

GETTING AN EDUCATION: FROM STATE PRISON TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

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I was born in Iowa City, Iowa - a college town. My parents are well educated (they both have their PhDs) and I grew up in an upper-middle-class Jewish white home. I graduated from high school at age 16 and immediately enrolled in community college. I received my AA in Liberal Arts and was working towards my BA in Sociology at the University of Iowa when I was arrested at the age of 19 (I am now 27). Despite my battles with the legal system I was able to earn my BA during my time on probation before I was sent to prison.

Busted for Drugs

I believe that many of the revelations I had during my incarceration are tied to both my privileged life prior to my incarceration and my background in sociology, which allowed me to see how the details I witnessed had much broader social implications. In 2004 I was charged with two drug selling crimes, one for methamphetamine and the other for cocaine. I received the former charge for selling to my ex-boyfriend; he came to buy drugs from me with an undercover police officer in the car. I didn't find out for about six months, and when the police showed up with a warrant to arrest me I had cocaine in my apartment, hence, the latter charge.

Time in County Jail

When I was arrested I was taken directly to the Johnson County Jail in Iowa. This local jail was not designed to hold many women. There was only enough space for about eight women in the female general population unit. After my bond was set, and it became obvious I couldn't afford to pay it, I was transferred to a variety of other county jails in Iowa. I served portions of my time in Linn County, Lee County, and Cedar County jails. Most of the time I spent in jail was pending court. When I was finally sentenced I was given probation with two separate ten year sentences to run consecutively. This means that if my probation was revoked I would have a 20 year sentence. Moreover, my drug charges carried with them a mandatory-minimum of one third, meaning I would not be eligible for parole until I had been in prison for at least a third of this time. Fortunately, when I did get sent to prison, the judge

who sentenced me altered my sentence from consecutive to concurrent, changing my sentence from 20 years to ten.

Although all the jails I spent time in were unpleasant, the conditions in Lee County were best and Cedar County was worst. In Lee County, although the cell space for women was far smaller than any other County Jail I'd been to (designed to hold four women at a time) the correctional staff were kind. The staff members treated us women as people, not malefactors, which palliated my stay there. I also learned something enlightening in the Lee County Jail in Iowa; there is a longstanding myth among women involved in the criminal justice system that male officers are not allowed to see us naked. I was disabused from this notion when I saw signs hanging everywhere explaining that male officers were indeed allowed to see us shower, use the restroom, and change. This sounds worse than it was, though; I believe this sign was hanging simply because the staff was overwhelmingly male and, as in all county jails, essentially all areas of the cell were constantly on camera. For the duration of my stay in Lee County I was never treated poorly or infelicitously by a male officer.

In addition to my time in jail I was also taken to a 21-day inpatient substance abuse treatment center in Iowa, and upon completion, directly back to jail. My time in treatment was pleasant and beneficial, although it was not easy going back to jail. When I was finally released from jail, about 100 days later, it was to a Halfway House in Cedar Rapids Iowa called the Hinzman Center. The Hinzman Center went well for me. There were lots of rules and restrictions but I read and reread the rulebook and followed these guidelines religiously. I got out of the center in the minimum time (after about four months) but the discrimination taking place in the Iowa Criminal Justice system was starting to become glaringly apparent.

Even in jail I began to realize, even at a purely demographic level, that something was not right. The African American population of Iowa is a little over 3%. In Johnson County this racial group makes up only about 5% of the population, but in Johnson County Jail there were many points at which the African American women outnumbered the white women. While I noticed the overrepresentation of African Americans in jail, I didn't become aware of any differential treatment until I arrived at the Hinzman Center. I do not know if this is

because the staff to inmate interaction in jail is so limited it would be difficult to notice, if I was too wrapped up in my own life to pay attention to what was going on around me, or if racial mistreatment just didn't occur in jail like it did in other facilities, but I do know that the Hinzman Center taught me a lot about my white privilege.

As I mentioned, I was very careful not to violate any rules while at the Hinzman Center, but the arbitrary nature of the rules themselves, and the incredible discretion afforded to the staff members created conditions in which certain individuals were targeted and eventually sent to jail if the staff members didn't like them. I noticed that many of the targeted women were not white. Being OPA (Out of Place of Assignment) for example, was a serious infraction that could be given at staff discretion for something as minor as walking across the grass instead of on the sidewalk. Another serious violation was a failed UA (Urinary Analysis Drug Test). Understandably, if someone failed a drug test they received a serious violation for doing so and would most likely be taken back to jail. Less understandably, if someone could not pee in front of a staff member within an hour of being instructed to do so they would automatically fail their drug test. Hence, if a staff member approached someone coming out of the bathroom and asked her for a urine sample that individual was at a severe disadvantage. I was fortunately not targeted, and was therefore able to complete and leave the center on probation after a short time.

Probation Violation

Probation was a difficult road for me and I was eventually sent to prison on technical violations. Essentially my probation was revoked for making telephone calls to a couple of friends who were in jail, which was deemed a violation of the terms of probation because this was considered associating with known felons. Although I fought these accusations in court, the state prevailed and I was en route to prison.

State Prison

It was my time in state prison that truly changed me and instilled in me an apoplectic rage about the ways in which certain people are treated that has helped motivate me to desist from crime, drugs, and being sent back. The conditions in Iowa Correctional Institution for Women (ICIW) were far better than the conditions of any jail I'd been to for a number of

reasons. In prison I was able to work, go outside, have face to face visits, and given access to far more hygiene products (although I had to pay for them). Being able to fill the day with more than television and sitting in a cell mitigated the passing of time. I spent about ten months in ICIW and was grateful to be there compared to jail. However, the advantages I had, not only white privilege but also class privilege, heterosexual privilege, and mental health privilege became undeniable and un-ignorable while I served time in ICIW.

I mentioned already that while in the Hinzman Center I saw that certain inmates (primarily African American women) were treated differently than white women because of staff discretion, but I was so careful to abide by all rules in the Hinzman Center that it was hard to see just how overtly unjust decisions by the staff were. However, in prison, although I tried to follow the many rules and restrictions placed on me, over a ten month period it was near impossible to do so, which allowed me to clearly see the overt discrimination taking place.

A quick illustration of this took place when I briefly worked in the kitchen (I soon got a better job, as a life-skills tutor which paid 50 cents an hour). In the kitchen, if you eat food while cooking it is technically considered stealing and when caught an inmate can be sent to the hole (solitary confinement) for doing so. Three women and I were caught red-handed by the kitchen manager, who merely said 'you'd better stop that, ladies' and walked away. A few weeks later, another woman (an African American ex-cellmate of mine) was sent to the hole for being caught by the same kitchen manager for eating. If it were not for the hundreds of examples of this that I'd seen I may not have attributed this to racism, but I saw a multitude of examples of white and non white inmates doing the same things over and over with far different consequences.

I have already talked about race a lot, an area of incredible interest to me. Racial discrimination in the criminal justice system is a huge because many states have a higher overrepresentation of African Americans jails and prisons in the US. But I noticed in prison that African Americans were not the only group that seemed to be overrepresented in prison. I also saw more Native Americans in prison than I had met in my entire life - but race is not the only issue in Iowa Prisons.

In the same way that staff members in prisons can use their discretion to exacerbate social inequalities against racial groups, the same phenomenon occurred against homosexual women. I believe this problem is almost worse because it is so undocumented and unknown outside of the prison walls. It took me longer to realize the heterosexism that was occurring because I was not aware that it was a problem to begin with, but once I became aware of it I saw it constantly. This is an ongoing problem that needs to be documented and changed and my desire to help in that process is yet another force that drives me to desist from crime.

I have come to the realization that all social inequalities are magnified in a prison setting. Class differences, for example, are stark in prison where anybody without outside income is at a severe disadvantage. I am undeniably aware of how much worse my time in prison would have been had I not been able to purchase a radio, a television, extra food, or hygiene products because I saw so many women who could not purchase these things. Making the standard wage of 28 cents an hour is not enough to afford these things. Women who owe restitution and child support, find money deducted from their inmate pay, with very little left to pay for canteen items. Making less than \$12 a week, without outside financial support they struggle to buy toothpaste and tampons (tampons, I should note, cost more than one week's earnings for such women).

Mental illness also is a horrific problem in ICIW. Women with severe paranoid schizophrenia are shut into a tiny cell for months on end; mental healthcare is a joke. Women are prescribed tranquilizers and sleeping pills at an alarming rate and physical healthcare is even worse. When women with severe mental illnesses act out and exhibit symptoms of these illnesses they are literally electrocuted with 'tasor weapons' or 'shields' (an electronic device the correctional staff use to cover themselves as they run towards a person shocking them on impact) then tied up like hogs-at the ankles and wrists, and dragged to solitary confinement. Women with more severe mental illness never leave solitary confinement; they sit in a cell all day with their hands covered in enormous mittens they cannot remove to stop them from scratching themselves. The way these women are treated disgusts me. I do not have the space here to go into the gross maltreatment of all of these groups, but I can say that it is what I have seen that has helped me to desist. For I know that I cannot help any of these women or any of these groups of people from behind the prison walls.

From Prison to Graduate School

When I got out of prison I paroled to New Jersey. I thought I would do better in a new place and I was right. I applied, and was accepted to the Master's in Sociology and Social Justice Program at Kean University and I am trying to find a way to help make the changes I know must be made. While I was in prison I felt like a bystander, witnessing first hand as inequalities took place and not acting in the interest of self-preservation. Now that I am out, I know I need to do something. When I got out of prison, while doing research on Criminal Justice Conferences I stumbled across the Convict Criminology Group. It has been a huge inspiration to me. I know that my criminal record will be a barrier to me, but seeing that other people who have come from similar situations were able to make it gives me hope that I can too. It is because of my contact with the Convict Criminology Group that I will be able to present a paper on inmate misconduct at the American Society for Criminology Conference, November 2012, in Chicago.

Conclusion

Having strong family support, getting away from Iowa (both the place and the people there), and discovering the Convict Criminology Group are all important factors in leading me away from crime and towards a path of higher education, but the strongest force that helps me is my desire to change and help the women I left behind. Being sent to prison was awful and traumatic and dreadful for my friends and family, but it did help me. If I had not seen the atrocities occurring behind bars I do not know what path my life would have taken. Now I know that because of my insights and experiences I have the knowledge to create change and all I need are the tools. I hope that pursuing my education (my Master's now and eventually my PhD) will help me to gain those tools and that I will someday make a difference.