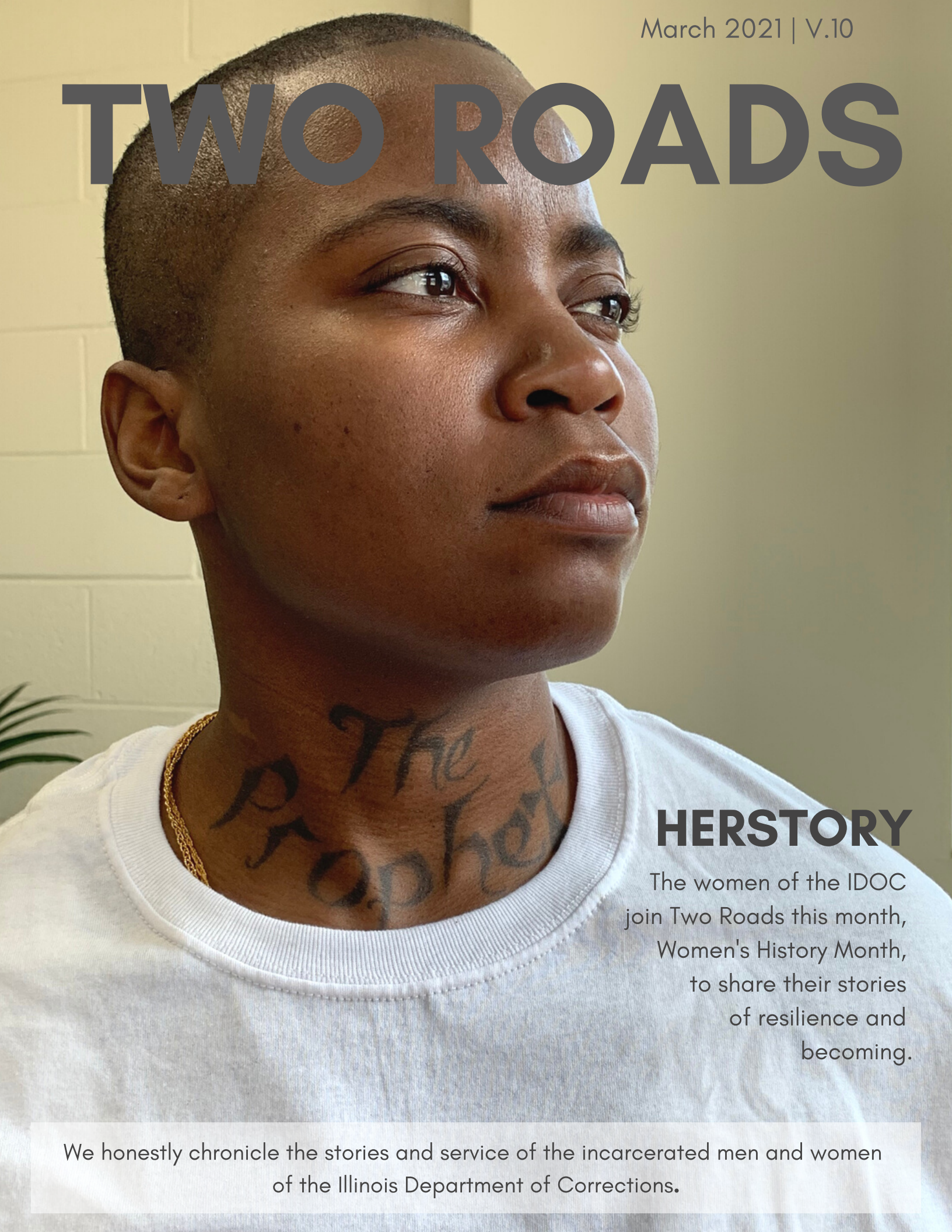
March 2021 | V.10

TWO ROADS



HERSTORY

The women of the IDOC join Two Roads this month, Women's History Month, to share their stories of resilience and becoming.

We honestly chronicle the stories and service of the incarcerated men and women of the Illinois Department of Corrections.

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HERSTORY

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"AND SO WE LIFT OUR GAZES"

NICK WORLEY
KEWANEE LSRC

Pencil Drawing. Nick Worley, March 22, 2021
"AND SO WE LIFT OUR GAZES" is an excerpt from Amanda Gorman's poem "The Hill We Climb" read by the poet at President Biden's inauguration on January 20, 2021. The women depicted in Mr. Worley's drawing are: Ruth Bader Ginsburg (U.S. Supreme Court Justice-top left), Amanda Gorman (U.S. Poet Laureate-top center), Frida Kahlo (Mexican Painter, top right), Greta Thunberg (Swedish Environmentalist, bottom left), Malala Yousafzai (Pakistani Education Activist, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, bottom center) and Sharice Davids (Native American U.S. Congresswoman, Kansas, bottom right).

"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

GUEST EDITOR

TANGENISE PORTER

Welcome to "Herstory". Two Roads v.10 is monumental. We tell stories written by women, about women, during Women's Herstory Month. And, Two Roads V.10 serves as the formal introduction of the Two Roads Social Justice Project's partnership between IDOC's Women & Family Services (WFS) and Kewanee Life Skills Reentry Center. We begin a long-awaited collaboration, sure to change the face of the IDOC's Social Justice Campaign as we endeavor to bring equity and fairness throughout our Agency.

This is an opportunity for Women to take our place in the Social Justice Movement and provide balance. What better time than now, Women's HERstory month? We tell stories for women by women! Stories by the women in our care and custody, as well as the women who are responsible for the daily operations within WFS. These stories will encourage, empower, and engage all that read them.

I'd like to share the time in my life when I realized the importance of being unstoppable.
It was the summer of 2009, and I was at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The Chicago School of Professional Psychology was hosting its Commencement Exercise. Included in the celebrations were a wonderful lady (my maternal grandmother) and a few of her daughters (my aunties). They were seated in the audience to cheer me on and provide the same love and support they'd provided for years.

To truly understand the significance of that day, allow me to take you back to a less than meager beginning on the westside of Chicago in a neighborhood known as Lawndale. During the early 70's I was born to an unwed teenage mother. Keep in mind my maternal grandmother had 9 children at the time. My mother was the second oldest, coming in at age 15.

While growing up and attending school in the City of Chicago, I was told on more than one occasion that the cards were stacked against me in more ways than one. I was told anything other than a high school diploma was out of my reach. I was constantly reminded of the statistics surrounding those born to unwed teenaged mothers. These false limits were pressed upon me so often I almost accepted them as my truth.

However, on that stage in 2009, preparing to have my Master's in Arts conferred, I'd proven all the naysayers wrong. The little black girl from the westside of Chicago had done good. In that moment, I vowed to never let any circumstance define who I am, but that I'd define who I am, despite any circumstance.

Now the path wasn't a smooth one, I experienced hurdles, dips, and valleys along the way. However, at each crossroad there stood a woman waiting to give me the tools I needed to make it to the next step. Those women were pivotal in my growth and

helped me become all that I am today. As we celebrate Women's Herstory Month, let us continue to give honor and atta-girls to the Great Women continuing to blaze paths for generations to come.

I asked the administrators on my team if they would share a statement about who has/continues to inspire and motivate them. Here are their quotes:

"My 84-year-old mother, what an inspiration she is. She's always a source of encouragement and support. Her faith in the higher power has transformed my daily journey. Her faith has defined what she loves to do which is being of service to others". -A.M

"My mother is my inspiration. She treated everyone with dignity and respect; she even volunteered at a Women's Prison giving Bible studies for years. She instilled that hard work reaps rewards but to remain humble no matter the position you attain. Making her proud has always been my motivation". -A.C

"My parents are my constant source of inspiration. Growing up, I observed with admiration as they bravely faced challenges and setbacks with unwavering motivation and determination. They emphasized having gratitude, as well as being kind and helpful. I proudly follow their example as I strive to inspire others!" -S.M

"The many moments when there was little light to guide my way, inspiration shined through every time I looked into the eyes of my children. For every obstacle that showed up, the fear was quelled by knowing that there was honor in choosing to continue striving for a better life for my children". - A.S

"What motivates me to get up every morning and inspires me to keep moving forward is my commitment to make small incremental changes each day that will not only contribute to making my life better but serves as a road map for others to improve their lives as well".- A.L

"My daily motivation is reflecting on the strides that have been made in the Women & Family Services Division by the wonderful leaders before me and whom I walk alongside daily. My goal is to continue to move forward while educating and motivating others to let their light shine". - A.F

Motivation comes in many forms, from many places and spaces, both within and without us.

I want to thank Mr. Estes, Mr. Hamilton, Ms. Rowan and the Kewanee team for the honor and privilege of sharing your platform. I'll leave you with one of my favorite quotes, by Ayn Rand. "The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me."

Continue to move with precision and purpose, be unstoppable.

Tangenise S. Porter, LCPC
Chief of Women & Family Services
Illinois Department of Corrections

PUBLISHER'S LETTER

JIM ESTES

"Herstory," our 10th Volume, serves as a celebration and creative launch party for our new partnership with Chief Porter and the IDOC's Women's facilities.

More than a magazine, Two Roads is a stubborn, reformative idea. We are a social and restorative justice project that knows there is meaning and service in the stories people tell about themselves. Our men and women write, speak, and podcast their stories. We hold town hall meaning-maker meetings. We listen. We think. We reflect. We remember.

I've read and listened to lots of stories as our partnership forges. Some stay with me.

"You are worthy," Deborah Shannon, Decatur CC's Assistant Warden of Programs, told me is a truth she wants women to understand.

Kennashoe Pendleton said, *"We shall overcome."*

Jessica Breuer said, *"I can, I will."*

Janet Richmond said, *"Honesty and vulnerability are what impact people the most – knowing that you've struggled and stumbled in your story, too."* She says, *"No one can disparage my truth."*

Najee Webster said, *"I hadn't realized that waking up every day with a smile, full of peace, was a sign of strength."*

Mr. Hamilton and I have often explored the idea we all create our own "prisons of the mind" by accepting false limits and letting our vision cloud. But our writers tell clear-eyed, strong-hearted, ego-free histories that have become understandings for them. Their stories are our stories. They resonate with our histories. As they do, we are all set free.

EDITOR'S LETTER

RICKY HAMILTON

Happy Women's Month! I must admit this may be the proudest moment of my life. "Herstory" represents more than just a collection of amazing stories from a collection of clearly amazing women. Rather, this magazine represents the reaping of a long awaited harvest.

Four years ago, I approached Mr. Estes with a vision for his Two Roads magazine; I envisioned a restorative justice program I felt would have a true impact for us. I was an incarcerated citizen who wanted to know hope, positivity and inspiration in an environment where these essential elements to life are seldom found.

Well, Two Roads became that program and our new partnership is further proof of our mission. Taking in the words of these women brought up a well of emotion as I realized the vision of Two Roads has found its mothers.

Ms. Tangenise Porter and staff, the Love, Support and Compassion you operate with is ever so palpable and honorable. Please continue to let your humanity and care shine through as you guide these women and yourselves to a better tomorrow.

Incarcerated Women, you are the official "moms" of this vision. I am confident the level of support you all possess along with the innate strength and nurturing spirit your gender brings will allow you to continue to foster this vision to its maturity.

As I transition to a free life in the community later this summer, I promise to keep all of you in my heart as I continue to strive to build a better system. Thank you all and continue to be great. Peace, Queens.

HONORANDO A MIS MENTORES

YESENIA DIAZ
LOGAN C.C.

Editor;s note: *Ms. Diaz was encouraged to write in Spanish, her first language, to provide Spanish speakers an opportunity to read in their native language.*
The English translation of her story follows on the next page.

Entré en la prisión dias antes de mis 18 anos de edad. No sabia qué esperar, pero sabia que quería cambiar, mejorar, hacer cosas positivas. Pero no sabia cómo. Dios estaba escuchando y empezo a mandarme mentores en mi vida. En este mes de las mujeres 2021, quiero agradecer y honrar a estas maravillosas mujeres.

A mi mamá por amarme a pesar de todo. A mi mentora, quien ahora es mi amiga. A travaz de su guianza y ejemplos cambio mi perspectiva para poder ver la prision como mi comunidad, y tambien me ha motivado a buscar mi propisito.

A las therapistas quieres me escucharon y me enseñaron formas positivas de lidear y superar mis problemas emocionales.

A las maestras y tutores que me ayudaron a pasar mi GED cuando hablaba muy pequito de inglés.

A las enfermeras que van más allá de tomar temperaturas y pasar medicamentos. Que me recuerdan que me mantenga hidratada cuando estoy trabajando en el jardín en un dia caliente.

A las grandiosas mujeres de Dios quienes dan su tiempo para venir a proveer servicios espirituales, como estudios bíblicos y retiros. Quienes an derramado en mí; su conocimiento para crecer y fortalecer mi fe.

A las alcaides y administradoras quienes muestran que las mujeres pueden ser líderes fuertes, y compasivas, amables y divertidas.

A todos las consejeras, voluntarias y trabajadoras de todos los servicios quienes han sido de mucha ayuda y me han alentado.

A mis compañeros quienes han compartido las mismas dificultades y victorias.

He sido buy bendecida al estar rodeada de muchas mujeres especiales. Dios las hizo a todas diferentes como a las flores. Cada flor es única y juntas crean un jardin hermoso. Como mis mentores, cada una de ellas me ha inspirado y juntas me han motivado a estar a la altura de las circunstancias y volverme en la mujer que Dios ha creado.

HONORING MY MENTORS

(TRANSLATED BY ASSISTANT WARDEN DR. ARACELI CABARCAS)

YESENIA DIAZ

LOGAN CC

Translator's note: *Ms. Diaz was encouraged to write in Spanish, her first language, to provide Spanish speakers an opportunity to read in their native language. She was gracious enough to indulge in this request although her English is now impeccable. She is an exceptional artist and works in the Horticulture department.*

I entered prison a few days before my 18th birthday. I had no idea what to expect, but I knew I wanted to change, improve, and do positive things...I just didn't know how. God was listening and began to send me mentors in my life. For Women's History Month 2021, I want to thank and honor all the amazing women who have helped me.

To my mother for loving me despite all I've done. My mentor, who is now my friend, whose guidance and examples changed my perspective to see prison as my community and motivated me to find my purpose in life.

To the therapists who listened to me and showed me how to manage and overcome my emotional problems.

To the teachers and tutors who helped me pass my GED when I only spoke a little bit of English.

To all the nurses who go the extra mile and don't just take temperatures and pass medications. They often remind me to maintain hydration when I'm working in the garden on those especially hot days.

To the great women of God who give their time to provide spiritual services, like Bible studies and spiritual retreats. Their faith has overflowed into me; their knowledge helped me grow and fortify my faith.

To the Wardens and administrators who demonstrate that women can be strong leaders but also compassionate, friendly, and fun.

To all the counselors, volunteers and all the workers whose services have helped me and encouraged me.

To my peers who have shared the same difficulties and victories.

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. As my mentors, each of them has inspired me and collectively they have motivated me to overcome any circumstance and become the woman God has created me to be.

IT IS MY HONOR TO HONOR ME

JANET RICHMOND
LOGAN C.C.

I once was so poor I had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. I was homeless, My hope was fueled by the story of Steve Harvey. He had once been down so bad that he slept in his car for three years. That he earned a place of his own to live in is what kept me going.

I once felt ashamed of the fact that I sold myself.

When I discovered that Maya Angelou - the brave, regal, respected, historical Maya Angelou - told us she'd done the same thing, I relaxed my shame. I was willing to talk about it, and I stopped viewing my setbacks and mistakes as roadblocks preventing me from reaching my destination.

I used to believe that if life slapped you in the face, then you had to turn around and go back to where you'd come from. But that's not what Madonna did when she left the small town she grew up in, deciding to chase her dream in New York City, where she was raped before she could even get a good look at the place. No one would have blamed her for turning back towards home, though we never would have known the fire in her soul. Madonna's faith in the vision she held for her future was much bigger and more glorious than any pain or obstacle. She taught me to never let anyone stop me.

For years I thought my violent past, that violent accusation, would forever leave me with a red stamp on my forehead.

I thought, "Who would really be interested in reading my work?" Then it dawned on me that when I open my bible to read the books of Corinthians, Titus, Timothy, Galatians, Colossians, Hebrews, Romans, Thessalonians, Ephesians, Philippians and Revelations – when I am delving in and applying that information – it never crosses my mind that Paul was once a Christian slayer. This proves that the Glory of God can overpower any situation.

Experience and understanding have taught me to be more concerned with being an example and inspiration to the mass of people dealing with personal, mental and economic issues and less concerned with applause and fitting into social circles.

Honesty and vulnerability are what impact people the most – knowing that you've struggled and stumbled in your story too.

Therefore, no one can disparage my truth.

STRENGTH

NAJEE WEBSTER
DECATUR C.C.

Beginning my incarceration at the age of 21, and not really knowing too much about life, I was terrified. I just knew I was not strong enough to do my time.

Reality really set in once I got my calculation sheet, which informed me I had to give IDOC 10½ years of my life.

I told myself I couldn't do it before I even made it to population.

What I didn't know was that God was about to show me just how strong I really am. Making it to population and meeting women who had served 20+ years, and exuded strength, got me thinking, "Maybe I can do this time."

It took me a while to come to terms with my time, but once I did, I started participating in programs and groups. I began to realize things about myself I'd never known.

The biggest eye opener was that I have strength. I hadn't realized that waking up every day with a smile, full of peace, was a sign of strength.

I attended a bible study one day, and the volunteer told me I wasn't serving this time for me. I didn't quite understand what she meant. Then one day my roommate asked me how did I become so strong as I did my time because she was scared.

I realized I had become an example of strength for someone else.

I discovered I was doing my time to be an example of strength for my nieces and godchildren.

Today, 8 years into my bid, I can honestly say I am grateful for my time, as well as grateful to the women who displayed their strength and helped me get through my time.

Most importantly, I am thankful to God for giving me the strength I never knew I had.

There's so much strength in being a woman, and once you're able to embrace your trials and grow from them, you'll realize just how strong you really are.

"I'm proof you can turn your failure into success. So, I encourage you to believe in yourself, fully apply yourself and never give up. I made it. You can too. Wear your crown and use your strength, Queen Kong."
- Mishunda Davis-Brown

TIE YOUR LACES TIGHT

CHERITA RAYFORD
DECATUR C.C.

Once upon a time there was a little baby girl. When her mom had her, she was 16 years old, so she decided to put her up for adoption. Well, thank God her grandma wasn't having any part of that. She took her home and raised her as her own.

For many years, grandma did all she could to protect, provide food, clothing and a home for this lil girl. The girl's mother had two more daughters, and she wasn't in a position to care for them either, so the grandma raised three granddaughters.

The mother ran into trouble in her days, so as a result, the grandma was strict with the kids. Growing up, the oldest granddaughter began to be rebellious and found herself hanging in the streets with the wrong crowd.

One night she found herself hanging with the wrong crowd and got herself into some serious trouble. She was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and being a lil black girl from the inner city, with little money, she landed in an unjust system. With the deck stacked against her, and a system so unjust, she got 20 years at 100% for being at the wrong place at the wrong time under the accountability law. The lil girl was lost to the penal institutions at the young age of 18.

TIE YOUR LACES TIGHT

CHERITA RAYFORD
DECATUR C.C.

This girl had so much fight. She fought her case for five years in Cook County Jail. She eventually lost, and once she did, she was sentenced and went on to the next phase of her life – doing prison time. To be so young with so much time, she remained hopeful.

Once she got to prison, she frequented the law library looking for a way out. She remained patient, humble and hopeful and did all she could to be a better person. She went to school, groups, treatment, work, you name it. She was one busy girl, but was not able to receive any relief on her sentence.

One closed door after another, yet she's one of the most pleasant people you could meet. She's always so cheery and smiling. This lil girl grew up and became a woman all on her own. She was self-raised in the prison system.

She was determined to have something to show for all the time she had to do. She has many college certificates and is a couple of credits from an associates. A jack of all trades.

She empowered herself with the one thing they couldn't take from her – knowledge. She persevered when time after time no one would give the young girl/woman a second chance. She's as resilient as dandelions, or a rose out of concrete.

She refused to self-medicate, act a fool or do anything to demean herself. She's months away from freedom, and she's ready. She has a loving and supportive family. Right now, today, she and her mother are best friends, and she eagerly awaits her release.

She won't tell you her journey was easy. She shed much blood, sweat and tears. How do you prepare for a 20-year race? She ran a smooth, solid and steady race, and the finish line is quickly approaching.

Thank God she had love and support to run beside her throughout the years. Nothing is impossible; we can do the unthinkable, and we are all stronger than we may think, know and believe. Tie your laces tight, one foot after the other, and we'll meet at the finish line.

FROM TEST TO TESTIMONY

SANDRA BROWN.
FOX VALLEY A.T.C.

My educational experience as an African-American incarcerated woman has been a challenging experience. But the journey continues to be as meaningful today as it was when I took the first step. Aside from ABE/GED programs, the facilities in which I was confined offered cooking, cleaning and planting classes – all of which prepare women for entry-level, minimum-wage jobs upon release.

While I could appreciate that such classes offered practical alternatives to unemployment and crime, I found choices immediately available to the incarcerated female population sexist, since across the same state in Danville Correctional Center men were provided Bachelor degree programs. Kewanee Correctional Center – also in the same state – offers men the opportunity to write, edit, and publish an e-magazine that is posted on GTL.

Assuming I wanted to complete the domestic education courses available, I had to wait until those leaving before me enrolled, paroled or declined, as every program was out-date based. I once waited six years on a wait-list for two programs, programs that were discontinued as I remained on the wait list.

As an African-American female incarcerated for 22 years at 100% for defending myself, how am I expected to return to a society I no longer know and contribute to the well-being of myself, my family and my community? First, I got discouraged. Then I got angry. And then I got proactive.

In spite of being locked out of school, I earned my Bachelor of Specialized Studies degree and my Master of Arts in Humanities degree through correspondence programs. I am currently a doctoral student, pursuing an Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership.

Despite being denied state or federal financial assistance because I am a prisoner,

I was awarded the Richard K Brackin Scholarship and the Marilyn Buck Award. To date, I am a two-time recipient of the Davis-Potter Scholarship.

Despite my systemic challenges, I am the first incarcerated female in Illinois history to earn a Master's degree, the first incarcerated woman to pledge and earn acceptance into the Gamma Pi Delta Honor Society, and the first incarcerated woman in Illinois to complete an editor's internship through Ohio University.

I lacked the benefit of campus amenities such as student support services, computers and classmates. But I had a typewriter, tenacity and a handful of friends who supported what I was doing.

LOVING AND LIVING WITH STRENGTH

RACHEL REES
DECATUR C.C.

A substantial part of being a woman is having the ability to adapt. I believe that it takes strength to adapt. Most of my life has been one change after another, which has made me the complex woman I am now.

My femininity makes me an UNSTOPPABLE force.

I've fought many internal and external battles.

I have questioned myself endlessly.

"Am I beautiful?"

"Do I have what it takes? "

"Am I a good mother?"

"Can I do this? "

But then I look in the mirror and see the truth.

I am enough. I'm here, standing STRONG.

There might be moments or even seasons when life is hard.

But there is nothing that can stop me.

Nothing.

I am a woman.

I will pull through and continue loving and living with STRENGTH.

MY STORY

SHERRI EHLERT
FOX VALLEY A.T.C.

I have only begun to figure out my life during the 4 years I've been locked up. I am not to blame for others' stupidity, but I am to blame for my own mistakes. I hold myself accountable and have learned my past will never define me. I regret hurting everyone I have in the past. They did not deserve to be treated so badly by me. I forgive my abusers, so I may go on and live the peaceful, happy life I deserve. Their time destroying me is over, and I am free. I am here today to say all things are possible. I have survived the worst things a child could go through. I am stronger than life.

"I CAN, I WILL."

JESSICA BREUER
LOGAN C.C.

When I was in high school, I was in special classes due to a learning disability. I struggled with learning. The counselor told me I should give up. She told me I would never graduate with my diploma.

She told me I would drop out and maybe get a GED later in my life.

She told me that I would not achieve anything in life, that I would most likely end up pregnant as a teen or choose a life of crime and drugs.

I am mentally ill and I I started to give up. I started to believe what my counselor told me were my limits.

When I was 17, something clicked, and I started trying again.

I received my high school diploma at age 21. I am now two classes short of getting my horticulture certificate, and I completed my certificate in cake decorating at the age of 24.

Even though I am incarcerated, I have not given up on myself. I will make my life as fulfilling as possible. Just because someone says "You can't" doesn't mean you can't say, "I can, I will."

"She knows who she is. She'll scream that out loud.."
-Haley Rose Gallagher

KAMALA

KENNASHOE PENDLETON
LOGAN C.C.

As we celebrate Women's History Month, I want to recognize the one and only, inspiring, Kamala Harris, our first African American Vice President. Kamala Harris has made a huge impact on black women, proving her path to greatness – making it known that anything is possible and hope is still alive.

She was born to Shyamala Gopalan, an India native, and Donald Harris, a Jamaican native. Kamala Harris's parents met at a civil rights movement meeting. They divorced when she was six years old.

She and several other black students were involved in an integrational experiment in Berkeley, California when she was in first grade. Growing up around activists involved with the civil rights movement inspired Kamala to make systemic changes for people.

Kamala Harris sets an example for women to follow our own dreams; we know we can purposefully stand because she stood and accomplished her goals.

She has knocked down walls of racism by being elected not only as Vice President, but also in 2004 as the San Francisco DA. She then became the Attorney General of California. She empowers women of all races.

She is for the people and cares for our young people. She has organized new programs for young, nonviolent offenders; she has also protected education by enforcing truancy laws fining parents for student truancy.

In 2018 and 2020, we saw a diversity movement in American politics, as Americans of many races were elected to office. Kamala is mixed race, a symbol of biological unity for our divided country. She proves a developing equality for our American political system.

Even though I'm incarcerated, she empowers me to become an activist and leader of the movement toward equality.

I know that I, too, can make changes in my life to become a law-abiding citizen and the best mom to my five children. I look up to strong, black women like Kamala Harris,

In conclusion, this is a history-making experience, proving that even though our country is under fire, we can come together as one and stand side by side. No matter the color of our skin, we are on the path to change. We shall overcome.

MY MOM'S STRENGTH

JESSICA HAWLEY
DECATUR C.C.

My name is Jessica Hawley. I'm 42 years old, and I have three kids and two grandkids. This is my third prison incarceration.

My mom was and is my inspiration. She was an amazing mother, not just to me and my siblings, but to anyone who needed her. She became a foster parent when I was in my early teens, so I have always known her to care for everyone.

When I went to prison the first time, my kids stayed with my mom. If not for her, my kids would have been lost to this messed up system. I thank God for giving me such an amazing and loving mom.

I lost my mom two weeks after I went to jail this time. I'm not sure how I'll process my loss and not having her when I get home, but I know one thing. I want to be just like her. She had so much fight within her, and she was always humble.

I want to make her proud. I want to change who I was and become what she wanted me to be... a good, loving mom and grandma who's not scared to love and care for others, to stay out of jail, and to be a productive member of society.

MY MOTHER

CRYSTAL CRUZ
DECATUR C.C.

I've had much inspiration in my life, mostly from my mom.

She's from a big family, with 14 brothers and sisters. Growing up, she had a hard life.

We're Catholic, and her mom and dad were strict. I remember a story she told me about having to pray on her knees on top of rice.

Even though my mom endured the "hard knocks" of life growing up, she didn't let that keep her down.

She had four kids and she's buried two of those four. No mother should outlive her kids, but she is strong.

When I got into trouble, my mother stood up and took in my three daughters.

The way she adapts to whatever is thrown her way is remarkable. She holds down the fort, keeps everyone in check, and works a third shift job.

She empowers me.

She has always told me, "If you want it done right, do it yourself," and to always be a leader, not a follower.

Earlier this year, she buried her mother and sister. It was tough on her, but she was persistent and made it through, even though she has the extra stressors.

She is such an inspiration to me, and gives me hope. If she can do it with everything life has thrown at her, I know I can, too.

QUEEN KONG

MISHUNDA DAVIS-BROWN
LOGAN C.C.

Throughout my life I have struggled with math. To not be able to grasp it as quickly as others made me feel stupid. So, I began to rebel in school. I goofed off, skipped math class, argued with the teacher and once threw a book, which led me to detention.

I preferred to be the bad girl rather than the dumb girl. I excelled in my other classes, so actually wasn't dumb at all. I developed a "defeated" mentality though, due to my low motivation and no examples of success in my environment. I stopped caring and dropped out.

At 17 I became pregnant, and as a young woman and soon-to-be mother I attempted to accomplish my GED at Simpson (pregnant girls) High School.

I had relationship issues with my boyfriend and dropped out, had my daughter and was pregnant again with my son the following year.

I was arrested in April, 2001 and had my son two months later while incarcerated.

A few years passed. I began to mature and realized I was hurting myself and my children by not obtaining my GED. So, instead of running I faced my fears and enrolled in GED classes.

I let go of my defeated mentality and gained hope. I knew I had to be a better woman for me and my children.

It took me a few years, but with God, commitment, diligence and by fully applying myself I received my GED from Richland College in 2010.

I went on to excel in every college course I took. My GPA is 3.6. I received a $30,000 scholarship from North Park to obtain my Masters Degree in Theology. God is God. My accomplishments have empowered me to be a woman who always believes in my strength and capability.

I know that I can do anything. I'll use my strength to encourage and strengthen others to believe in themselves, including my children Melvin and Melvina and my husband Tyvonne Brown. My children have both obtained their high school diplomas, and I'm proud.

As a woman, mother and wife, failure is not an option. I'm proof you can turn your failure into success. So, I encourage you to believe in yourself, fully apply yourself and never give up. I made it. You can too. Wear your crown and use your strength, Queen Kong.

THE PICTURE

BRANDI BALDWIN
FOX VALLEY A.T.C.

On a cold Christmas Eve in 2013, four generations of women in my family came together for one beautiful picture. A picture I cherish to this day, for both the good and bad that has happened in our lives has value.

My husband and I packed our home on the Camp Pendleton Marine Corps Base and came home in November, 2013. November holds all three of our daughter's birthdays, Thanksgiving and my birthday,

But this year his enlistment had ended. I felt the gloom of that day coming for weeks, and sent our young girls, 4, 3 and 1 year old at the time, back to Illinois ahead of us.

My husband drank and stewed over his decision not to reenlist. It was the height of the recession. I begged him to reconsider.

We packed all that we owned and made the 2300-mile trip for the last time. We fought the whole way, mostly about money and how to afford Christmas.

We made it to my mom's and moved into her basement. I was okay and was so happy to be with the girls again, but I could tell my husband was so lost. He drank for the next month straight, and we fought – about money, about his drinking, and about Christmas.

Christmas Eve came, and as we packed our bundled little girls in the vehicle, we began to fight. I don't remember why now. After the fight was done, we drove to my grandmother's house in silence. We got there, and he wouldn't come in.

My mom, my grandma (who was in her 80's) and my daughters all ate and laughed and played like they had no other worries in the world. We posed for the picture that now is a testament to our love, strength and our resilience as women.

That was the last Christmas we spent together. My husband and I divorced, and he won custody of our daughters. My grandma passed away in 2018, but no matter what happens, that picture always makes me smile.

HER STORY, HER VOICE

SIMONNE GRAMPTON
LOGAN C.C.

Once upon a time, there was a little girl who didn't get a chance to grow up with her family. She was taken away from her family and forced to live with total strangers. She was very scared and felt all alone, but she adapted to her new environment.

She was exposed to a lot of new things and had an opportunity to have good experiences. She grew up with a different view on life, She was empowered with the idea that all kids should be given the same opportunities she was offered as a child.

Years later, she lived in a different world than the one she was used to as a child. She was around a lot of newt people and saw things she didn't agree with.

When she visited her friends, many of whom were young mothers, she witnessed her friends neglecting their kids. She related to those kids. She remembered how her mom wasn't there to take her places as a young kid.

It was crazy how those kids would be all over her when she visited, begging her to take them with her or take them to the park. She couldn't understand for the life of her why these women, with all these beautiful children, never took them anywhere.

Sometimes when she visited, she noticed their dirty clothes, uncombed hair and diapers needing to be changed. Some of them looked like they needed baths. It brought tears to her eyes.

When she was young, there was always so much adult love and attention for the kids around. Kids always went to the park. Shoot, some places she lived at even had a park built into the back yard.

Where she grew up, kids went swimming, skating, to parks, camping, fishing, wall-climbing, arcade room, etc... Kids even went to Baskin Robbins 31 Flavors.

It amazed her how young mothers didn't seem to care. So, she persevered in her everyday life to make it her duty to see as many kids as she could would get good experiences.

She believed all kids should have good experiences in life.

She believes it will give them a better outlook on life and help them understand there's so much more out there, and this environment is not all life has to offer. She will be their outreach for a better life.

THE HURT SHE LEFT BEHIND

HALEY ROSE GALLAGHER
LOGAN C.C.

17 years old, with a 3-month-old, and a 6-year sentence at 85% for a crime she didn't even commit. Her family gave up on her, and that's legit. DCFS took her daughter; she doesn't even know where she is.

She prayed.

People told her she wasn't gonna make it; at first, that's how it seemed. She's much stronger than you think. Just because you see blood doesn't mean it's her blood you see.

If you can keep up, then it's time to get on your feet.

3 years down, less than 2 years left, halfway out the rain. Poet, artist, beautiful, intelligent – all things that she became.

When you look at life, there's so much to gain. The only question is if you're woman enough to maintain. So called friends nowhere to be found.

Not to worry; she has much more than that now. An ability to get up when knocked down. Never gets discouraged when standing in the middle of a crowd.

She knows who she is. She'll scream that out loud. You can look back to who she was and who she is now. And even you would be proud.

A mother, although not quite a mother. A woman, but not merely a woman. Strength she never knew she had. It takes a lot to get her mad.

Although being away from her child left a huge impact. She loves her baby and wants her best, ya that's a fact. Being away for so long. Never really noticed when it all went wrong. But with her baby, that's where her heart belongs.

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY ABUSER

ANONYMOUS

Your secret is out. I am no longer willing to keep silent about the things that you did to me. You've held me captive for most of my life, but that ends today. For so long I felt shame and guilt, but that was just what you did to me; I now know that was just part of the game to you, but for me, it was never a game.

All I ever wanted was to be accepted, and you perverted that. You used me for your own pleasure, then made me own the shame. I believed all of the things you said to me.

"Nobody will ever believe you," you said, and I remained silent. "Nobody else will ever want you," you said, and I shrunk into myself. "You're fat," you said, and I learned to eat my emotions, my self-loathing. "You're ugly," you said, and I learned to hate myself. You tied me up so tight that it has taken me most of my life to unwind; but I'm there.

I've told six people. Every single one of them believed me. You lied. I've developed many loving friendships in my years, so I have finally come to learn that I am lovable. I no longer believe that lie you told me over and over. Fat? Ugly? Irrelevant, because I know that everything that makes people beautiful lies within.

That I am or am not visually attractive is irrelevant; I have a beauty that lights me up from within. I am kind, loving, compassionate and friendly. For too many years, I let you hold me back from being all of those same things to myself. It was easy to find good in others, but never in myself. You scarred me that deeply.

But no more. Those bonds are forever broken. You no longer invade my mind and speak lies in my head. I have no interest in discussing it; I forgive you, because it frees me. I don't want explanations and excuses from a liar; I just want to declare my independence.

I am an empowered woman now. I no longer give you permission to hold me back. What's in our past is in my past, and I am only looking forward. I am lovable, and I appreciate who I am – faults and all. I love me. God loves me. And you? You have no say in my life anymore. Good riddance.

i love myself

the
quietest,
simplest,
most
powerful
revolution
ever.

-Nayyirah Waheed

DEBRA

LEDORE LENOIR
LOGAN C.C.

Hi, I am Ledore Lenoir, and I am a 24-year-old lesbian with two kids, living on the west side of Chicago. My story isn't about what a man did to me to make me gay; it's about codependency and empowerment, addiction and becoming stronger.

In 1993 I lived in a brownstone - a two-bedroom apartment with my mother and little sister, Gabby. They called my mom Lolo, short for Lorraine. Back then, my mom was what kids today call the plug. She sold drugs and occasionally used them.

One night we slept with my mom, cuz it rained so hard the trees kept scratching the windows. The three of us went to sleep, but Gabby never woke up. SIDS, they said. I remember standing by the door, soaked and wet, holding my blanket and crying at the top of my lungs, "Mom, she won't wake up!"

DCFS later took me from my mom and placed me with my grandparents. "Only for a little while," she said. But she never came back, so they adopted me. She gave up, and the five of us kids got split up. Now, I usually could adapt to any place, and I was usually resilient, but my recovery from being separated from my brothers and sisters wasn't quick.

My father was a local dealer who all the women loved. He loved the streets, and my mom loved drugs and men. After a while, I got over both of them. By 2005, mom had had eight children. She neglected us, but kept having more kids.

In 2007 I had got pregnant. I lost my best friend, my twin brother, the same year. He got killed trying to protect me in a drive by shooting. For years, all I'd known was abandonment, neglect and feeling lost, I hurt and I was in pain. I wasn't able to cope anymore with no one to lean on.

But later that year, 7/31/2007, I had a miracle - a little girl named Debra, the one person that would never leave me.

My first child, and she empowered me to get past all the hurt. She gave me the tenacity to love again and to keep going!!

A CHALLENGE TO ALL WOMEN

EDUCATOR PENNY ROWAN
KEWANEE LSRC

I have never been incarcerated in an institution, but like so many women today, I have long been imprisoned by society. In a political climate which is calling for all things equality, women are still seen as inferior, shallow beings. I love that this edition of Two Roads is all about empowering women.

Mass media – tv, movies, social media, cultural norms – everything in our world says the beauty of a woman is external. In fact, media could not be more wrong. There are many visually appealing women who are wonderful human beings, but others focus solely on their external beauty; it's unfair. There are wonderful women who may not fit the culturally acceptable definition of "beautiful," yet who are so inherently good that it oozes out of them.

Why are they so overlooked? Do they weigh too much? Is it the acne? Are their teeth not straight or white enough? Women have been objectified for so long that many have bought the lie. Men too. They have been equally raised in an environment that teaches them to value the wrong things about women.

Outward beauty does fade over time, but those women who exude their beauty from within remain attractive. They continue to brighten any room they enter with their cheer and general goodness. These are the strongest women I know – regardless of their outward appearances – they put others first and spread compassion and love wherever they are.

I honestly believe this is the true gift of womanhood. We are mothers – whether we have biological children or not. We care; we value others; we work to resolve issues that hold others back. We are life-givers and life-builders; that is our special gift to the world.

In this special month dedicated to the amazing women in history, I challenge all women to own their beauty! Don't allow others to define you. Be the voice of womanhood in its purest sense...just the way God made you.

If women would own what they've been given, rather than letting others define what they are to be, it would truly be a new time in history for all women.

"If all girls were taught
how to love each other fiercely
instead of
how to compete with each other
and hate their own bodies,
what a different
and beautiful world
we would live in."
-Nikita Gill

ONCE UPON A TIME

LEENA ULTSCH
DECATUR C.C.

Once upon a time, there was a woman who was sentenced to 10 years in prison. She left a beautiful 13-year-old daughter behind to live with her father. The daughter was used to visiting her father on weekend only, and often came home early. The woman was concerned for her daughter's well-being and up-bringing for the next 10 years.

This woman was determined to rise above all of her circumstances and try her hardest to raise her daughter the best way she knew how, even behind bars. Throughout the years of her incarceration, they went through some ups and downs, but never lost sight of the prize throughout their experience.

They always had open communication, and spoke every day, sometimes two or three times. The daughter was always truthful as the mother had asked her to be, because she knew that she would be the only one to help her out of any situation in life.

The mother worries about some situations her daughter is put in, but the majority of the time, her child comes out on top.

Even though she'd not been there for her daughter in the physical sense, she'd always been there emotionally and gave her guidance in everyday situations.

Her daughter graduated high school 8 months early with a GPA of 3.8, and has worked full time for the past two years. She was just promoted and received a raise as shift supervisor.

She has established a healthy relationship of two years, as well, and completely amazes with her mentality on life in general. Overall, this whole experience has helped them build up what feels like an inseparable, unstoppable, amazing relationship and bond, because both now know what it is they should hold dear to their hearts, and how important they are to each other.

They do not take life for granted and cannot wait for the day they will be reunited after this time is up.

The girl always reminds her mom of their saying, "Stuck together forever, mom!" I just admire her for all of her perseverance!

MY STORY

CORRECTIONAL OFFICER SARAH DORSEY
LOGAN C.C.

I am a human version of the lost and found. At the age of 7, I suffered abuse from a loved one and felt like I had lost everything.

It took no time at all then, for ways to feel numb to be found. My self-hate was too heavy, By the time I turned 19, I knew I needed to learn to swim or I would drown.

The weight was too much to bear, though. I wore my smile bright and loud. I perfected the lie, the false happy, the everything's okay smile!

I got tattoos to numb the pain, to my mother's dismay. She didn't understand what was so wrong in my life, she gave me everything. I had a big house and lots of friends, I even won a college championship ring, but those things meant nothing.

All I wanted was for the memories to fade, for all of it to just go away.

The hurt, the disgust, the can't look at myself thoughts, the cuts, the anger, the tears, the broken mirrors, don't look at me, don't touch, don't even think that you could love me.

There's no happy here, there's no trust.

There's no real definition, even, to explain what's been done. Nobody understood and even if they could, I was already 30 feet down the rabbit hole and lost for good.

The start of my healing journey was unforeseen and unlikely. I got a job at the local penitentiary.

And I was set free.

To most this wouldn't be the ideal career, but for me, well, I was allowed me to see I wasn't the only person with a rough history.

I gained confidence and power, not power over others, but the power to control myself, to be content, to get up every day with the hope to help, the passion to grow and the need to succeed. I see myself reflected in them. They walked the road I could've walked, but my road wasn't paved with some of the unhealthy choices they couldn't escape.

I am proud beyond measure of who I've become, humbled and blessed, safe and sound, no longer lost but lovingly found.

"Kamala Harris becoming Vice-President is a history-making experience, proving that even though our country is under fire, we can come together as one and stand side by side. No matter the color of our skin, we are on the path to change.
We shall overcome."
-Kennashoe Pendleton

"FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS"

LATORRIA FIELDS
DECATUR C.C.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
These words are the most powerful words ever spoken – Esther 4:14 – Not just to Queen Esther, but to me.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
A child of the King of the Most High God. That causes me to be royalty. I don't need a crown or a palace. The woman I am belongs to the real Love of my life.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Reigns, meaning "time in power". The woman I am as long as I am alive – that is my time in power. I am to reign every single day, to be victorious. To rise up to new levels. To accomplish great things.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Believing plans are in order for me to reach my destination. I must move on to what God has for me today, and whatever that is...God is faithful.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Be the woman on the inside and outside of the woman I am.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Sometimes it takes nothing but raw courage to do the right thing, to stand up for the truth and care about others. To speak out when others are silent. I let Queen Esther be an example that when I have God and courage, I need nothing more.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Never getting too busy securing my rights or accomplishing my agenda that I missed an opportunity to serve. I surrendered my life to God so that He can use me to accomplish His goals.

"FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS"

LATORRIA FIELDS
DECATUR C.C.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Knowing the struggle is real. Let's be real; this struggle is not a bad thing. It's called maturity. Growing up. Self-control.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Getting up. Keeping it moving. Doing what I am to do, and becoming what I am to become.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Lifting my voice and matching it with my actions; knowing God, who makes everything work together, will work me into His excellent harmonies.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Will be moving on to my new beginnings in life to step into my expectations. God wants me to enjoy life; I don't have to choose between having fun and having a future. With God, I receive it all.

For Such a Time as This
(Woman I Am)
Daughter. Granddaughter. Niece. Sister. Mother. Grandmother, in that order. Someday, wife. Woman I am. I am blessed. I am fruitful. I multiply. I resupply. For such a time as this – The Woman I am.

"I WALK WITH GOD"

YOLANDA PERRY
DECATUR C.C.

I want to take the time to write a story about who I was when I first came to prison.

I had low self-esteem. I felt like I was nobody. People talked about the way I looked and the way I talked.

One day, I picked up the Bible, opened it, and my life changed.

One day I stood in front of the mirror. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I saw a man standing behind me. He had his hand on my shoulder. He told me that I'm beautiful, and asked me to take his hand. I did, and when I touched his hand, I saw my beauty through his eyes.

The next day I began to walk and exercise. I started walking with God. He opened my eyes to places I didn't think I belonged.
Now, I'm 150 pounds lighter, and my self-esteem is better.

I still walk with Him.

He has kept me safe behind these walls, and He has kept me sane. I give Him thanks and praise. Once I touched His hand, I got a new outlook on life.

TIMEKA

KAWANA D. BELL
LOGAN C.C.

There is a woman I love telling people about, and her name is Timeka. Timeka is really my cousin, but I'm honored to call her "Mom". She is the greatest, strongest, most intelligent and beautiful woman that I have EVER known. And here's why...Timeka was (just like me) raised by her grandmother.

Grama made sure that Timeka had everything she needed growing up. She made sure that she behaved well whether it was at home or out in public, and she especially made sure that Timeka stayed on track in school. Timeka worked extra hard to make sure that she came out on top in all of her classes. She had the best friends, a loving grandmother; life, it seemed, couldn't get any better.

Unfortunately, that's where you're wrong. Although she had all of these perks of life, there was a secret she was hiding. She put on a great face; no one ever knew the reality of what she was really going through. At home, she was dealing with her mother, who was a struggling heroin addict, forever begging for money from Grama and her brother.

Things kept coming up missing from the house that her mother sold for her next fix. Other struggling addicts camped outside of our house and more terrible things happened than you could imagine. Even though Timeka went through all of these things, she never let that stop her from becoming successful.

She graduated high school, went to college, and now she's studying for her Ph.D. My mom inspires me because she has taught me that no matter what life throws at you, you have the ultimate choice to let it keep you down, or make it your inspiration to work even harder at becoming a better you.

She's taught me to never give up and to continue to strive at what I want most out of life. I know she hasn't been happy with some of the choices I've made, but she never leaves my side, no matter what. And this is why I'm honored to call her Mom.

WOMEN

LT. A. HICKEY
LOGAN C.C.

I was 22 years old, with one year in the United States Army. I was in a combat unit with approximately a dozen women. It was time for our unit's deployment to Afghanistan. Unfortunately, I ended up in a platoon, and squad alone with all men for most of my deployment.

It didn't bother me until my counterparts decided I wasn't strong enough, or smart enough. I was an outcast, worthless because I didn't give myself out to please them.

My assigned weapon for deployment was the M249 light machine gun. I was not the only female in the unit assigned this weapon, but I was the only female to carry the M249, and its 800 round carry load for the whole deployment. I hated that weapon. I hated that platoon. I hated Afghanistan. But I pushed through, knowing there must be an end. Praying that I get taken out by Taliban the second I leave the wire. At least then I could be out of that hell on Earth.

I made it through...despite all the odds, the harassment, the degradation from Afghan men, and even my own side.

Fast forward to 2012. My contract was up; I transferred to the National Guard. I was given the chance to fly. I became a member of the Aviation Branch. I was the only female again... Oh no, I know how this will end. But I was wrong. They loved me. They taught me everything I needed to know to be one of them.

I was their sister!

One day we were given the task to fire the M249. Little did I know, my brothers had never fired this weapon before. I hesitantly spoke up. I had... and I hoped I never would again. But they assigned me soldiers. I had to teach them, and quick. I returned the favor they gave to me. I taught them everything I knew in ten minutes.

Range day came. My brothers emerged experts, above the competition, on a weapon they had never touched. I was so proud. After returning home, I was awarded The Army Achievement Medal. They thought I deserved a medal... That was my confirmation. I am strong, I am smart, and I AM WORTHY. And so are you.

NEVER TOO LATE

JACKIE CLAYPOOL
LOGAN C.C.

No one really knows what it feels like to be you, but you.

I always felt misunderstood, unloved and unwanted, and I treated myself just how I felt.

How crazy is that?

Over time, I began to realize that if I ever want a life worth living beyond these walls, then everything about my life, my behaviors and my way of thinking had to change.

It was time to turn my pain into power.

It was time to turn the broken me into the best me.

It was time to focus not on what I'm moving on from, but what I'm moving on to.

I couldn't keep one foot in the past and one in the future and expect to move forward.

I used the excuse my life was half over and that I'm too old to make a difference. The lies we tell ourselves!!

I stopped giving my energy, time and attention to things that did nothing but inject my heart with pain.

I stopped looking back, and going back, to the things that made my life a living hell.

I've been addicted to cocaine and alcohol for half of my 44 years, and, though I knew brutal consequences waited in my near future, I did not stop. I continued to live in hell.

Can you relate to that? For me, it was easier to stay in the dark pit because it was familiar. I felt I deserved to be there. I thought I belonged.

I've stopped looking for happiness in the same place I lost it. I stopped looking for my self-worth in the same places that made me feel worthless.

What we have to do is to keep moving forward toward our worth every day. You and I (We) will get stronger once we begin to realize that the personal situation – addiction – that once had power over us is starting to lose that power; it's about becoming powerless.

It's hard to find healing when you're always looking for closure. Give yourself a break! You are worth so much more!

MY STORY

TATIANA AU'ON
FOX VALLEY A.T.C.

The year 2020 was a tumultuous year for all of us.

COVID-19 didn't go easy on anyone or anything. It personally hit me hard.

On April 2nd, 2020, I was rushed to the hospital because I couldn't breathe; I was admitted to the ICU as my lungs had collapsed. I felt as if I was drowning in my own breath.

Images of my boys and family & friends flooded my mind, and the worst of it was the idea I couldn't say, "I love you," or "Good-bye," And then I was gone.

On April 29, 2020, I woke up only to realize I couldn't move my legs or left arm.

Cognitively, I was fine, but I had suffered a stroke while in a coma, hence my immobility.

In order to return to Fox Valley ATC, I would have to be able to walk and climb stairs. That was tough, since I couldn't even stand.

I was determined to conquer all odds, and pushed myself through six weeks of comprehensive rehab in two different medical facilities.

With my faith and the strength I found within myself, I walked out of the hospital and back to Fox Valley ATC and all of its stairs!

I may be still healing, but I survived.

I fought.

I'm resilient.

And best of all, I'm a woman!

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

IRMA JEAN PIERCE
LOGAN C.C.

My name is Irma Jean Pierce.

I was born in 1956. I had five children; one was thirteen, and twelve years later God sent me and him four more children.

During that time, I was an addict and a seller. I was addicted to any drugs I could get my hands on for thirty-nine years. It would have been longer, but I've been in jail four years as of today.

My point is very simple: God has a purpose for everyone. It's up to you to find yours. Being locked up this amount of time, I've looked back at my life.

I didn't live.

I existed.

I realize now I have a chance to start a new life. It's all about what you take out of your time in jail. And this is what's opened my eyes.

The time I look back on is the time I didn't give my children. That's the time I will be living for now. So, this is my story as best as I can put it in words.

Life didn't stop. You did. Now it's up to you to start again in a new way.

That's what's up, women!!

Find out what you think is important for you and your family.

I send you all my love and hope.

Start living, women!

Your life's just waiting for you to open the door.

Amen.

GOD'S HELPER

VIVIAN MITCHELL
LOGAN C.C.

At thirty-five I found a lump in my right breast. It was hard, unmoving and without pain. Despite having a clear exam only six months earlier, the invasion seemed bigger than a pea.

The next day I found myself in fight mode. My great-grandmother was 94 when she passed. My grandmother was still healthy at 87. My mother didn't take a single prescription and never wore out during full days of antiquing, going to thrift stores looking for bargains. I reasoned the lump was nothing.

I went into fight mode. I called work to tell them I'd be late. I double-checked that my insurance card was in my billfold. I got dressed and then sat staring at the clock until I know my doctor's office opened; at a minute after eight, I called.

When I told my doctor what I'd discovered, he tried to reassure me. "You don't have a family history of breast cancer and you're too young. It's nothing."

In his office, he examined the area. "Hmmm. Why don't we send you for an x-ray?" He pulled out my chart and made a note or two. "It's likely something benign; I'll get you set up."

Twenty-four hours later, I had the x-ray. Shortly after the buzz of the machine, the technician announced he'd return in a few minutes. When he came back, he said, "I consulted with your doctor, and we agree you need an ultrasound."

"An ultrasound? Like a pregnant woman would have?" I was confused.

"Yes, it's similar. We'll just do an ultrasound of your chest area." By the time I dressed, the address for my next appointment was in my hand. It had been too quick – obtaining an appointment doesn't happen that fast unless it's urgent, right? In my mind, the quick scheduling felt like a confirmation of my fears – cancer.

The lubricant during the ultrasound felt cold. I shivered and asked the technician if I could see the monitor as she proceeded. The dark spot looked like a rotted apricot.

The technician said she would send the results to my doctor. I left the office in a state of numbness. I kept revisiting what everyone was saying. When I closed my car door, I burst into tears. My hands shook until I clasped them in prayer. Several minutes passed before I could safely navigate traffic.

That night, my husband and I lay in one another's arms and talked about what we would do with the diagnosis that we were expecting. "There's a chance it is not." He refused to speak the word, too, and tried to be hopeful.

"Well, if it is, you need to hurry and buy those concert tickets you've promised me for years."

We could have heard a pin drop. He played dumb. Then we both laughed. It didn't matter what the diagnosis was; he had no

desire to see Michael Jackson.

The next day, the biopsy was scheduled. "Count backwards from ten, please." The anesthesiologist stared at a beeping machine over my head.

"Ten...nine...eight..."

At some point I heard a female voice over my left shoulder. "It is malignant, but you will be okay." I tilted my head and saw my mother. Her hair gleamed and matched her white uniform. She looked angelic. It wasn't my doctor or the anesthesiologist I'd met before blacking out, but my mother, the nurse.

I smiled, and she returned the smile. Her countenance of peace made me believe. She reassured me. The next thing I remember was throwing up over a sink in the recovery room because of the anesthesia.

We left the clinic, and my euphoria didn't go away. I laughed when I told my husband he needed to buy those Michael Jackson tickets.

As we walked into the house, the phone rang. I recognized my doctor's voice. "What do I do next?" I asked.

He said, "First, I need to tell you the diagnosis."

"Oh, I heard my mother tell me during the biopsy," I said.

Longer silence.

"I heard my mother over my left shoulder saying it was malignant, but I'll be okay."

"Gail, there was no one over your left shoulder, and we were working on your right side. And I didn't say anything after I determined malignant cells."

As soon as we hung up the phone, my husband spoke. "It's funny you had an odd smile on your face as you told me it was malignant. I figured you were tipsy from the anesthesia. Now I wonder if your surprise visit from your mother made you giddy."

"I feel at peace about the whole thing." We hugged. "She said I'd be okay, and I believe her. I thank God for my mother."

It's been twenty years, and I rarely think about this challenging period, but the gift of God's angel remains in my heart.

"The time I look back on is the time I didn't give my children. That's the time I will be living for now.
Life didn't stop. You did. Now it's up to you to start again in a new way.
That's what's up, women!!
Find out what you think is important for you and your family.
I send you all my love and hope.
Start living, women!
Your life's just waiting for you to open the door.
Amen. "
-Irma Jean Pierce

TWO ROADS

Kewanee L.S.R.C.'s Social Justice Program

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