

CENTRE FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF IMPRISONED PEOPLE

Inside the Story Telling Project



Acknowledgements

Firstly, the Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People (CHRIP) would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to the women who participated in the Story Telling Project (STP) – Kim, Liz, Alisha, Alessia, Elizabeth Norman, Mary, Kaz, Gabby, Vickie and J. Unfortunately, not all of the women's names can be listed here, as some felt at personal risk. The only way to share their stories and voices safely was to remain anonymous. Thank you for your trust, openness and commitment. It took courage, bravery, and perseverance to create the stories.

This project arose from the anecdotal evidence of women incarcerated at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC), Victoria's maximum security prison, who described the injustice of the dramatic increase in young women in the prison system. CHRIP would also like to acknowledge the women currently imprisoned in Victoria, and their children and families.

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Introduction

This booklet arose from The Centre for Human Rights of Imprisoned People (CHRIP) Story Telling Project 2009/2010.

CHRIP facilitated a series of storytelling workshops for women who had been subject to youth detention, policing, surveillance, community-based orders and or prison.

We collaborated with a group of 12 women over a period of six weeks from 3 June to 7 July 2010 through a series of full-day digital arts workshops, where they developed their own stories through creative media such as poetry, creative writing, song and short films about issues affecting their lives.

This booklet is the published version of some of these stories.

The Story Telling Project – In recent years in Victoria, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women in the prison system. The Story Telling Project confronted this increase in imprisonment, policing and surveillance, by giving women the opportunity to tell their stories in their own words; challenging stereotypes and highlighting examples of discrimination and injustice.

The Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People (CHRIP) - (CHRIP) is a project promoting human rights for Victorian prisoners through systemic advocacy, campaigning, and education. CHRIP is fundamentally informed by a decarceration and social justice framework, and is committed to the involvement of people with the lived experience of imprisonment.

Flat Out is a state wide advocacy and support service for women who have had contact with the criminal justice and/or prison system in Victoria. Flat Out auspices the CHRIP project.

Flat Out leads and participates in research and community education, seeking to inform the community and other service providers about the issues that occur for women in the prison system.

Flat Out advocates for women who have experienced incarceration, and works towards improving the rights and conditions of women in prison. Flat Out works towards preventing women from going to prison, and keeping them out of prison once they are released. Through community involvement and education, advocacy and research, Flat Out works towards having a strong voice in the prison abolition movement in Australia, in the hope that eventually prisons will not be seen as a legitimate arm of the justice system, but will be viewed as an antiquated, cruel and ultimately ineffective institution.

Reflections

The Story Telling Project gave women the freedom to record whatever parts of their story they wanted to share. It enabled women to share their individual experiences as well as contributing to the broader debate about issues of social justice. Reading these stories clarifies that labelling, blaming and shaming of women in itself a crime. These are just some of the comments from the women involved.

Why they believe women are criminalised

*“Due to violence, homelessness and abuse”
“By being judged and stereotyped”*

“Easy targets, vulnerable”

“Poverty, homelessness, family violence and substance use”

“By having a friend do something when you’re with them and then they run off and you cop shit and the police don’t believe you”

Their hopes for the project and their ideas on the ways to challenge criminalisation of women

“It (STP) will go a long way as people hear about jail and think it’s a fun place until you end up there and you’re locked away from your loved ones”

“It will help young people be aware of what can happen if you are in the position of the police and child protection”

“It can help young people be aware of what the consequences are so they know to stay clear of trouble”

“By educating other people in the community – hopefully raise awareness of some of the major issues and consequences of criminalising women”

“By telling others such as young women our stories”

Sharing a Story

“My mood has lifted. Before I got here I was feeling so tired and didn’t think I was going to make it but when I got started my brain ticked over to another feeling, a feeling of high”

“I’ve learnt what a hard life I really had, and I am learning new skills”

“very good cause my story belongs to loads of people and isn’t just my own”

“very confronting/challenging – cried heaps at home when I remember the bits of the past I’d blocked out. All very healing and helpful to me.”

“enjoyed voicing issues that effect women and children who are in custody”

The following pages are some of the stories written by women who participated in the Story Telling Project.

Some of these stories were made into short films however due to issues of consent, identity and disclosure the films are not available to the general public.

Desired outcomes of the Story Telling Project

- Enable women’s voices to be heard
- Create social change
- Raise awareness of discrimination in the labelling and criminalisation of young women
- Highlight the fact that the justice system’s current treatment of young women does not create real safety in our communities
- Encourage the development of stronger, healthier, safer communities
- Advocate for policy changes in the youth, and criminal justice systems
- Highlight the need to prevent all forms of violence against women and children, (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Highlight the ways that women are resisting this process of criminalisation.

Jap

Am I the only one who remembers Jap
Who knew 'Jenny' was her real name
The only one who remembers
How Jenny, at 18, died
Alone
Her lithe and beautiful body
Broken
And bleeding on the concrete floor
Of a lonely convict cell
Her bold, defiant laughter snatched
Forever from this world
With the snapping
Crack!
Of a police issue boot
On the back of her neck
I wonder if the cop remembers
The feel of her young body
Crushed
Despoiled
And lifeless beneath his heel
Has he slept well
These past thirty years
With his conscience
And his memory
Of a dark-skinned girl
With a long proud neck
And glowing dark eyes
Does he remember Jap
I do

Vickie Roach



Used to beg when I was homeless

Begging in Southbank CBD
Police came
Questioning me
5 of them
1 of me
Was just 16 there was no need
Pepper spray and Cuffs
What is all this stuff?
Was just 17 this is all new to me
I was scared
I couldn't breathe
Five Officers Overkill
Something I didn't need
Didn't need them all around
I was young with no criminal background.

3 years later being questioned again
Something for much worse than begging
A stolen car and robbery
I myself was having a baby
Still living on the streets
Interrogated again
They were wrong
Found it was a misunderstanding.

At 21 was in a mood
"Hey fuck you dude!"
Threw a jar to make a saucy mess
Now you know the rest
Here they come yet again
Starting now to know the game.

Then I'm older but yet again
This old man he started to complain
He hit me so I hit him
This is where it starts to get grim
A bus load of cops
Now I'm in strife
Yelling at me to "Put down that knife"
There is no knife I said timidly
And started to have anxiety
They pushed me down and
In my back their knee
Pushed me and searched me
Forced me Struggled into the van
Scared was hot and stuffy
Can't breathe
Help me Help
Help me Man.



The truth will set you free

When I first started writing this story I was residing in the Psychiatric Unit of Victoria's maximum security women's prison. The DPFC. I had no criminal record or previous convictions. This was my first time in jail. I was being held on remand, awaiting trial for drug charges. Before that day I had never written much of anything. I have always been embarrassed by my limited education and I never thought anyone would be interested in what I have to say.

But today none of that matters! I read something that changed my perspective on what it means to write. The passage that

inspired me was written inside a book my mum sent me months ago. It only just made its way through prison security and finally into my hands today. It isn't much to look at as far as books go. It's medium in size, green and solid with a hardcover. It has no title or writing of any kind on the outside. The torn edges show where the original cover has been removed by prison security. Maybe it was beautiful when mum bought it, but I will never know and it doesn't matter anyway.

My mum is good with books. I always thought she had a special gift. She could walk through a book store full of thousands of books and somehow find some obscure unheard of author and book that was perfect. She knew without asking what I liked to read, she even knew my preference changed depending on my mood. With that in mind I opened the book with high expectations and was disappointed to find all the pages empty. I flicked through from the beginning thinking it was a joke or maybe a mix up in property but as I got to the end of the book I found some writing on the back page. The words were as follows:

Life is a book and you are its author. Believing in your own intuition and instincts is key. Asking yourself new and empowering questions and writing your thoughts and observations will allow you the freedom to take both small steps and great strides. There is not one name for happiness, contentment, or caring. Let the words that you write here serve as your own key to life.

So I've decided to try to write my story, or at least part of it. I doubt that any words in any language, written by even the most acclaimed and eloquent writer could do justice to the emotion, passion or significance of that day. But however inadequate my literary skills, it is my hope that my story finds its way into the hands of a person who will find value in it.

September 2007

I can't remember waking up, getting dressed or anything before being in the car that morning. I've always loved watching the sun rise, but that day was different. I watched so intently, trying to burn every little detail into my memory. I knew that where I was going I may not have the chance to watch the sun rise for some time. That knowledge made the glare bearable as the sun climbed high above the city; its finger like rays caressing the sea of oddly shaped buildings. I couldn't help admiring the beauty as reflected light split and danced across thousands of windows. I followed it down to the streets where the dismal day unfolded. To anyone else it would have seemed like an ordinary day. So normal it wouldn't warrant a mention but for me it was a day I will never forget.

I was a passenger locked in the rear of a car, silently watching through the window as the city began to tick like a wind-up clock. The crowds of people seemed to build up and disappear in waves, like watching the tide go out at the beach. I felt disconnected. I wasn't part of that world

anymore. Unable to look away I sat staring at simple things that would have gone unnoticed days before. I watched random people and tried to imagine how their day would unfold. There were well dressed adults going to work, children in uniform going to school. People were cued in long lines looking straight ahead, earphones hanging from their ears. They rocked from foot to foot, anxiously waiting for buses and trams which as usual, seemed to be late. Cars were weaving in and out of traffic as impatient drivers made undignified gestures and screamed in the direction of the offending pedestrian or car.

As the city faded behind me I sunk deep inside myself, terrified of what came next. Trying to stop myself from completely breaking down in tears I kept thinking "just five minutes at a time" over and over in my head. As each five minutes passed I'd look at the clock and think "that wasn't so bad, I can do another 5 mins". Time passed quickly like that and soon we arrived at our destination. Nothing could have prepared me for what I felt as we drove under the first roller door that separated the two worlds. Complete panic overwhelmed me as I listened intently to the sound of steel grinding against ancient cement followed by the offensive beeping as the door rolled to a final stop. I could see officers at the next gate signalling to open the inner door as the previous one faded from view. I think I was too scared to cry. I'm usually pretty brave but I'll admit that in that moment I was terrified. From what I had heard, this was a place I could only

imagine in nightmares. I was told that it was not the place I should be afraid of just the people in it. I've always been good with people so with that in mind I breathed in deeply, held my chin up and tried to look confident as I was helped from the car.

Hand cuffed, I was placed in the custody of prison officers and lead into a small holding cell. As I waited my anxiety seemed to peak. My vision blurred and a high pitched ringing filled my ears. I felt dizzy and nauseous and my mind went blank. The smell of rancid vomit and urine overwhelmed me as muffled whispers and stifled screams sent shivers all through my body. The hours that followed were filled with new and frightening experiences. I was photographed, questioned, patted down and finally shuffled into a small room with three women in uniform ordering me to remove all my clothes, spread my legs and squat while 6 eyes looked over every inch of my naked body.

"Have you been to the bank?" The most imposing looking officer asked. "Which bank?" I replied. All three officers laughed at the same time. I must have looked confused cause I saw their faces soften into a smile and the same officer said "you poor pet, you have no idea what we mean do you?" in a thick New Zealand accent. I shook my head and asked her to explain. It was then that I learned my first words in prison speak. Apparently to "bank" something meant to hide something illegal i.e.: drugs or weapons by inserting them inside yourself. The thought made me

feel sick and I wondered if they would believe me when I said no or if they would check. Not being aware of any of my rights I wondered if they were allowed to check. Those thoughts lingered as the strip search continued.

I was not prepared for the humiliation of complete exposure. I felt vulnerable and submissive, almost servile. I quietly followed each instruction in a dazed zombie like state until finally I was handed prison blues and told to dress. Happy to lose my clean clothes I obeyed without protest but watched sadly as the clothes I arrived in were bagged and taken away. I felt an overwhelming sense of loss as the last physical sign of who I was disappeared.

After being processed on paper and given a prisoner number, I was handed a trolley with a basket on it. It was piled high with bedding and a change of clothes, some toiletries and cigarettes. After a short wait an officer arrived to escort me to my cell. She was a short, plump, overly friendly middle-aged woman who talked non-stop from the moment she arrived. My heart was pounding so loud in my ears I could not hear a word she said but I nodded politely and mumbled the occasional uh-huh, yes, no, etc. I was in a daze of shock so much so I didn't even look where I was going and was surprised to suddenly find myself standing in a small cell. The bang of the door closing and the keys clanging in the lock temporarily snapped me out of my stupor. I quickly tried to open the door, checking to see if it was really locked. It was!

As the reality of it all started to sink in the basket I was carrying suddenly felt very heavy. I put it down gently afraid to make a sound and slowly sat on the edge of the bed.

For a while I sat there shaking, trying to get my head around what just happened. I had been holding back tears all day and now finally alone I burst out crying. How did this happen? Me? In jail? I felt confused and terrified! Feeling nauseous and light headed I seemed to lose my balance, collapsing backward on the bed. I couldn't breath. I remember trying to call out for help, but my mouth felt dry. Like in a nightmare my lips were moving but no sound came out. I tried to breathe in deeply, forcing air into my lungs. Every breath seemed smaller than the last. Finally I felt air in my lungs. There was silence all around me as the voices in my head began screaming. I felt helpless as the worst panic attack I can remember took over my body. Unable to control myself anymore, my mind on the edge of madness, let go.

For what felt like hours I lay still, overwhelmed, lost in the madness in my head. My darkest memories crept from the hidden corners of my mind. The images, sounds, smells, tastes, pain and fear that had been my life came flooding over me like water bursting from a dam. They played out like scenes in a horror film that could not be turned off. The pain I felt with each memory was unbearable. I felt my body instinctively draw itself inward until I lay curled up in the foetal position, my arms wrapped

tightly around my knees trying desperately not to fall apart. I could feel my eyes swelling shut while burning tears streaked down my face and into my mouth. I'll never forget the salty bitter taste as I tried to wipe the pain away. I can't find words to describe how hard I cried. I don't know how long I stayed in that moment but it felt never ending.

A blanket of loneliness wrapped around me as shadows crept across my walls. My cell seemed to shrink in size as night fell and darkness invaded. Before the last of the light faded I pulled myself to my feet and found the mirror. I looked intently at my reflection, my fingers brushing the hair from my eyes. I felt strange looking at myself. Staring past the red blotchy skin, puffy eyes, and tangled hair I could see someone looking back. For the first time in many years I recognised myself. Looking back at me were the eyes of the frightened little girl I used to be. I remember being her and the terrible confusion and fear all those years ago when I found myself completely alone. For a while I looked at my reflection feeling sorry for that little girl. Staring into my own eyes I started to feel calm again. If I survived the monsters and took care of myself when I was only six years old then there was every chance I could do this now.

For those few moments I stopped thinking about why and how unfair and unjust this was. I just looked at the little girl inside me and decided I would have to be ok. It made me start thinking about my own daughter away from me for the first time. She would be scared and sad too.

I knew I had to be ok so I could get back to her.

Picturing my little girl alone and afraid I suddenly felt very brave. I made a promise to myself in that moment that I wouldn't give up. I remember the look on my face as it changed. I saw my expression harden. I wasn't that powerless child anymore. I was a mother with a child to protect. I couldn't help being afraid inside but from that minute on I knew I had to face my fear! Not for me, for my daughter. Even if no one else believed in me or understood, it didn't matter anymore. I was a mum. If I was never anything else again it didn't matter. I just had to get back to my little girl. Thinking about that I felt strong. Focusing on my daughter my heartbeat slowed to a steady rhythm. It was a moment of clarity like no other when I realised who I really was. I was a mother and nothing else mattered.

Exhausted, I closed my eyes hoping to sleep. I'm still not sure if what happened next was a dream but I remember it like it was real. I felt like I was dancing but my body didn't move, like my soul was moving to a gentle waltz, floating gracefully above me. Strangely I felt connected in body and mind; for the first time I could feel. I felt alive inside. No drugs, alcohol, pain or other stimulant. It felt amazing, like an orchestra inside me-every instrument in perfect harmony.

In my darkest, most painful moment I was given a priceless gift. I found myself hiding in the tangle that was my mind. As painful as the journey was that brought me to that moment I know in my heart that it was

all meant to be. Every painful memory had its purpose. As stubborn and strong willed as I am I think fate had to take me to a place where I had no control, nowhere to hide from the pain, and no one but myself to blame. I had to be completely alone before I could find the courage and strength to look in the mirror and really see myself, the good, the bad and everything in between. I finally made peace with myself.

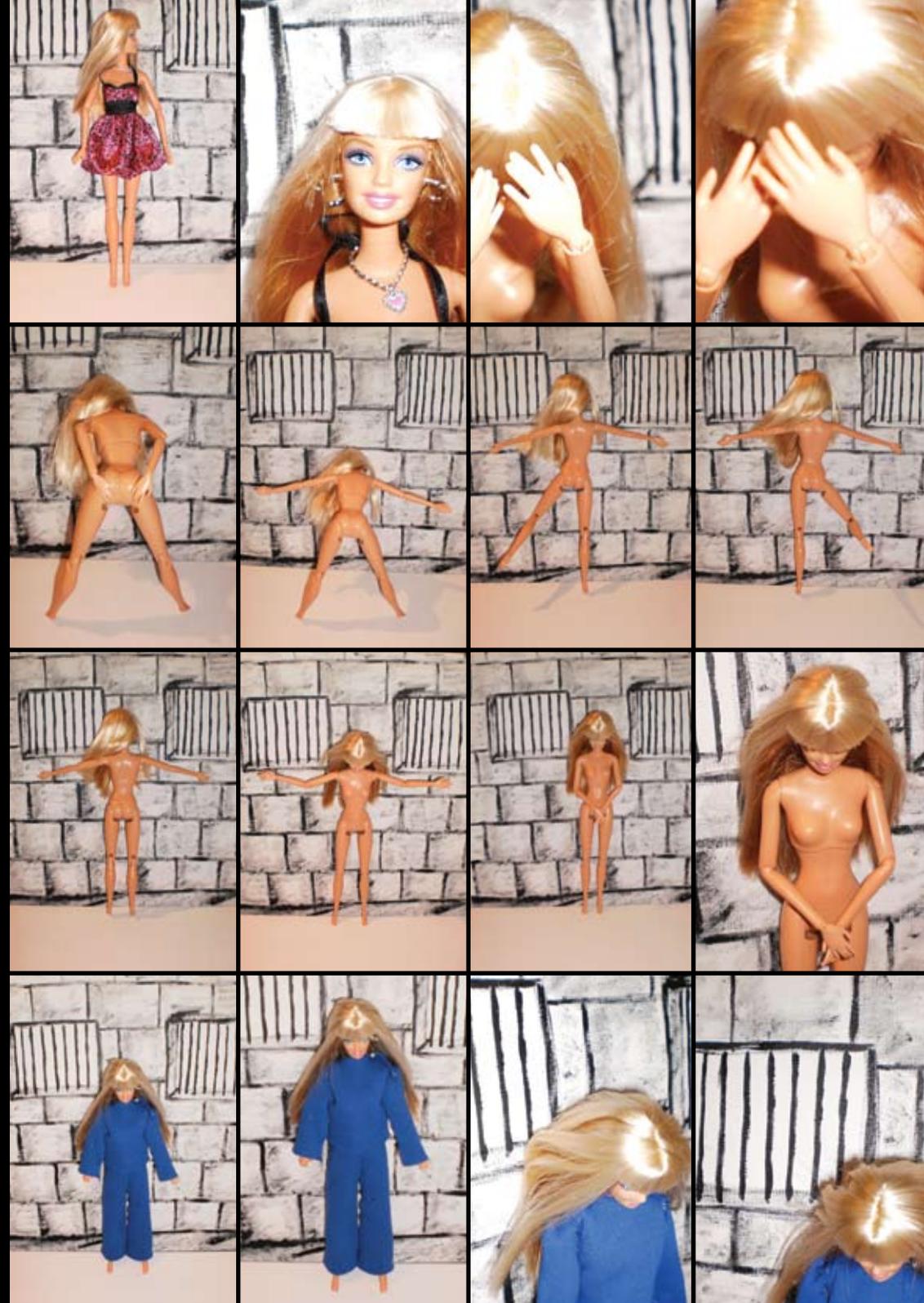
That was almost 3 years ago today. I spent 15 months in jail before I was granted bail in late 2008. I have now spent the last 17 months on bail. I am still waiting for my day in court. Although jail was hard it was even harder to walk out the roller door with nothing but the clothes on my back, a tram ticket and a \$10 food voucher. I had to rebuild my life from scratch. I knew once I got bail that I would do anything necessary to get custody of my daughter back. Regardless of the pain and personal sacrifice I endured daily I will never regret one moment. I was rewarded for my effort in February 2009 when my daughter came back to live with me full time.

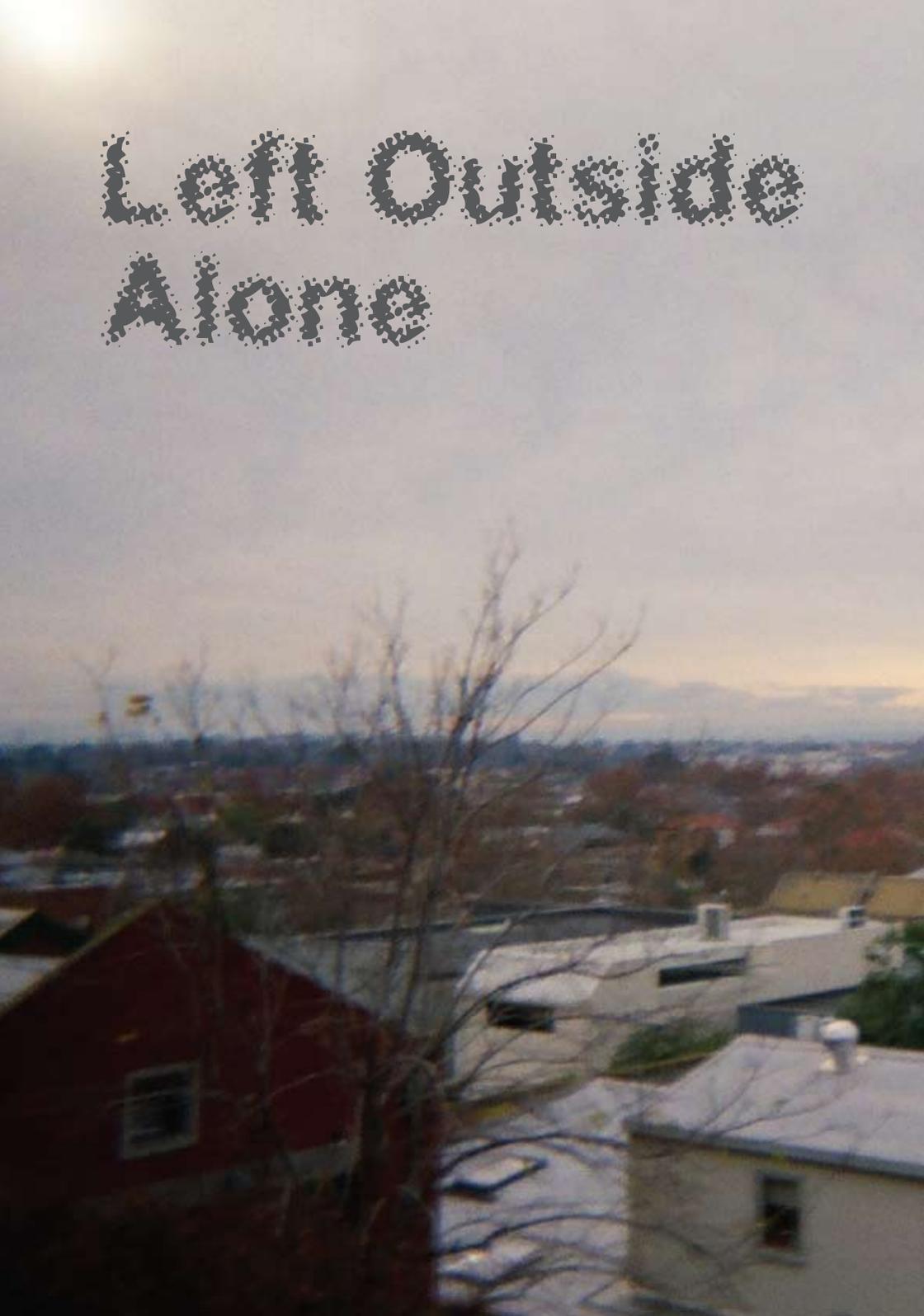
Since that day I have stood tall, unashamed, proud and fearless! I have faced and overcome every obstacle that has been put in front of me regardless of the size. I've felt fear from time to time but knowing why I'm fighting and who I'm fighting for puts everything into perspective. It doesn't make any difference to me now what people think or say about me. I don't need their approval anymore. I can look myself in the eye and that is enough for me.

Silent Screams

Being nice, sweet and proper
Doing as I'm told
Cooperating with the police
Trusted them
Twisting everything I'm saying Used to think the system was fair
Court
More lies there, but I had to keep quiet Like I was in a bad movie
I was screaming but nobody could hear me
Thought I'd be ok if I told the truth
Sentenced to jail - my head was in a spin
A totally different world that I was in People I'd normally never mix with
Now I'm walking on eggshells
Scared to be me
Doing my best to survive
Suddenly I'm in the middle and so different
Rumours, whispers, 'she's a dog', 'an undercover cop'
Feeling so violated - strip searches, pissing into a plastic container
Once I had my period - blood and urine mixed in there together
Stinging cheeks, almost crying, so embarrassed
Nothing like this has ever happened to me before
Had no idea people were treated like this
It was absolute hell
Prison targeted me, non drug user - helped their stats
Everyone and everything around me, so cold, so evil
The screws were the enemy but so were the other women
Whole prison turned on me
Bashed and threatened
Scars still there
Pain, so much hurt
Darkness and despair
Screaming, begging for help
Nobody could hear me, Nobody cared
Waiting for the appeal, God what a joke
Result comes in just before I'm released
I remember so many times
Looking up at the sky
Wishing with all my might I was up there in the plane
Then one day I was in the plane, looking down, I could see the prison
Chills down my spine Thinking of the women down there behind the
barbed wire Now I'm one of them
I feel their pain
I see their eyes
I hear their silent screams

Mary





Left Outside Alone

I have had Tourette's since I was 8.

I battled through school and was bullied because of the Tourette's

In 2002 I went to the Austin Hospital for 6 months to try to get better and change my medication.

I was overdosed on the medication that I was on. I started getting paranoid because of the overdose. I threw up food when I was paranoid because I thought I was being poisoned with the food. I lost 20 kg in 2 weeks.

I then left hospital and went into a foster home for 4 weeks. I then went back to live with my family and they couldn't cope with the ticks so I ended up going to a place called Denham House, which is a rehabilitation place for people with mental illness. I ended up living at Denham House for 2 years. I met my best friend Phil there. I also met my boyfriend Chris at Denham house. I had been at Denham a few months before Chris came to live there.

When he arrived he kept staring at me and I thought he was gonna attack me. But after a few days I asked him why he was staring at me so much, and he said it was because I was beautiful. I was shocked and ecstatic at the same time. During the next few weeks we starting getting to know each other and then we had our first kiss, we've been together ever since.

I left Denham house in 2006, and then my Dad bought me an apartment.

In February 2007 my best friend Phil committed suicide, which was very hard for me then and still is now.

Some people don't understand what Tourette's is and they call the police. The police usually question why I am yelling in the street. Often I go to Borders in Lygon st to read magazines. The staff at Borders

called the police who came to speak to me and asked me why I was swearing. I told them that I have Tourette's and they told me I had to leave in half an hour. They asked for my address and phone number, and this made me feel like I was being interrogated.

It makes me feel like a bad person when the police question me.

It is now 2010 and I am still struggling with the ticks. They are very loud and they startle people on the street. Because of my Tourette's I swear at people, this is hard because I have to explain to people all of the time that I have Tourette's. I don't have the ticks when I am at home because I am in a quiet space. Being around people frustrates me and makes the ticks worse.

I am very upset that I don't live at home with my family because I miss talking to them at night and being with them. I also get lonely at night although I have a carer three days a week. My carer helps me cook, clean and keeps me company for 3 hours a night for the 3 nights.

I am waiting to have surgery to fix my Tourette's. I found out about the surgery on 60 Minutes on September last year, it is called 'Deep Brain Stimulation' where they put 2 stimulators into your brain in the areas which the Tourette's are affected. This will help to prevent any further Tourette's.

I attend Gateway 2 days a week, Monday and Friday. I am happy to be at Gateway because I have made many friends and I enjoy making and learning new skills. They also have a music studio at Gateway where I have had singing lessons with Abby Dobson. I have written 3 songs with Abby and have recorded them on a CD. I guess the future for me is to follow my dreams. My dreams are to become a famous singer, to get along better with my family and to make more friends.
Alessia

Solitary Confinement

Story and Poem

As I was growing up I was the only girl out of 4 boys and if that wasn't bad enough I was the baby of the family as well so it was hard for me. I done a lot of the girl things that had to be done around the house as both of my parents worked a lot of the time. My brothers had it a lot harder than me when it came to my father. He used to beat them around a lot. I got it and so did my mum when they weren't around. My mother worked through the days so I did all the lunches and made sure all the beds were done before I went off to school.

By this time some of my brothers worked and some of them went to high school. My oldest brother was my favorite brother, he was more of our father than the one we had. My dad was a shift worker so when dad was at work the house was full of laughter and happiness as my mother would be home through the night in the end.

I still remember the day my oldest brother was big and my dad was drunk once again. This time my brother got it over my dad. MY FATHERS Blood all over the place my brother said if you ever hit one of us or mum again next time I will kill you. My father still got drunk but that was the last time we got bashed. As we got older my brothers stopped toughening me up and started being my mates. They knew I smoked. Then I started smoking dope and was stealing it off them.

I left school. My father would say you can't leave school until you get a job. Well end of year 8 summer was coming to the end. I got a job. Never went back to school. Then I started using smack. My friend was using it we had stopped spending time together when she was with one of my brother's mates. I would do it on my pay day each week. They would get it and put it in my arm. Once a week went to a couple of days.

Then my brother got out of jail. As the rest of my brothers used as well they lived interstate. He gave me a hiding. Then one day I was sick he knew why. He came back and gave me a hit he came in my room. I was in so much pain. He threw it at me. But I can't do it myself I had to say. He turned the light on and I got ready. He done it and it was straight away better.

Because my mum would lend me her car and not to him because she knew what he was like. So he got me to get the car and that was it. I would be the driver and he made the money. I got him out of there. We made some money. Well that's when I got a habit. When he got Court and went to jail I didn't know what to do. So I got paid and got a big amount and started selling smack on the streets of Dandenong or Springvale. I never got done for selling smack. I went to jail late in my life. As I only really had stupid charges like shop stealing and possession of smack. So I was lucky in that way. Then I got out of the game for about 4 years not saying every now and then I would have one; but that would be it. As I was with my 2nd oldest son's father and he never used drugs only had a chuff with me once in a blue moon.

He worked and I told him about my whole past never lied to him, as we dated for 2 weeks which I had never done before. And I started to get strong feelings for him (see with my ex he was my first and our little girl passed away at birth). And I hadn't been with anyone since. So when I met Monty I never thought anything of it. He made me laugh and made me feel as though I was the only purified woman in the world. So it was about 2 weeks. And I couldn't play the game anymore because most times I would have a hit for when I got up at his place. I still lived with mum and dad. So I had no choice but to tell the truth. But I also told him about a program I can get on, methadone. He said I love you too so let's go to the doctors and I will help you through it, we will

find out what this methadone is about. It took 2 weeks to see one of those methadone doctors. So I had to use just to be normal. He was so good to me. Then when our son was born one of my brother's passed away in a really bad car smash. I still remember going down to the car to get his dog out so the ambos can get to him. He had half of a face. It killed my family. Then 5 months later I found another one of my brother's dead in his bed, drug overdose. That was it my family was no family. I moved up bush where my family lived as my son's father left me, just gone, I did well. Then I met my second son's father and he got me into pills. He was obsessed with me. He held us up at gun point two times on two different occasions. When I finally stood up to him with two broken ribs and a broken mouth, I still got the strength to stab him. He charged me.

My kids were taken away from me and I lost the plot started using anything I could get my hands on. They moved me to Melbourne and gave my kids to my mother and that was that. I went to jail done about 5 months. Got out doing really well, go to see my kids. My ex gave me a hand full of pills and that sent me off so for that Christmas and New Year back inside. Got out and got help, got housing stable. And got on a program, linked in and got the help that was needed. I haven't been back to jail for 2 years.

As you will read a poem I wrote and it is so true what jail is like as it takes your whole dignity away. So I hope it helps people understand what it is like to have your whole world ripped away from you. And it's meant to help you but it will wake you up OR make you worse.

Thank you for taking the time out to read my story and my poem from my heart I pray it helps people understand jail isn't the answer when most people in there want help to better themselves not be traumatised.

Have you ever been ordered to strip,
Before half a dozen of barking eye's;
Forcing you against a wall – ordering
you to part your legs and bend over?

Have you ever had a door slammed;
Locking you out of the world!
Prolonging you into timeless space!
To the emptiness of silences?

Have you ever laid on a concrete slab!
In regulation pyjamas;
And tried to get the toilet to talk!!!
In all seriousness???

Have you ever begged for a blanket
From an eye staring through a slot in
the door!!!
Rubbing at the cold air;
Digging into your flesh
Biting down on your quivering lips!!!
While mouthing the words
"Please sir"

Have you ever heard screams in
the middle of the night
Or the sobbing's of a stir
crazed prisoner;
Echoing over and over in the darkness-
Threatening you into their
depression and madness???

Have you ever laid awake for hours!!!!
Doubling over in pain?
Waiting for morning to come to mark
yet another
lonely day!!!

If you've ever experienced even
one of these
Then bow your head
THANK GOD!!!!!!
For it's a strange thing indeed...
This so called
REHABILITATION PROGRAM!!!

Elizabeth Norman
(pseudonym)

Resilient

There was a time in my life that I spent rebelling against the world cause I felt that I had no one, not being allowed to see my Mum unless it was supervised but then she wouldn't turn up. I started drinking a lot at the age 13, going out with friends absconding from the refuge.

This one time we were drinking this girl got so drunk that she was stumbling in the middle of the road. I went to help her, the police rocked up and they thought I was bashing her, they hit me.

They took me in to the station and kept me there for 4 hours. When I was allowed out I went to make a complaint they just stood there and laughed and weren't listening saying they never touched me.

The police made me feel so low within myself. Knowing I couldn't do anything to protect or stand up for myself, I felt like I was a nobody.

I felt harassed.

I didn't want to go out with my friends or by myself, cause of the police, if they saw me drinking they would take me in, put me in the cells without telling me why. I felt harassed.

They had all my power, going to court nearly every day. I had no clue of what I had done.

When I went to court one day the judge turned and asked my lawyer why I wasn't locked up yet, thankfully I had a good lawyer. The judge sent me to an anger management program, that didn't last very long due to I already knew the worker, I then had to go back to court, they then skipped the first few orders and put me on the last order {cant remember the name} as well as bail, where I had to be in the refuge by 8pm and not leave until 8am which made it harder for me to keep friends due to my bail time, cause we use to go out at night and I couldn't anymore.

I lost a lot of friends at that point in my life. I'm the type of person who finds it hard to make friends, by losing all my friends I wanted to kill myself; I was letting the police take my life!!!!!!!

I have in the past and present been trying to learn new strategies to cope with the intense feelings that occur in my life but have been struggling to get things done due to grief and losing people that are important to me, at this stage in my life I feel that I'm not getting anywhere, slowly going downhill, anxiety rising, there is a list of things I am trying to do to help myself but I just can't seem to get to the stage of actually doing them cause of side tracks.

Doing stuff that's good for me

Talking more about how I'm feeling

Eating three meals a day

Having a normal sleep pattern without nightmares or panic attacks

Playing soccer, this is the stuff I'm struggling with doing day to day

Alisha



Background

Criminalisation and discrimination

As a minority group, there is very little research in Australia and internationally about the experiences of girls and young women entering the "criminal justice system", but there is little doubt they are criminalised and discriminated against.¹

- Incarcerated young women in Victoria represent only 13% of those in the juvenile justice system, but their recidivism rate is 44%.²
- Young women will typically have recurrent contact with the criminal justice system.³
- Young women (and men) who have been incarcerated have much higher mortality rates than other young Victorians.⁴
- It has been widely acknowledged that the high criminalisation and incarceration rates of Indigenous young people are serious problems that need to be addressed. Young Indigenous women are 20% more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous young women.⁵
- Young women in juvenile justice often come from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience violence, neglect and experience family issues.⁶
- Other issues experienced by young women in the juvenile justice system include social disconnection, unemployment, low educational attainment, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol use.

The process of criminalisation is fuelled by dramatic and sensationalised reporting – "the violent female offender", "delinquency" and "rebellion" – which reinforce society's fears. As a result, young women are increasingly incarcerated and placed on orders or under surveillance for longer, in the supposed interests of safety for the community.

Breaking the cycle

We as a community are failing to understand or respond appropriately to the complex issues in the lives of women in the criminal justice system. Research has shown that policy makers have tried to change this situation with the development of community-based/statutory orders, however these do not appear to be working. Instead, it is thought they are setting young women up to fail and to return to the system.

We must listen to women themselves to find ways to prevent and circumvent the cycle of incarceration. Young women's voices need to be embedded in research in order to achieve real social change and improved outcomes for women.

Individual, family and community benefits

Young women's imprisonment not only greatly affects the health and welfare of the women themselves, but it also has a profound and often irreversible affect on the lives of their children, families and our community. There is sufficient evidence that preventative measures to addressing crime within the context of socio-economic, gender, racial, and ethno-cultural realities are far more cost-effective than current criminal justice approaches. This requires investment in building safe communities, providing education, housing and employment.

Policy and practice

A significant way in which the justice system could improve the quality of young women's lives would be to take a stand against violence against young women and work collaboratively with other groups to develop an effective response to this violence.

1. Sandra Simkin and Sarah Katz, Criminalizing Abused Girls Violence Against Women (2002 (8): 1474-1499)
2. Youth Justice, Recidivism Among Victorian Juvenile Justice Clients 1997-2001. Juvenile Detention Statistics AIC p12
3. Youth Justice, Recidivism Among Victorian Juvenile Justice Clients 1997-2001, 2001 Detention Statistics AIC
4. Carolyn Coffey, Rory Wolfe, Andrew W Lovett, Paul Moran, Eileen Cini and George C Patton, Predicting death in young offenders: a retrospective cohort study, The Medical Journal of Australia (2004; 181 (9) pp. 473-477)
5. Juvenile Justice in Australia 2007-08, November 2009 Juvenile Justice Series Number 5. AIHW p.60
6. C Coffey C, Veit F, Wolfe R, et al. Mortality in young offenders: retrospective cohort study. BMJ 2003; 326: 1064-1067

