

For More Information:

University at Buffalo School of Law's
Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic
Website: <https://bit.ly/ublawcjac>
Email: law-cjac@buffalo.edu

University at Buffalo School of Law's
Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic Presents:

"I AM" Campaign

Organizations Making a Difference

Release Aging People in Prison
www.rappcampaign.com

People's Campaign for Parole Justice
www.parolejusticeny.com

Prison Policy Initiative
www.prisonpolicy.org



Stories from Currently and Formerly
Incarcerated People who are Changing the
Narrative on the Importance of Parole Reform



Table of Contents

Message from CJAC Student Attorneys	1
Message from Jerome R. Wright	2
Executive Summary	3
Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic Student Attorneys	
Jerome R. Wright	6
Formerly Incarcerated	
David Sell	10
Currently Incarcerated	
Thomas Gant	12
Formerly Incarcerated	
Walter Ball	15
Formerly Incarcerated	
*Incarcerated at time of Initial Interview	
Anthony Dixon	18
Formerly Incarcerated	
Brandon Dennis	21
Currently Incarcerated	
Chelsea Kuss	24
Formerly Incarcerated	
Alshariyfa “Missy” Robinson	27
Currently Incarcerated	
Joyce “Joy” Powell	30
Currently Incarcerated	
The Stigma Formerly Incarcerated Women Face	32
References & Acknowledgments	33

Message from CJAC Student Attorneys

As student attorneys in the Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic, we represent people seeking parole release and appealing denials of parole. We also advocate for parole and resentencing reforms in New York State. Through this work, we engage with individuals whose lives have been shaped by hardship, trauma, and systemic neglect. Each conversation offers a raw and deeply human perspective, revealing how profoundly circumstances can influence the choices we make. The people we meet are not defined solely by their criminal records. Many were children born into environments of adversity—suffering long before their first offense. Their stories serve as poignant reminders that they were often prisoners of their circumstances long before they became prisoners of the state.



In addition, we also hear about the crushing reality of life inside New York's prisons, including the re-traumatization that comes with repeated parole denials. Many of our clients face their fifth, sixth or ninth parole hearing, only to be met with the crushing disappointment of yet another denial even after doing everything they can to show how much they have grown since the start of their incarceration. However, even in the face of overwhelming adversity, there are stories of hope—stories of individuals who continue to hope for the day they can return to their families upon release and of individuals finally granted parole, returning to their families, contributing to their communities, and advocating for those still behind bars.

Our aim is to capture the humanity of incarcerated individuals and their transformation, ensuring their voices are heard with the dignity and depth they deserve. Our mission is to elevate their stories—not as mere statistics, but as real people striving for a second chance.

Message from Jerome R. Wright

"I Am'...two of the most powerful words in existence. For what you put after them, you become."

So, why an "I Am" Campaign you ask? Foremost, it's to highlight the two parole bills presently before the legislature (Fair & Timely Parole and Elder Parole) but here, it's expressed in the context and words of men and women who were formerly and those who are currently incarcerated.

The juxtaposition of the two realities is that beyond a statement of existence, "I Am" is used to tell someone about yourself and/or what you are doing. Who you are NOW, in this space and time; after having personally examined yourself honestly, allowing you to become what you now consciously choose.

This campaign is precisely about extolling the many and varied virtues of those who have consciously demonstrated their maturation and change, thereby refusing to be defined by one bad act, or the worst days of their life. Inside or out, EVERYONE is more than the sum of a few parts; good or bad parts. More importantly, the similarities between those incarcerated or not, as shown by their stories are not the quantum leap one might imagine, but are similarly demonstrative examples of the power and processes one undertakes towards rehabilitation, redemption and ultimately release back to society.

I Am as you are still a work in progress, under construction but no where near who WE used to be!



Executive Summary

When it comes to parole in New York, the numbers are atrocious. In January 2024, the prison population totaled approximately 32,750 people. [i] That same month, only 693 incarcerated people had an opportunity to appear in front of the New York State Parole Board and only 255 were granted release. [ii] In other words, only 0.79% of incarcerated people were granted parole at the beginning of 2024. [iii] The rates were worse for incarcerated people over the age of 55, with only 38 people over the age of 55 being released in January 2024 from a population of approximately 4,815. [iv] Racial disparities in parole decisions were even more egregious; only 0.5% of black incarcerated people were granted release compared to 1.4% of white incarcerated people despite the population of black incarcerated individuals being almost twice the number of white incarcerated individuals. [v]

Currently, Executive Law 259-i clearly enumerates factors a parole board must consider in determining whether an individual should be released on parole. [vi] Despite these statutorily enumerated factors to assess whether a person can “live and remain at liberty without violating the law,” parole decisions are primarily based on one factor: the nature of the offense. Even with overwhelming evidence of rehabilitative efforts, including remorse for their offense and the harm they caused, accomplishments in training and vocational programs throughout their incarceration, academic achievements, letters of support from family, friends, and community members, and positive institutional record, parole is often denied based on the nature of the crime alone. Rather than an assessment of whether someone is ready to return to the community, the parole process becomes a forum for re-trying an offense wherein Commissioners spend the majority of a parole hearing dissecting the intricate details of the underlying offense. [vii] Furthermore, Commissioners will often equate the details of the underlying offense with a risk to “public safety.” While the parole process should assess any potential danger a person poses to the public if released, currently Commissioners base this assessment on who the person was at the time of the offense rather than who they are at the time of the parole hearing, which may often be decades after the offense.



Executive Summary

Legislation is needed in order to shift the parole board’s focus onto who the individuals appearing before them are today—how they have grown, what they have accomplished during their incarceration, how they have contributed to their communities while incarcerated, and how they can contribute to their communities after release—in order to create a system that offers real second chances to incarcerated individuals who have shown a genuine commitment to rehabilitation. Currently, there are two bills pending in the NYS Legislature that aim to reform the parole process in a way that would create a fairer process for those appearing before the parole board.

First, the Elder Parole Bill (S.454/A.514) provides incarcerated individuals aged 55 or older who have already served 15 years or more of their sentence an opportunity for parole release consideration. [viii] This includes some of the state’s oldest and most medically vulnerable individuals, many of whom are aging behind bars in deteriorating health. Research shows that a person’s life expectancy is cut by two years for each year they are incarcerated while the recidivism rate is just over 2% for people ages 50 to 65 and almost zero percent for people over the age of 65. [ix] This bill does not guarantee release but merely provides an opportunity for these individuals to go before the parole board. The Elder Parole Bill offers these people a chance to live out their remaining years in the dignity of their communities rather than in prison.

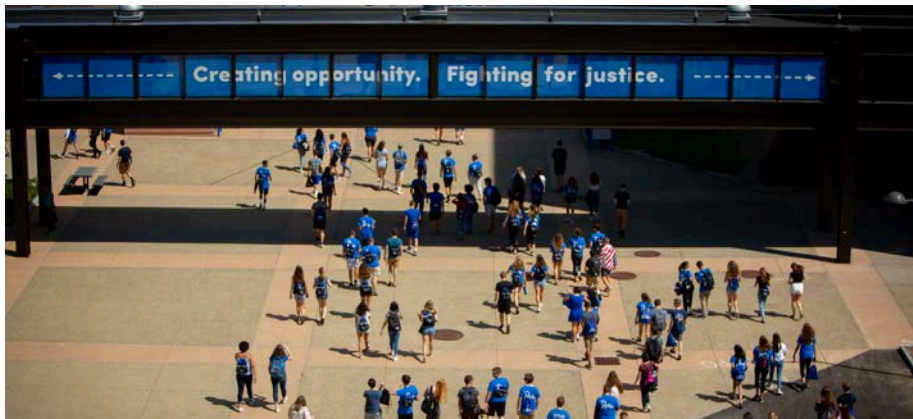
Second, the Fair and Timely Parole Bill (S.159/A.127) seeks to improve the parole review process for individuals who are already parole eligible. [x] This bill creates a presumption of release for incarcerated individuals who have served their minimum sentence, unless there is a clearly articulated current public safety reason to keep that person in prison. This law does not change the factors that a parole board can consider in granting or denying parole nor does it strip the commissioners of their discretion. Furthermore, it still allows the parole board to consider the nature of the offense, yet the bill shifts the focus from the original crime to the incarcerated individual’s reform and current risk of recidivism.



The “I AM” Campaign aims to share the real stories of currently and formerly incarcerated people who truly understand the importance of the need for parole reform. It highlights the success of individuals released on parole who have returned to their communities as contributing members, leaders, and advocates. We associate these success stories with those of currently incarcerated people with similar backgrounds and accomplishments who would benefit greatly from parole reform. Our goal is to show the faces of incarcerated people who no longer pose a risk to society and have undertaken great efforts to improve their communities from within prison while they anguish behind bars waiting for the day they can appear before the parole board.

Students in the Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic at the University at Buffalo School of Law interviewed people from New York State, each of whom is serving or had served an indeterminate prison term. With their input, we present these stories as reminders of the real people behind bars who are often framed as no more than “criminals.” However, many of these people have made great strides in improving themselves and their communities through education and advocacy work.

What follows are nine personal narratives from formerly and currently incarcerated individuals. These narratives shed light on the lives of individuals who have been impacted by the flaws of the current criminal legal system. In each of these stories, we see common threads: shared histories of trauma, struggle, and resilience. More importantly, we see people who have changed, grown, and become leaders on the inside and in their communities. But we also see a glaring difference in outcomes. Half of these stories end with individuals who are granted parole and return to their families, while the other half remain incarcerated. Nevertheless, those currently incarcerated continue to fight for themselves, for other incarcerated people, and for the people in their communities.



Jerome was a strong student, consistently making the honor roll and Dean’s list. In high school, he was a star basketball player and track and field record holder. However, with little guidance on what to do with this potential, Jerome was pulled into the streets, where this potential slowly faded away. At 18 years old, reality came crashing down on the once promising student-athlete: Jerome was sentenced to 18 and ½ years to life for second-degree murder.

In the first half of his incarceration, Jerome continued to make poor choices. He often found himself in solitary confinement. In solitary, he was locked in a cell alone for 23 to 24 hours a day. While he was supposed to get one hour of recreation time a day, that rarely happened. When it did, it was spent inside of a four-walled yard. Additionally, while he was allowed family visits, he could only see them while in shackles and from behind plexiglass.

In that stillness, Jerome wrestled with a question that would haunt him: did he want to continue down a path of selfishness, self-destruction, and despair? It was in this dark hour that a flicker of hope ignited within him. He realized he could choose to transform his life instead of letting it wither away. Determined to change, Jerome immersed himself in every program—anger management, substance abuse counseling, and academic courses.

Interested in furthering his education, Jerome enrolled in classes at Skidmore College and Dutchess Community College, realizing that education could be his lifeline. Over the years, as he grew into a husband, father, and grandfather, he began to understand the weight of his responsibilities. Jerome was no longer only accountable for himself; he was a part of a family that loved him, and he couldn’t keep blaming others for the choices he had made.

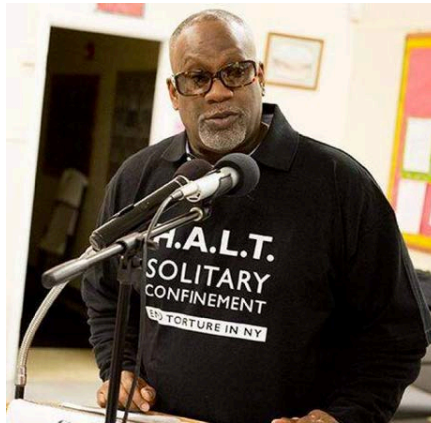
After serving his minimum sentence of 18 ½ years Jerome faced the parole board for the first time at 39 years old. After his first denial, Jerome went before the parole board five more times over the next ten years. He recalls how each appearance and subsequent denial was torture. Each time he came prepared with letters of support from his family and friends, certificates of accomplishments, and re-entry plans including job offers for if he was released.

Yet, when he was denied parole, it didn't only affect himself. The companies who offered him jobs had to subsequently scramble to find a replacement after learning that Jerome would not be joining them. The repeated parole denials also took an emotional toll on Jerome's family and friends on the outside. But what disturbed Jerome most was the realization that the Board would never see past his crime. In the parole board's eyes, he would never be anything more than the worst thing he had ever done.

Jerome knew he would need to prove his rehabilitation to others if he was to have a chance at parole. Through his job in the law library, Jerome improved his legal writing skills and wrote a parole appeal that thoroughly impressed the Judge who read it. Despite pro se appeals always being decided on the papers, the Judge scheduled oral arguments for Jerome to come to court to argue his case. Jerome's appeal and performance in court led to a new parole hearing and his eventual release, as the Judge recognized Jerome's merit beyond the actions of his 18-year-old self.

In his last parole hearing, Jerome felt as if he was "dragged through the mud." The board attempted to anger Jerome into an outburst that would justify denying him parole again. But Jerome remained steadfast in his belief that he was more than the worst decision he had ever made.

Jerome was released on parole after that sixth hearing. After 28 years, a decade beyond his minimum sentence, Jerome walked out of prison at 48 years old. Jerome was determined to make up for lost time with his family, cherishing the laughter and love that surrounded him. Perhaps the most profound joy in Jerome's new life came from his role as a grandfather. Every moment spent with his grandchildren fills his heart with a gratitude he had never fully understood before.



With the weight of the past still with him, Jerome found purpose in social justice. Knowing first-hand the detrimental effects of being isolated for extended periods of time after spending years in solitary, Jerome became the co-director of the #HALT solitary confinement campaign of Western New York. Jerome played a pivotal role in getting the HALT Solitary Confinement Act passed which restricts the use of solitary, restricts the maximum time a person can be segregated, and requires incarcerated individuals continue receiving programming while segregated.

Jerome is the co-director of the NYS Jails Justice Network, which established a network of county jail representatives. This role is important to Jerome because of the realization that more people go to jail than prison. Thus, improving county jails presents a massive opportunity to make more impactful changes. Because each county jail is largely autonomous and overseen by the county sheriff, the goal in the JJJN is to bring uniformity to county jails in New York State.

Jerome is also the Executive Director and Founder of the Mentoring and Nurturing (M.A.N.) Program, created in the 1990's. This mentorship program was used to help people on the inside get better with role models they could positively emulate. Since his release, M.A.N. has been used effectively in schools, churches, community centers, reentry programs and the courts.

With his past shaping his mission, Jerome passionately advocates for parole justice reform. He believes parole reform bills, such as the Fair and Timely Bill and the Elder Parole Bill, can provide a glimmer of hope for others. His goal is to encourage those who are preparing to face the parole board to set goals and strive for a better life. As the creator of the "I AM" Campaign, Jerome seeks to amplify the voices of those who are incarcerated, showcasing their potential for goodness rather than defining them by their past mistakes. He understands the need for accountability, but he also knows that the system must be fairer, allowing for the release of those who have truly transformed.

Jerome hopes that when people see someone who has been incarcerated, they will look beyond the worst thing they have done and recognize the person they are today. In a world that often seems quick to judge, Jerome stands as a powerful reminder of the capacity for change, rehabilitation, redemption, and, ultimately, compassion.

Jerome wants people to know one thing: "Aristotle once said that 'poverty is the parent to both crime and rebellion.' If you want to end crime . . . end poverty."





David grew up in an area where committing crimes was valued, and education was discouraged. Convicted at age 20 for second-degree murder, criminal possession of a weapon, and reckless endangerment, David has spent the last 27 years in prison. His first parole opportunity will not come until 2036, when he turns 66 years old. Reflecting on his own transformation, David recalled a pivotal moment: “I remember taking my GED test. My mother was so proud. Once I took the test and saw her joy, I realized I had options beyond crime. It was like a light turned on.”

After this, David began to see a whole world of opportunities. His favorite quote echoed through his mind: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” It was this sentiment that propelled him toward personal growth. He dove into various programs at Attica and Five Points, recognizing that true rehabilitation required a willingness to change. “Rehabilitation isn’t really promoted in prison,” he admitted. “You have to want to change.”

Among the programs David enrolled in, Aggressive Replacement Therapy (ART) stood out to him. Though he was not required to take it he “wanted to.” It taught him “conflict resolution and how to handle [himself] in difficult situations. In an environment that breeds aggressive energy, learning to deescalate conflict was invaluable.” His commitment to change didn’t stop there. David also participated in several skills based programs, including a Welding Program, where he excelled. “I was commended by my instructor,” he said, pride swelling in his chest. “These opportunities need to be promoted more. Many don’t even know they exist.” He believed that skills training could be a lifeline, a means of preparing for a life beyond bars.

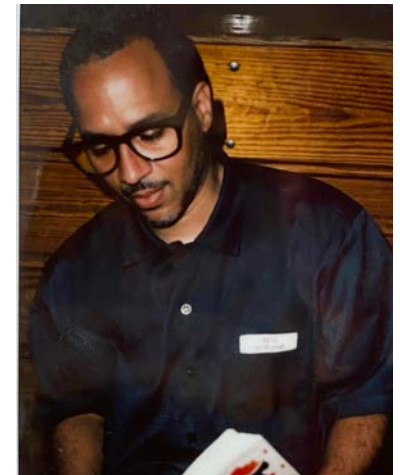
In addition to working on self-improvement, David committed himself to helping others. David established a fatherhood program at Attica Correctional Facility. Furthermore, he actively participated in the Youth Assistance Program (YAP). YAP focuses on identifying the needs of young people who are on the brink of entering the criminal justice system. It was extremely rewarding mentoring at-risk youth who were on the verge of making the same destructive choices that David once made. However, YAP limited the extent of this mentorship, often ending when the youth still needed guidance. Thus, David worked with two fellow incarcerated individuals to establish a similar program that provided more opportunities for mentorship. They called this program “Change Comes From Within” (CCFW).

CCFW is an organization dedicated to mentoring at-risk youth and guiding them away from criminal behavior. The curriculum David co-developed focuses on preventing gun violence by pairing gang-affiliated youth with incarcerated mentors, bridging the divide between the incarcerated and the outside world. This program aims to provide young people with role models who understand the consequences of the destructive path the youth are on, helping them avoid the same pitfalls that led to their mentors’ incarceration. If David could go back in time and give himself advice, he would tell himself to “stay in school. Lack of education is destructive.” It was a lesson he learned the hard way; one he now shares with the youth he mentors through CCFW.

David’s advocacy work is complemented by his published pieces in the NYU Harbinger Review for Law and Social Change, where he uses his voice to champion humanity and justice for incarcerated individuals. David’s transformation includes his advocacy work which was driven by a profound sense of responsibility. “I don’t speak for myself. I speak for those who have no voice, no way to comment, no family on the outside,” he said. David had seen firsthand how incarceration could strip individuals of their humanity, and he was determined to extend empathy and understanding to all who were locked away. His advocacy is fueled by compassion, and a foundational belief that “we need to extend humanity to incarcerated individuals.”

David is acutely aware of the challenges that surrounded him. “You see so many depressed people in prison,” he remarked. The atmosphere often felt devoid of hope, particularly after the package ban that severed connections with loved ones. David knows how vital family connections are and does all he can to maintain a strong connection to his wife, children and grandchildren. He knows firsthand that “having ties to your family really helps with rehabilitation”. To take that away is to take away hope.

David Sell’s journey is not just about his own redemption; it is about lighting the way for others. With a heart full of hope and a mind sharpened by reflection, he is committed to transforming not only his life but also the lives of his fellow incarcerated colleagues. David understood intimately that rehabilitation was not just possible; it was vital for the human spirit. David’s story highlights the urgent need for Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole, as his case underscores the profound injustice of being denied release before the age of 60, despite nearly three decades of transformation.





Growing up on the East side of Buffalo, Thomas had a relatively normal childhood. He was a boy scout and participated in extra-curricular activities at school. It wasn't until he graduated high school that he chose to embrace life on the streets. Not really sure where his life was going, Thomas got caught up in a gang. In 1998, after an escalation of territory issues with a rival gang, Thomas shot and killed one of the rival gang members. At 21 years old, Thomas was found guilty of second-degree murder and was sentenced to 25 years to life.

Despite being incarcerated, Thomas felt that he could still set an example for his children, and in order to do that he couldn't "tell [his] kids to do the right thing if [he was] not doing the right thing." Thus, Thomas devoted his time to his own rehabilitation. He continued his education and earned a degree from Genesee Community College, where he learned a lot about technology and sign language. In fact, Thomas became a certified ASL interpreter because many of the people in his class were deaf and he wanted to support them in any way possible. In addition to college, Thomas participated in an Alternatives to Violence ("AVP") program, in which he took a workshop on managing negative emotions. Thomas was also on the Inmate Liaison Committee, which facilitates communication between incarcerated individuals and facility administrators for the purpose of improving the general welfare of the incarcerated population in the facility.

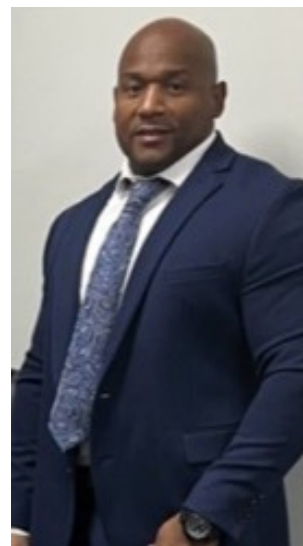
Through this work, Thomas began to notice the uptick in youth violence both in gangs and in prison. Thus, Thomas began a Youth Assistance Program ("YAP") at Wende Correctional designed around mentoring at-risk youth and dissuading them from taking similar paths to those currently incarcerated. YAP demonstrated how different factors -- family issues, lack of education, peer issues, and substance abuse -- can lead to criminal behavior amongst younger people. Through YAP, Thomas promoted a new paradigm for "respect" with one basic idea: every human being automatically deserves respect and that it shouldn't have to be earned. Between the years of 2000 and 2015, Thomas spoke with approximately 100,000 to 175,000 youth about community-based programming and alternatives to violence.

One of the most impactful positions Thomas held during his incarceration was becoming a hospice aide. Though reluctant to take this role, it gave Thomas the chance to see both the immense fragility and immense value of life. In this role, Thomas read patients their mail and helped them write responses to their loved ones. He fed them, cleaned up after them, and prayed with them. Thomas also reflected on his own family's experience with hospice and even though he couldn't be there for his family, he realized he could be there for the incarcerated individuals who had no one else.

Despite his successes, Thomas describes prison as a place where every day feels identical to the one before while the world outside keeps on moving. Thomas had to overcome the challenge of not being there for his son who was shot, having his clemency application rejected, and watching COVID ravage the world while all he could do was watch. All of these hardships often made Thomas feel hopeless in his situation.

However, watching his loved ones continue to fight for him on the outside rekindled Thomas's sense of hope; he called their support an "injection in the arm to push him through the finish line." One of the major forces fighting for Thomas was his family, including his wife, Kerry, as well as his five children and eleven grandchildren. As Thomas' first parole hearing approached, Kerry put in a great amount of effort in preparing for his re-entry into the community. She reached out to numerous organizations to help secure job offers for Thomas that enabled him to start working as soon as he was released. Now that he is home, Kerry no longer feels the exhaustion of being Thomas's sole emotional support and feels that her life has completely changed since having Thomas home to help take care of their children and their home.

Upon his release, Thomas found that he wanted to continue being an advocate. He currently works as a Community Organizer for Center for Community Alternatives ("CCA"), a program that assists people who have been negatively impacted by the criminal justice system through direct action, such as advocating for those currently incarcerated, offering re-entry services to formerly incarcerated people, and promoting alternatives to incarceration (mental health support, substance abuse treatment, etc.).



Through CCA, Thomas participates in Communities Not Cages ("CNC"), a grassroots campaign that fights to end mass incarceration and to overhaul sentencing laws in New York. In particular, Thomas' work in the campaign involves attempting to pass a number of bills: The Marvin Mayfield Act, which would eliminate mandatory minimum sentences and allow judges to consider mitigating factors in a case (e.g. drug abuse, mental health issues, etc.) for the purpose of reducing excessive sentences; the Second Look Act, which would allow incarcerated people to petition for resentencing after serving either 10 years or half of their sentence; and the Earned Time Act, which would allow incarcerated individuals to earn time off of their sentences by engaging in good behavior and participating in rehabilitative programs, including those centered on education and vocational training.



In addition, Thomas is also a Re-Entry Coordinator for the Rochester Education Justice Initiative (“R.E.J.I.”) at the University of Rochester. This program focuses on providing continued education to incarcerated people and supporting formerly incarcerated people in pursuing higher education. Through this position, Thomas mentors formerly incarcerated individuals who are pursuing higher education and helps connect them to different services in Rochester. Thomas also continues to mentor at-risk-youth by encouraging nonviolence and demystifying the “coolness” of prison.

Since his incarceration, Thomas has carried with him a deep sense of remorse for his actions. He consistently deals with the fact that he was once a part of the violence that he works so hard to prevent and recognizes that he can never truly give proper recompense to the victim’s family. Thus, Thomas is constantly motivated to encourage non-violence in his advocacy work so that nobody else ends up in the same position as him or his victim.

Despite spending almost a quarter-century in prison, Thomas has held on to a hope that many others have struggled to keep. He truly believes that passage of both the Fair and Timely Parole Bill and the Elder Parole Bill will give currently incarcerated people hope for the possibility of returning home. He truly believes that once released they will do so much good contributing to their communities just as Thomas has done. Thomas aspires to bring that same feeling of hope he left Wende Correctional Facility with in 2022 to so many others who are currently incarcerated.

“These bills give people hope. The worst thing you can do to any person is take their hope away.” – Thomas Gant



Walter Ball grew up in a community with limited opportunities, where access to quality education and positive role models were scarce. As he navigated his adolescence, the absence of resources and support created an overwhelming sense of isolation, and Walter often felt trapped in a cycle of hopelessness.

Despite having a basketball scholarship, Walter began making a series of poor decisions. He became drawn to negative role models in his neighborhood and joined a gang. He dropped out of high school during his senior year due to peer pressure and sunk further into the gang lifestyle. At just 18 years old, Walter was convicted of second-degree murder for killing a rival gang member in a drive-by shooting. He was sentenced to 25 years-to-life. Now, after serving over half his life in prison, Walter does not recognize the person he used to be.

Walter’s story is a heartbreaking reminder of how the environment we grow up in can shape our futures—sometimes in ways that are irreversibly devastating. However, Walter chose not to let his background define him. At the outset of his incarceration, he began working towards his own rehabilitation. Starting with his education, Walter received his GED and continued pursuing further education to obtain a college degree. He began reading self-help books and focusing on changing his destructive mentality to be more positive and productive, realizing that “the thing with change is you got to be courageous.” Now he works on helping uplift those around him and educating young people on alternatives to incarceration emphasizing the significance of education and creating a space where they feel heard and valued.

Walter has found a greater purpose in helping others, both inside and outside of the prison walls. Walter, along with fellow incarcerated individuals, Brandon Dennis and David Sell, were members of the Youth Assistance Program (“YAP”) while in Attica Correctional Facility. Through YAP, Walter taught at-risk youth how to develop more positive attitudes and recognize three key “negatives” that lead to incarceration: lack of education, disregard for authority, and involvement in crime. YAP was transformative for Walter because he saw himself in many of the children he mentored. Thus, Walter became even more compelled to steer them in the right direction, so they would not have to spend over half their lives behind bars like he has.

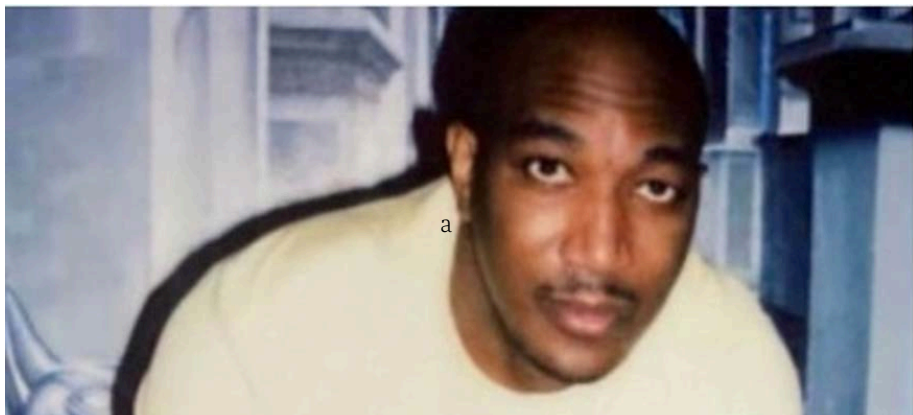
Walter became determined to bring this YAP mentorship into the community. Therefore, Walter co-founded a community-based youth mentoring program, called Change Comes from Within (“CCFW”).

Unlike with YAP where the mentoring was limited in time and often ended before the youth were ready, CCFW provided for greater opportunities to consistently mentor youth while also hosting community events to address issues such as gun violence, crime, prison reality and so much more.

In addition, Walter helped organize an event through “I Matter, You Matter,” a nonprofit organization that promotes social change via education, giving scholarships to youth, and support for the homeless and veterans. The event centered around the concept of “change,” where people shared areas in which they have changed throughout their lives. For Walter, his area of change was the people with whom he associated; leaving behind the negative influences of his youth and surrounding himself with positive people who encourage each other.

One thing that made Walter realize his true potential was his selection to appear in a 2017 documentary titled “Breaking the Cycle”. The director of Norway’s most humane prison visited American prisons to promote a criminal justice system more focused on rehabilitation than confinement. In the documentary, Walter advocated for reducing excessive sentences and for more humane conditions inside prison facilities. In 2019, Walter participated in an independently organized Ted Talk that took place inside Attica. During the program, Walter discussed the importance of facilitating a connection between those currently incarcerated and those on the outside by sharing ideas on how to transform the perception of incarcerated individuals.

Through his dedication to helping others and all his work with at risk youth, Walter earned a Limited Credit Time Interview wherein he appeared before the parole board six months before his initial appearance date. In November of 2024, Walter was granted parole. He was released in February 2025. Walter gratefully reunited with his family, including his mother, grandmother, his three sisters, his nieces and nephews, and his daughter, Raniya.



Walter has spent years planning for his potential release where he has obtained numerous job offers, including an opportunity with “No More Tears,” a nonprofit focused on supporting victims of gun violence. Through Change Comes from Within, Walter envisions expanding the platform, by having individuals impacted by gun violence and medical professionals who treat victims of gun violence share their experiences to foster understanding and healing on this epidemic. He also dreams of establishing a nonprofit dedicated to education, tutoring, and connecting youth with local entrepreneurs. By introducing “credible messengers” – those with lived experiences of incarceration – he aims to inspire young people and broaden their horizons.

At the core of Walter's journey is a profound purpose: to give back to his community and foster positive change. This purpose stems from the deep remorse Walter feels for his victim and the pain he has caused the victim's family. Walter recognizes that, while he and the victim were part of rival gangs, they both came from the same background and lived with the “street mentality.” Looking back, Walter wishes that he and his victim would have had a conversation instead of resorting to violence. More than anything though, Walter hopes to not be defined by his past, “I am not the worst thing that I did. Not even close.” He lives each day believing that “no matter where we are in life, we should leave it a little better than we came.”

While Walter was released before the passage of the Fair and Timely Parole Bill or the Elder Parole Bill, he strongly advocates for their passage, as there are still so many of his fellow incarcerated individuals, like Brandon Dennis and David Sell whose only hope at release is through these bills.





Growing up as an only child in a single parent household, Anthony Dixon felt completely alone when he lost his mother at 18 years old. With no other family in New York, Anthony was on his own. With no one to guide him, he found himself caught up in a life on the streets.

At 21 years old, Anthony was arrested and charged with homicide, robbery, and possession of a handgun. He remembers the pivotal moment when he rejected a 15-year plea deal and chose to go to trial.

Reflecting on that decision, Anthony explained that "when you're in your early twenties, 40 seems old." However, at trial he was found guilty and sentenced to 30-years to life. The weight of such a lengthy sentence was immense. Yet, a spark of determination was kindled within Anthony as he "made up [his] mind early on that [he] was going to make sense of [his] life." Once he committed to this purpose, he immersed himself in programs designed to better himself and help others.

Seeking growth, Anthony turned to older incarcerated persons for guidance and joined a Lifers group. Through the Lifers, he learned about the history of injustices within the prison system in New York, dating back to the Attica uprisings. Seeing what previously incarcerated people had been through, Anthony felt it was incumbent upon himself to continue to advocate for better prison conditions and treatment of incarcerated people. Embracing this new perspective, Anthony worked to help younger incarcerated persons navigate the challenges of prison life while building a sense of camaraderie. He also became a leader in the Protestant church, serving as a chaplain assistant.

As Anthony continued to devote himself to his personal growth and helping others, he realized that time "started to pass me by because I had a purpose". By the time he reached the halfway point of his sentence, he marveled at how quickly those 15 years had passed and how he "became a man in prison."



Through his work Anthony realized that "whether over the walls or behind them, my life can have purpose. I can impact people. That became my guiding light... My life can still have purpose, and I can make my mother proud, no matter where I am."

Part of that purpose was making long lasting impacts. During his incarceration, Anthony developed an anti-violence program called Breaking Free from Criminal Thinking. Through this program

participants are exposed to a solution-based prevention and intervention cognitive approach to crime and violence in group sessions and workshops hosted in schools, prisons, mental health units, and anti-violence treatment services. With a zero percent recidivism rate, every participant of this program has broken free from their criminal thinking. Anthony didn't stop there. He also created a therapeutic anti-drug program called ASAP Life Areas.

Another lasting impact Anthony made came from his involvement in a class-action lawsuit against the Department of Corrections, accusing it of racial discrimination against black and Hispanic incarcerated individuals in [Santiago v. Miles](#), 774 F. Supp. 775 (W.D.N.Y. 1991). This did not come without significant personal cost. Anthony suffered an emotional as well as physical toll as "forty officers came to assault [Anthony and six others] for being part of the lawsuit." However, despite the backlash, the lawsuit became a landmark case in New York's prison history after it successfully argued that significant disparities existed between white and minority incarcerated individuals as to placement in preferred housing, assignment of jobs, and the imposition of discipline, leading to changes in prison employment and disciplinary practices.

Despite over thirty years of this selfless work, Anthony's path to freedom was far from easy. After earning a Limited Credit Time Allowance for his achievements, which granted him a parole hearing six months before his first scheduled appearance, Anthony was denied parole. He would appear before the board two more times before finally being released. Each time he faced the parole board, Anthony came prepared with letters of recommendation, proof of his commitment to rehabilitation, and testimonials from correctional officers who had witnessed his transformation. However, each time Anthony went before the board, he felt as though "the board had already made a conclusion before the hearings." Only those who have repeatedly appeared before the parole board can truly know the frustration of being judged by the worst mistake of your life despite decades of growth and devotion to helping others.

Anthony Dixon

Yet, each time he waited for his next chance to appear before the parole board, Anthony spent his time helping others prepare for their hearings, putting together packets advocating for their release and helping them feel confident in telling their stories. After serving 32 years in prison, Anthony was granted parole on his third appearance—an achievement he feels was made possible in large part by the support of the Parole Preparation Project.

Now the deputy director of the organization that helped him become a free man, Anthony continues to help those who are still incarcerated try to gain their freedom. Through the Parole Preparation Project, Anthony helps those who are released transition from prison to home and continues to support them for months and years after their release. Through his role, he also advocates for systemic change. He aims to raise awareness about the injustices of the prison system by writing op-eds, such as “The Murder of Robert Brooks Shines a Light on Abuse and Racism in New York Prisons”. In collaboration with other nonprofit organizations, he helped create a support group known as SOS (Survivors of the System). Emphasizing the importance of community in fostering hope and resilience, this group “meet[s] weekly to share resources, job offers, and support.”

Furthermore, Anthony is deeply involved in legislative efforts, advocating for bills that address systemic inequities within the parole system. “The Fair and Timely Bill will allow the board to evaluate individuals for who they are and who they have become, rather than seeing them as stagnant.” He believes these changes could restore hope to those currently incarcerated. He also advocates for the Elder Parole Bill which would help reduce overcrowding in prisons, particularly among elderly incarcerated individuals. Anthony underscores the urgency of reforms such as these as “one out of every three people in New York State prisons has a life sentence.” Advocating for others brings “great joy to [Anthony’s] heart and incentivizes him to do even more.” He will continue fighting for the release of others as he knows first-hand that incarcerated people have valuable skills that they could be using on the outside to help run programs and make a better community.



Scan the QR Code to read Anthony Dixon’s op-ed, “The Murder of Robert Brooks Shines a Light on Abuse and Racism in New York Prisons”



Brandon Dennis



Brandon grew up in a single-parent household with two sisters and one brother. Without a father figure or positive role model, he gravitated towards other male role models in the neighborhood who introduced him to selling drugs. He soon learned the harsh realities of the drug trade when he was jumped and stabbed on his way home from high school. Struggling to cope with the trauma from his attack, Brandon began homeschooling. However, this resulted in less supervision, providing Brandon with even more opportunities to continue his illicit lifestyle. Looking back, Brandon admits that he made poor choices and “was guilty of the drug-selling lifestyle.”

This led to his association with his co-defendant and ultimately a robbery and homicide. At the age of 23, Brandon was convicted of robbery and second-degree murder. He was sentenced to 50-year-to-life. Now 39, Brandon has served 17 years of his sentence. He is not eligible for parole until April 2059, the same month he will turn 74 years old. Brandon fully acknowledges the gravity of his actions and the choices that led him to prison.

Brandon is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s powerful words, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Within minutes of arriving at the Niagara County Jail, Brandon felt humiliated. But inscribed on the wall was a quote “God won’t put more on you than you can bear.” He had a profound realization: there’s more to life than how he had been living. He resolved to live by Ghandi’s principle, dedicating himself to transforming his life into a force for good.

Over the past decade, Brandon has fully committed himself to studying law, using his time behind bars to gain a deep understanding of legal principles and systems. Brandon has also worked diligently to acquire practical, hands-on skills by taking vocational classes in business, plumbing, electrical work, and residential construction. However, his passion for education extends far beyond academics. For Brandon, education is not just about self-improvement; it is also a way to better equip himself to advocate for others, particularly at-risk youth, and to make a lasting, positive impact on the world around him. “Who I am today is a reflection of my faith and all the programs I’ve completed.”

Brandon spent years working directly with at-risk youth as part of the Youth Assistance Program (YAP) at Attica. As part of the program, Brandon and other facilitators identified each participant’s needs through initial background questions, discussed four key negatives – crime, drug use, lack of authority and lack of education – and then contextualize how the participant’s experiences could lead to criminal behavior.

As Brandon would explain, “one bad decision, one poor choice, can lead to you being arrested.” He felt that “if we can help even one kid, we’ve done our job,” stressing the need for systemic support, like community centers, to address the root causes of youth involvement in crime.

Brandon’s experience with YAP fueled his desire to create a more impactful change, leading him to co-found “Change Comes from Within” (CCFW). This organization has spearheaded initiatives to combat gun violence, bridge the divide between the incarcerated and the outside world, and mentor young people to help them avoid the pitfalls that led Brandon astray. For the organizations hard work and dedication to at-risk youth, CCFW was recognized with a community engagement award from Mayor Byron Brown and Senator Timothy Kennedy at the No More Tears 10th annual event. This success promoted CCFW to transition to the name “I AM YOU,” representing the organizations connection with at-risk youth’s experiences.

Since then, I AM YOU has hosted three events, including a back-to-school event in the neighborhood Brandon grew up in. At the back-to-school event, I AM YOU gave away 100 bookbags with supplies and apparel. Brandon says, “It was so heartwarming to hear about the smiles on the kids faces and how much fun they had.”

In addition to his advocacy work, Brandon has taken up trusted positions within the correctional facilities. Most recently he worked as a draft porter in transportation at Wende Correctional Facility. In this role, he helped load and unload the property of incarcerated individuals onto buses for release and meticulously filled out transfer tags, tasks that require a high level of accountability and attention to detail. Achieving this position just six months after his arrival at Wende reflects not only his dedication but also the trust placed in him by the facility as this role carries a certain prestige.

Through all of his work helping others, Brandon’s strongest motivator is his family. With a wife and four children, he does all he can to be a present father and husband. He is grateful for their continued support along with the support of his mother, sisters, and nephews. The worst part of his incarceration is that his “family is doing time too.” As Brandon has shared, “it would mean everything to my family if I could be there for them.” The passage of the Elder Parole and the Fair and Timely Parole Bills would mean that Brandon could appear before the parole board in 16 years, when he turns 55 instead of 34 years from now.

Due to Brandon’s impeccable institutional record, he has been participating in the highly privileged, “Family Reunion Program” (“FRP”) since 2011. Admittance to the FRP requires completing all mandatory programs and not having any disciplinary tickets. In FRP, Brandon gets a private space to spend two nights with his family periodically.

While it cannot replicate the ability to live with family outside of the facility, Brandon is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this highly exclusive program and spend quality-family time with his loved ones.

While his current potential release date is over three decades away, Brandon continues to plan for the possibility of returning home. Whenever he is released, he has high hopes of giving back to his community, by opening up a community center that provides teaching of trade services, financial literacy services, and mental health and trauma services.

Today, Brandon’s goal “is to continue providing youth with the correct tools to diffuse the issues and negative experiences they’re facing daily.” He hopes that at-risk youth can use these tools to overcome their problems, rather than learning in prison, as Brandon had to. “My job is to help break the cycle and not perpetuate it.”



Scan the QR Code for the 2023 article, “We Founded a Youth Mentoring Program While in Prison, and It’s Saving Lives“. This article details the foundation of I AM YOU, formerly known as Change Comes from Within,





Chelsea was in her first year of college when she was incarcerated for the first time. At only 17-years old, Chelsea was convicted of aggravated vehicular homicide after a drunk driving accident in which she lost her close friend. She was sentenced to 3 1/3-to-10-years. After serving almost six years, Chelsea was released from prison for the first time and immediately found a job and went back to school for cosmetology. However, still reeling from the impact of causing her friend's death and the trauma of incarceration, Chelsea turned to alcohol to cope. This led to another terrible decision. In 2019, Chelsea was convicted for driving while intoxicated and received a 1-3-year sentence, of which she served two years.

As Chelsea describes, being incarcerated for a second time as an adult was different; she had to deal with the PTSD that resulted from her first sentence while also facing the trauma, guilt and shame of a second sentence. In particular, Chelsea was severely affected by being away from her family for such a long period of time. While the instant offense led to backlash against Chelsea herself, the backlash also came against Chelsea's family. The guilt Chelsea felt for her instant offense was compounded by the guilt she felt for the stigma attributed to her parents.

As such, Chelsea worked to improve herself as much as possible so that she could get home to her parents and tell them that the instant offense was not their fault. During her first sentence, Chelsea attempted to enroll in a college program as soon as possible. However, she was told that it was "too early" for her to start school due to her "earliest release date" and she had to wait two years to begin the program. Once she did start school, Chelsea would stay on the phone with her mother as much as possible so that her mother could help with research and school projects. Chelsea is adamant she would not have gotten through school or prison without the support of her parents.

Chelsea became involved in facility programs and even became a group facilitator. For example, Chelsea worked with the Transitional Service Program, a program run by DOCCS that is designed to assist in preparing individuals to return to their community. In particular, Chelsea assisted individuals in their efforts to re-enter society, which included helping people find an approved address at which they could live upon release and conducting mock job interviews to prepare for the real thing.

In addition, Chelsea was also involved in Aggression Replacement Training (ART), a program that helps incarcerated people to learn what causes them to act aggressively, how to manage their negative emotions, and how to make better choices in the future.

Despite her experiences with programming inside of prison, Chelsea took note of the issues plaguing these programs. Many of the programs are considered "mandatory" for certain incarcerated people based on the crimes for which they are convicted. In other words, people are forced to participate in programs that are not geared towards the particular issues or traumatic experiences that led to their incarceration. In addition, Chelsea notes a general apathy amongst group facilitators and counselors in that they were only present because it was their job; they did not truly care about the people there nor what these people were going through. Furthermore, the counselors and facilitators did not understand the experience of incarceration and did not want to take the time to provide person-centered care.

In addition to the issues with programming, Chelsea also recognized the issues plaguing incarcerated women in general. Specifically, Chelsea saw the struggles incarcerated mothers faced just to try to see their children. Women often lost their connection to their children. Given the importance of her family's support while incarcerated, Chelsea felt particularly heartbroken for these women.



Upon her release in 2021, Chelsea continued to keep improving her life. As of today, Chelsea is a Credentialed Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Counselor (CASAC). She works for the Center for Community Alternatives, Inc., an organization focused on providing programs and services to reduce incarceration, advocating for those facing poverty, addiction and violence within their communities, and helping formerly incarcerated people reintegrate into society. Chelsea currently works as a Recovery Care Manager in Rochester, NY. In addition, Chelsea has done re-entry work for formerly incarcerated individuals while working for Delphi Rise, a community-based substance abuse treatment and support organization.

Chelsea describes herself as career-driven and gains inspiration by helping her clients, even if it's through small actions. Remembering what it was like working with counselors who didn't understand where she was coming from, Chelsea often tries to be "real" with her clients by being honest with them and trying to get to know them and their struggles on a deeper level.

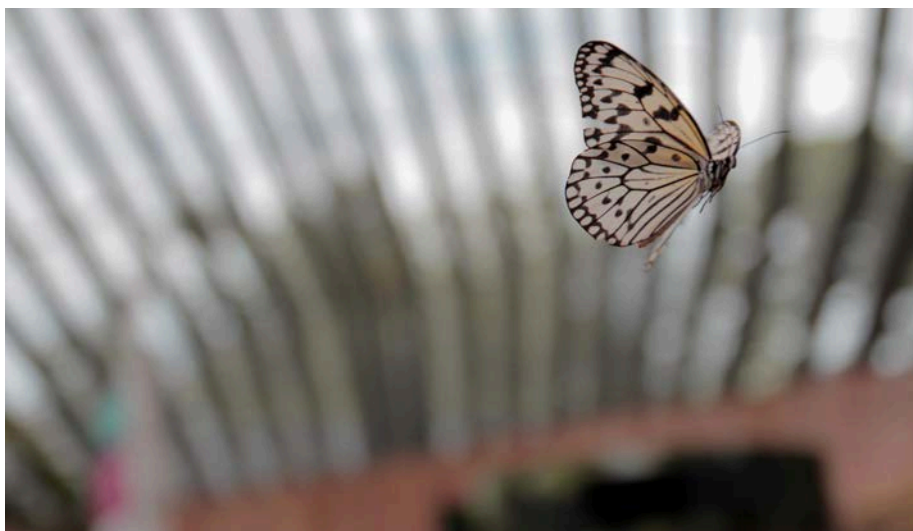
Chelsea Kuss

Chelsea will often tell her clients that she will help them, but she will not do the work for them. Instead, Chelsea encourages her clients to do the majority of work themselves much like she did. Yet, Chelsea will always do the best work possible for her clients; if she does not have an answer to a question, she will do everything she can to find that answer.

Chelsea considers herself lucky to have had the support of her family both during and after her incarceration. In the future, Chelsea wishes to further her education and to step back from case management to build stronger re-entry programs for people so they can receive the financial and emotional support they need.

Over the past decade, Chelsea has come to realize that she is not defined by the worst moment of her life despite how others made her feel. As she sees it, there is so much more to people than what you see or what they have done in their lives. Chelsea met some of the best people in her life while she was incarcerated. Chelsea hopes that through the passage of the Fair and Timely Parole Bill and the Elder Parole Bill, individuals will get a chance to go home to their families.

“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely acknowledge the changes it goes through to achieve that beauty.” – Maya Angelou



Alshariyfa “Missy” Robinson



Alshariyfa “Missy” Robinson grew up in an environment rife with drugs and violence. At home, Missy’s stepfather was so violent that Missy’s mother had no choice but to leave him. As a young woman Missy became involved in physically and emotionally abusive relationships. Missy had her first child right after her high school graduation and began raising him as a single parent. A year later, Missy thought she had found a reliable father figure to help her raise her child.

Unfortunately, this relationship quickly became economically, physically, reproductively, and sexually abusive. Missy was forced to hand over her hard-earned paychecks. He kicked Missy out of her own home on multiple occasions, leaving her and her children periodically homeless. Inevitably she would return when he asked because she had nowhere else to go. After eight years of abuse and fearing for her life after a violent attack, she finally worked up the courage to leave.

She spent the next eight years rebuilding her life. She found a steady job, where she worked her way up to a supervisory position, which enabled her to buy a foreclosed house for herself and her four children. Unfortunately, Missy found herself in another abusive relationship. However, since domestic violence was not something people spoke about, Missy never discussed her experiences with anyone. She was determined to not be a victim this time around but not knowing how to leave she chose to fight back.

The years of abuse brought Missy to a tipping point, and she retaliated against her abuser. After a night out she lit a part of his house on fire hoping it would make him angry enough to leave her. Regrettably, the fire grew out of control, tragically taking the life of two residents who couldn’t escape the fire.

At 40 years old, Missy was convicted of second-degree murder and arson. Missy was sentenced to fifteen years to life. Today, Missy has been incarcerated for nine years and will not be eligible for parole until 2030, when she is 55 years old.

Prior to her incarceration, Missy tried to find solace in strength through her faith but the abuse she was experiencing pulled her away from the church. During Missy’s incarceration, she turned back to the faith she once lost to help her cope with the trauma of life behind bars. If Missy could go back and give her younger self advice, she would tell her to “stay in church.” Her faith has also supported her through family hardships and not being able to be home to support her children, mother, or grandmother.

Alshariyfa “Missy” Robinson

There’s only so much she can do over the phone or on the occasional visit when her family can make the over six-hour drive from Buffalo all the way to Bedford Hills.

Since she cannot be as present for her family as she wishes, Missy devotes her time to mentoring young women who are recently incarcerated. As an intake receptionist, Missy helps orient the women coming to Bedford Hills for the first time or returning to the facility. Among many things, she issues incoming incarcerated people their new clothing, provides information on the facility and programs offered, and helps them get settled in. In this role, Missy believes her job is to “get them ready” for incarceration. Missy sees a lot of scared women coming into Bedford and she tries to encourage them. Missy advises them to “stay busy”, engage in programs, and “behave” so they can get back to their families as quickly as possible. Most importantly, Missy encourages the women to hold tightly to the positive attributes they bring with them into the facility.

Missy finds her mentoring work particularly rewarding because no one was there to mentor her when she first arrived at Bedford. She had no idea what to do or how to navigate life in prison. All she was told was to “sign up for programs” and hope for the best. Missy’s role as an intake receptionist allows her to be the mentor in the facility that she never had.

Since Missy did not have a mentor, she had to look inward for motivation to grow and change throughout her incarceration. Starting with her education, Missy initially joined the social science college program just to keep busy. However, she became discouraged as she struggled through the coursework. Missy was lucky enough to have other classmates and a professor who encouraged her to keep going. Before she knew it, Missy earned her degree in social science. She felt so much pride walking across the stage at graduation in May of 2023.



Alshariyfa “Missy” Robinson



Missy also attributes her growth to her participation in numerous programs, including a church initiative, a print shop, and an anger management program. Through her programming, Missy learned techniques for de-escalating situations, self-awareness, and emotional regulation. She has found work in the domestic violence program particularly rewarding. Like many women who take the program, it was not until she came to prison that she realized that her prior relationships were abusive. Growing up, having physically or emotionally abusive partners was the norm.

Inspired by her own story, Missy dreams of advocating for prison reform by addressing the often over looked topic of domestic violence. She feels a deep calling to shed light on identifying domestic violence, aiming to prevent cycles of violence before they begin.

Missy describes herself as bubbly and resilient, prioritizing self-rehabilitation and happiness. The love for her four adult children and three grandchildren is a constant source of strength, and she cherishes every visit—whether in person or through video calls. “They’re everything. I love them so much,” she says, expressing the profound joy they bring to her life. For Missy, motherhood remains one of her greatest honors. Like so many women in Bedford, Missy knows all too well how tough it is to be away from her children, no matter how old they are. She urges newly incarcerated mothers to keep their focus on their children, emphasizing the importance of maintaining connections through frequent visits and phone calls. She also encourages these women to do all they can to get back to their families as quickly as possible.

For Missy, she looks forward to the day where she is reunited with her family, and she is finally able to hug her children and grandchildren and see her grandmother before she passes. She can’t wait to hold them close and share the love that has sustained her throughout her journey. Although prison has been one of the most difficult experiences of her life, Missy has met some wonderful women who have helped her get through each day. If she is released, Missy hopes to continue her advocacy work in the community, by joining RAPP to help the people she will leave behind.



Following her incarceration at Albion Correctional Facility from 1992 to 1993, Joyce Powell became an esteemed activist against the violence and injustice against incarcerated women. After her release, Joy joined the Rochester Challenge Against Violence, an advocacy group run through the mayor’s office that focused on addressing violence in her community through street clean-ups, candlelight vigils, and more. In addition, Joy started an organization called “Equality and Justice for All,” where she often gave pep talks to young people to dissuade them from violence. Later, glaring examples of violently discriminatory policing in Joy’s community called her to speak out against police brutality. While law enforcement initially

applauded Joy’s calls to end gun violence, their attitudes changed when she shifted her focus to them. This activist work—specifically a compliant Joy was filing with the Rochester Police Department’s Internal Affairs unit regarding the police related death of a mentally ill man at a grocery store—put a target on her back.

In 2007, following a trial that showcased no eyewitnesses or physical evidence linking her to the crime, Joy was convicted of 1st degree assault and burglary and sentenced to 16 years. The only evidence presented was the word of a confidential informant, who was granted immunity for testifying against Joy. While serving this sentence, at 46 years old Joy was accused and convicted of second-degree murder in a cold case. Following an all-white jury trial, she was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. During the trial, the judge refused to allow any testimony related to Joy’s advocacy work or her status as a clergy member. Joy—along with her many supporters—maintains her innocence in this conviction and the 2007 conviction. She has been incarcerated for 17 years and will not be eligible for parole until the year 2045, when she is eighty-three years old.

Despite being incarcerated, Joy continues advocating for what is right. She has worked tirelessly for better conditions and treatment for herself and other incarcerated women. For instance, Joy successfully advocated to introduce fans into Bedford Hills Correctional facility to combat the summer heat. Similarly, she has participated in multiple letter campaigns, including writing letters to the New York Civil Rights and Liberties Union (NYCLU) in support of the organization advocating for requiring the use of body worn cameras by all corrections officers. After being placed in solitary confinement for four years upon reporting a sexual assault by a corrections officer, Joy successfully advocated against the inhumane nature of solitary confinement and to change the disciplinary guidelines surrounding solitary.

In addition to her advocacy, Joy’s most fulfilling work comes from directly helping others. As an escorting guide for the legally blind, she supports individuals facing vision loss. Joy appreciates how traumatizing it can be for people going from having the ability to see to going blind. This is amplified by the trauma of incarceration. In her role, Joy helps people move around the facility to locations such as the mess hall, infirmary, and counselors’ office. With Joy’s help, people can get to essential activities like programming and visits with family and friends.

While physically guiding people is rewarding, Joy uses faith to guide women spiritually. Before her conviction, Joy found great value in being a Pentecostal pastor in her community. Where she once worked in youth outreach, encouraging young people to express their emotions through writing and the arts and pursuing education, she continues that work at Bedford. Joy became a facilitator for the Nation of Islam, which allows her to gather women from many different backgrounds to pray and to read both the Bible and the Koran. For Joy, this position means more to her than just religion; it provides Joy one more opportunity to uplift the women around her. During her group meetings, Joy passes a mirror around to each woman in the group so they can look at their reflections and say, “I am loved and I am beautiful.”

Uplifting women in the facility has been a common theme for Joy throughout her incarceration. Joy has spent her time at Bedford supporting her fellow incarcerated women. Joy believes that incarcerated women are more than just their crime; many simply made a mistake or were fighting for their lives. It is this understanding and perspective that encourages Joy to continue supporting the women in her community through her various positions within the facility.

Despite having a lengthy sentence, Joy continues to look to the future and to one day being free. If released, Joy hopes to create an organization catered to incarcerated women who lack family support. It should come as no surprise to anyone that Joy’s post release plans are centered on improving her community; much like her tireless work prior to incarceration and her current work within Bedford Hills. For Joy, her advocacy for women, children, the disabled, and the elderly embodies the true essence of “equality and justice for all.”





Since the 1980s, the number of incarcerated women in the United States has increased from approximately 26,000 women to a total of 180,684 women in 2022, which is 585% increase. [xi] Despite this drastic increase, re-entry services are generally geared towards helping formerly incarcerated men and neglect needs specific to women. [xii] Similarly, women face limited opportunities for job training and education both in jails and prisons and upon release, which often stifle attempts to gain employment and economic stability. [xiii]

The stigma associated with a conviction also disproportionately affects women when trying to re-establish themselves in their communities. When applying for jobs with a criminal record, women are 30 percent less likely than men to receive a callback, and Black women are 93 percent less likely to receive a callback or receive a job offer compared to white women. [xiv] Furthermore, having a criminal record often makes it difficult to obtain occupational licenses and certifications. [xv] Thus, formerly incarcerated individuals are often barred from jobs in healthcare and childcare, two professions which are primarily dominated by women. [xvi]

Women also feel the stigma of incarceration from their families, their peers, and society as a whole, leading many formerly incarcerated women to experience social isolation in a time where they need social support. [xvii] The lack of support from family and friends results in formerly incarcerated women failing to seek mental health services that would help them reintegrate into their communities. [xviii] However, fewer transitional workplace programs and therapies are available to women compared to men, further exacerbating the difficulties in re-entry. [xix]

One of the biggest challenges we faced in bringing this campaign to fruition was finding formerly incarcerated women who were willing to identify themselves and tell their stories. Many of the women we reached out to were reluctant to speak with us. For those who did agree to an initial interview, some ultimately chose to withdraw their participation, not wanting their stories to be publicized.

These women did not want to exacerbate or add to the stigma by identifying themselves and the nature of their offense. However, these women continue to do great work in the community. They work hard to further their educations, seek out jobs in areas that help formerly incarcerated people, and continue to advocate for the incarcerated women they left behind. The good work these women do is not only a testament to their rehabilitation, but to the strength that they have in overcoming the many obstacles that formerly incarcerated women face.

- i. Vera Institute, “Prison,” New York Criminal Legal System Data Hub, (last accessed March 18, 2025), <https://www.vera.org/ny-data-hub/Prison#top>; see also DOCCS Incarcerated Profile Report (January 2024), https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/01/2024_01_01-uc-profile.pdf
- ii. Vera Institute, “Parole,” New York Criminal Legal System Data Hub, (last accessed March 18, 2025), <https://www.vera.org/ny-data-hub/Parole#top>
- iii. Id.
- iv. Vera Institute, “Prison,” New York Criminal Legal System Data Hub, (last accessed March 18, 2025), <https://www.vera.org/ny-data-hub/Prison#top>; see also DOCCS Incarcerated Profile Report (January 2024), https://doccs.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2024/01/2024_01_01-uc-profile.pdf; Vera Institute, “Parole,” New York Criminal Legal System Data Hub, (last accessed March 18, 2025), <https://www.vera.org/ny-data-hub/Parole#top>
- v. Id.
- vi. Executive Law § 259-i(2)(c)(A).
- vii. See Ctr. On Race, Inequity, and the Law & the Parole Preparation Project, *The Problem with Parole: New York State’s Failing System of Release* at 10.
- viii. Senate Bill S454 <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S454>; Assembly Bill A514 <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/A514>
- ix. Emily Widra, *Incarceration shortens life expectancy*, Prison Policy Initiative (June 26, 2017) (updated March 2021), https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2017/06/26/life_expectancy/; see also Rebecca Silber et al., *Aging Out: Using Compassionate Release to Address the Growth of Aging and Infirm Prison Populations*, Vera Institute (Dec. 2017), <https://vera-institute.files.svdcn.com/production/downloads/publications/Using-Compassionate-Release-to-Address-the-Growth-of-Aging-and-Infirm-Prison-Populations%E2%80%94Full-Report.pdf>
- x. Senate Bill S159 <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S159>; Assembly Bill A127.

xi. Kristen M. Budd, Fact Sheet - Incarcerated Women and Girls, The Sentencing Project, (July 24, 2024), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>

xii. Erin M. Schnappauf and Theresa E. DiDonato, From Solitary to Solidarity: Belonging, Social Support, and the Problem of Women's Recidivism, *Modern Psychological Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (2017), <https://scholar.utc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1286&context=mps>

xiii. Akua Amaning, Supporting Women Affected by the Criminal Legal System, Playbook for the Advancement of Women in the Economy, Ch. 12, Center for American Progress, (March 14, 2024), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/playbook-for-the-advancement-of-women-in-the-economy/supporting-women-affected-by-the-criminal-legal-system/>

xiv. Id.

xv. Id.

xvi. Nancy La Vinge, Formerly Incarcerated Women and Reentry, National Institute of Justice (Jan. 2025), <https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/nij/310062.pdf>

xvii. Erin M. Schnappauf and Theresa E. DiDonato, From Solitary to Solidarity: Belonging, Social Support, and the Problem of Women's Recidivism, *Modern Psychological Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (2017), <https://scholar.utc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1286&context=mps>

xviii. Id. at 9.

xix. Id.

Thank you to our current students, Will Hecht and Edward “Ned” LaDuca for all their hard work in getting the “I AM” Campaign across the finish line and to their Supervising Attorneys Annabel Mireles and Director Ali Harrington for their dedication to this project.

Thank you to all our former Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic Students who contributed to the “I AM” Campaign, including but not limited to:

Rachael Cunningham
Sara Paltrowitz
Olivia King
Alexis DiCarlo
Analiese Vasciannie
Hannah Davis
Hannah Campbell
Madelyn Storms

A special thank you to Audrey Grout for all of her help. The “I AM” Campaign would have been impossible without your help and the entire Clinic Staff at the University at Buffalo School of Law.

