



# WHER *story*

An honest chronicle of the stories and service of the Incarcerated  
Women of the Illinois Department of Corrections

Volume 28

# To All Readers

Our monthly newsletter focuses on three phases: *Rehabilitation*, *Restoration and Re-Entry*. These are the necessary phases of a successful incarceration and transition back to society.

***Rehabilitation*** involves the struggle for change one confronts during incarceration.

***Restoration*** reflects the refined version of one's self that we've become and our restored self seeks service of self-worth to the world.

Finally, ***Re-Entry*** is the ultimate goal one accomplishes through class study, self-study or modification programs completed during one's incarceration.

We are TWO ROADS, and we want to be a viable resource for our readers. We serve you by sharing the honest chronicle of the stories and service of the incarcerated women and men of the Illinois Department of Corrections. Join our movement.

TWO ROADS Editorial Staff

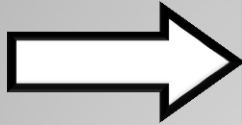
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# TWO ROADS

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## Volume 28





# *Our Mission Statement*

“We are committed to empowering those most impacted by harmful systems to become dynamic leaders and agents of change. Using the connecting, restorative power of these stories, we hope to do our part in bringing us all together to overcome societal ills, such as violence, poverty and mass incarceration.”

## DISCLAIMER

TWO ROADS is built for bringing integrity and honesty about the people who are submitting their stories. There are times where the editors are required to make changes due to spelling errors or grammatical structure. Please know that **we will never take away your voice**, however, understand that we take pride in our work and strive to be the best in our representation of your voice.

Thank you.

# Editors Take

## Take I – How It All Began

How it all began. I did what I saw  
others do.  
Treat women like my fool.  
They loved it;  
Never tried to avoid it.  
They knew what I was like,  
They watched me all through the day  
and night.  
I got talked about,  
Those same girls were waiting for me  
to turn them out.  
They came with a light, and I quickly  
put it out,  
Let me tell you guys how it all began.  
Go ahead and pull up a chair.

My pain you feel for it,  
It can't be revealed,  
As I watched her get beat, my heart  
raced and legs weak.  
I wanted to help but fear and anger  
was all that was released.  
My mind is made up. I'll never see me  
as the person I watched her be.  
Her in control of all my surroundings

you will not hold me down or bound  
me. My weakness you won't know,  
To find me in distress, I won't go.  
So, I will continue to verbally abuse  
you.  
Your self-esteem will not surpass me.  
To keep you down is my motive.  
Praying you won't leave me.  
For I'm afraid to be alone  
Stuck in this corner of darkness and  
cold,



**LaKisha Woodard**

TWO ROADS  
Senior Associate Editor

refuse to open my heart or show my emotions.

The tears I would shed are deeper than the ocean,  
So instead of showing you the truth.  
I'd feel better rather you knowing you are the same too.

All the people that know me know this is how I use to treat girls.

What they didn't is...

This abuse is what I watched up and close.

I turned out to be just like the "hims" my sister was with...

I'm just a 'her.'

I once read 'strong women aren't born.'

They are made like the storms they walk through.

I have been through a lot.

I no longer allow my past to dictate my future.



**Break the Chains in Your Mind**



# Editors Take

## Take II – The Quiet Storm

Al-Hamdu lillah (All Praise Be to Allah) for this opportunity to share my experiences, encourage others and to help solidify my purpose in the moment. I haven't always been the level-headed person in the room. Although it's been deeply rooted in me by the three most important



**Evelyn 'Qiyamah'**

**Jackson**

TWO ROADS

Senior Associate Editor

women in my life, Debbie (mom), Joann (maternal grandma), and Helen (paternal grandma).

I've always been like a quiet storm—it comes unexpectedly, yet it destroys everything in its path and leaves everyone affected by it to pick up the pieces. I left my family to pick up the pieces after having a child at 17 years old, getting arrested at 18 years old, and sentenced to 45 years at 19 years old.

All the things that wasn't expected from PeeWee—everybody's favorite sister, cousin, niece and friend.

Nobody knew the pain I struggled with, the guilt I carried every day.

Nobody knew the extent of the reckless life I was living or why. I expressed pain at the tender age of 5 years old, when my older sister Tamara (Tiny) passed away in a house fire that I thought I caused. I carried that guilt into my adulthood.

After Tiny passed, my family fell apart. I lost my big sister and gained a baby brother, Eric in the same year. Eric and I couldn't be separated. I had to protect him because I couldn't protect my sister. Soon after, my parents divorced; my brothers and I lived with our Father and Grandma Helen.

I then became close to my cousin Telisa. We all lived at my Grandmas' house. She didn't have a sister, so she became more of a sister than a cousin. Now, not only did I have to protect Eric, but I had to take care of Telisa. The both of them are my biggest supporters to this date.

I was accustomed to "unprotected" pain, to the point where it felt normal. I had to find an outlet for all of this pain and the anger that had built up. So, to ease this pain, I fought a lot. I sold drugs. I smoked weed and drank alcohol every day. I stayed intoxicated to drown out the pain I felt—masking my entire life. It was easier to stuff those emotions than to face them. The women in my life wore a mask

too. They endured the pain, yet never showed it. I mastered that (wearing a mask) to a "T".

As years have gone by, I endured more pain. I still didn't know how to process it. I was still destroying everything that was in my path. Throughout the deaths of my son, brother and grandma Joann, I finally got tired of the reckless lifestyle I was living, It wasn't working for me, because that's not who I am at heart.

**"I've always been like a quiet storm—it comes unexpectedly, yet it destroys everything in its' path and leaves everyone affected by it to pick up the pieces."**

I'm naturally a protector. I became more in-tune with my religion. I submitted myself to Allah. I converted to Islam in 2000. Being transparent, I wasn't truly ready to change my life until a few years ago. I realized that my family experienced the same trauma as I had. They were wearing masks, but somehow, they had found their outlets. They are living positive lives.

So, I followed suit and Allah has carried me through it.

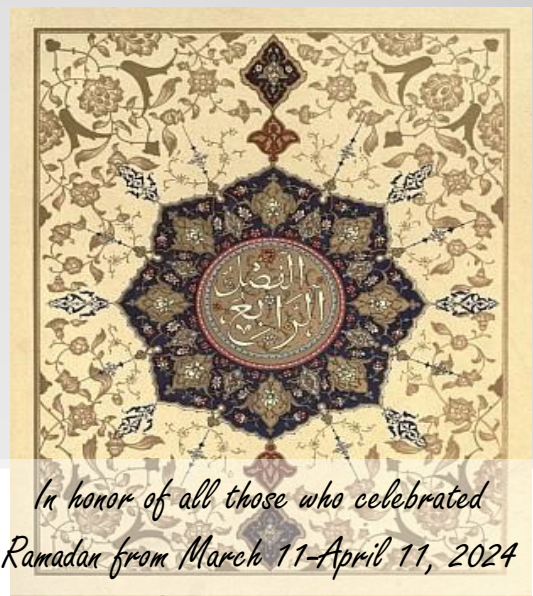
Everyone looks at me like I'm the pillar of strength. I used to tell myself the same thing. I've gotta be a strong woman to endure this pain and still stand strong. Today, I know my family was strong in their faith. That's what kept them from falling apart. My faith in Allah is unshakeable. That doesn't happen overnight. You can't have one foot in and the other foot out. You have to submit yourself completely. If you are 100% serious about your spirituality, your worldly life will fall into place accordingly.

Although my loved ones are gone home to God, they stay with me daily, just as they'd impacted my life. Allah is building me to impact others as well. I've been selfish and selfless. Being selfish caused me to be a quiet storm, while being selfless allowed me to be a beautiful ray of sunshine. My outlet now is to continuously journal and sharing my work through TWO ROADS. Perfecting my craft

at styling/cutting hair and extending myself to others in the best way possible.

To anyone that's been in these or other circumstances, my greatest advice for you is to find and build your faith. With that, your strength will come abundantly. You don't have to always be strong. Just learn to stand in your pain and don't run from it! Trust me, it'll always be there. My pain is not my struggle. My pain is my *motivation*.

“Just like the scars on my body, the scars in my heart tell the stories of my life. I choose scars over an unscarred, loveless life.”



# Publisher's Take

## Penny Rowan

I always love when it comes time for the HERstory edition of Two Roads because, well, let's be honest – I'm a woman, and I like to be a queen every once in a while. I mean, who doesn't like to be the center of attention? Truth told – a lot of people, and especially a lot of women, I've met over the years.

Why not want to be the center of attention? Well, because many women have been beaten down by life, society, media and people to the point that they feel so badly about themselves that they just want to crawl in a hole and stay out of the spotlight.

We believe you when you tell us we're stupid, ugly, fat, worthless or whatever pops out of the head when heated. We hold onto that; we feel that. That's why we don't want to always be "seen" by others.

For those who are told the opposite – how pretty/beautiful we

are; well, women manage to take that wrong, too. If we're constantly complimented on our looks, we manage to equate our self-worth with our appearance. It's really sad, actually, that we can't just be who we are and be loved and love ourselves for it.

Don't get me wrong, there are women who never falter from that their whole lives – but they are rare. Many others grow into the idea as they age, but only after they battle with themselves and self image for years.

So, how do we fix it? I wish I knew! I guess we could start by telling those women/girls we love what we value in them – besides looks: I love that you always make me laugh! I think it's amazing how you can think on your feet. You are such a kind person! You really make others feel special, and I love that about you! As for you, you ROCK!



*...and Justice for All??*



*Truth-In-Sentencing:*

# LOST TIME

**Without staff support:**

Mail submission, photo to:  
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**Outsiders, Staff and Individuals-  
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Please send your submission and  
scanned photo to  
doc.tworoads@illinois.gov  
"ATTN: Truth"

**DEADLINE IS APRIL 25, 2024**



# Grace

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## Ja'von Jaime Boyd

Grace has come upon me,  
The grace that Allah has shown me  
No longer bound by fear,  
No longer lost in lies for the truth Allah open my eyes.  
Once blinded by the truth.  
Yet I kept searching.  
Seeking until Allah had grace and mercy. upon me  
I can be me,  
I can be real.  
If you don't like it, well I'm sorry,  
I just don't care.  
True and loyal is what I am,  
Honest and loving is what I am,  
I give thanks to Allah,  
For I am no longer a slave to hate  
For forgiveness is the key!  
Allah has shed his grace on me.  
Grace be unfold,  
Truth being told,  
Open your eyes and you'll see,  
Allah's grace opens doors!  
Peace and blessing be upon you!

# HERstory

## My Grandmother

I feel like I started out with a normal life, my parent were divorced when I was about a year old. My mom got custody of my sister, my brother, also me, while my dad got visitation every other weekend. Growing up we got to do a lot of extra curriculars, pretty much anything we were interested in and wanted to try.

Outside of school we got to do what we wanted at my mom's, for the most part; whereas weekends at my dads were not so convenient. Life was

great, or so I thought, until DCFS showed up when I was 11 and removed us from our mother's home and placed us with our father.

My mom is an addict, functioning, but still an addict nonetheless and things were happening under her roof that should not have been happening. I was allowed to smoke cigarettes and drink at my mom's as early as 11, but unbeknownst to me there was even worst things s going on that I was not aware of.

At that age, all I really understood was that I went from being able to do what I wanted and being at school with my friends, to being under strict rules and going to a brand-new school that was literally 4 or 5 times bigger than where I had attended my entire life, and I was angry. There were all hoops to jump through for DCFS and then a custody battle, between my.



mom, and my dad, but through it all, my mom never got sober

She was required to pass drug tests at every court date, and she did with help; I never questioned her as why she couldn't use her own urine or my sisters. She slid through the cracks like the entire time, since the Court thought she was sober and she had completed every task she was given, the court was going to let her have custody of us once again at the next court hearing; however, she never showed up, so my dad was awarded full custody.

After some "rebellion" that resulted in legal issues for all 3 of us kids, my dad and my grandmother came to an agreement, that if we finished the school year with him, he would sign guardianship over to my grandmother. My grandmother gave up so much, to be there for us kids. She moved to Illinois, from Texas, leaving her husband and farm behind to raise us. She essentially gave up her happy home; to do what she felt was the right thing for us. My brother

drank, my sister was on drugs, and I was beyond angry, my anger was definitely misplaced. It was almost always directed at my grandma, when it should have been directed at my mom, but as a kid sometimes you are blinded by the love you have your parents, and only time depletes those blinders.

**“I was allowed to smoke cigarettes and drink at my mom's as early as 11, but unbeknownst to me there was even worse things going on that I was not aware of. “**

Looking back, I see my grandma was not to blame and that she did not make my mother that way or choose any of that to happen. However, regardless of how we acted or what we did my grandmother always gave us her all and still does!

She has always been patient and mindful as possible with us and did what she thought was best. She always loves us unconditionally! I hope to be more like her someday!



**"I have been abundantly blessed to be surrounded by so many special women. God has made each of them different just as He has made each flower. An individual flower is unique by itself, but with other flowers it creates a beautiful garden."  
-Yesenia Diaz**



# Prisons are Traumatizing: But it is Possible to Reduce Some of their Harm

How some women's prisons are adapting policies and practices to foster a more trauma-informed culture.

Prisons are inherently traumatic places that dehumanize people in the name of security and control. Incarcerated people navigate constant surveillance, social isolation, limited personal care services, ongoing harassment, and threats of violence and abuse. These experiences can be especially traumatic for women, many of whom have experienced victimization and abuse before becoming involved with the justice system.

Prisons can exacerbate old trauma and create new trauma for incarcerated women

From 1980 to 2017, the number of incarcerated women in the US increased more than 750 percent. In 2017, Black women were incarcerated at twice the rate of white

women, while Latinx women were incarcerated at 1.3 times the rate of white women. These incarceration rates can be traced to deep racial disparities caused by structural racism in the justice system. Being confined in this inherently flawed and racist system has lasting impacts on physical and mental health. And prisons cannot meet women's unique mental, physical, and reproductive health care needs.

Women are also especially vulnerable to abuse while incarcerated. Roughly a quarter of women experience sexual or physical victimization—with higher rates among LGBTQ people and women who have been victimized in the past. Invasive searches and solitary confinement can trigger past traumas and create new ones. Victimization histories, the threat of violence in prison, and an inherently traumatizing environment present significant barriers to incarcerated women's healing.



The COVID-19 pandemic [was] an added strain. Although incarceration always restricts interaction with people's support networks and opportunities for pro-social connections, this isolation has become particularly acute because the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted prison-based programming, increased the use of solitary confinement, and eliminated in-person visits with family and friends. Intentional prison policies can reduce harm, although incarceration is intended to address criminalized behaviors and rehabilitate people, evidence shows it does not improve public safety outcomes. Despite the wider public recognizing that rehabilitation and prevention should be more important than punishment, the US justice system remains rooted in a punitive approach that is conducive to neither healing nor growth and strips people of agency and social supports.

Although stakeholders are beginning to acknowledge the racism and violence perpetuated by the current justice system, they can take immediate steps to address trauma in prisons while working to reduce the scope of the carceral state overall.

Our recent study of state departments of corrections and women's prisons suggests correctional leadership can take the following actions to treat incarcerated women with humanity, develop a more trauma-informed culture, and reduce some of incarceration's harms: **Adapt custodial practices like searches, restraints, and discipline** to provide incarcerated women with more decision-making power and knowledge around invasive procedures. Adapting these practices and policies, focusing on regular training for staff, providing comprehensive medical and victim services, and developing intentional programming are all essential steps toward fostering a more trauma-informed correctional culture within prisons.

*"Prisons Are Traumatizing, but It Is Possible to Reduce Some of Their Harm" was written by Melanie Langness, Jahnvi Jagannath and Evelyn F. McCoy of The Urban Institute (Oct. 26, 2020)*

**Build partnerships with community-based service organizations** to provide the type of trauma-informed care and service continuity that is often better for healing than what prisons can provide. These partnerships can come in the form of external advocates for sexual assault survivors, birth support for pregnant people in prison, mental and emotional therapy, or other services provided by community groups and coalitions.

But even with these adaptations, prisons can never be fully trauma-informed, safe spaces for women. So our last recommendation is crucial: **Invest in community-based services and divest from prisons.** The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that the US spends more than \$80 billion annually to maintain prisons. Instead, policymakers could focus on preventing incarceration in the first place. The majority of people in prison are victims of the poverty-to-prison pipeline, and many behaviors, such as drug use, are disparately criminalized along racial and class lines. Neighborhoods designed to be

low-income communities, particularly Black neighborhoods, are the most heavily policed and often lack social supports, such as accessible mental health services, outdoor spaces, and other social infrastructure. Investments in economic support programs, community-based case management, trauma-informed counseling, and victimization support services could help mitigate the circumstances that lead to crime.

Commitments from policymakers and practitioners, including lawmakers and correctional leadership, to developing a more trauma-informed correctional philosophy are the first step toward improving experiences for incarcerated women. However, to truly reduce trauma and harm, these stakeholders and the wider public can rethink the current criminal legal system, prioritize community investment, and seek alternatives that promote growth, accountability, and rehabilitation.

# HERstory

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## Katie Bodie

My name is Katie Bodie, and I am writing this to and for all the women who have encouraged and helped me grow during my incarceration at Logan.

There are too many to name, but they will know who they are when they read this. I've been blessed to have had them in my life. They are spread out over the institution, in *Helping Paws* and in the kitchen (both individuals in custody and supervisors). I have friends and supporters in every unit.

Because of them, I have grown and become a better person. My friends and the ones I call family range from

anywhere from being here as short as a year to as long as 30 years. I want to be like them; having a positive attitude to do my time and not let my time do me. If I can do what they do, I can reach new heights.

In my ten years, I have only had two tickets, no segregation time and I've held a job for the last 9 years (mostly in the kitchen). I'm taking care of my mental health and I owe it all to the women in my life.

# Know Your Worth

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## Chelsea Gallo

Do you ever look back on all you mistakes? And wonder how you ended up where you are Today! I'm sure everyone does a time or two, I would never have thought I'd be in prison not just once but for the third time now!

And hearing the judge say 14 years @ 50% almost had me drop to the floor! I am almost done with my time and I can say I've learned so much about myself and also opened up to girls who also went through the struggle! I'm actually very blessed to still be who I 'am today being an addict to the needle alone is nothing anyone should ever endure in life!

Don't you ever say or think your not good enough, or that someone ain't dealing with the same battles as you! I ended up down a dark hole chasing things I thought that I saw, it got so bad. I used puddle water to

shoot up in alleys alone!

Meeting strangers for what I thought was support, it definitely wasn't the case at all. Losing my loved ones from the deceit or the pain I caused.

Having 3 beautiful kids I can admit I know nothing about them, that me being a mother should know. Committing crimes that don't even make sense to why I did them to begin with.

Not loving myself enough to finally say enough is enough. I can say I'm blessed and very thankful that I'm still here to say "Know Your Worth" and know that you can do whatever your Heart tells you to. Obviously no-one wants to sit in prison or jail. However, I 'am so happy to have over 3 years clean today and actually speak to and see my kids/family.

I'm 31 and it's crazy that I'm just now finding out who I truly am and starting to love me for me. Don't ever be scared to help someone or tell your story, because I honestly hope to go

home be able to speak about my struggles and able to lift those who went threw or is going threw the same! "Keep Your Head Up Always".

# Forgiveness is the Key

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## Ja'von Jamie Boyd

### **Forgiveness is the Key**

As I sit back and pray, I pray that Allah forgives me. leads me on a straight path, for once I was lost, but now I'm found and free, for the true forgiveness was the key.

### **Forgiveness is the Key**

*An eye for and eye and a life for a life,*  
so was once taught, but not anymore,  
for the forgiveness is the key.

Abuse, lies, games – told stories start to unfold. A child asks, "Why mom?" or "Why dad?" A lover desires

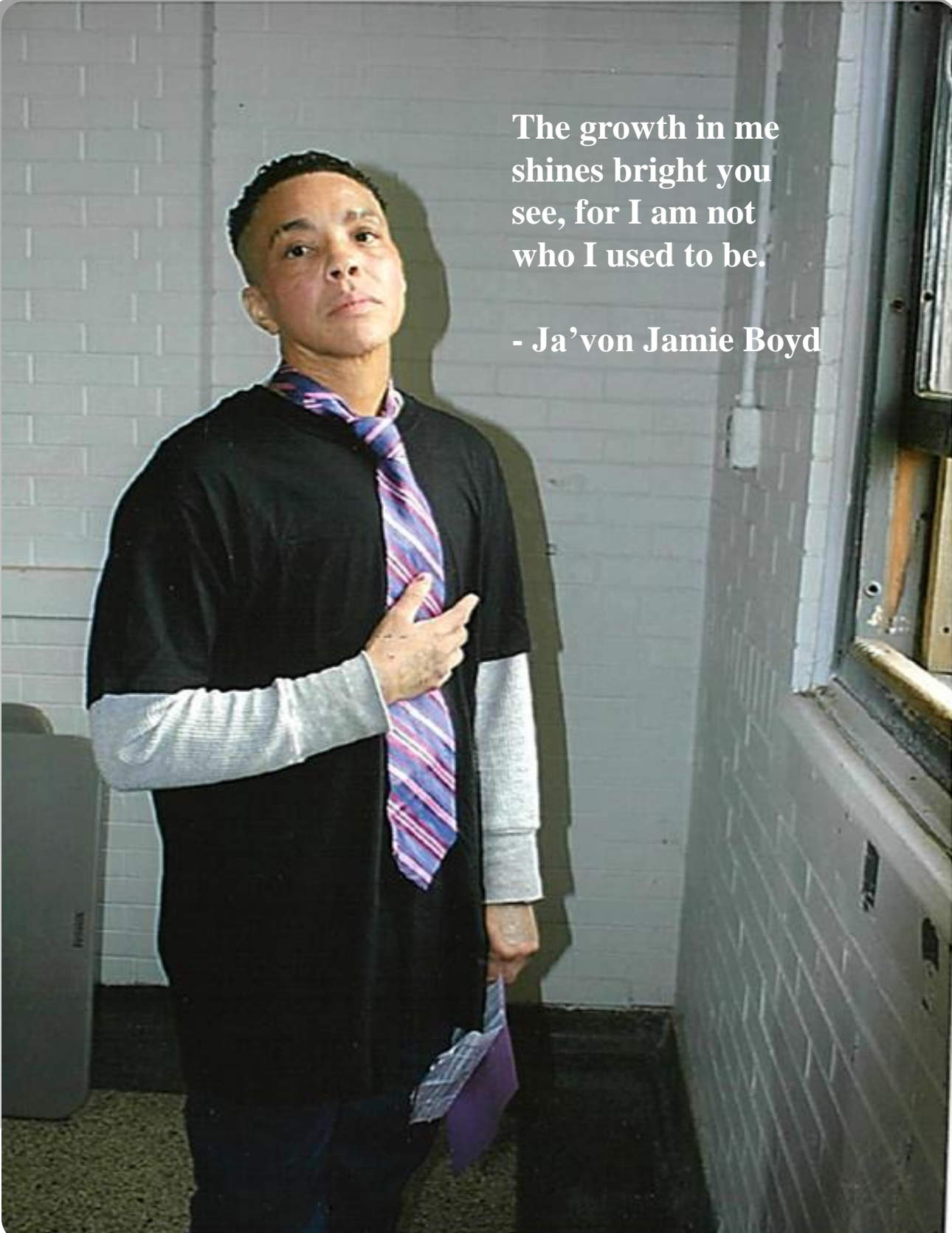
only true love, yet she cries herself to sleep, asking Allah why did he hit me? for abuse is a deadly cycle that can be broken by true love...yes indeed!

### **Forgiveness is the Key**

Fighting for my freedom is for me, yet I know that forgiveness is the key.

Peace and Blessings Be Upon You  
from Allah



A young man with short dark hair is standing in a hallway, looking upwards and to the right. He is wearing a black graduation gown over a light-colored long-sleeved shirt and a purple and blue striped tie. He has his right hand on his chest. The hallway has white brick walls and a window on the right side. A grey trash can is visible on the left.

The growth in me  
shines bright you  
see, for I am not  
who I used to be.

- Ja'veon Jamie Boyd

# Growth

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## Ja'von Jamie Boyd

### Growth

The growth in me shines bright you see,  
For I am not who I used to be.  
Trying to fit in and be liked,  
Trying to make friends and prove a point.  
Misguided,  
Mislead,  
Lied to made fun of,  
No I'm no longer a part of that crew.

### Growth

The **G** stands for the grace that Allah has shown me thru time and time, he has set me free. Now a follower and true believer, no longer lost for the blessings of Allah has guided me.

### Growth

The **R** stands for the realness that I am honest and loyal to the bitter end. The realness of Allah's grace is so good to me. For now, I'm finally free. It took some time, hard work, dedication, yet I was determined to get my hit. I've passed my test, graduated and on to the next. The

realness of education is the key knowledge is power at least that was told to me.

### Growth

The **O** is for the openness that Allah has given me, and others like me. by allowing the will to change and the words to share, it allowed me to become full, free and wise. There is nothing that I can't receive if I ask Allah for the knowledge and strength. That is fulfilling and righteous.

### Growth

The **W** stands for the wisdom that I've gained from my past mistakes and the lessons learned and I only have Allah to thank.

### Growth

The **T** stands for truth. The truth that I tell. The truth that I read daily from the Holy Quran. The truth that I've learned.

Growth

The **H** stands for the honor that I feel for being able to keep this real. I'm honored to serve Allah—the one and only. May peace and blessing be

upon you from Allah. For I'm not the same...I'm growing, so that you'll see...for the G.R.O.W.T.H. is in me!  
As-salaamu Alaikum





# TR

presents

## Mothers and Others

*A Mother's Day Special*

**Without staff support:**

Mail submission, photo to:  
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2021 Kentville Road  
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**Outsiders, Staff and Individuals-  
In-Custody (WITH Staff Support)**

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[doc.tworoads@illinois.gov](mailto:doc.tworoads@illinois.gov)  
"ATTN: Mothers"

**DEADLINE MAY 8<sup>th</sup>**

# HERstory

## Melanie M. Grant

*Psalms 103:12-18 “As far as the sunshine is from sunset, HE has separated us from our sins. As parents feel for their children, GOD feels for those who fear HIM. HE knows us inside and out, keeps in mind that we were made from mud. Men and women don’t live very long; like wildflowers they spring up and blossom. But a storm snuffs them out just as quickly, leaving nothing to show they were here. GOD’s love, though, is ever and always eternally present to all who fear HIM. Making everything right for them and their children as they follow HIS covenant ways and remember to do whatever HE said.”*

We are all unique, fearfully and wonderfully made. All have free will and the ability to make choices in this life. Our choices produce our outcomes in this physical realm. In the spiritual realm we are given

mercy and grace which leads us to victory. In the middle of the physical and spiritual realms is LOVE. Love is the fibers and fabric that holds us together, love fuels us in the hard



times, uplifts us in the dark times and carries us through the storm. This life is fleeting, and no one knows when they will go, until it is time for them to move on. As I sit here, searching my heart, I am inclined to share about a woman



who was caring and giving to many people in her lifetime. I didn't always agree with her nor understand her, but she taught me some *priceless* lessons. Lessons that have shaped my heart and mind in a way that only a "real mother" can.

She was a "crowning jewel" and most times in her physical existence she did not realize her value. But I saw it near and far, I could feel it in the depths of my heart. I told her, as often as I could, how much I valued her. now, I'm just left with the memories of her, but I know that she can see clearly, no longer in a mirror, dimly lit, and she knows just as she is also known.

A brilliant crown jewel—  
sparkling and twinkling away.  
HERstory is my legacy and a life that greatly impacted those whom she knew and loved, though she once felt defeated, she is now victorious for all eternity. Now, when I think of her, I can hear her say *"This is the day the LORD has made, I will rejoice and be glad in*

*it."* (Psa. 118:24)

It is my turn now to choose to live, love and laugh with those she left behind. Sharing all the gifts and lessons she gave me, impacting those I know and love. Who will one day say of me, "HERstory is my legacy." In loving memory of Francis Mary Grant.



# The Dejah Brown Story

## Dejah Brown

You never know how strong you are until being strong is your only option. I would ask myself why could God put me in undesirable places and situations. But I realized that those same places and situations made me stronger and a better woman. Being in prison since the age of 25 showed me a different side of myself; one that's willing to learn and strive for better.

When people say God works in mysterious ways, it's true because these chapters in my life have unlocked so many new characteristics in me...ones that I had locked away in the world.

I thank God for placing me here. I've met women who are humbled beyond measures that motivate me to keep going and never give up. I've learned a

mother can parent from near and far while life goes on.

Being a woman, mother, daughter, sister, and friend behind these walls is not always easy, but here I stand, not easily broken, getting stronger and wiser every day, one day at a time. This is my story...Dejah Brown's Story.

# HERstory

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## Janay Hayes

Hey Girl,

How we end up in the same spot??

Because the color of our skin and Imprisonment doesn't discriminate, But by The grace of God we continue to yell "The Devil is a Lie." Because even now lifers have an outdate.

Whether I'm your cup of tea or not, with  
All my Queens I'm willing to join hands.  
Fixing your crown when you get down  
And truly thanking God, knowing it's  
Nothing but a Blessing when you get a Remand.

It's a lot of things inside me most has said no one sees,  
But Herstory is my Story,  
So, in all actuality, you could see.

Why continue to kick her when she down?  
Not being strong mentally she'll self-destruct,  
Let's give the hard truth to each other and tell  
your sis it's time to boss up!

History repeating itself is inevitable,  
But giving it a new narrative on a day to day will  
become unforgettable.



That's Why I no longer live inside a box mentally,  
I place myself on a pedestal.  
Being involved in a greater cause will never be compared,  
I'm on overload with abundance cause God gave it to share.  
It's not about the Race Right???  
It's about who finishes no matter if last,  
So if we went through it, but overcome it,  
Why define us by our past??

With make-up I cover up the pain, but  
Society says I'm enhancing my beauty.  
It all started when I was 17, you thought  
That was the only way to get through  
to me,  
But I give thanks every day for being  
Here today to tell this story.

Yours Truly,  
Janay Hayes



# My Story

## Viola Dean

My name is Viola Dean, known as Shirley Reaves aka Dean. I was born in Chicago, IL raised in Rockford, IL by my father's mother. I'm now 54 years old, and I've been incarcerated for 22 years. I've never really told my story to the public, but with this outlet here we go.

At 32 years old, I was charged and convicted with 1<sup>st</sup> Degree Murder and sentenced to 30 years. I have 2 grown daughters and 11 grandchildren that I'm desperate to get home to.

During these 22 years, I've lived and learned a lot. One thing I'm still striving to do is learn how to read and write on my own. I've learned that everything doesn't deserve an angry reaction. I'm learning not to be so defensive. I've learned to be respectful to people because that's how I want to be treated.

At 32 years old, I was out living a wild life. I have been on my own since I was 16 years old, searching for

love in all the wrong places. I've learned to not be ashamed and afraid to tell people that I was molested by an uncle. I want others that have dealt with this to know that there is healing and life beyond molestation. It's not our fault. People used to be able to make me feel less of a person; nobody can break me down like that anymore. My self-esteem is higher than Mount Rushmore.

I'm a very loyal and loving person. I still love my family no matter how they abused me. God has been my go-to since I've known to say God, I pray and believe and thank God for loving and protecting me. Even after this case, the abuse I've suffered, I still love God and I thank God daily for protecting me.

Listen to that lil' voice, He will talk and guide you.  
Respectfully, Dean



# The Rules of Reading Inside Prison: books can free our mind – but only if we can access them

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## Donna Hockman

Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women (Virginia)

Prisons all over the United States are withholding books from prisoners, but not because they contain contraband. Books are becoming harder to receive based on their content.

This is the case in my Virginia prison, Flauvanna Correctional Center for Women, which is the state's largest female prison. It's also the case across the nation, which state prisons are now banning more than 50,000 books, according to the Marshall Project.

In Virginia prisons, people can only receive books mailed in from an approved book vendor or directly from the publishers. Books must also pass contraband searches and not be on the state's current list of

banned titles for the prison, according to the Virginia Department of Corrections. Books can be banned for a number of reasons, including promoting violence or disorder posing a threat to security, or containing nudity. With rules like these in place, plenty of books that would generally be considered benign have been banned in my state, while books that could actually be considered threatening are still allowed.

In Virginia, we are not allowed to purchase "World of Warcraft" because VDOC believes it emphasizes "depictions or promotions of violence, disorder, insurrection, terrorism and criminal activity." We are also not allowed to read "1001 Photographs You Must

See in Your Lifetime,” a book that features a “selection of the greatest still images... from the medium artist’s earliest days to the present.”

That book was denied for the same reasons as the “World of Warcraft” books. Multiple books that help people learn foreign languages have also been banned because they contain “material written or communicated in code or in a language other than English or Spanish, according to VDOC policy.

When I’ve had books denied during the initial screening process, prison staff has brought me a sheet of paper that lists the titles of the books. The sheet has a long checklist of potential reasons that a book can be denied. In the past, I have requested a review of rejections. I haven’t been informed of what happens during those reviews, but eventually I’ve received a written notice on the outcome of that review—whether I am allowed to receive the book or whether it has been denied. If the book is denied, it goes on our prison banned book list and is unavailable to anyone in the future.

Most women at my prison are so upset by the initial rejection that they don’t even seek a review for their book. Over 14 years in prison, I believe the VDOC has gotten stricter about what books they allow inside. By my observation, Fluvanna is not following the same procedures they had in recent years and is now searching for reasons to deny books that should be allowed.

**“The ban on books is all the more ridiculous because we still have access to TV channels, many of which air violent programs.”**

Over the past year I have had several books denied and therefore banned by the facility. I’m currently in the process in appealing these decisions. The first was “The Battered Woman Syndrome.” A prison investigator denied the books on the basis that it promoted violence. In actuality, the book, written by an authority in the field, is an important resource because so many of us here have experience abuse.

According to the Amnesty International, it's estimated that at least half of the women in prison (in the U.S.) have experienced physical or sexual abuse before being incarcerated.

The second book that got denied was "Counseling for Women." I was told it was denied on the grounds that "you can't counsel from prison," but I haven't been able to find that explanation in the state policy. Peer-to-peer classes and training are encouraged by staff, and they use them as a part of our reentry preparation for prisoners who are about to be released.

Finally, "Prison by Any Other Name: the Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms" was recently denied for promoting violence. I wanted to order the book because I have read it before and found that it outlined alternative justice pathways.

I thought it provided an informative take on how our criminal legal system can be changed for the

better; I wanted to donate this to our library for others to enjoy. In fact, just last year, I was able to receive a copy of this book without any problems. That seems to suggest that there has been a tightening of restrictions by the administration since then.

Other women in my facility have also voiced concerns about the books they could not receive. Contemporary or Western romance novels have been denied because of sexual content. Several women have had the contemporary novel "Lotus" denied because the book contained the word *intercourse*.

The ban on books is all the more ridiculous because we still have access to TV channels, many of which air violent programs. None of us are acting them out. Books and TV programs are entertainment, and just because we read a story or see a television show depicting dangerous behavior doesn't mean we will mimic that behavior.

According to the prisons' standards, the state should ban on the Bible, which includes stories of incest, murder, sex, violence and much more. In our depressing and oppressive environment, books serve as our *mental escape*. While reading, we can be somewhere else, and this brings solace to many of us.

I read "A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Survival, Learning, and Coming of Age in Prison" by Reginald Dwayne Betts a few months ago. Betts was arrested at 16 for carjacking and sentenced to 9 years in a Virginia prison. In his book, he shares that he would read any and all types of books to keep his mind busy while incarcerated.

After incarceration, Betts went on to earn a degree from Yale Law School and became a 2021 MacArthur Fellow. He recently started a nonprofit called Freedom Reads where he supplies books to jails and prisons that don't have libraries.

Books don't promote violence. They provide ways out of prison through our minds. They keep us sane and safe; unlike the violence and noise that surrounds us on a daily basis. Books provide ways to stimulate us intellectually and emotionally, and they can evoke hope when we feel swallowed by the prison walls. For many, books provide our only outlet to freedom.

*This article was original written in **INSIDE: Prison Journalism Project, Spring 2024**. Thank you for your continued support.*

# HERstory

## Vanessa Wooden

Hello everyone. My name is Vanessa Wooden, and I am currently housed in Logan Correctional Center. I am answering the call to share in HERstory.

I have spent way too many times in jail and institutions in my life and even died a couple times **Norcan really save lives**...thank you Ryan. So it was during this incarceration that I realized that I needed to figure out my reasons for why I am the way I am before I could change.

So, I asked myself often:

- “Why do I keep disappointing my family?”
- “Why do I keep disappointing my children?”
- “Why did I turn my back in the closest thing I ever had to a marriage...to a family?”
- “Why did I do wrong to the only

man I’ve ever loved?”

- “Why do I keep on ending up back in here?”

The answer came to me in the form of a self-help book written by Karen Carey called *Change Your Mind and Your Life Will Follow*. She states, “Our lessons are repeated until we learn them.” I have never read a truer statement in my life. And I have begged for help or direction ‘til I’m blue in the face; until finally I realized ladies and gentlemen, that I HAVE TO BE THE HERO IN MY OWN STORY.





All alone in a prison cell for months and months, I had to figure it out. Reading every self-help book I could get my hands on; seeking out therapy, (one-on-one and group). I also sought out spiritual enlightenment and a connection with the higher power.

I am a different person today than I was last year. The answers were inside of me the whole time, and I was just too busy trying to find them in other things and other people.

The road to enlightenment wasn't easy, but it was worth it. The only way to get to the other side of this is to go **through it**. Some days are still so hard, but now I can see those days for what they really are – moments, and if I get through it without reacting negatively, that's all they have to be...just a moment came and gone. Today, when I visit my children or call home, I no longer hear pain or disappointment in their voices...only hope and joy.

I have my family back and our bonds are stronger than ever; and as far as my marriage, that is forever a memory, but he will always be a part of me and I'm okay with that. So, my advice to you is to be the hero in your own story. If you fall, get back up.

Keep trying to get it right. After all, no matter how many times you tried in your past ...it only matters that you get it right one time. **MAKE THIS YOUR TIME!**

# Chaos

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## Katlyn 'Kat' Clayton

Chaos helps me meditate; it's the quiet that crushes me like a million pound weight.

How can silence feel so empty, yet so full of broken promises at the same time? I want to throw my hands up and surrender...but today it feels too much like giving up, let's not even go there...

I want so badly to be strong—to be “better” by way of growth.

Unfortunately, I feel like I have another five-thousand miles to go on this foo race against myself. My mind changes, but my body stays stuck, here of all places.

My soul is on loan to the sky that hovers above me, too far to hold, but it waits for me...

It's enough to give me hope. I've been steppin' on cracks my whole damn bid; wishing this awkward

burden of a groundhog day would pause or abruptly swallow me up. I want some good to come from all this! I know that good is buried somewhere inside of me—and each day I rise in search of it. Happiness is a warm gun, and my hands shake at the thought of grasping it at last.

Allowing myself to do anything but struggle, seems so foreign to me...all these years, its' felt like an iron-clad part of my identity. It would be a miracle to feel content...but I'm tryin'.

I'm getting out in a year, back to my life, my family, my triggers... u am more aware now, more than I ever have been; that I'm capable of being loyal to myself...a gift I've only lent to others until now.

There are endless things I want to accomplish, things like being an empathetic and present parent...cooking dinner for my grandma, and finishing my auto mechanic certificate.

I realize now that none of those things will be found at the bottom of the bottle. I'm confident that I can do this. Why? Because I said so! I stand on my words...because it's all that

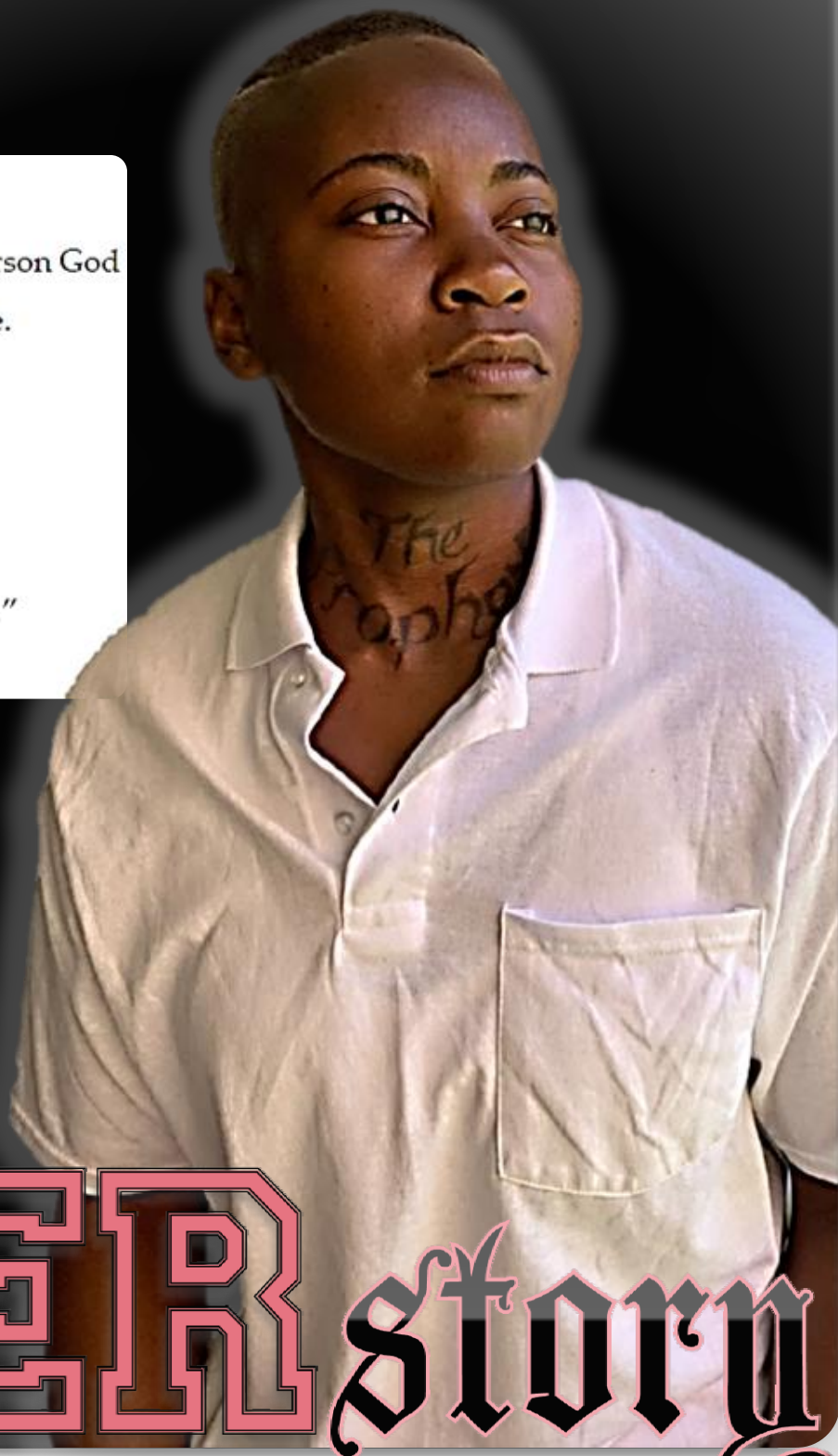
I have left. That's not to say there won't be challenges, however, my silver lining keeps getting clearer...and as my light shines, it shrinks my shadow. That's good enough for me. This is prison...not perfection.

Katlyn "Kat" Clayton  
Decatur

"I grow more  
and more into the person God  
pre-destined me to be.

I am becoming  
strategic enough,  
strong enough  
and wise enough  
to move mountains..."

-Janet Richmond



# HER story

*Meaning Makers, Vol. 11*