



Reflections

Life - With the Possibility of Education

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I work with currently and formerly incarcerated women to assist in helping them regain their lives. I focus on offering specialized support and education for women whose pathways to prison or jail are often tied to domestic violence or substance abuse. Through education and wellness programs during and after incarceration, I provide the tools needed for them to become powerful change agents for themselves, their communities, and their children. Many aspects of my life occurring throughout my life have drawn me to this work that I do every day with passion and with a deep sense of purpose.

MY BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES AS A REENTRY EDUCATOR

Growing up wasn't easy for me. At a very early age my parents divorced. My young mind absorbed adult-level stress as home life became increasingly unstable and I internalized a deep sense of sadness that I had somehow caused my parents' split. This manifested as multi-layered trauma later in my life. As the eldest of three children, a great deal of responsibility was placed upon my shoulders early. I became largely responsible for watching over and keeping my younger brothers safe and nurtured as my mom struggled with distractions and the challenges of being a single mother. It wasn't long before we had another dad. My stepdad was a great man, but struggled with a lifelong addiction, causing his tragic death in 2003. My stepdad never held a mainstream job, but he was a brilliant and creative man who found alternative streams of income. By working with his hands he made money from scavenging and repurposing from what others had discarded as trash. My stepdad became one of my greatest teachers of life's lessons - often using metaphors and a street savvy that helped me to embrace my own natural gifts and curiosities. He instilled the notion that it would be far more rewarding for me to cultivate what made me different and stand out from the rest of the world than relenting to my longing to be

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accepted. One such metaphor was that the world is full of bananas but scarce of plums...instead of taking the easy route of being a banana, strive to become a plum. To this day, I live by this lesson never knowing why he chose to use bananas and plums in that lesson.

My mother, once an active member of the civil rights movement in the 60s, taught me invaluable lessons about social justice. She was the main breadwinner for our household and was often at work. This and other family realities accelerated my maturation exponentially, bypassing the usual childhood rites of passage. I grew from an adolescent straight into adulthood and shouldered responsibilities that were counter-intuitive and mostly unthinkable for a child at the time.

As our family grinded financially, it seemed apparent that college wouldn't become a reality for me. We were an African-American family living hand-to-mouth in New York City in the 70's and 80's. My biological father, who obtained his MBA from Harvard Business School following the divorce, had mostly abandoned his children - including financially. Nevertheless, he was my role model. The importance of education was instilled in me early. I decided that it was the answer to avoid the poverty-riddled lifestyle that my mother and stepdad seemed to embrace.

I was learning how to bury layers of complicated emotions and would not be deterred from being college bound. Even in the face of overwhelming challenges, there was always a way if I wanted it badly enough. My mother called it "having fire in the belly". I embody this fundamental belief to this day.

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I earned a bachelor's degree in Business from St. John's University and for a time, I held a secret regret for not continuing on to obtain a Master's degree and that I was somehow not good enough. I eventually evolved and began to realize that my college degree helped open doors of opportunity, but my life lessons and experiences became far vaster and more valuable.

I derive so much joy from helping others overcome obstacles and discover their own life's potential. I use my multiple experiences - the complex, invaluable forms of early life education, endured through multiple layers of child and adulthood traumas, to draw parallels and bridges to better understand the women I work with every day. I embrace each of my life lessons and continuously evolve my own perspectives of this journey. I see incarcerated women as my kindred sisters. As aforementioned, there are many parallels in my life and these women. I profoundly empathize with their struggles and utilize every step of my life to continuously learn how I can become a more effective coach, mentor and champion for changes, not just in how I work to help them grow and develop, but also in how society treats them.

NEW HOUR FOR WOMEN & CHILDREN: ADVOCACY FOR REENTRY EDUCATION

After more than 20 years of experience in business at a Fortune 500 company, I became a certified career and life coach and obtained a specialty certification in Social and Emotional Intelligence. I have been the Director of Programs for New Hour for Women & Children - Long Island for the last 5 years. I joined the organization at a critical growth point in building up membership and developing direct services and reentry support. New Hour

consists of a small staff that services women and we are a unique and fearless agency, serving incarcerated women who are mostly black and women of color in the deeply conservative Long Island region of New York State, a strand of mostly suburban communities about 45 miles east of New York City.

Educating and developing future advocates for social change and criminal justice reform is an important part of the work we do. Providing justice-impacted women with the opportunity to understand the harmful impact that mass incarceration inflicts on women and people of color, plays an intrinsic role in our educational focus. In my role I facilitate a full gamut of subject matter education through weekly programming for our members during their incarceration. It's a delicate balancing act to ensure women receive education about mass incarceration while they are still incarcerated, but, it's important to define the prison industrial complex. Their very presence as "the incarcerated" means they are adding to the critical and steady influx of

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humanity, ultimately ensuring a hefty return to investors and stakeholders. I believe that providing education is also an integral part of the necessary healing in overcoming trauma.

Incarceration and its multi-layered forms of trauma strips the majority of women of their rights and

self-dignity. Their overall healing must involve support and education and a renewed perspective through various disciplines and multiple facets. Furthermore, accomplishing this in a consciously biased and racist community that does not embrace or provide meaningful services to this demographic is complex and worrisome.

New Hour, an organization created from recognizing these barriers, has offered support and wrap-around services to thousands of women since its inception. Our EMERGE (Empowering Methods of Effective Reentry, Growth & Engagement) program - is one of these facets, and was designed and introduced almost 5 years ago to provide the life-saving support and education our members in reentry need to experience. As we continue to grow and receive additional funding, we invest by finding new ways of learning for all our members. We have since developed and implemented the next phase of EMERGE - 2.0 Financial Wellness program, another unique New Hour program that provides essential education to spark awareness and assist participants in becoming fiscally responsible thinkers. It is also powerfully designed to provide an in-depth learning conversation and insight into this country's wealth gap. This distinct education assists participants' understanding of the importance of shifting their thinking from scarcity to abundance and that it is this way of critical reasoning and discipline that will catalyze significant changes in their lifestyle, and the value of life itself. They learn that It isn't about amassing money, but what it can help provide once one knows how to manage it more efficiently. The EMERGE Financial Wellness program includes topics of frugality, savings, and even the concept of entrepreneurship and the possibilities of parlaying natural gifts and hobbies into a potential business. Since its inception we have graduated over 100 women from both programs combined.

For most women in reentry, their journeys can be a maze chocked full of realities in which they struggle to find any pathway that does not lead to their re-incarceration. This population of women are arguably one of the most marginalized groups in our country. When women are labeled offenders - an intentionally de-humanizing reference, their reentry journey is wrought with endless denials of most meaningful assistance or support. They find themselves stigmatized,

invisible, and precluded from the already meager social service assistance programs that are offered on Long Island, and demeaning reminders of being previously incarcerated women.

Before they can begin thinking about possibilities, women - often single heads of their households prior to their incarceration- have essential needs that must first be met. One member recently released from state prison describes a visit to the Department of Social Services (DSS) for essential housing assistance. As Sage (a pseudonym) retrieved her wallet to produce her identification, the DSS agent noticed that it contained money. The agent insisted that she take out and count the money in front of her. It was \$65. In addition to this initial attempt of humiliation, Sage was immediately denied services and was instructed to only return when her wallet was empty - until then, she had resources and didn't need DSS assistance. It would be weeks before we would assist in her placement into a transition shelter. She continues to struggle, reporting being "released" from the shelter for reasons unknown, even to shelter management.

Sage's journey represents just one of our members encountering societal invisibility - who face a series of similar humiliations, frustrations, disqualifications and general "let downs" as they navigate through a system that is constructed to produce their continuous, and ultimate failure. It becomes clear that she has to find an alternate means of survival - this is a recidivism trap that claims many victims. According to a recent report by the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than half of incarcerated women (55%) were rearrested for another offense within 5 years of their initial arrest.

A woman in reentry faces insurmountable odds seeking a post-incarceration education from a system that is not designed or structured to support her unique circumstances. The majority are returning home to face high-bar challenges: incomplete high school educations, limited recognized vocational skills and the most tragic reality is that they often return with broken and deflated perceptions of self. The overall notion of pursuing higher education is not only terrifying, but in her mind, is an unrealistic pipe dream. The irony is that this access to education is an integral and necessary part of her healing.

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Infusing empathy and restoring hope and possibility thinking into a Reentry Education program has been an effective approach for New Hour as we instill a shift in a life-long way of living and thinking. In a recent group dialogue of incarcerated women, a member lamented on how much she wants to change the circumstances of her life. She is weary of her cycles in and out of the carceral system, and deeply desires the opportunity to change what seems to be an endless round of unmet, but immediate survival needs. She was frustrated that she can never get beyond her inability to obtain or afford basic human services upon her release. These are services that support the basics, particularly in a post-pandemic society that include obtaining a government issued identification, finding sufficient employment and housing - needs that mainstream society seemingly takes for granted. Yet, it is not just providing additional services that will increase her chances of moving beyond the basics, but it is also inducing a shift in her mind-set. Empowering women impacted by the criminal justice system introduces them to this shift, and a community focused on showing them what it looks like to reclaim their lives and expand their voices and vision.

As a certified life coach it is essential for me to draw out a woman's sense of personal power, an inner knowing that she can face and overcome life's adversities. Fostering a relationship of trust is the beginning of this shift in mindset. Many incarcerated women have never thought of themselves or their lives in this way. Maya Angelou once said "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care". This is profoundly true for many incarcerated women. Teaching our members strikes a balance of kindness, patience and support without the perception of being judgmental or condescending. These women have been manipulated and betrayed; some have been physically and sexually abused and have experienced some of the most extreme treachery that a human being can endure and remain upright.

Listening is also an essential part of teaching, as it fosters trust and a meaningful connection with these perceptive humans. Empathic listening is an absolute necessity. The world is moving very fast, and they often feel invisible and left behind. These women will encounter and rely on many decision-makers along their journeys who have the power to greatly influence their hopeful ascent, but who are often too busy and inundated with their workloads to listen and pay attention to their immediate needs. One inside member recently insisted that she was eligible for release into a drug rehabilitation program and couldn't understand why she was still in jail. Even her attorney advised her that she was eligible for release into a rehab program, but no one listened. Ten weeks later, it was discovered that she was right. When I inquired about it, I was told in a whisper..."someone didn't do their job". Further, two additional months following her release she had not been admitted into that promised program.

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It is worthy of noting here that many women in need of drug rehabilitation programs immediately following their release from incarceration are at high-risk of relapse. This is a dangerous reality with the rise of fentanyl poisoning deaths on Long Island and in many U.S. communities. Of the population of women we work with, over twenty lives were lost within a six-month time period. Significantly more focus is required on this issue by policymakers and the healthcare industry to address this rapidly growing crisis, one impacting this population of women at a frightening pace.

Developing effective reentry education programs that successfully overcome distrust and cynicism help facilitate meaningful change. Long-term effective programs include mentors who possess personal passion, are professional, and are kindred peers who willingly assist and provide connections to solid resources and referrals.

We teach that language matters when referring to those impacted by this country's carceral system. They are simply people. The damage inflicted by mainstream society's seemingly neutral references to this population are devoid of humanness and become references to things and not humanity. We need and seek culturally competent professionals who will honor the differences of women in reentry and will coach them towards realizing their true potential and who will generously share with them all that they have to offer, helping them honor and hone their natural gifts. Women in reentry are indeed hungry for a different experience and relationship with life, and being able to foster the trust in another who understands and listens, makes a marked difference.

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We invite women to discover their vivid imaginations, and that it is okay to dream. We encourage constructive self-expression through poetry, improv, and other forms with consistent stimuli to discover other venues. They can then embrace ways of discovering a sense of peace and striving for self-actualization or the full realization of their creative, intellectual, and social potential by discovering that they indeed have internal drive. We introduce critical thinking and the notion that solid decisions are made not with fleeting emotions but with conviction and well thought out planning and logic.

Education in reentry is often the journey itself with previously incarcerated people being able to experience and process their challenges differently. In my role, I develop a connection with women while they are still incarcerated. I do this with the intention to spark their interest and curiosity to increase the likelihood that they will want to continue exploring their gifts and talents and seek our assistance (when they come home) in moving past the obvious challenges that come with reentry the moment they step beyond the grasp of their jailers.

THE NECESSITY FOR REENTRY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

It is necessary to practice love and patience and continued understanding acknowledging that sometimes, a woman will recidivate before she decides that she needs to lean on more than just her own knowledge and understanding or the skills that she currently possesses. We recognize that mass incarceration operates on recidivism in order to remain in existence and requires that people cycle through it repeatedly. Any woman caught in this cycle where we are present is welcomed with open arms. We recognize that for her, change is initially driven by the desire to experience something more than society's apathy and negative judgment that she is somehow weak, incapable, or less deserving. Infusing hope, sometimes beginning as a small initial drop, is what it takes to make a difference in developing a sense of self-empowerment. Each woman is encouraged to re-define her life, post incarceration, as a discovery that she is not invisible, but rather that she is the key to the success of every aspect of her life in reentry. Each small victory along her journey helps foster this sustainable change. She realizes that she can develop the strength to face and understand how the trauma she has endured most of her life, more likely originating as far back as her childhood, changed the trajectory by way of her circumstances, choices, and decisions. There is a shift away from finding a way to cope and normalize her trauma, away from thinking that her life is supposed to be a continuous struggle. Rather, as her personal power grows, she discovers that trauma and toxic vulnerability no longer have a place in her life. Shame and guilt are steadily replaced with forgiveness and self-discovery.

Providing wrap-around support fosters this significant shift in a person's thinking; showing that there is a community that will always show up and remain present and active in her life. Continuously encouraging her into a belief that her life indeed belongs to her. It is not to be controlled or manipulated by malevolent societal forces. When a woman accepts that these external forces will always exist, she will learn that she has the capability to shape and live a meaningful life. She will become more autonomous alongside negative forces and will eventually minimize and neutralize them - she develops a new perspective. She begins to understand and embrace the value of education and the necessity of it for her growth.

A recent conversation took place with an EMERGE graduate, the survivor of tremendous brutality beginning when she was just a toddler, and who was later forced into sex work for many years. Amber reached out to me to share that she had landed a peer advocate position with a community-based organization focused on helping abuse-survivors overcome their trauma. For the first time in her life, she feels happy and fulfilled with purpose and optimism about her propensity for joy in her future. Amber is experiencing joy - which is distinctively different from happiness, in that joy is a choice that is intentional and practiced regularly. I found this remarkable and deeply profound, coming from a woman who has grown beautifully like a rose emerging through the cracks of an urban sidewalk.

OPPORTUNITIES IN FUTURE REENTRY EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Rentry education programs like EMERGE provide a first-hand view of what life can look like. Our program provides exposure to a community of peers who share very personal experiences in their respective reentry journeys. Many of these peers are also leaders with networks, who have also spent a part of their life incarcerated who have become sisters. These are women who walk this walk together, very often forming bonds stronger than blood relatives. Many justice-impacted women leaders in our community are survivors of lengthy incarcerated sentences - measured by years and decades. As a part of this reentry education, these are the women who can also invoke forgiveness - one of the greatest gifts one can give themselves. New Hour will be excited to introduce to our members offering a new evidence-based parenting program that addresses this very issue of forgiveness for our members who are parents, in regards to their children.

Because we offer wrap-around support, every aspect of the work we do is for the education and advancement of our members. New Hour continuously seeks opportunities to continue developing our educational programming and expanding our reach to forge relationships with new networks and partners who offer additional services and education of any form. We also provide spaces like healing circles or programs that invite women to address their past trauma and express themselves through their varying talents of art that include dance, drawing and drama, as examples. Some women discover that they enjoy writing and journaling their thoughts and emotions. Our members have amazing talents, and it is through some of these healing spaces that they find their voices and realize there is much to learn. We fuel their interests and desire to become a part of advocacy for change. One significant discovery for me in this journey is accepting and honoring that learning happens when the student is ready.

Providing educational opportunities for the disenfranchised also requires a depth of resources - including research. For example, there is CPAR- Critical Participatory Action Research - a body of work that chronicles the struggle and survival of many communities impacted by mass incarceration, in order to not just understand but to include this population and their communities in developing viable solutions. There is a need to develop educational programs that provide investment in talent and skill assessment and ultimately, in the development of viable skills and abilities. Many incarcerated people who develop skills while on the inside have reported that they are precluded from including these skills on a resume when seeking employment.

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In closing, there is potential to create long-lasting and robust reentry educational opportunities that hone natural and cultivated skills and talents from the often-muted members of our society. It can perhaps be done through the creation of forums represented by a collective of educational institutions from all community sectors and levels; or by a forward-thinking consortium of leaders who believe not only in the worth and redemption of the previously incarcerated but consider them a source of potential talent and ability. Further, providing educational programs that offer life-changing and holistic development opportunities for thriving change agents who have done the necessary groundwork on themselves can also yield positive results. Most previously incarcerated people do not deserve to be permanently stigmatized or defined by the worst period or decision in their lives. They are instead ready to experience their life differently, and are driven towards privileges once considered elusive and belonging to others. They indeed deserve second chances and are worthy of the possibilities of education.



Danielle M. Donaphin serves as Director of Programs for New Hour for Women Children Long Island. In her role she works with women impacted by the criminal justice system on Long Island. Danielle embodies New Hour's mission which is to empower our members with knowledge and opportunities to address the stigma of incarceration and racial disparities. Through providing education and awareness, Her work is focused on empowering the voices of justice-impacted women - who encounter stigmatizing and discriminatory practices in almost every aspect of their lives.

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