

COMMUNITIES NOT CAGES

FREE OUR MOMS + CHILDREN

Thousands of mothers are currently separated from their children by a cage in a New York State prison due to our racist and unjust sentencing laws.

This is what they want you to know.





Kmea Jones

I wish lawmakers understood the struggles of being an incarcerated mom. We are ignored and not treated like people. There are so many struggles.

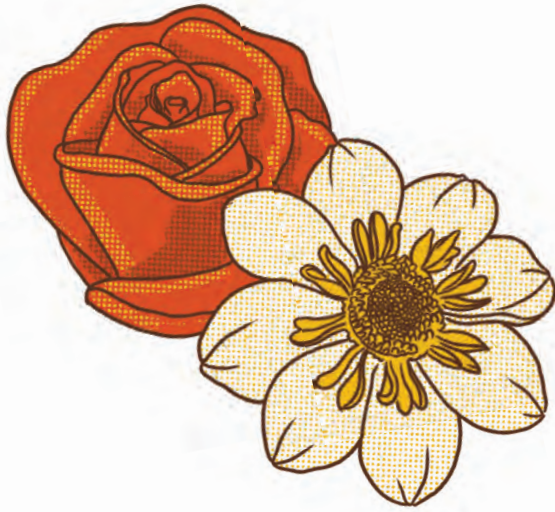
I took a plea deal. My attorney told me the only option for my felony charges to drop down to a misdemeanor charge if I completed a 2 step program. I had to go to court over and over again- there were no choices or options.

My family was upset with me and I was disappointed in myself and the choices I made. At one point, I was remanded. I cried and was so depressed and anxious getting on the bus. People look at me differently now.

As the last court date, the judge was proud of me because I am doing well and I turned my life around. People change and deserve a first or second chance.

Mothers like me need access to resources instead of long sentences behind bars separated from our children so we have an opportunity to turn our lives around.





Dorothy Ball

I am the mother of Walter Lewis Ball Jr.

Walter had a great future ahead of his life but was in the wrong place at the wrong time. When you think of a mother, you must think about the process. A mother is the first to feel the movement of a child. The child's first voice they learn is mother's.

No matter how bad or many mistakes a child makes, a mother's love can never disappear.

I have given my son the best life I could have. I have Multiple Sclerosis, which affects my nervous system. I was physically unable to do the motherly things for a child.

Walter is my only son; sons are genuinely precious to fathers, but especially to mothers. When my son went to prison, it honestly changed my life forever. I never saw my son walk across the stage for high school graduation, college graduation, and even marriage.

I could have used the help of my son years ago, but I need him more than ever now. I have my 90-year-old mother, who loves and cherishes Walter. In these last days, she wishes to see Walter walk through the door as a free man.

My son has served enough time for his crime. Over 22 years, he has led "Scared Straight" and other programs to help young men not go down the wrong path. I am very proud of my son being a founder of the C.C.F.W. (Change Comes From Within). It is a non-profit organization that goes into communities helping, mentoring, and educating the community to support anti-gun violence. He also has "I Am Youth," which helps young men not make the mistakes he did and lets them know there is another way to go successfully.

My son being incarcerated for as long as he has has made myself, my father, my grandmother, and my younger sister's life harder. His not being home has caused his younger sister, who is nine years younger, to be the "older" sibling. My son being home will help not only our family but our community as well. He has served his time; now, it is time for him to come home. Thank you for your time.

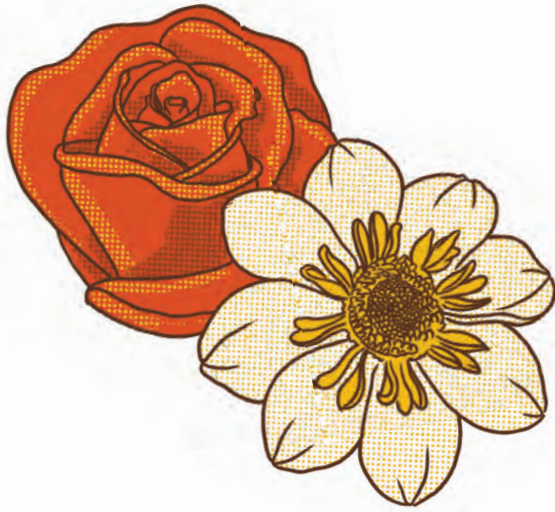
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From: ALSHARIYFA ROBINSON

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The Webster dictionary does the term Mother no justice. Being a mother entails so many attributes that explaining the word in the dictionary would require a half of page to fill up. Mother's don many hats, no hat is easy to wear. To love a child, to live for a child and to lose a child is an ever enduring task of joy and sorrow, that only a Mother could adept. The shouldve's, couldve's,wouldve's,but didnt , makes a mother stronger. I draw my strength from my mother Donna L. Robinson.

I am so in love with my mother Donna ,she supercedes the mere term female parent,she is my best friend. The advice she gave me growing up ,whether I listened to it or not, that advice sticks with me and is always useful when i am stuck in a jam. The indescribable love mom gives regardless of how she is feeling is amazing. Her love and guidance allows me to raise my children and grandchildren, and have that best friend relationship with them. I love being a mom ,that extra love is there even when I feel like I do not deserve it. You know



Sheena Perry Harris

I am Sheena Perry Harris and I am incarcerated at Bedford Correctional Facility.

I'm serving 15 years and I have a 9-year-old son who is growing up without his mother.

When I was sentenced, I felt like my life was over and I failed at being a mother. I thought about my loved ones who will probably not see me again.

My life just went down the toilet and there is nothing I can do about it. The separation alone is going to create a lot of trauma for my son and relatives.

There is no familiarity at all when holidays roll around. My son is forced to conform to uncomfortable situations. I was labeled a "predicate felon" because of my history and that increased my time.

I would love to have a Second Look at my case and another shot at my freedom.

I would make sure everything is done right so my family and I will never experience this again. Kids should not be forced to grow up so quick.

I pray everyday they will live to see me free. My elders are not getting any younger. Time stops for no one. I full responsibility for my actions. I wish I could turn the time back. My son did not ask for such a extensive separation nor did my family. They just have to deal with it.

I need lawmakers to know that doing time behind bars makes it hard to communicate with my son and family. This creates depression and a lot of emotional trauma for me. It's not easy. A lot of people going through what I am going through die. A Second Look is my only hope.



Melanie Bishop

I am grieving daily but my son has not died. My son lives in constant limbo. He doesn't have access to proper medical treatment or dental care. He doesn't have access to a proper diet and since the package policy has taken effect he has no fresh fruits or vegetables. I live with guilt because on a Public School Teachers income I can't afford to send my child the expensive vendor packages. My life is lived in a constant state of grief, worry, and stress.

I wish people in power understood that even though my son is convicted of a crime he is still loved. He is a son, grandson, brother, uncle, and friend. He is needed in our community and in our family. My son has a dream to open a community center one day in a rural town like the one he grew up in to help prevent other kids from making the same mistakes he did.

I wish they understood that his experience of incarceration doesn't just hurt him but fractures the entire family unit. His grandfather visits him every week. His grandfather is afraid the last place he will ever hold his grandson before he dies will be in a prison visiting room. His neice and nephews ask about him all the time, attend visits, and want to know him and be able to experience his wisdom and love. There is always an empty chair at holidays and often even when I try to find joy I will feel the tears streaming down my face because my heart will remain broken until our family is whole again.

My son wanted to exercise his right to trial. He was 19 years old and a first time offender that suffered from a severe anxiety disorder and depression. He was an alcoholic and an addict. He had never had the opportunity or motivation to pursue treatment. My son took a plea deal on the advice of counsel because he was told if he went to trial he would be sentenced to forty or more years if found guilty. He was 19 years old! He took a plea deal of 12 years. There is no choice when given that option. This was the day I learned that there really is no right to trial with Mandatory Minimums. Noone should ever have to choose between what amounts to their lifetime and exercising our rights as American citizens but this happens every day in NYS courtrooms.

The day my son was sentenced I cried more than I ever thought possible. My son wanted to go to treatment but was denied the opportunity to do that and instead sent to prison. My son went into prison seeking help. After just 30 days in county jail as a first time offender my son knew he wanted nothing to do with a criminal life. Since he has been incarcerated he has requested Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment (ASAT) no less than 7 times and has been repeatedly denied due to limited programming and there being "too much time left on his sentence."

The passage of the Earned Time Act and expansion of good/merit time would change the trajectory of my son's life. This law would change the culture of DOCCS to expand programming to allow the opportunity for my son to EARN his way home sooner. It would open ASAT and Thinking for a Change up to him NOW so that he can put in the work for his transformation. No one's child should be turned away from Drug and Alcohol treatment because the system hasn't taken enough of their life away from them yet.

DOCCS talks all the time about concerns with prison safety and believe me that is my concern too. I want every Correctional Officer and incarcerated loved one to return home safe. The best way we can create true safety both inside and in our communities is by providing HOPE. Hope for the future. Hope for a way to come home. Hope is given by the passage of this law!

The Earned Time Act would be a game changer for my family. It would allow my son to earn the opportunity to come home and begin the process of rebuilding his life as an integral member of his community. He can work a job, pay taxes, and maybe just open that community center for troubled youth. This would allow him to attend his niece and nephews soccer games, school events, and birthday parties. It would allow him to help his elderly grandfather get to doctors appointments.

Most importantly I want people to know that The Earned Time Act is not just a get out of jail free card but the opportunity to acknowledge and support true transformation in our prison system so that when, not if, our loved ones return home they can contribute to their communities and be given the second chance we all deserve.

Thank you so much for your time and I hope that if your loved one ever finds themselves on the wrong side of a courtroom that we have already won the fight to pass the Communities not Cages legislation and enacted common sense criminal legal reforms that make the system more just for all of us.

Sincerely,

Melanie Bishop



Julie Werkheiser

My name is Julie Werkheiser and I am serving (2) 11-years-to-life sentences concurrently at Albion Correctional Facility.

I am entering my 8th year of incarceration, and I have a 9 year old son named Julius. Being separated from my son has been extremely difficult for both of us, most especially in these crucial formative years of his life.

I have missed him learning to ride a bike, learning how to swim, and his cheering on his first home run playing baseball.

Last Mother's Day, my son came to visit me at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. We got to throw a football to each other and play basketball in the outside visit area. It was only this one day, and I remember the sun was shining and we were just so happy.

I try to hold on to that moment and channel into it whenever I am overwhelmed by missing him.

For now, we do our best sending each other artwork and practicing his 4th grade spelling words over the phone.

This past year, I won my 440 motion and I may come home to him.

Still, I will never get these years back, and I wonder if I will ever have the bond that I could have had if not for this prison sentence.

I'm hoping that New York legislators pass the Communities Not Cages bills that will positively affect justice impacted individuals and families just like mine. Julius deserves it.

Thank you.



Julius was instrumental in helping to pass the Halt Solitary Confinement bill, and is a kid activist in New York. He was born during his mother Sammie's Life sentence, which was overturned by the appellate court. Julius and Sammie eagerly await Julie's return home.



Julius, at age 7, works on some artwork for his Mom who is in prison.



The Werkheiser Family on Mother's Day 2022 at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Julius has never had both of his mothers free.

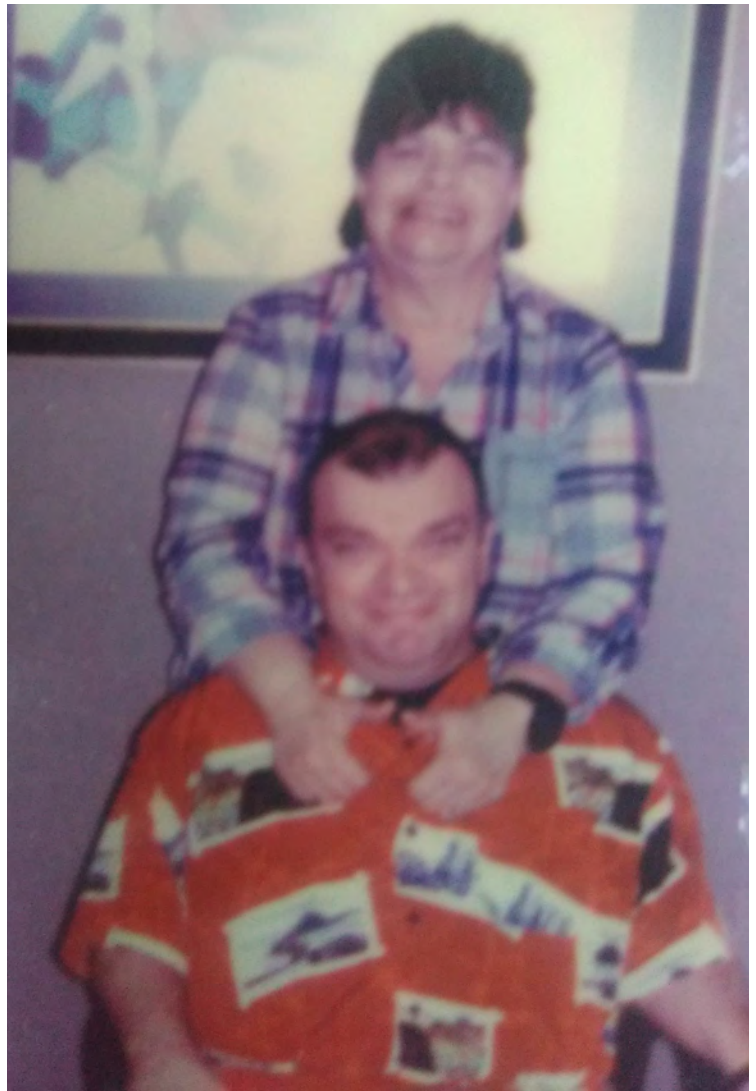


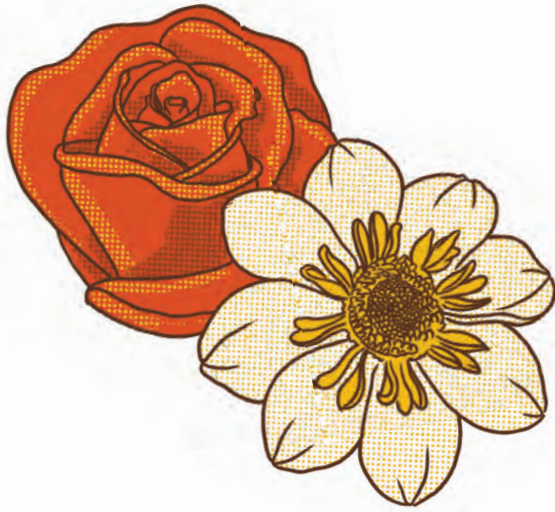
Jayette Lansbury

A Poem For My Son

Behind Bars Is Where You Sleep
Know That In My Heart You I will Keep
Every Night And Every Day
I hit my knees and for You I pray
Though, We are separated by these bars
I look Up and see you in the Stars
As long as my hear beats in my chest
I will fight for you without rest!!!

One day soon....
You will come home
And you will never feel alone
Even though you are now grown
I will hold you close, for you are my own.





Julia Lopez

My name is Julia Lopez.

I am 48 years old and currently incarcerated at Albion Correctional Facility.

I am from Long Island and lived there my whole life.

I am a mother of 6 daughters, 3 grandchildren, and was a sole caregiver of my two elderly parents.

When I was arrested, I was not allowed anytime to get my personal affairs in order or make arrangements for my family before being detained and then incarcerated. My mom passed on in April 2023 during my incarceration. My children are now caring for each other and their grandfather.

I have a sentence of 2-to-4 years. I asked to withdraw my plea, because I was forced and didn't understand the law and what I was doing when I took it. I was afraid, and my lawyer told me it was in my best interest, so I took it in spite of the truth or evidence.

Upon my realizing that I could fight my case, I put in a motion to withdraw the plea but to no avail.

I am preparing for my children's prom and graduation, and trying to maintain their home from behind bars.

I am blessed with the way they have been raised.

All mothers need the Communities Not Cages laws to pass so we have a fighting chance for our babies and their futures. There are so many other mothers incarcerated here with me that are in the same situation -- or worse.

Please pay attention. It is vital and needed. Thank you.

COMMUNITIES NOT CAGES



Eliminate Mandatory Minimums • Grant a Second Look • Support Transformation