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Restorative processes provide participants with opportunities to exercise autonomy and power for problem solving (Braithwaite, 2000). Each individual in a restorative process is allowed to exercise personal choices about what they want, and what might help transform difficulties into a more positive future.

A common difficulty faced by impoverished, and especially young mothers of color, is their inability to show that they can adequately care for their children according to standards established and enforced by government agencies, and private service organizations.

Implicit and overt biases influence people's judgments (Gladwell, 2005). In assessing the capability of young, uneducated, and poor women of color to provide for their children, biases create imbalances of power and barriers difficult to overcome (Roberts, 2002). When violence and substance abuse are present, these mothers are more vulnerable and disadvantaged to show they are capable of caring for and protecting their children. Rather than assisting the women learn to be better parents, especially when they make mistakes, they are often punished instead.

This case study came to our small agency, Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice, through work we do at the Hawai'i state women's prison. We provide services including a family law clinic, and a restorative reentry planning circle process for incarcerated individuals who meet with loved ones to address their needs for a successful life back in the community (Walker & Greening, 2013). Imprisoned individuals' needs include reconciliation and making amends for any past harmful behavior and consequences of

their imprisonment, including any trauma they may have suffered.

Research shows that the reentry circles assist the children of imprisoned parents heal and deal with trauma they often suffer (Walker, Tarutani & McKibben, 2015). The circles also help reduce repeat crime after imprisonment (Davidson, 2016).

Imprisoned women are often affected by the “victim-offender overlap” (McDaniels-Wilson & Belknap, 2008). Incarcerated women usually suffer from trauma and hardships due to abuse, and a lack of economic, social, and educational opportunities (United Nations, 2014). How they have been harmed, and what they can do to recover and desist from crime and substance abuse, as relevant, are addressed during the reentry circles.

The case study presented here was prepared with our assistance by the 32 year old woman it concerns. She is remaining anonymous to protect information about her four minor children.

The woman participated in four reentry circles. She also participated several times in a 12-week facilitation training cognitive course we provide at the prison. We have worked with her for over six years and observed first hand her growth and development. Practically, the circles helped her develop a vision of what she wants for her future and strategies for attaining her goals. Emotionally and psychologically, the circles helped her address her lack of power as a poor mother of color, and encouraged her confidence to develop relationships and support for herself and children. Importantly, the circles helped her create social capital for that has assisted her in addressing hardship.

Two of this mother’s children participated in two of her circles. Her other two children were able to have their needs expressed through their father who contributed

information for them at all the circles.

This is her story:

I was born in 1984. My parents met at a New Orleans strip club. They abused alcohol and drugs, and never had a committed relationship. My mother is Caucasian and Cherokee Indian, from Alabama. My father is Chinese, from Hong Kong.

My mother left me with anyone who would babysit. At age two she gave me up to my great uncle and his wife in Ohio who adopted me. My adopted dad is an alcoholic who abused my adopted mom so badly I worried he would kill her. Their son beat me up, and told me that our parents: "Bought you and are sending you back to China." Kids at school always made fun of my black hair and slanted eyes.

In eighth grade I ran away to find my bio parents. I was an angry teenager and fought with them. They pressed charges against me and I lived in shelters and on the streets. I felt most accepted in Black neighborhoods. By age 17, I had two sons with different African American fathers.

In 2002 I moved to Hawai'i. After living in my car with my sons, I worked waitressing, went to school, and got an apartment. I married a gentleman (I thought) and we had a baby girl. He abused me and cheated with another woman who I assaulted. I pled guilty to three felonies. I went to prison, and my children went into foster care. Later my sons went to live with the oldest one's father in DC. My daughter stayed in Hawai'i with foster parents who I agreed could adopt her.

I was sentenced to five years imprisonment after I pled guilty to three felonies. I went to a residential treatment facility, but got kicked out after six months for not obeying a BS rule against non-verbal communication with a male client. I got re-sentenced to 10 years imprisonment for each felony that the prosecutor wanted me to server consecutively, but the judge allowed me to serve concurrently. I spent five and a half years in prison before my first parole.

The Hawai'i women's prison is horrible. Most of the women are poor, many are mentally ill, and some are drug addicts with intellects and vocabularies of ten and twelve year olds. Some speak in baby voices. Guards beat and cussed at us daily and did many other unethical, unprofessional, and the unimaginable.

I was isolated often for fights defending myself and for trying to kill myself. I gladly took antidepressants, antipsychotics, sleeping medications, and any meds the medical unit wanted to try on me.

I learned about the restorative reentry circles in prison, and have had four.

My first circle was in 2011. My adopted auntie came from Hawai'i Island and my bio parents gave information by phone. At the circle I planned to make amends to my family by obeying the prison rules and being law abiding.

My second circle was in 2013. My daughter's adopted father brought her to the circle and my son's father explained by phone how the boys were affected and what I could do to make amends.

In 2014, I was first paroled, and 12 months later I had my third circle. On parole I did well for about a year, but eventually I lost my job, home, and

took prescribed anti-anxiety meds. I was also drinking, which is not permitted on parole. A dirty urinalysis sent me back to prison in 2015. I was pregnant and imprisoned for the last five months of my pregnancy. I was released to a drug treatment program for mothers, which I completed, but was caught with a prohibited cell phone days before my discharge. I was sent back to prison a third time and my newborn went into foster care.

My fourth circle was in December 2016 after I was paroled the third time. I remain paroled at this writing. I am off all meds now and have been for over two years.

I am in a reentry furlough program with strict requirements including each week: working 40 hours, doing one hour daily housekeeping, 16 hours of serving meals at the facility, and three hours taking mandated courses and attending AA/NA meetings. Additionally, I meet weekly social service requirements including family therapy, meeting with a social worker, and 2 visits with my baby, to regain her custody.

I believe I neglected my children and they are suffering the consequences. I also believe the system works against us. Many of the things I must do are redundant and unhelpful.

The circles helped me realize it is up to me how I respond to difficulties. Hearing how I affected others helped me find ways to make things better, to grow, and improve. Each circle helped me map out my life. I learned from all four. I am proud to see my strengths and how much I have grown, mistakes and all. I realize it's not so much about the wrong I've done, but what I do about it.

My ten-year sentence, for my episodic crime of passion committed when I was 21 years old, is complete in 2018.

I will stay out of prison, and help others learn from my experiences. I commit this for myself, and my children. I feel a duty to help improve the system by reducing the trauma and unnecessary punishment it inflicts. I want to help others avoid the hardships and pain my children and I endured.

This woman struggled to meet the requirements of the programs she was in. Many times she sought assistance when she faced housing eviction and experienced work difficulties. She was not provided the help she needed by the government or private agencies. Often while struggling she did not have a counselor or therapist to assist her. It was due to her own initiative that she developed relationships with professionals she met in programs who have assisted her, e.g., a university professor she met in a creative writing course in prison, several directors of NGOs who assist people with reentry from prison, a family court lawyer who was assigned to help her when the state took custody of her three oldest children when she went to prison, etc.

Regardless of her difficulties meeting all the requirements of the programs she is in, she is currently succeeding. Several months since she wrote her story above, she continues to do well. She is working full time at a well paying job, which is much closer to her home and no longer requires bus commute that could take up to four hours a day.

She is becoming independent with the goal of reuniting with her youngest child. We are confident that eventually she will achieve her goals, and we remain committed to assisting her in whatever ways we can.

It is evident and ironic, however, that the programs for people involved with the

justice system, which are supposed to help, often create unnecessary burdens and further hardships. The programs that this woman participated in were often more of a hindrance than help when she began to have problems. Few mistakes are allowed, and zero tolerance was often imposed for rule violations. It is as if one is to succeed, they must be perfect, which ignores that fact that people will make poor decisions, make mistakes, and encounter problems.

Many mothers of color who are indigent lack resources outside of what government provides. Instead of helping them find solutions, and overcome difficulties when they stumble, harsh and punitive consequences are imposed.

Mistakes should be expected, and helping people learn from failure and poor decisions should be the goal instead of more punishment. The funds spent on imprisonment could easily pay for better treatment and resources for improvised mothers.

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