

re-entry

Artwork inspired
by women recently
released from an
Arkansas correctional
facility.

INTRODUCTION

I recently had the privilege of meeting with five remarkable women newly released from Arkansas' Wrightsville Correctional Facility.

In this 'zine, I have paired excerpts from our conversations with visual responses by artists whom I admire. Each artist was given a copy of the transcribed conversation and asked to submit artwork that responded to the former inmates' shared experiences.

Although my time with the newly released ladies was brief, I was impressed by how they responded to the challenges of re-entry with joy, resolve, and strength of character. Each of them possesses a conviction that they now exist beyond prison walls to serve others. To them, freedom is not the ability to live as they wish but to the power to seek the good of others.

In creating a format for these women to share their experiences, I hope that the larger community might consider its role in this transitional process.

These women also collaborated with me on a public sculpture, Cloud of Witnesses. The installation is on view at the Bernice Garden in Little Rock, AR from September 2011- August 2012. See cloudofwitnesses.org for more information about the project.

Feel free to take and share this 'zine with others.

Sincerely,
Tori Pelz

cover design by Kim Wardenburg

STEPHANIE

How long have you been out? 6 months

How long were you in? 2 years [My sentence was] 15 years with 5 years suspended. I did 23 months. It was an arson charge. I had several other felonies on my record, but that's what sent me to prison.

When you were in prison, what did you imagine your life looking like when you got out?

I had this picture perfect thing...

I thought that I had this job lined up. I thought that I would come home to open arms from my children...

Within 3 days of getting out of prison, I realized that my children were not opening their arms to me. The job was not a good job... I stayed with one son until his girlfriend didn't want me around anymore... I stayed with a friend [but] she was using drugs. I was on the edge of losing my mind... Really... it was not the area that God wanted me in.[Stephanie relocated and currently lives in a church in Carisle, AR.]

So you're totally separated from family now?

Right. I used to turn tricks with my step-father when I was using drugs, and he still feels like I should still be doing those favors even though I'm clean... And that's not how I choose to live anymore.

What were some of the biggest unknowns leaving prison?

I was anxious [about] rebuild[ing] a relationship with my [adult] children. My 2 years I was there, I only seen them once or twice... I



David Bailin

was only 45 minutes away from them, so it was kinda hard dealing with the fact that I wasn't worth driving 45 minutes.

My older son is walking in my steps that I was walking in before...

So that's my biggest anxiety—is that my life the way I live it now is not leaving an impression on them the way that my bad life did.

What's changed in your neighborhood since you've been gone?

[Before prison] everybody was wearing baggy pants with the cuts in the knees... I walk into McDonalds and

I see a dude with windblown hairstyle, skinny jeans.

I was like, What is that?

I'm in a relationship, and my fiancé won't be released until 2017.

We've known each other for several years when I first started cooking drugs... I totally ruined his life... I got to go see him for the first time in 3 years... God put it on my heart...to show him commitment and be celibate because I was a prostitute, well escort services. I'm going to be able to prove to him that I can be celibate, be a standing pillar of my community...

What do you want your life to look like in 5 years? Amazement.

What do you want to be amazed by?

The work of the Lord. I see my community getting better, depending on each other...Our church, we are a family. We've done all sorts of things together I never did with my real family. It's good, clean fun. I can laugh, be myself... be accepted...

Where I'm not getting to help with my own children, I'm getting to help with others—young foster girls— So, I'm cool.

SHEBA

How long have you been out?

I got out February 28th [I was in] 5 ½ years, 2005-2011

What did your daily life in prison look like?

I did hair, went to school, did [a faith-based re-entry program].

They had styling products for you guys?

We get \$12 a month to buy supplies. But we'd make our own product with hot water, jolly rancher, Lottabody lotion—I loved [doing hair].

How would you describe your support network now?

Actually, you gotta focus on self and where you come from, what you learn. If you were ever an alcoholic

you can't never let your guard down....

Look girl, you can't drink wine.

You not like everybody else....

I fell for one day, and I jumped back up—said, I don't want this! Reality check. If it was a relapse, I woulda still been out there...

Now that I got a taste of this good life—
productive, perspective, respected...

Everybody like the way you are. I hated the old Sheba....



Delita Martin

What are some of the challenges of adjusting back to society, other than those old temptations?

I can't let my guard down. That's my struggle... I just [have to be] around people that's clean. Givin' back what I got—I want to start talking. Maybe I can help somebody—that'll help me.

Did you notice anything different about your neighborhood when you came out?

The way people look—the way drugs make you look- 5 years, no teeth—to' up. I'm glad God put me in prison because I be lookin' the same way.... You your worst enemy.

What would you say to somebody who is where you've been—something that might change their perspective?

Well, actually I'm gonna keep it real. Say, well, I guess you gotta go through what I went through— prison, this and that... I had to bump my head about 15 times before I realized... I'd just tell 'em what I've been through—and if that don't scare 'em, they ain't ready....

I don't shoot cold nothing with nobody, not my daughters.... Both of 'em scared... because of where I've been. I started at an early age, bein' on the street, prostitution... You've got all your life to have sex, have boyfriends. You better get some education—I'm workin' on that.

What's your ideal job or career?

Beautician! I want to do nails, massages, a little boutique to buy purses or shades.

FELICITY

How long have you been out?

Almost 2 years. I was released on August 24 of 2009.... I did 5 years.

Is there anything that you now cherish about your daily life?

Absolutely. My apartment. I've never been single, always been in a dysfunctional relationship... So having my own apartment and enjoying family time...

Rebuilding a relationship with my children. I left them as toddlers... I started my addiction and walked out of their lives.

Being able to get my girls and walk into our own apartment and say, This is our home. Let's create it....

Both my parents died from alcoholism and drugs, so it's in the genes. I carried it. But I'm breaking the cycle. I refuse to allow my children to not have me like I didn't have my parents.

Gaining restoration with my whole family that I'd burned bridges with. Because I was addicted to methamphetamines for 5 years, I was a true junkie... I was a disgust to society, as you would say. Prison was the best thing that could have happened to me.... That was where I started to believe in God.

What's your ideal job?

A bookkeeper. Absolutely. I love numbers. I cannot get a company--when I fill out an application and they see—are you convicted of a felony? And I put yes... I try to stress, Put me on a probation... See



Katie Dunn

what you think. I will prove you wrong. Now, I'm starting out-- I'm a waitress... I'm just speaking to people, throwing out my name...

I have a fear of rejection, and that gets to me.
When they see my track record...

It's been an adventure...

I don't regret one challenge.
For me to just boldly say, I messed up....

Never before did I have people that would reach out to me...

HATTIE

How long have you been out? How long were you in prison?

3 years and nine months. I was in 5 years.

Did you count the days?

Oh yes, you do... but I stayed busy. I was a counselor in the substance abuse program... [God] not only helped me clean my life up, ...but he showed me there was something inside worth saving. And He planted in me that I could help other people...

In my wildest dreams, I never thought anybody would want advice from me, because of where I'd been.

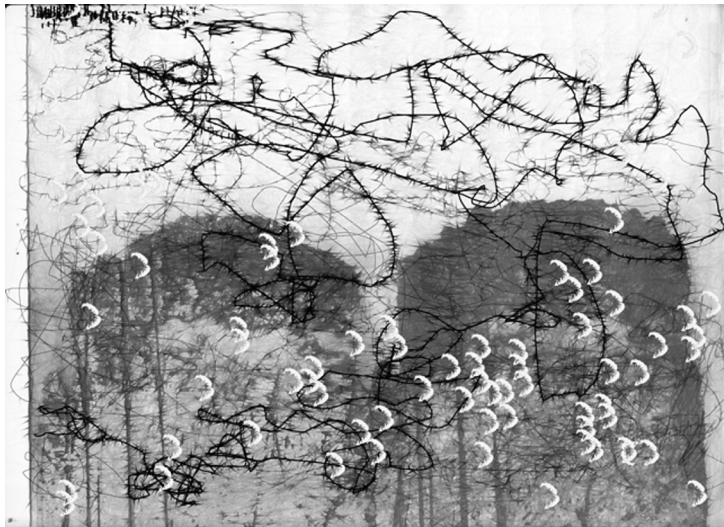
[Hattie and her husband were sentenced to prison at the same time.]

My husband and I got into a faith-based program in prison, and God kept us on the same page... we recovered together. We learned about loving one another the way God would want you to love-- like [telling] your husband you believe in him... In every day life and struggle, you think, Oh, that's not important. But it is so very important because ...the more you affirm people, the better they love. [That revelation] gave us a brand new life.

It's like the ugly duckling. As the love was poured into us,
the transformation began.

What are some good memories from prison?

Just being in class learning—'cause it's like my eyes of understanding were being opened... The darkness was slowly starting to drift away.



Lisa Renz

Or when my family came to visit. They only came 2 or 3 times in 4 years... The letters and phones calls were few and far between and you start to experience,

"Well, maybe my family don't care about me."

But as soon as they was in your presence it it was like... like they had never left.

What have been some major challenges of re-entering society?

There's so much shame and guilt associated with your
past life...

I started seeing people that were like, "Hattie, where you been?" And I was like, "Outta town, you know." I had to fight that the first few weeks I was home.

Hey, [my] guilt's been covered by the blood of Jesus...
I'm not that person anymore.

In my past life, somebody says No, and that was it... But today, I know I gotta fight for what I want...

So, what are you currently fighting for?

Right now, my housing... We always been independent, so now to rely on someone else... All of a sudden, I've become a child.

What do you want people to understand about challenges you face during this transition?

The person that you become in your drug addiction is not the person you really are... All of a sudden, you're in so far, you can't get out. But there is freedom, and it comes with making that change.

TASHONDA

How long have you been out of prison?

Goin' on two years.

And how long were you in prison?

Six years. I was in on delivery-- of methamphetamines.

[Tashonda's original sentence was 20 years.]

When you were in prison, what did you imagine your life looking like when you got out?

You know, you live a life of what's mine and what you think is mine, and you get to a point where you realize what you've been livin' for—this is the grand finale: prison.

My best thinking landed me in prison. I know that seems
like a cliché, but it's true.

I was like, Things have gotta change. The Lord began to draw my heart, began to give me a purpose, a hope.

What were your options in terms of where you could live after prison?

I really had no options, no place to go. [I could] go to a half-way house or have a wonderful friend who said to a friend, "This girl needs a place to stay." The family who took me in didn't know me from Adam. They never lived a life of corruption, but they opened up their home. They're still a big part of my life. They helped my son go to a private school. [They] lived on King's Arms Road, and I felt like, literally, I'm in the King's arms. He's just held me the whole way.



Kevin Cates

So you were in 6 years. When you got out, what struck you about how things had changed?

Phones! Telephones. Technology is so fast moving. Getting in with all that Facebook.

Beginning to get a budget... I can remember the first couple times I made payments. I was scrambling around, finding addresses...I was all over the place. I had to sit down, say, "Ok, you need to... get yourself organized."

What do you cherish about your daily life or routines that you didn't think about before?

Oh, everything!

It's amazing what you take for granted—Being able to open up a refrigerator or clean your house, pray with your children, take a walk in the woods...

I first was in the woods, just me and God. I just fell on my knees and just cried and prayed to him, "Teach me your path, Lord."

What's been the most rewarding experience since you've been out?

Sunday before last, it was Father's Day weekend, and I was like... we're gonna go to church! ... Our whole family was down, and I thought, How in the world am I gonna get all these people up? So I took my laptop and hooked the speakers up under the carport and set up chairs.

I ran up to the apartment and woke everybody up... My brother was like, "How long is this gonna last?" They were really not into it.

My uncle told me, "I done a lotta things under that carport, but never church!"

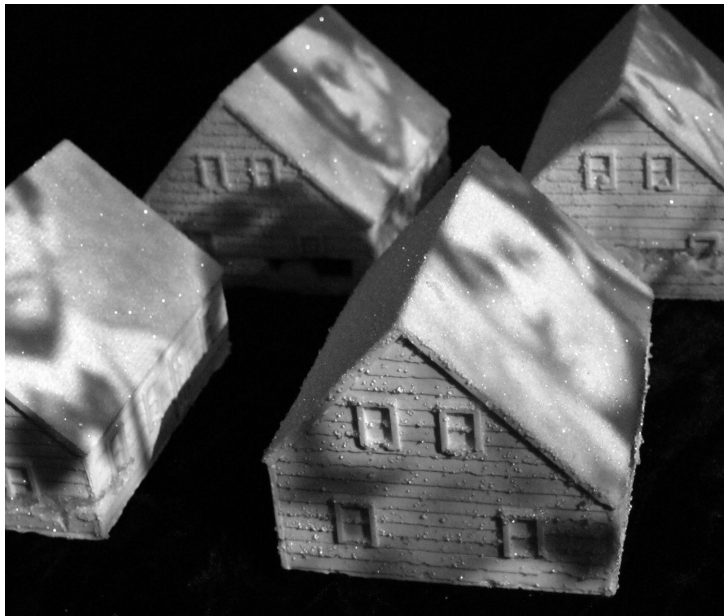
It was rewarding and good to...have church—all of us together. To pray together, talk about the brokenness of the fathers in the room, children that had been broken by their fathers, and most of all that He is the ultimate father that can fix all that brokenness. It was a wonderful, sweet, sweet time.

My brother's girlfriend...was literally drowning herself in alcohol—one of the worst types of alcoholic I had ever seen.... Her parents, everybody had tried to talk to her

--- Anyway,

I [got to] just live a life that's changed...

She couldn't really fathom [my change] and asked, "How do you do it?" And I said, "I can't, girl. Believe me. I can't." ...Somehow some things really inspired her to change. She's now at [a faith-based recovery program]. [She's] doin' well, and her mother emails me and tells me she don't think she would've came to that decision on her own. She's really grateful—it's always good when we're able to help somebody else. So those have been wonderful times since I've been out.



Holly Laws



Anita Horton

ARTIST BIOS

David Bailin is an artist working in Little Rock, AR. He received Arts Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Arkansas Arts Council and the Mid-America/NEA and has had critical reviews in Artnews, the Los Angeles Times, the Oxford American Magazine, and others. He teaches at the University of Central Arkansas and Hendrix College.

Kevin Cates is Assistant Professor of Art at University of Arkansas at Little Rock specializing in upper-level graphic and web design classes. He also is a prominent print and web designer for local and national clients but wishes he could do more of this cool inspirational fine art stuff.

Katie Dunn recently graduated with a B.A. in English and Art History. Presently, she pursues studio art at University of Arkansas at Little Rock and University of North Carolina- Asheville. She enjoys exploring new mediums, learning from teachers and peers, and developing her personal approach.

Anita Horton resides in Dallas, TX and teaches middle and high school art at Trinity Christian Academy. She is a member of the Nasher Sculpture Center's Teacher Advisory Board and an active member of the National Art Educators Association. Her work is in numerous individual collections, as well as in the Museum of Biblical Art, Dallas.


Holly Laws studied sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University and Temple University. She currently raises chickens, makes art and teaches in Central Arkansas.

Delita Martin teaches at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and Pulaski Tech College. Her prints and drawing are included in several private and public collections. She is also the founding director of Black Box Press, an open studio printshop in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Tori Pelz merges studio practice with community engagement as she seeks to give a voice to individuals who are often overlooked. She spent the last few years teaching art courses at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock and University of Central Arkansas. Currently, she is preparing to move to Grand Rapids, MI where she will organize her first parade.

Lisa Renz After living in Little Rock and New York, she relocated to Dallas, where she lives in an old house, makes art, and fosters hopes of becoming a beekeeper.

Kim Wardenburg studied printmaking and drawing at Washington University in St. Louis where she was encouraged to push the boundaries of traditional printmaking. Combining traditional printmaking techniques with other media including food, sculpture, and book arts, Kim investigates the significance of covenants in political, communal, personal and spiritual bonds.



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