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# Lost in Incarceration: An Ethnographic Study of Three Women Discovering their Path through Structural Violence and the United States Justice System

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## Abstract

The United States has incarcerated more of its citizens than any other progressive nation worldwide. The female population of prisoners has dramatically risen over the past thirty years. Structural violence, childhood trauma, socioeconomic factors, education, and healthcare are all reasons for the rise in numbers of female inmates. I conducted an ethnographic study, collecting life histories of three women who have recently been released from Dallas County Jail. These women have also participated in a program provided through the jail called Resolana. I examine the circumstances that place these women in each major life situation and analyze how change can be made through gender specific programming.

## Introduction

The United States is a world leader yet also tops the charts in the large number of citizens it has incarcerated. Over the past thirty years, the prison population has increased 500 percent (Fuentes 2013). During the 1990's, the United States incarcerated more human beings per capita than any other modern nation worldwide (Haney 2001). In 2006, there were approximately 2.3 million people in the U.S. prison system (Fuentes 2013). Most surprisingly, the U.S. state and federal judicial systems have incarcerated women at a notably high rate since the 1980's. The female jail population has grown 11.2 percent annually since 1985, while the male population has only increased at a rate of 6.1 percent (Greene et al. 2000). As the rate of imprisoning women continues to exceed that of men, a feminist or gender specific approach must be taken when approaching policy and programming.

The war on drugs, the struggle of many low-income women to find jobs and adequate health care for themselves and their families, childhood trauma, and the cycle of incarceration from mother to child have had a tremendous effect on the increasing number of women jailed or imprisoned in the United States. In 1980, before the war on drugs was launched, 4.1 percent of prisoners nationwide were women (Reynolds 2008). By 2006, the population of women in prisons was 7.2

percent (Reynolds 2008). Inmates incarcerated for drug offenses were approximately forty thousand and that number increased tenfold to 450,000 by 2003 (Reynolds 2008).

The cycle of incarceration begins before anyone is even arrested. The capitalist economy of the United States makes it difficult for families of low socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic minorities, and immigrants to compete and survive. This struggle often leads to violence of one sort or another against women and children. Violence against women in this demographic often involves rape, and/or other forms of physical, as well as verbal and psychological abuse. Children who suffer abuse are at a much greater risk of failing to achieve the different stages of development (Greene et al 2000).

It has been found that victims of sexual abuse display symptoms of anxiety, depression, aggression, sexualized behavior, low self-esteem, self-destructive behavior, and substance abuse (Greene et al. 2000). Their choices are the result of “negative life events, a response to a crisis or to prolonged disadvantage (Singer et al. 1995:103).”

Women of low socioeconomic status who are traumatized do not usually have access to mental health care. There is also a social stigma associated with reaching out for help in this community. Drugs and alcohol often become a solution as women self-medicate. Oftentimes, women turn to selling drugs or prostituting themselves to support their drug habits. Eventually, the crimes they commit will lead to their incarceration.

Most women are imprisoned for non-violent drug charges or economic crimes. The number of women incarcerated in Texas is double the national average. Many are homeless and have barely any education. Four out of five women jailed or imprisoned are mothers (Greene et al. 2000). Many women lose their children to foster care when they are incarcerated. According to the organization Resolana, these children are five to eight times more likely to become involved in the justice system as well. Sixty-one percent of girls in juvenile detention have mothers who are in the criminal justice system. When the women are released, they must find a way to fulfill basic family needs and pay probation or parole fines. With no job-skills or education, many resort back to the criminal lifestyle where they are lost in the cycle of incarceration. A woman's journey into the cycle of incarceration begins when she experiences the culture of poverty, childhood abuse, and mental illness (Dirks 2004).

## Methods

I began this research by conducting participant observation in 2012 while volunteering for the organization, Resolana, a program of Volunteers of America, Texas. This organization is an NGO that provides holistic, gender-specific programming for female offenders while inside Dallas County Jail and continues with support for re-entry into the community. Resolana's website states, "Our goals are to increase readiness for change on the inside, to increase use of existing community resources on the outside and to reduce recidivism." (give website address)

“Resolana” is a Spanish term that refers to the sunny side of a building where people would gather to talk. The village elders would spend their time exchanging wisdom within their community. Resolana is an organization that attempts to create this sense of community in the Dallas County Women’s Jail, Lew Sterrett. While working with Resolana, I attended classes that are provided to women inside of the jail. The programming included writing workshops, art classes, yoga, dance classes, group therapy, and alcohol and drug therapy in the forms of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Al Anon. I participated in these classes along with the women. Resolana has volunteers come in from “the outside” with the goal of showing that there is support from the community waiting for them when they are released.

All women who participate in Resolana programs are non-violent offenders, usually incarcerated for drug, alcohol, or sex work charges. They must apply and be accepted to participate and be placed in the Resolana exclusive living quarters or “pod” in the jail. This pod was created with the intent that the women would form a community and as a group strive to improve their living conditions and rehabilitate one another for re-entry into society.

In 2015, with the help of Resolana employees, directors, and counselors, I was connected with several women who volunteered to share their stories with me. To avoid pressuring women to participate, Resolana employees used several methods of communication to let women know that they could voluntarily contribute to this research. No benefits were given to the women other than the opportunity to share their own life experiences. The women were also informed

that all identifying information would be kept confidential. Names and some information that could identify the informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

The women who self-selected to participate have all been through the Resolana program at Lew Sterrett and are currently released and living in the Dallas community. I conducted a structured interview and followed up with multiple meetings while gathering life histories. The initial interview consisted of socio-demographic information including age, ethnicity, number of children, relationship status, job histories, health care information, and level of education. Life histories were then recorded and transcribed by audio recordings, or from notes I took during and immediately following the sessions. Three women participated and one Resolana employee also contributed stories of her experiences while working with women in the Dallas County Jail. I found consistent themes of trauma, lack of healthcare, and cycles of incarceration for each woman.

## “Christina”: The Cycle Repeats

Christina, 26, grew up in Austin, Texas never knowing her mother or father. Her biological mother was incarcerated and her biological father was absent. Her mother’s mother raised her as her own child.

*“The earliest and only memory I have of my mother is when I was six years old. She came to see me at my “mother’s” (grandmother’s) house and was crying at the front door to see her kids. My “mother” told her that these are not her kids*



*and called the police. The police came and asked me what I wanted and I pointed at my grandmother and said THIS is my mom. They took her to jail."*

In a study by Greene et al. 2000, it was found that 54 percent of women in their sample who were incarcerated had experienced abandonment and separation from parents for extended periods of time during childhood.

At 9 years old her "mother" passed away and she was forced to move to a city in Texas where her biological father lived. She described her relationship with her father as purely empty. He did not play the role of father and passed that responsibility on to his mother, her other grandmother. She says that at that time she felt abandoned by everyone she ever loved. Her "mother" had passed away, her stepbrothers stopped all communication with her when she relocated, and her father passed her off to his mother. At 15 years old she started acting out, skipping school, and smoking pot.

After being abandoned by everyone she had ever loved, Christina met Zack, a man who was ten years older. He was heavily connected to the Mexican Mafia and imported and sold methamphetamines. The first night she met him she did meth and moved in with him a month later. She was soon pregnant with his child and continued drug use during her pregnancy. After the child was born, Zack's mother gained custody of her first son. Two years later, she had another son and was able to stay sober during that pregnancy. But soon after, she was convicted of a DWI; check fraud, and drug charges. She said: *"Going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me."*

She says that after she was released, it was extremely challenging to find employment with her criminal record, and that continues to be true.

*"I only apply for jobs where I know they won't do a background check. I am a hostess at a restaurant in the mall! I am watching all of my friends become lawyers, doctors, start families, and purchase homes, and I am here... I was once offered a corporate marketing position at a steakhouse for \$17.00 an hour. But after I was hired, they said that all they had to do was the background check and then I would have the job."* She had to disclose her past and then was immediately dismissed.

Christina feels that her mother's actions started the cycle of drug abuse and incarceration. Her two stepbrothers also served time in prison. One is clean and straight now. The other just completed an 11-year term but was recently sentenced to go back to prison again.

Christina's son has severe behavioral problems. She said, *"I'm scared I did to him what my mom did to me. I'm continuing the cycle"*. He was diagnosed with ADHD, is on medication, and is in therapy. Christina longs to find a father figure for him and is sad that her own father cannot even offer that as a grandparent because he was never even present in her life.

In 1995, 1.5 million children had a parent either in jail or prison. By 2000, 7.1 million children had a parent either in jail, prison, on probation or parole. Sixty Four percent of women in prison or jail have children who are minors (Lawrence 2007).

*"Now I have to take it slow in new relationships. How do you tell a guy that you have two kids, and only custody of one, and that you have been to prison?"*

*Sometimes I feel like I failed my son.” She states that prison is the best thing that ever happened to her. “When I was getting high I could run and hide from the pain, but in prison there is no running away from it. Resolana changed my life. My life has gone through transitions. The difference between my birthday last year and then this year is amazing. I have so many friends now and my life has evolved because I have grown as a person.”*

## “Melissa”: Failure of United States Mental Healthcare

Melissa always felt weird, labeled herself as an outcast, and felt unloved. She says she was a “weird kid with weird quirks.” Melissa described to me how she could not fall asleep as a child because she was compelled to open and close her dresser drawers and closet door in multiples of three throughout the night.

*“I couldn’t fall asleep at night because I would have to get up and close my closet door, but I just did it so I know it’s closed. Like in my head its like get up and make sure it’s closed again.”*

She had a hard time explaining this problem to her parents because they would just tell her to stop.

*“I was like I have to and for me it was more of a life impending doom, it was like something bad is gonna happen and I don’t know what. But, I felt comforted when I did it.”*

Melissa’s rituals expanded to constant hand washing up to the elbows, the stretching of her neck, and constant rearranging of items on tables and desks at

school. She also had paralyzing fears that “robbers” were coming to her house to murder her at night and demanded that her parents move her to the back room of the house so she would feel safe. Eventually, her parents and teachers realized this was not normal behavior for a ten year old and took her to therapy. She was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The doctors insisted on medication, but her parents refused, and after two more years of unsuccessful therapy they finally agreed. She was placed on Prozac at the age of twelve.

Melissa also described loneliness as her father’s job constantly moved the family from town to town. There was always with a new school with new bullies to conquer. Her last move was near Dallas, TX in her junior high years. She found herself attracted to *“the kids wearing all black and the kids getting into trouble.”* She claims that they may have had even more issues than she did and they made her feel accepted for the first time in her life. She started stealing her father’s cigarettes, sneaking out at night, partying, and did the drug ecstasy for the first time at twelve or thirteen. Her parents attempted to control her by putting locks on the windows and grounding her, but she would always find a way out. She believes that it was so difficult for her parents to ground her or keep her home that they gave up, *“because they didn’t want to deal with me.”*

Melissa tried methamphetamines for the first time at 15 and “loved it.”

*“When I started doing drugs it was like that my mind would be so wrapped up in the drugs that nothing bothered me, the OCD didn’t bother me and I was finally free of that... the parties and the lights, it was just so beautiful.”*

At school she was still running track and keeping up with her work until she got kicked off the team for having a cussing match with her coach and the “drug dogs” hit on her car in the parking lot. The day after Halloween Melissa was confronted by campus police for having an open container, weed, cigarettes, and a bottle of liquor in her car in the high school parking lot. But the police who reported to the scene did not even give her a ticket.

*“I should have gone to jail but I was working at an Italian restaurant and there were these cops that would come in all the time and I would wait on them.*

*These were the cops who came to the scene.”*

But then after a school board meeting, Melissa was kicked out of public school. She had the opportunity to go to an alternative school and complete her work through mail-in packets. Melissa finished two months before her peers. *“It was really good that I got kicked out because if I hadn’t I wouldn’t have finished or I would have dropped out.”*

As soon as she received her diploma, Melissa moved in with a man who was seven years older. They would smoke meth and do ecstasy and cocaine on the weekends, but *“I wasn’t really getting in trouble with the cops so it was ok.”* This boyfriend proposed to her and she accepted. But it soon went downhill after they got in an argument and she left the house for about thirty minutes. When she returned, her fiancé already had another girl in the home that they shared. This was another violation of trust and trauma that was repeated throughout her life.

She then got two DWI’s (Driving While Intoxicated) before she turned twenty-one. Melissa was working at bars and eventually a strip club.

*"I guess the drugs got bad. I guess that atmosphere of being up and out until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and then partying with my friends after... I would be driving home during morning rush hour traffic totally wasted and everyone else was going to work."*

After working at an erotic dance club as a waitress, she began to hear about people doing heroin. Her obsessive compulsion took over and her mind was fixated on trying it even though she had at least seven friends overdose from the same drug in the past. She had friends connect her to a known heroin dealer and he shot her up the first night they met. Within one month she was romantically involved, living with him, and shooting up everyday. This continued for two years.

*"Of course I'm gonna date the drug dealer cause I want free drugs. Around the time I stated shooting up I was getting headaches and stiff neck pains because I had spiral meningitis. The heroin made that pain go away. But, it was horrible; we did the same thing every single day. We would sleep for fourteen hours and go to bed at six in the morning and sleep all day then wake up, sell drugs, steal things, get money, and come up with plans to get more heroin."*

By this time, Melissa was too skinny, bruised up, and strung out to hold down a job. She had not been taking medications for her OCD or depression for several years. Her boyfriend at the time sold heroin and lived off of a trust fund from his parents. She got an abscess on the her arm from shooting up and was left with no choice but to beg her mother to take her to the doctor and admit where she was in life. Her parents urged her to go to Homeward Bound, a state funded rehab facility in Dallas County. She went to detox for 3 to 5 days and immediately left with

someone to go score heroin. She ended up back at her drug dealer, boyfriend's house as if nothing had changed.

The couple eventually got into a fight and broke things off. Melissa slept in a car and crashed on several friends' couches for weeks until she realized that she needed to give Homeward Bound another shot.

*"This time I was smoking crack during the day and would do heroin all night and I was in so lack of sleep that I totaled my car on the way to rehab... its so funny cause the officer, I remember him sitting in the front seat of my car cause I wouldn't get out of the car cause I was freaked out people would know I was high."*

She had hit a parked car that was a service vehicle for the city of Dallas and was taken to Parkland Hospital. After waking up in the psych ward at Parkland, she left immediately. She had a friend take her to rehab, stayed in detox for five days, and completed the thirty-day residential program.

*"The withdrawals were terrible and I couldn't sleep. But I felt like I met other women who were trying to get clean and I loved it. Its just the bonds that you make with people in rehab and jail its like we are gonna be friends forever."*

After successfully completing the residential program she was released and could not return to her parents' home. *"So I went to the 24-hour club which is technically a homeless shelter but you can live there and they have AA meetings."* She lived there for four months, sober, and rode her bike to work everyday. *"I worked all the way through the 12-steps and started sponsoring someone and I know that is what kept me sober but then I stopped doing that."*

After an argument with her sponsor and meeting a new man, who was also living at that facility, things quickly progressed down hill. They moved into an apartment together. *"So, he relapsed first and got drunk and locked himself in the closet. Drinking is not enough for me. I was like I need hard drugs."* They went to a bar that is well known as an easy place to score cocaine. The cocaine was not enough for her and they proceeded to buy ingredients to cook the cocaine into crack. An undercover police officer at the grocery store noticed they were intoxicated and followed them to the car.

*"I guess I am the crazy one... I tried to spit in the face of the cops and I don't remember but I punched something and woke up in jail with a broken knuckle."* She was charged with felony possession of a controlled substance over one gram and fewer than four. The boyfriend was not charged with anything and was free to go. *"It was good he didn't catch the charge because he would have lost custody of his daughter."*

After her father bailed her out of jail she immediately went back to smoking crack on the weekends. *"I could still function and go to work on Monday... and my parents were ok as long as I wasn't living with them."* Her relationship ended with the single father and she started drinking the heaviest during this time. Melissa would find herself in dangerous situations. *"I would talk to people and hang out with them after the bar and I woke up on a couch at a stranger's house where they were smoking crack."* After resuming her crack habit she moved again, was and within walking distance of her work and many local bars.

One night she was walking home after smoking crack for four days.



*"I don't really remember but I was pulled in between some houses and he rapes me. I wasn't really scared of the rape, but I thought he was gonna kill me. I couldn't breathe. He was choking me and then he tells me to run in that direction."*

She then proceeded to run through her neighborhood while searching for her apartment. Melissa knocks on other people doors but in a psychotic hallucination she feels that those people are chasing after her with intentions to do harm. She wakes up most of the residents and eventually the police come.

*"People are chasing me and I think I can see them and they are not real, it's just so horrible."* The police gave her a chance to explain, but in a manic state, she did not trust them. *"I think I overhear the cop say look at her she is just a crack head and this is what she deserves."* She was taken to jail and charged with public intoxication.

She was released from jail with no purse, no shoes, and no idea of what really happened the night before. Melissa was trying to process the rape and the hallucinations of people pursuing her. Her father picked her up and tried to convince her to go to her family's house with him. *"I had a bunch of meth at my house and after that night my only solution was to get high. So I kicked my Dad out."* After this traumatic event she says she was extremely nervous to be around men, started wearing baggy clothes, and only trusts one male friend.

Melissa became romantically involved with that friend and began to shoot up meth. *"At this point I am staying awake so long and I'm having hallucinations. I saw a scarecrow and a wizard across the street and would tell my mom."* Melissa's parents sent her to the rehab Green Oaks in Dallas, but after telling the counselors about her

hallucinations they sent her to the nearest psych ward. *“That was the scariest place I have ever been and I left immediately.”* She ended up getting high again in a few days with her new boyfriend.

*“I’m bipolar so when I get high, I get a little crazy, especially when I get drunk. I wanna punch you and physically fight. My boyfriend was physically and emotionally abusive. He would sit me down and make me read the symptoms of borderline personality disorder and make me agree that I have it in order to get drugs from him. I wanted to push his buttons cause that’s how I get attention. I go to my apartment and get a screwdriver to stab him. He wrestles it away from me and I get another one. Then I bite him and I have blood all over my mouth and go stand on his car and kick his windshield in with my bare foot.”*

She was charged with breaking and entering with intention to commit other felonies. But after sitting in jail for one month, the charges were dropped because she did possess a key to his house.

Melissa was then allowed to move back in with her parents and started to go back to Alcoholics Anonymous, but she was not really working the 12 steps. She quickly relapsed after finding a bag of dope in storage. She continued other dangerous behaviors by going online to find people with whom to do drugs. *“There are certain things you can type in where you can find people who want to do drugs and have sex.”* During this time she met various people online and lived with them for a couple of weeks at a time. Online, Melissa met an overweight, financially successful, drug addict who invited her to move in with him. Simultaneously, she continued the

abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend. Melissa was still not on her prescribed medication and the probation for the cocaine charge had begun. She said, "I have arrived!" But she violated the probation is violated after several failed drug tests and then went "on the run" for three months before being picked up by the Dallas Police.

Finally, Melissa was taken to the Dallas County Jail, Lew Sterrett, where she was accepted into the Resolana program. Today, she feels comforted by the recovery offered through the program. *"Jail was a pretty positive experience for me. I'm not with that crazy boyfriend, I'm back on my medication and the fog is gone. I was content in jail."* Melissa became a peer leader for Resolana. "Becoming a peer leader made me feel like I had a reason [to live] and people looked up to me." For the first time in her life, Melissa had hope and felt like things could get better. *"Resolana turned jail into a positive experience and change my perspective."* After she was released, Melissa was sent to a rehab facility where she was put on stable medications and learned about her own mental health problems.

*"My Dad always made me feel guilty for taking meds... he said you don't need them. I sat my Dad down and told him, don't ever say that to me again, I need this medication and I know why now."*

Melissa has been sober for twenty months and is living in an Oxford House, which provides sober living at a reasonable cost. She has been consistently working at a restaurant where the owner specifically hires people in recovery because she lost her nephew from a drug overdose. *"My goals are getting off probation and going back to school for nursing. I want to help other people."*

Women who are mentally ill and have substance abuse problems are far more likely to be *imprisoned and receive longer sentencing* (Singer et al. 1995). In research among incarcerated women, Fuentes (2013) found that nearly all respondents disclosed childhood trauma and mental health disorders, with substance abuse as a treatment to drown out rejection and feelings of worthlessness. He says, "The downward spiral gains momentum with greater feelings of hopelessness, increased substance abuse, desperate bids for love from abusive and criminal men (e.g., stealing and prostituting to support his drug habit, being an accessory to crimes out of fear of abuse or loss of his love), unplanned pregnancies, and ever-accumulating victimization and trauma" (Fuentes 2013:96).

### "Destiny": Effects of Trauma

Destiny is forty-three years old and grew up in another state. She was raised by "*good parents and I was never molested or anything.*" Her father was a preacher and an accomplished academic. Destiny wanted to make it clear to me that she was "raised right." Trauma is what plagued her and sent her into the cycle of incarceration. "*I was in a gang and the girls we hung around, we weren't a bad gang. I just loved the colors.*" As an adolescent she would go to church, but also smoked marijuana and "*hung around the kids in the ghetto.*" She first got into trouble while at a nightclub and one of her friends got in a fight and was stabbed. "She stabbed her and then they tried to stab me, but I stabbed her first." She was traumatized by this experience. "*It was the worst experience of my life.*" Even though it was self-defense,

Destiny was sentenced to prison for five years. *"I took the wrap because my friend had five kids at the time."*

Destiny had no resources to cope with the trauma of the stabbing in prison. Constantly searching for love, she found it in the only place available. *"I had a homosexual relationship with a guard from prison for five years. She was a person I would cling to."* She was released early for good behavior and her partner was there to pick her up. They lived together. But, after being made to feel pressure, shame, and guilt from her family and various religious ties, she decided that she and her partner would be better off if they were just best friends.

Destiny then found someone else to love her. This relationship was with an abusive man who was also a drug dealer. They lived together in his car and she soon became pregnant with twins. Both of her children died within hours after giving birth. Destiny was not very clear on the explanation for the death of her twins.

*"I lost my kids and that was an emotional disturbance. But, the relationship I was in was very abusive so that's why God took them from me. I was blinded by him. I chose him over my family. It was real hard because my mom gave up on me. After my kids died I woke up from the situation."*

Destiny is now raising a ten-year child that she has had custody of since the child was three days old.

*"One day I was sitting in the living room watching the news and I saw my God sister was getting busted for drugs. I went to get her three year baby and she signed the rights to the baby over to me."*

She is now trying to legally adopt her “daughter” who has eight sisters and brothers who are still living with the biological mother. There has been a battle to legally adopt her daughter; the biological mother refuses to go to court, or sign required adoption documents, yet she will not take care of the child. Destiny has spent her entire life being a mother figure to all of her friend’s children and the children in the community. She took in a “son” for three years after his mother (also her friend) was sent to prison. She was his caretaker until the biological mother could take care of him again.

*“The moms are worried about benefits and stuff. I don’t care about that. I just want to take care of them. They be calling me can you take him to the doctor? Can you do this?” It hurt me at first giving him back but he knows this is his real home. Me losing my own kids made me draw closer to other kids.”*

Destiny currently works with the children who live in her apartment complex. They receive funding from the state to feed all of the children in the community center after school. *“I’m the candy house also. I got chips and candy bars and they come eat them.”*

She has now been in a relationship with a minister for eight months who is married and living with his wife. *“He is a blessing to me. But, being married he has to uphold his ministry so I have to let him take care of what he needs to. It bothers me sometimes but I deal with it. He helps me with things like probation and fees.”*

Destiny also struggles with literacy even though she graduated from high school. She is on disability, cannot work, and does not have a driver’s license. *“I’m on*

*disability but I wanna work. It's hard to find a job. I wash clothes for people, decorate they houses, and do what I can."*

Her most recent arrest and conviction is for selling crack. She has never used crack and "was just doing a favor for my God sister." An undercover cop busted her during the transaction. Destiny had six grams of crack in her possession. *"The police lady said, "why didn't you run?" I wasn't thinking. Well, I did it and I went to jail."* Her mother took care of her daughter while she was serving three months in Dallas County Jail. She has not had any communication with her God sister who sent her on the drug deal and was very angry with her after the conviction. *"God says forgive and that's what I did and I paid for my mistakes."*

During this time, Destiny encountered Resolana, which helped her acknowledge the trauma she experienced throughout her life, and learned life skills to cope. At first, Destiny was weary of sharing her experiences and feelings with the other women in the pod after her prior experience in prison. The prison time she served in her 20's groomed her to self protect and display no weaknesses. Eventually Destiny was able to form "transformative ties" (Parson 2010) with other women in the program.

## Resolana: A Light at the End of the Tunnel

Dirks found that for, "Women with previous histories of abuse, prison life is apt to simulate the abuse dynamics already established in these women's lives, thus

perpetrating women's further revictimization and retraumatization while serving time" (2004:102).

I interviewed a counselor with thirty years experience in trauma, drug, and alcohol recovery named "Stephanie." She told me several stories of women she has encountered doing this work.

*"There was a woman in her 60's and she was sexually abused by every man in her life -- her father and her uncles -- and was made to believe that all she was good for was the sexual abuse. The only place she felt safe was her doghouse in the backyard. One day her dad called her and she was hiding in the doghouse. He found her outside and the dog growled at him. Her dad then killed the dog in right front of her. She was telling me this story so nonchalantly almost like saying the sky is blue. She said that the first time she discussed trauma and the first time she understood that should not have happened was through her experience with Resolana. This program was the first place that gave her some language to discuss trauma and have hope."*

Stephanie spoke to me of one of her most positive experiences while working with women at Resolana:

*"This girl was arrested at seventeen and was a high level drug dealer at the time. Dallas Police did an undercover operation and infiltrated her drug ring for several months. The police officers were part of the chain that she dealt with on a regular basis. Her best friend came to her in a nightclub and said he needed twenty pills. Then he went in the bathroom and killed himself. She was*



*looking for him and went into the bathroom while he was still alive. The owner of the bar wouldn't call 911 because he didn't want anyone to know there were drugs in his bar. Her best friend died in her arms. The undercover officers knew she gave him the drugs and they arrested her that night. She was so upset that her friend had just died in her arms. They said we will give you twenty years for distribution and she agreed to the plea. But, shortly after they came to her to give her forty more years for manslaughter. She was in the Resolana pod for fourteen months and a Resolana employee testified at her trial. The jury gave her twelve years and the judge told her they would be served concurrently. She now sends letters from prison. She is using what she learned from Resolana and is teaching the other women in prison. She is doing yoga with them, is so positive about her life experience, and believes that this is what she was meant to do in life."*

Stephanie told me, *"I just get reaffirmed over and over how the unresolved trauma tends to act in their lives."* More women than men in jails and prisons are far more likely to have histories of childhood abuse and trauma" (Dirks 2004).

According to Stephanie,

*"Trauma is like a weed if you just clip the top it still grows back in different ways. I've never seen a woman in Resolana that hasn't had trauma, that is what takes them into prostitution, drugs, and abusive relationships is that trauma. I keep doing this because I know it opens a window for them. It gives them awareness. It is the beginning, the change for them opening the door or window for that effect of trauma."*

Resolana can offer “transformative ties” by producing social support networks among women who are working together to transform from the inside out and by re-defining the gendered expectations of society for themselves (Parsons 2010).

## Conclusion

The narratives of these three women and my work with Resolana has revealed that a woman’s path through the cycle of incarceration is interconnected, and that the framework of their criminalities cannot be considered without first examining structural violence, trauma, and mental illness that has plagued their lives. Green et al. argues, “Despite the individualistic premise on which our criminal justice system is founded—that we are all autonomous beings who freely choose our behavior and are equal blameworthy for the consequences of our bad choices—the majority of these women had little control over their painful lives and the environments of poverty, abuse, and drugs to which they were exposed as children” (2000:20). Dirks states, “If we understand that women’s criminality is inextricably linked to their victimization and traumatization, we also need to then examine the structural changes that must occur to disrupt the current cycles of victimization in the lives of girls and women (2004:111). Female offenders often return to the community with extreme difficulties gaining employment, housing, health and child care and can resort back to the same survival tactics used that launched their initial incarceration. At present, the underlying social forces that cause childhood trauma,

abandonment, mental health care issues, and substance abuse are being ignored by the judicial system and by society itself. The United States criminal justice system must examine and respond to the gender specific needs of women who are suffering from the cycle of incarceration.

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