been a factor for most of my life while growing up. I had several experiences, both in the community and at home, while still very young, and I am sure these events had specific traumatic impact that went undetected and untreated.

My mother was a single mother struggling through college while working two and three jobs just to pay bills and she has always done the best job she could with what she had. In fact, it would be impossible to talk about my own path to desistance without talking about my mother because when I was younger she is the person who made me believe that I could accomplish anything I put my mind to. Through all of her own struggles she served as a role model for me, and made me believe that no matter what life may throw at you, you could overcome if you persisted through the trials and tribulations. Believing in self and the process of life provided a foundation, but it wasn't until I found faith in God that I found the power those beliefs could rest on. I found out that a foundation doesn't have any good until you have some where to lay it.

A single mother who worked too many hours and was going through college could not provide adequate supervision for the overly curious and somewhat rebellious child that I had become. I was smoking cigarettes and running the streets with older kids by age eight, and by twelve years-old I was smoking marijuana, drinking, popping pills, shoplifting and selling both merchandise and drugs. That year I had already begun exploring options with the opposite sex and got arrested for the first time.

That was supposed to have been a joke but there was nothing funny when they took me to jail. It was April Fool's Day and I wanted to be funny for some friends so I thought it would be a good joke. I let security see me shoplifting and then yelled 'April Fool's Day' as I pulled the merchandise back out. He didn't think it was funny and somehow I ended up at the local precinct waiting on my mother to come pick me up. She had recently had surgery on her foot and was walking on crutches. She hit me with one of those crutches all of the way out of the police department. The police laughed saying that I was getting what I deserved and looking back I am sure they were right.

Somewhere around my 13th birthday I caught a shoplifting charge and I took my grandmother's truck on a joyride to a store a few miles away with some of my friends. I spent the summer grounded in my new step-father's house and it didn't turn out to be a real good experience for either one of us. I resorted to stealing alcohol and staying up all night drinking, trying to drown whatever perceived misery I was experiencing as a young teen. That is not to say that I wasn't going through some distressing experiences at home, but as an adult I understand things somewhat differently now. At that age, you have little autonomy and the ability to advocate for self-efficacy is limited.

I wanted to be an adult, provide and be able to live peacefully by myself. This was not an option for a 13 year-old and I found out, like I have with most things in life, the hard way. I snuck out of the house one night to hang out with friends and for some reason I could not make myself go home in the morning. I really did try to make myself go home but I just couldn't do it. The pain that I was experiencing there was too intense for me to handle at the time and I gave up the fight. For some reason I went to an old friends house and hid in her

closet where I fell asleep. Her mother called mine, who came to get me, and then she took me home where I slept for two days. That was the end of anything I would ever have that would resemble the normal adolescent experience.

### **Locked Up**

When I awoke my mother took me to the state authorities and even though a roundtable of personnel discussing my case in front of me concluded that a juvenile detention facility was not the best option for me, that is exactly where they sent me. Once in the system, it would be nearly a decade before I made it back out. My first real charge, the one that eventually allowed them to sentence me to a maximum-security youth facility for females, was a federal offense. I know, it sounds like a big deal, but I was stealing mail out of mailboxes to kill time. Definitely not a good thing to do, and certainly aggravating for the victim, but I am not sure it should qualify one to serve time in the same institutions we reserve for rapists and murderers. That is just my personal opinion based on my own experiences.

I have a lot of opinions based on a perspective shaped by my own experiences. However, I have been blessed to have been afforded an opportunity to be truly educated about the same system that dominated my life for so long. It would take a book to give details on the many different institutions and settings that I experienced during that time and the charges that I caught along the way, but suffice it to say that there were many. It turned out every file I ever saw on me had RUNNER scrawled or written somewhere on the front. This was a warning to whoever was working with me at the time. I did not enjoy forced confinement by any means and there were many times my solution was to run back to the streets. I had been hanging out in the streets since I was a child and somehow this is where I found my comfort.

I wanted to go home to my mother several times but that often didn't seem an option. Whenever we were reunited there always seemed to be problems. The emotional baggage I picked up along the way was heavy and burdensome and I always wanted her to take it for me, but she never could. It was never meant for her to carry. She had her own baggage to deal with. My drug and alcohol use continued, I suffered through a midterm miscarriage with twins that intensified my internal pain, and I somehow managed to stay in the system.

I served nine and a half months at a “youth center for girls” in Beloit, Kansas, a maximum-security institution designed to house the worst young female offenders in the state. I was released shortly before my 16th birthday with one-year of parole to complete, and then one week after my 17th birthday I was arrested again and charged as an adult. I had been living on the streets as usual and was doing different hustles trying to eat and survive. I had run into someone with some stolen checks and we had run a few of them and had not gotten caught when one day I was particularly hungry. We stopped at Antonio’s pizza on Main Street, in Kansas City, Missouri, where I had ended up after all the years of moving around.

That pizza was so good and all I could think about was how much I really wanted another piece of that pizza. I did not have any money and had to wait a few days for some of the money for the other checks I had cashed to come through. I begged my connection for another check and he told me not to do it. He reiterated what I had heard so many times out in the streets, “if you get greedy, you get caught.” I took the check anyways to a check cashing place on 47<sup>th</sup> and Troost Avenue, in the heart of the city. It did not take long for me to realize the customer service agents had locked the doors on me from the inside and had called the police. The responding officer laughed when he looked at my driver’s license ... “You just turned 17. I can take you to the County.”

My mother bailed me out of jail and did her best to help me get through whatever it was I was going through, but by then I was out of control. I spent the next several years either in the streets, jail, or some other state correctional institution. I had begun a relationship with God, as I understand Him, and this is where I would constantly go, to my faith, even though my whole world was continually falling apart. I wanted to change. I wanted to do better. I wanted to use my experiences to help others. I remember telling my friends on the streets about all of these things I wanted to do and them telling me I was crazy. Yes, I knew I was crazy. My life proved that point, but it did not mean those dreams could never come true. Now I am living proof that they do.

## **Becoming a Mother**

Having my first daughter, Destanee, changed my life. I spent most of that pregnancy incarcerated in a county jail in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I was facing a year in prison and was told I would need to find someone to take my baby after she was born. I made a vow to God that I would leave things that didn't belong to me alone if He would just help me be the best mother I could be to her. But to please let ME be that for her, not anyone else. I was released in time to have my child and I did learn to quit taking things that I couldn't pay for, no matter how bad I thought I may have needed it at the time.

I had three babies in two years and my faith was continually growing. These experiences gave me the determination to fight for my own life. To fight for what it was I had wanted the whole time, yet had never understood how to reach. It was not an overnight process. I have struggled through many things and I have also experienced miraculous delivery from certain obstacles. I remain truly blessed and as humble as my finite mind can understand to be. I am continually amazed at my life and at the progress that has been made throughout this journey. I take none of the credit, but can only speak of my faith. It has made me the woman I am.

### **A Student at University**

I went back to school to fulfill my dream of helping people, not realizing that it would be my academic experience that would help me become the person I have always wanted to be. I have been in school since first going back in 1997. I am still struggling to finish my PhD in Juvenile Justice from Prairie View A&M University (Texas). It seems I have always had to work a little while longer than my peers, maybe I have struggled a little more. I don't know. Not all of my peers have made it as far as I have, so there may be something to be said for the struggle. The last grade I completely finished in my primary education was probably the 6<sup>th</sup>. I took my GED when I was 16 years-old and tried to take a few classes at the community college but I wasn't ready at that time.

I was 24 years-old when I went back to college the second time. Interestingly enough, new research shows this is about the same time the brain is fully finished forming inside the human brain. Even though my original intention was to go into social work I have been in the study of criminal justice, criminology, and juvenile justice since the beginning. In a way, it felt

like home. Yet, I have never been overly confident on the value that is being placed on my unique perspective among other academics and peers in the field.

## **Conclusion**

My introduction to the Convict Criminology Perspective and Group, and finding out that I was already a huge fan of the work of one of the founding members, John Irwin, helped me believe that even while expressing authenticity I could find my place here.

My combined experiences have not always bolstered this belief. Instead I find myself feeling perpetually caught somewhere between wanting to fit in with the “regular” people, and needing to stay true to my own experiences and the perspective this has helped shape. At the beginning of a new semester I always ask my university students to let our classroom be a judgment free zone. I ask that we not get caught up in judging each other for how we talk, what we look like, or even our opinions and what we think. I believe we have to be free to truly express ourselves before any of us can grow and learn from the experiences that we have all encountered. Every voice matters, every perspective has importance. As I continually find my own voice I seek to empower my students to do the same. I think of it as one of the first steps in achieving the goal that I have held onto forever - the one where I use my experiences to help other people. I really am living my dream!