



# FROM CELL TO HOME

## WOMEN, TRAUMA, AND INCARCERATION

*“Over time he didn’t hit me with his hands...as it progressed he took anything, he beat me with anything – crow bars, weights, anything he could get his hands on... I never saw my parents or anybody in my family raise a hand to each other, so this was a total[ly] new experience, and I didn’t know what to do with it.”*

Those words are from one of the women whom the Ortner Center is helping to seek clemency. The incessant abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband began when she was 18 years old, the same age as most college freshman. As she tried to protect her infant daughter from traumatic scenes of abuse by her extremely violent husband, she lived in constant fear for her life and the lives of those she loved. Her abuser was “always threatening to hurt my family,” and she was determined to keep them at a safe distance. Isolated, abused, and paralyzed with constant terror, she made the worst decision of her life. The consequence was being sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, a fate that fostered further isolation, continued fear, and new forms of abuse.

Since then, a better understanding of severe abuse and women’s criminality has been developed. Women’s risk of incarceration is growing and a history of severe abuse is common. Senior Analyst Wendy Sawyer of the Prison Policy Initiative notes that “Nationwide, women’s state prison populations grew 834% over nearly 40 years – more than double the pace of the growth among men.”

The great majority of incarcerated women (77% to 90%) report extensive histories of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Women’s most common pathway to crime depends on surviving abuse, poverty, and substance misuse. Such histories can complicate adjusting to incarceration and are associated with higher rates of in-prison misconduct, which directly impacts the likelihood of a woman seeking freedom from her lifetime sentence.

Although reforming the criminal justice system and reducing mass incarceration have become mainstream ideas, women already in the system have limited recourse. That is why the From Cell to Home project is necessary. For many of the inmates, this will be their last hope to leave prison and return to their families and communities.

## THE PROJECT

The primary goal of *From Cell to Home* is to obtain the release of a select few women who are serving a life sentence – again, a life sentence in Pennsylvania means life without the possibility of parole – at Muncy State Correctional Institution, one of two women’s prisons in the state. By engaging and educating college students about women and incarceration, we create the opportunity for them to have input into the deliberations of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons.

The project, begun in fall 2017, has evolved such that in 2018-2019, students working in pairs are helping six inmates. Inmates chosen for the project are recognized by corrections staff, community leaders, and her incarcerated peers as an exemplary inmate who they would support for clemency. Many of the participating inmates were involved in criminal cases heavily defined by or impacted by drug use, domestic violence, mental health problems, poverty, and now-outdated policies and practices.

“We don’t relitigate these cases, we seek clemency. In other words, we appeal to the Board of Pardons for mercy.”

**KATHLEEN BROWN, FACULTY DIRECTOR OF FROM CELL TO HOME**

Penn students draft research and interview-based petitions that are refined by Professor Kathleen Brown. They call upon the scholarly literature, review the often decades-old case files, and conduct two video-link interviews with each inmate to gather information about her upbringing and post-release plans.

Students are motivated to use their research and writing skills to prepare dossiers in support of women inmates. The students who participate gain valuable research skills, specifically related to the abuse-to-prison pipeline, adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and how they impact criminality, and a more informed view of the way criminal justice works in America.

Also in 2018-19, participating students have had the opportunity to visit the Muncy State Correctional Institution, a maximum security facility that houses the state’s death row for women as well as the women being served by the project. With assistance from Penn’s Transportation office, students make the 3-hour trip to the facility and, with assistance from Muncy staff, learn about the corrections system as well as the prison itself.

Undergraduate and graduate students participate on a volunteer

basis; they do not receive payment or course credit for their work. Project coordination comes from the students as well.

Each year a student who worked with the project becomes the project coordinator for the subsequent year. This ensures continuity as well as gives students a chance to deepen their knowledge about abuse and incarceration and further develop their organizational and leadership skills.

Professor Kathleen Brown has directed the project since it began in the fall of 2017. The Quattrone Center at Penn Law has helped fund the project since its inception.

The first two clemency petitions developed by our students were heard by the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons when they met on March 13-15, 2019. Both were delayed until the Board's next quarterly meeting.

## STUDENT REACTIONS

Students commonly express satisfaction, frustration, surprise, humility, and gratitude when they are asked to reflect on their experiences. Excerpts from reflection letters, written by two former project participants who are now Penn alumni, follow.

*My participation in From Cell to Home expanded my knowledge of the justice system, criminal justice reform, incarceration, and their impact on individuals and communities. I applied when my interest in criminal justice reform and female incarceration was just budding; I had interned at the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia and been a telephone counselor at the Women's Law Project. My interest in criminal justice reform, the impact of the justice system, and women's rights, converged in From Cell to Home.*

*I know that my understanding of justice and rehabilitation was challenged and influenced by my experience. The opportunity to work with my peers for positive change for the individuals and the community also provided a platform to discuss the topics related to our work. Dr. Brown and Nia provided resources, data, and space for important conversations.*

*The project is an exciting and impactful way to get involved in the larger community through Penn. It brings people of similar interest and values together, and provides a space for intellectual curiosity, informed dialogue, and social justice exposure.*

Elena Prieto

*From the beginning of my life, the criminal justice system has had a significant impact on my family and me. I was raised by grandparents because both parents struggled with addiction and mental health problems and had spent time in jail. This sparked my interest in the From Cell to Home project; I wanted to help women who were treated unfairly by the system. I knew that I would be doing work that few have the privilege of doing at my age. Partnering with Madison [another student], someone equally passionate about supporting someone who already paid for her crime, was both humbling and invigorating. Although we do not make the decision as to whether [name of the woman seeking clemency] goes home, I believe we wrote the best letter possible to ensure that our role was played to its fullest.*

*Participating in this project made me confident that this is the kind of work that I want to do. I can make an impact on an individual and on a grander scale. It has further prepared me for my career as a public interest lawyer.*

*I will never forget [name of woman seeking clemency], my time talking with her, and learning her life story... Working on From Cell to Home was, without a doubt, one of the highlights of my college experience.*

Samantha Myers-Dineen

These student reflections underscore the value of the project for the women who seek clemency and for the students who dedicate the time and energy to make freedom a possibility.

## PROJECT COORDINATORS



2017-18  
Devan Spear is now the Executive Director of Philadelphia Jobs for Justice.



2018-2019  
Nia Kaudo is with the Philadelphia Re-entry Coalition and will start law school in the fall.



2019-2020  
Madison Pettaway will serve as the project coordinator during her junior year at Penn.

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