

Who we are now

Stories of Incarcerated Women
and Families Starting Over



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In Appreciation : a thank you to the Allegheny County Jail, Lydia’s Place,
and Sojourner House



Our Class

Charlee Brodsky, Instructor

We are a class of 15 students and an instructor. We are photographers, designers, writers, humanists, artists, and there's even a scientist and a graduate engineer among us. We met as a class once a week. We also traveled outside our campus to meet our women and children. Some of us worked with families at Sojourner House MOMS; some of us worked with women at the Allegheny County Jail.

Sojourner House and the Allegheny County Jail are not more than five miles from Carnegie Mellon University, our home. Yet, had we not taken a course such as this, we might never have learned from people who are often overlooked and are not seen by mainstream society. For many, the women we worked with are only known through crime and drug statistics. Our women are addicts but are now living clean and sober. Some have committed crimes so severe that they are incarcerated. Our women and children face obstacles in their lives daily. They don't take a roof over their head for granted.

We learned a lot from this experience. We learned about family, privilege, grief, happiness, loss, and determination to beat bad odds. We also learned how easy it is to bond with people, even when enormous differences exist, if people are open to each other. We believe that our cameras helped create trust between us. And we know for sure that our cameras helped us have fun and created great memories.

Who we are



Chan Hee Soh
I'm a senior, fine art major, concentrating on painting. I loved putting the photos and words together for our team's family and children.



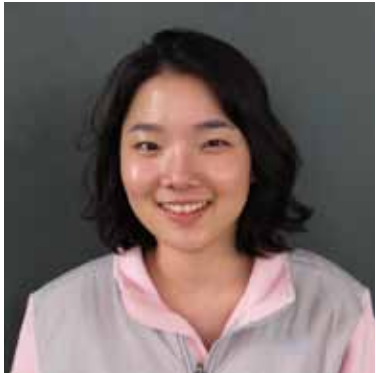
Alyssa Brown
I'm a soph cd major. I'm from Mars, PA. but I'm not an extraterrestrial.



Alexa Zin
I'm a junior cd major and a business minor. I love doing cartwheels and handstands, and being outside. I love making sushi and eating pierogies.



Alex Laskaris
I'm a cd major. I'm from St. Paul, Minnesota. I like to ride bikes.



Su-Youn Lee
I'm graduating with a degree in fine arts. I'm an abstract painter. I'll be going home to Korea soon and I hope to come back to the States next year.



Paresh Vasandani
I'm gradatuing with a masters in product development. I'm from Mumbai, India. I'm a die hard Manchester United fan (soccer team) and I love playing soccer on the beach.



Allison Seger
I'm graduating! I'm a creative writer and bicycle mechanic. And I'm from Nebraska.



Victor Ng
I'm a soph pursuing a degree in cd and photography. I consider myself a decent photographer and an adequate cook.



Carson Beyl
I'm a soph cd major. I have a pug named Peaches. I like to draw. My favoirite food is peanut butter.



Joy Nelson
I'm a junior cd major. My favorite color is green. And I have a lot of irrational fears.



Thea Mann
I'm a soph cd major and a photo minor; and I'm from North Carolina. I love spring. I have one large and one small dimple.



Grace LaRosa
I'm a junior cd major and a business minor. I'm tougher than I look and I could eat Fluffernutters the rest of my life.



Allison Piper
I am about to graduate with a degree in psychology and a minor in photography. I like kids and whitewater kayaking.



Maryanna Saenko
I'm a senior graduating in Material Science Engineering and Bio Medical Engineering. I'm from the Lviu, Ukraine. I'm going to spend the next three months traveling, taking photos and kite-boarding.



Amy Nichols
I'm a senior Psychology/ Urban History & Education Policy major. I'm most interested in the impact to be made by putting cameras in the hands of under-served populations. A self-converted "yinzer," I hope to return to Pittsburgh after law school.



Charlee Brodsky
I am the teacher of this class. I believe that photographs are remarkable in their abillity to teach us about the world.

We wrote one to two page reflections throughout the semester, in addition to working with our women and families through photography.

These reflections helped us understand many things including: our reasons why we were interested in such a course; the people who we were meeting who were vastly different than ourselves; our emotions surrounding a tour of the Allegheny County Jail; and more generally, how we were affected by all of our experiences during the fifteen week semester.

Why I took this class
by Amelia Nichols

On the night of March 3, 2008, a young woman put her three children to bed. Early that morning, a pot of hot grease left on a burning stove started a fire in the home. Firefighters arrived at the scene and quickly saved two of the children, but the young woman was too intoxicated—having ingested both marijuana and alcohol—to communicate that her third child was still in the home. By the time the firefighters got to the child, it was too late. The child had died from smoke inhalation, and the young woman was later charged with involuntary manslaughter and lost custody of her other children.

This was the story told by Allegheny County Deputy District Attorney Laura Ditka in a hearing on home visitation programs in the U.S. House of Representatives during the summer I worked in Washington, D.C. This was also a case I would later work with personally during my internship at KidsVoice, a legal aid organization that had taken on the tragic case. The story was striking, because Ditka pleaded with the committee to see this young woman as a good mother, but one of many that have fallen victim to the struggles of being a young, inexperienced parent. It is easy to argue on behalf of a child in the world of politics; no person in their right mind would deny a child of a positive upbringing. What is difficult is convincing people that parents are also victims—denied similar resources and support. I don't need to be convinced; I know this through first-hand experience.

I didn't used to think of my family life and my work as related, nor did I like playing the victim enough to connect

them. My community work made me feel incredible; my family did not. Growing up, I never had a place to call home. Out of my life by my first birthday, my father spent some of my childhood years overseas, some living on a boat sailing the Caribbean and some traveling across the country in a camper van; regardless, my visits with him were few and far between. Later visits would be ridden with arguments spurred by my father's own stubborn addiction to alcohol. My mother married twice after my Dad, her marriages interspersed with an assortment of boyfriends, fiancés or dates. Originally from Britain, she struggled with clinical depression that was exacerbated by a lack of family and a lack of resources, save what could be provided to her by a fleeting relationship. My mother was too restless to live in rural America and too unconventional for suburbia and as a result always felt out of place and out of touch with wherever we attempted to settle. She was alone, unemployed, and disheartened. In an attempt to find herself, my mother moved us six times and with each new home or father figure came a new tax bracket; between a rat-infested apartment in inner city Baltimore and a large Victorian in rural New Hampshire, my sense of place and self differed remarkably from year to year.

Yet no matter how inconsistent or trying my life circumstances often were, my mother's message to me never changed; she expected me to do my best, to attend college, to grow into a strong, grounded woman and to make a significant impact upon the world. These are similar, if not identical, to the wants and needs of every parent; in my case, what stood in

the way of my mother and my father were a crippling mental health issue and a similarly destructive addiction, respectively. For my mother, I treasure the notion that it is within one person's capacity to transform the life of another. It is my hope to empower and enable struggling parents to accomplish above and beyond what their circumstances would typically dictate.

I took this course because community policy to child welfare shouldn't just revolve around the children. Children are young, bright, endearing and appealing to many people looking for community outreach opportunities, but what I'm really interested in is the family. By limiting our scope to children, we are sending a message to families that our mothers and fathers and guardians are a lost cause. Families, especially those who experience mental health and addiction disorders, deserve to know that they have allies. I believe that photography and story-telling can be a powerful way of forming bonds and communicating this message with families and their surrounding communities.

Reflections

Victor didn't need to hand in the response here.
It was unassigned.

Reflections, *continued*

I think this weekend warranted a response ...
by Victor Ng

I am choosing to write a response this week not because my visit with Rasheeda and her family was unusual but rather the events that followed this afternoon lead to more profound revelations. Based on our two visits to the family so far, today was typical. Rasheeda was on the phone seeming angry at times and instantly happy at others. Her children were playing on the street. We showed her the photos we printed from last week and she seemed to genuinely appreciate them. She went through the stack at least three times and selected a few that she wanted larger prints of. Alex and I watched the kids play some more and said our goodbyes. And that was it, another visit to the family on an unusually warm April day.

About an hour after I left, I had to go to Squirrel Hill to shoot an event hosted by a retired Carnegie Mellon professor. She and her husband were hosting a Passover family reunion of sorts. I arrived and starting setting up to take their family portraits. Their large apartment overlooked Oakland from their balcony. Their children and grandchildren had come for the weekend to celebrate with the family. Two of her older sons had their eyes glued to their Blackberries, fingers clicking feverishly. Her grandson, who I learned was a year younger than me, caught up with family and talked about a new suit he had received as a gift. The younger kids were in another room filled with new toys but no one was playing. Instead, the kids were circled around a Ninendo DS, screaming and giggling. Eventually the event began in a party room in the downstairs of the apartment building. The caterers were busily preparing the hor d'oeuvre while Sarah, the host, arranged

the name cards accordingly. The guests came in one by one, kissing each other on the cheeks and making their way to the wine bar. As I floated around the room snapping pictures of people chatting, I overheard talk of people getting books published or teaching a new course. This was obviously an educated crowd. I even had a short conversation with a former CMU nuclear physics professor. After everyone had been acquainted and taken their seats, the hosts made short speeches. I quickly learned that this was, indeed, an educated family. The grandfather had a PhD. in mechanical engineering. Two of his sons teach at prestigious universities: Duke and MIT. Their grandson was a freshman at MIT. The hosts' daughter-in-law was a professor of political science. Family and friends would applaud at their achievements as the caterers discreetly clinked away, setting up for the main course, which happened to be salmon.

I described this event in detail because I left with an incredibly bizarre feeling. While one family I had photographed hours ago had never owned a camera, this one is paying me by the hour to document this occasion. While on one counter lies the crumpled remains of a bag of ramen, this one hires chefs to prepare a kosher dinner. While one mom celebrates another moment their children aren't getting into trouble, this one celebrates another Ivy League success. To think that this small black machine that I hold in my hand captured such different worlds within hours pains me with an odd sense of guilt. I am the witness to these extremes. Am I obligated to do anything about it? Does the mere dichotomy of these photos

on the same memory card say enough? I am not sure what to think, really. Both worlds exist, separated by a few miles. Both, at that moment, are seemingly unaware of the other. Both stories are told through one lens, and they are very different stories indeed.

At the semester’s end
by Maryanna Saenko

We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope.
—Martin Luther King

In a psychology class I once took we studied a concept called constructs. The idea being that people feel most apprehensive in life when they are placed in an environment or situation where they do not have sufficient prior experience to adequately predict what is going to happen. I’m addicted to that feeling of apprehension, the idea that anything could happen at a given moment. Photography is the perfect medium for being able to enter a new world and attempt to make sense of it. To live in the moments captured between shutter clicks and to find understanding in those milliseconds. Children Alone brought a new challenge. My partner, Vasu, and I were sent into foreign territory armed with only our cameras and good intentions.

Photography let us enter the lives of Sharon Taylor and her two youngest children, Brandon and Alisha. I enrolled in this class with entirely focused to produce a great image. As a materials engineer the extent of my emotional attachment to my work in the last four years has been nonexistent. As a member of Children Alone I found myself wrestling more with emotional contradictions than with the quality of my images. I came to really care for Brandon and Alisha and as a result I wanted to understand Sharon.

At five years old Brandon and Alisha possess all the best characteristics of humans: loving, kind, caring, excitable, and

most of all forgiving. Their mother, Sharon Taylor has been a crack addict for the last 20 years of her life. During which she spent her days hiding in a dope house, in search of her next hit, neglecting her five children. It’s hard to forgive Sharon, to trust that she truly has the best intentions. I believe this class has given me hope that people really can recover.

As a recovering addict Sharon is trying her best to make amends and be a good mother to her children. When we visit Sharon and her youngest, the twins, it’s hard to picture Sharon and neglectful and depressed. She seems caring and interested in the well being of her children. Although when you meet her three older sons, ages 14, 15, and 18 it’s clear that another side of Sharon existed for a long time. Her sons seem only too happy to get away from her. Her oldest son barely responds to her, meeting direct questions with a blank stare. The boys are too grown up for teenagers; they’ve never had a mother and they still don’t have one. It was hard to stay in Sharon’s house the day her older sons were visiting. They avoided the lens and it took a great deal of organizing to get a family shot. I recall being so drained after that visit that it was several days before I could go back and edit photos. The pictures I got all lacked the energy I usually get from Brandon and Alisha, I couldn’t find the spark in the eyes of Sharon’s older sons and it broke my heart.

I want to believe that Sharon has changed and that Brandon and Alisha will have a real family. I want them to be driven, to have passion, to succeed in all their endeavors, to be nurtured, and to know that they can achieve anything. Sadly, all

it takes is to look at the burn mark on the side of Brandon’s neck to lose a lot of hope.

In that same vain, I’ve contemplated whom Sojourner’s Moms is here to serve. I believe it’s for the children, so that they may have a stable home. I’m thankful for Sojourner’s Moms for giving Sharon a chance to prove that she is a good mother, but I also believe that the best charity is one which foster’s independence. When I asked Sharon how long she planned on staying at the Sojourner house, she replied, “Forever.” This dependency on the Sojourner program frightens me. Sharon needs to grow, to become independent and to take responsibility for her family. While I truly believe that Sojourner’s Moms is doing a great think for newly recovering mothers, it’s important to remember that recovery is a life long endeavor. Sharon will always struggle with substance dependence and depression but she needs to learn to live with that struggle.

Sojourner’s Moms is giving Sharon a large house so that all her children may move in with her. Her first goals are make sure the kids have their own space and more importantly their own TVs. When did parenting turn into entertaining children with TV around the clock? It worries me that when Sharon does spend time with the kids, the only difference is that the TV is turned to violent adult shows instead of cartoons.

As photographers, our camera provides entry into other people’s lives, emotions, and traumas. It is an honor that people let us into their lives, and a privilege to see and capture

their world through our lens. Photography is about telling a story. In thinking about the story I want to tell about the Taylors I have realized that I am torn. I’m torn between their past and their future. I don’t know what lies ahead for this family, and as subjects of my photographs I’m trying to keep my opinions out of it. With the privilege to enter people’s lives we also sign an unspoken agreement that we are flies on the wall. I may despise the constant banter of the TV blaring in the living room, but I cannot ask to turn it off. I have to document the truth about this family, and it’s hard when I have become emotionally attached and invested in their well-being. My world is too far removed from that of the Taylors to ever say that I understand them, but I can at least give them the pleasure of taking photographs on a sunny afternoon. If I’ve learned anything it’s that happiness preservers and that as long as your holding a camera almost everyone is willing to smile.

The End Effect
by Grace LaRosa

So here we are: a semester’s worth of speculation, interaction, and shutter-clicking all coming to a close. We’ve placed a frame around the day-to-day lives of the women at the Allegheny County jail and the families of Sojourner House, memorializing an immense stream of moments—some typical, some tender, and a handful of surprisingly beautiful—yet all meaningful in the capacity in which they were made. After so much time preparing for the “meetings to come”, discussing the unknown, and bracing ourselves to step into such different worlds, it’s quite strange to think that it’s almost over. It happened, it’s in the past. These photographs are made, and in just a few weeks, these women and families will resume their lives uninterrupted by any eager lenses or curious young visitors.

I wish I could say I knew with certainty that our time with the Bey family at Sojourner House left a lasting impact. The honest truth is, however, that I’m not sure. Week after week we came and spent time with Tracy and her children, and while the kids lit up with energy and openness around our cameras, Tracy seemed determined to keep herself at a safe distance. Every attempt at conversation was received politely, but never responded to in depth. After a while, it became clear that she was allowing us to come over and photograph purely out of love for her children—not out of any personal desire or wish. At first I was upset, going into the class wanting nothing more than to listen to these women’s stories, to help them discover a new outlet, to restore their hope in themselves. Yet while the past’s ghosts never fully emerged, a different triumph unexpectedly took suit. If anything, our presence at Sojourner

House ended up as a testament to a recovering mother’s unconditional love for the ones, as Sharon so bluntly stated, who “still have hope.” For—silent as she was about her own struggles—Tracy proved to us that she would do anything for her kids. The cameras certainly did not miss that fact.

As for myself? I’m still trying to work through my experiences over these past months, figuring out how my steps into foreign territory changed me on the way out. It’s a million times more detailed, complicated, and tangled to think through than I’d ever anticipated, and I know for a fact that I’ll never be able to look at certain things in the same light. There’s a lasting impact for you: after all this, my view on my own life will never be the same. I think back to when I was little, playing catch with my dad on the front lawn, waking up to him making me breakfast, driving me to school—and all I can think is that I was so damn lucky. For he loved me unconditionally, just as Tracy loves her children—the different being that my dad was in a position to be there with me every step of the way, to take care of me. I cannot possibly explain what a smack in the face it was to see the Sojourner House kids so excited about having a family car for the first time, or playing basketball with themselves (and only themselves) in the cul-de-sac out front of their home. There was no adult, no father there with them, and in every one of my memories there is. I will never again look back on my own past and take that for granted.

Patience’s World

by Grace LaRosa
and Joy Nelson



Joy, Patience, and Grace: a namely pairing.

Tall and reserved, yet all the while projecting an air of youthful confidence, Patience Bey came to us in the Sojourner House common room, proudly sporting a pair of sparkly sneakers and a Mickey Mouse sweatshirt. One would never assume she was just starting middle school, carrying herself with the maturity and poise of someone who’s seen and experienced more than your average eleven-year-old. It was an interesting juxtaposition, this mix of childhood garb and grown-up posture.

Then, all of a sudden: “I want *you*,” she called out. The pairing of families and students had just begun, but Patience had already decided who she wanted to work with, pointing directly at Joy.

And so it was, the birth of a namely trio: Joy, Grace, and Patience. As we began to get to know Ms. Bey, it became more and more apparent just how determined, bright, and refreshing her spirit was.

Patience's World

The following pages are the result of collaboration between the three of us, a mixed bag of vignettes into Patience's day-to-day wants, hopes, family, and surroundings. Several images were even made by Patience herself—it seems she was a natural photographer. Not only did Ms. Bey's spirit seem to have no end, her determination to achieve her goals was unparalleled, despite any circumstances or difficulties she may have been through. The oldest child home in a large family, she certainly has alot on her shoulders; yet she always carries herself with confidence, style, and—dare we say it—a bit of sass.

We only hope you enjoy these images as much as we enjoyed making them together.

Patience's
World

I would rather wear my contacts.





We just got a new car,
so now we can go on
trips.



My brother
and cousin
try to act
tough

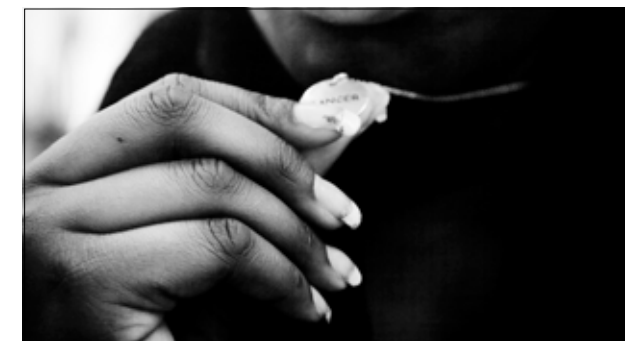


↳ the little
ones just
act silly:

I like to get dressed up.



I want to be a model.



I love jewelry.
This is my astrology
necklace, I'm a Cancer.



I also love shopping,
I can walk so good in



heels.



This is the dog I
would chose if I could
pick whatever kind I
wanted.



Q: WHAT DO YOU WANT
TO BE WHEN YOU
GROW UP?

A: OH GOSH, AT LEAST
25 THINGS. I WANNA
BE EVERYTHING.





all together.



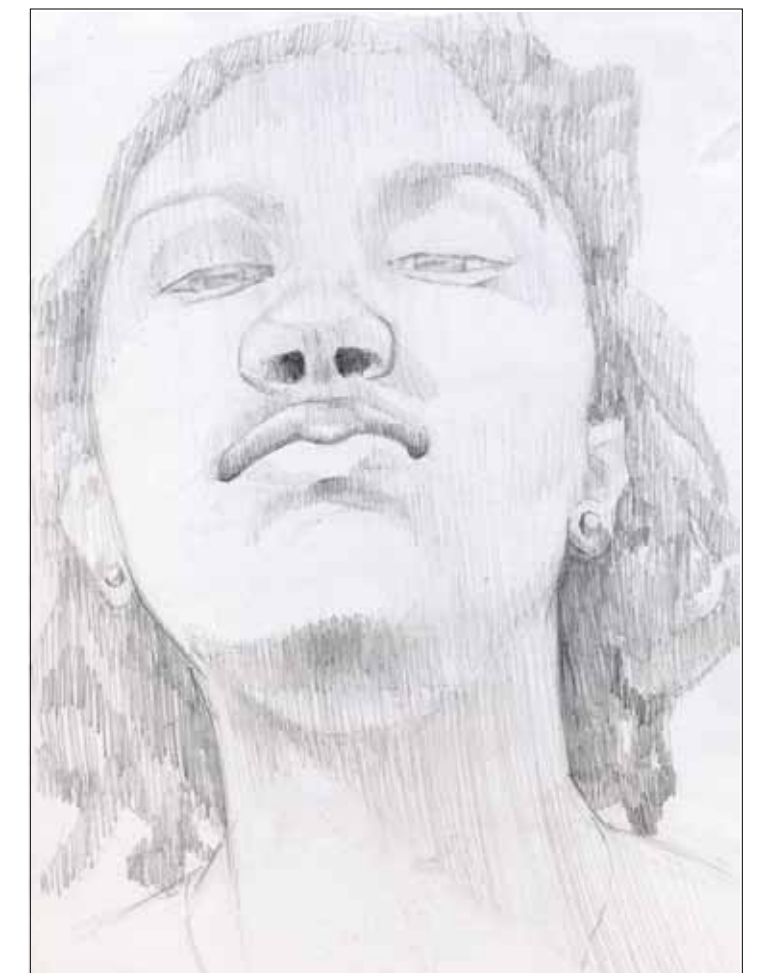
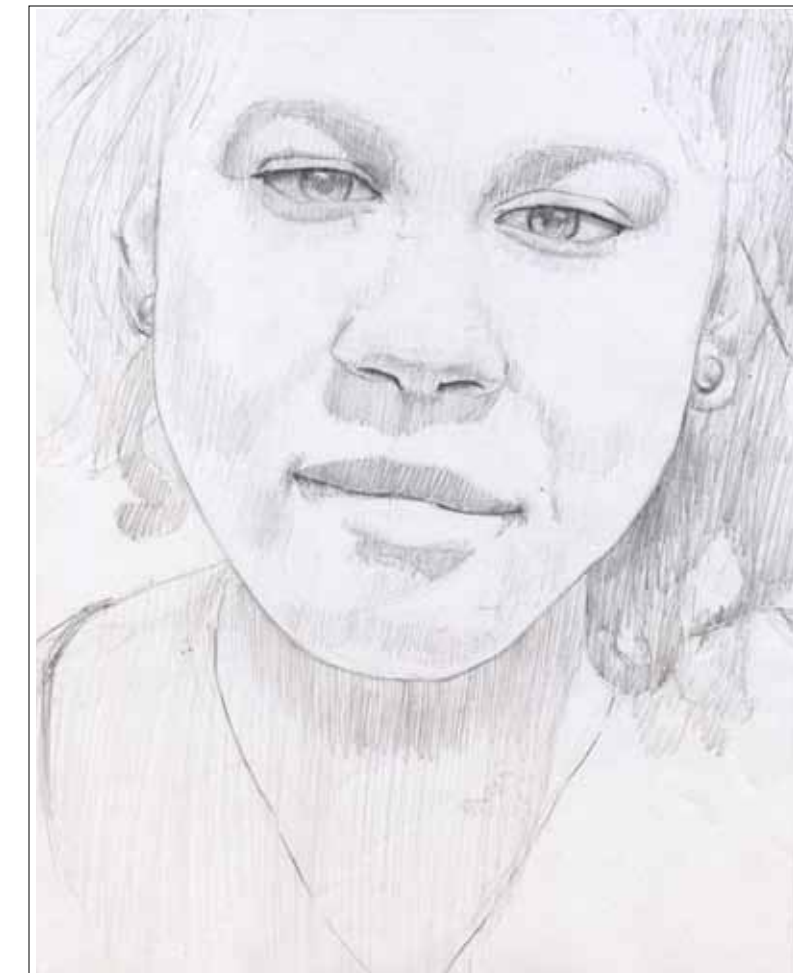
Thank you to Patience and the Bey Family for letting us “photographer girls” into their lives week after week, and for such general openness to the cameras we brought with us. You have taught us to appreciate our own families—as well as the availability of picture-making at our fingertips, a privilege we should treasure—and we will keep that gratitude with us always.

— Joy and Grace



Ms. Bey (facing page) and Patience

by Joy Nelson



Time Capsule

by Alyson Brown
and Carson Beyl



Keiona, Virgie, and Lisa

Every year brings change but it is so easy to lose track of the moments that have impacted us. We think it is important to try to record even the memories that seem insignificant, in order to realize how far we’ve come and who we are today. We met Virgie, Keiona, and Lisa in February of 2010 and over the past three months we have reminisced and worked together to record thoughts, goals, and memories in our journals. Our 2010 Time Capsule is a glimpse of meaningful moments with Virgie, her daughter, Keiona, and their friend, Lisa.



Keiona

Keiona

I want to go to disney world and the most extreme water park.

i do Really want to be in a fashion show. I want to go around the world and do fashion shows.

I like to Dance.



Virgie

Virgie

The day I threatened to throw the beans on the ground. When we were going to the sister to sister picnic.

When chuckie scared us on Halloween. (Me and Lisa)

I like making people laugh.



Lisa

lisa

Starbucks mocha Frappachinos
in the summertime kicking
back laughing and drinking
them.

watching all the new
movies with Virgie,
going to Wal-mart and
trying to keep her away
from movie section

McDonald's once a week my kids
and I would go to eat there.



When we look back on this semester and time spent
with Virgie, Keiona, and Lisa, we won't remember talking
about photography, journal entries, and meeting times.
It will be the moments spent sitting around the table or outside
on the sidewalk listening to stories about the neighborhood and
dreaming of Starbucks Frappaccinos. In the end, this experience
has taught us more about bonding than anything else.

— Alie and Carson

The Taylors

by Maryanna Saenko
and Paresh Vasandani



Alisha, Brandon, and Sharon enjoying the first warm days of a new year.

Sharon and her two youngest, Alisha and Brandon have let us into their lives over the past three months. This is the story of a family with a troubled past. Sharon has been suffering from depression and addiction for the last 20 years. She has five children, ages five to eighteen. For the entirety of the life of her older children Sharon has sought refuge in drugs. Now, as a participant in Sojourner House Mom she is clean, getting treatment, and reestablishing a relationship with her children. As Sharon puts her demons to rest, she gets to give her family a new life.

While a photograph may not be meant to an opinion it often becomes one. We are aware of the irony in the work, in the difficulty that lies ahead. For the strength they show, and the love they possess the Taylor’s are really a picture perfect family. As we’ve gotten to know and love them, we believe they deserve to be depicted as one. Sharon is kind, open-hearted and a great mother. So while we must accept disappointment we must never lose hope.



Sharon and her friend, Faith, relax after cooking a fantastic pork-chop dinner.



The Taylors remind us that there is nothing more liberating than full- bellied choking for air laughter.



“Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family: Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”

Novelist Jane Howard captures the essence of family in far better words than I. We all find strength and courage in our families and friends.

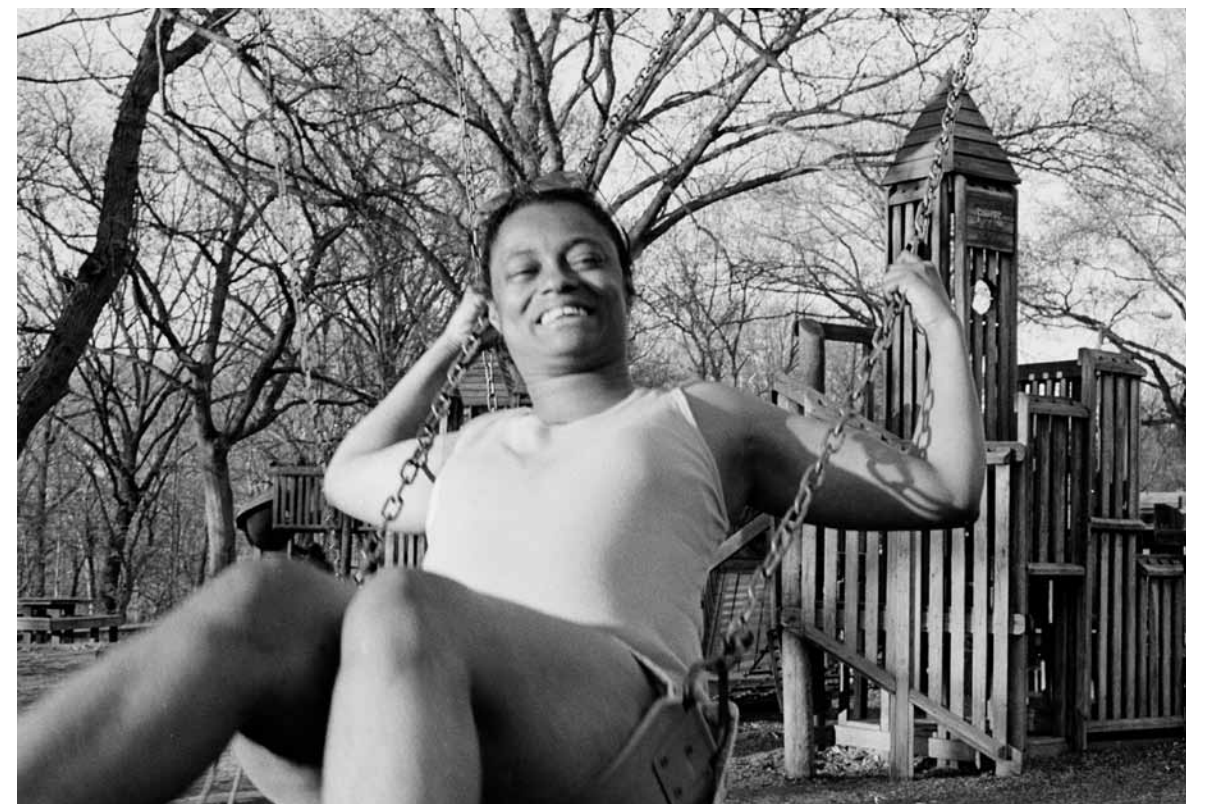


"I'm blessed with my angels, they've already been through so much." — Sharon



Brandon and Alisha took to the cameras immediately, as models, photographers, and dancers, reminding us that photography is just fun.

Using a 35mm film camera to shoot the Taylors in black and white will always be a special memory for me. Being so accustomed to digital cameras, I remember how uncertain I was feeling while taking pictures of them playing around. Without their patience and cooperation these photographs would have never made their way out of the dark room. —Vasu





They are twins.

Alisha is always smiling, amusing herself, and never missing a moment to shine for the camera.

Brandon is more introverted, lost in his own world he walks his own path.



Alisha, determined to conquer the monkey bars, looks to her mom for just a little help getting across.

While Brandon took on the slide, surprising us with his head first bravado.



Photographers are really just professional swing pushers. Vasu smiles as the family flies together.



Sharon won \$700 in her church bingo, she took the twins to buy bicycles.

At the store, Brandon cried and begged for an action toy, not understanding that he could have both the bike and the toy.

Later at home, a bikeless Brandon realized his error, a bike would have been way better.

Sharon promises to buy him a bike the next time they go to the store.



Luckily, Alisha was feeling charitable.

She shared her bike and gave Brandon a push onto his first off-roading adventure.





As photographers, our cameras provide entry into other people's lives, emotions, and traumas. It is an honor that the Taylors let us into their lives, and a privilege to see and capture their world through our lens's. This project was outside of my comfort zone and I'm thankful for the opportunity to learn about life, addiction, and most importantly recovery. I believe that Sharon is truly recovering. She has so much love for her children. I'm truly hopeful for Brandon and Alisha. I want them to be driven, to have passion, and to succeed in all their endeavors.

— Maryanna

Looking at Sharon's efforts of transitioning back into the society and being there for her children has further strengthened my belief that deep down inside no human being is bad, especially a Mother. A Mother cannot nurture life without love for that life. That is what keeps hope alive. I wish Sharon, Alisha, and Brandon all the very best in life.

— Vasu



No Matter What You Call Her

by Thea Mann
and Alexa Zin

Mom, Grandma, Cousin, Nephew, Brother, Sister . . .
We quickly discovered that Tracy’s family has a complicated tree. After getting to know all five kids that Tracy takes care of, we came to realize that her title is irrelevant. She loves, supports, and protects each one. That’s the only thing that matters.

Each time we went to visit Tracy’s family, our cameras were quickly snatched out of our hands by Jayden (age 4), “Mooka” (age 5), Praise (age 11), and “J” (age 12). These four kids were so facinated by photography and were so eager to learn how to use the cameras, that we began to dedicate all of our visits to the children exploring their world through photography. Because this became such a large part of our visits we decided to have the kids’ pictures be just as big of a part of this book as our own.

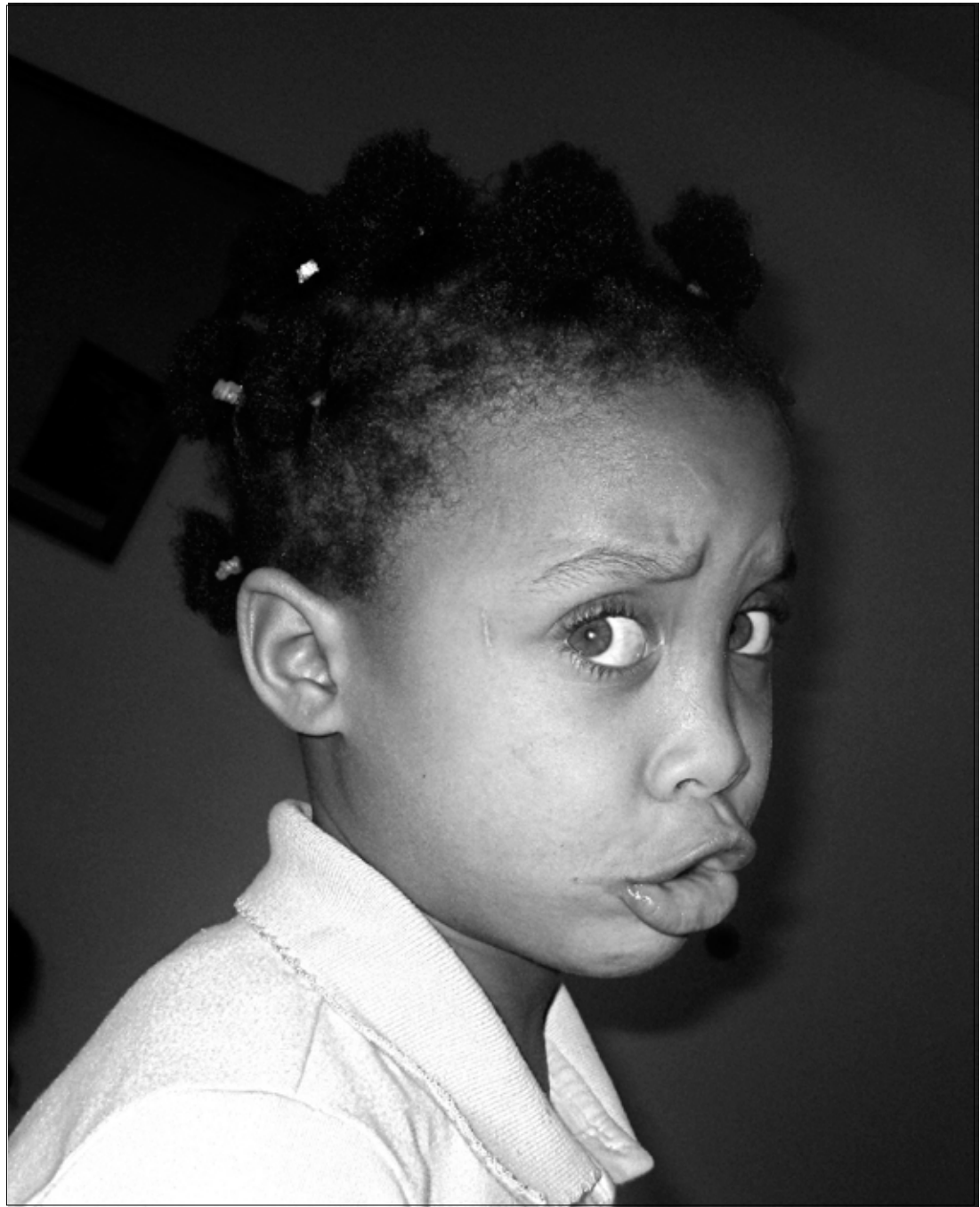


Praise

My perspective



My nephew, Jayden, running around as usual...



“Mooka”



My perspective



Thea’s feet are so much bigger than mine!





Jayden



My perspective



I love taking pictures of the houses and cars on my street.





Jordan

My perspective



Everytime they came to visit, I never wanted to give the camera back.





We remember this one day. Alexa was running around with Mooka, carrying her when she almost tripped on the sidewalk. A whole group of women sitting outside of Sojourner House started laughing and yelling at distraught Alexa. It was embarrassing but we realized how everyone in this community watches out for each other.

The community functions as a whole and we know that any one of those women would have had Alexa's neck if she had dropped Mooka.

Our experience with Tracy and her children and grandchildren was more than just fun days playing and taking pictures.

Getting to know this family broadened our understanding of a functional family. Despite the fact that Tracy's family has had a difficult past they are a loving bunch and clearly love to spend time with each other.

We are so thankful for their welcoming, trusting attitude.

— Alexa and Thea



DeAndre, Maceo, Chanhee, Su and Baby D

The Davis Family

by Su -Youn Lee
and Chan Hee Soh

Hello!

We are the Davis family. There are five of us total Faith (Mom!) Dominick, who’s away right now, Maceo, DeAndre and Duane. We live in Pittsburgh. I hope you enjoy seeing my family through photos as much as we enjoyed taking them.

— Faith

Hi!

We are Su & Chanhee from Carnegie Mellon University. We’re seniors majoring in Fine Arts. In Februrary, we met the Davis family for the first time and we’ve seen each other till the end of April. At first, it was challenging to take pictures of the family right away. But as we spent more time together, we could get more truthful side of the family.

— Su & Chanhee



On February 25, Charlee's Children Alone class visited the Sojourner House. Su and Chanhee were teamed with the mother Faith and her children. She has four sons, but only her youngest son, Duane Coleman II, was there.

When everyone did not know how to team up and the silent moment kept on, Charlee brought this kid to Su and Chanhee and asked, *"Do you want to be teamed up with these girls?"* This 8-years-old kid said, "yes," in a quiet voice.

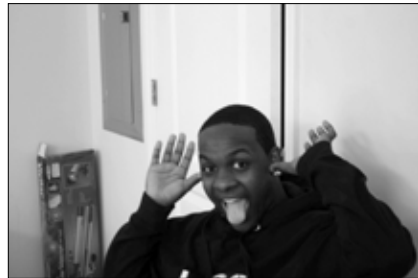
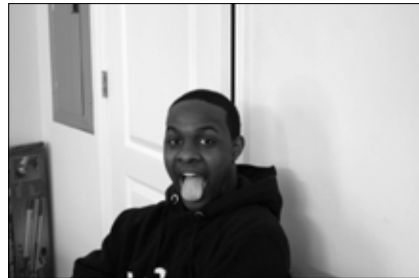
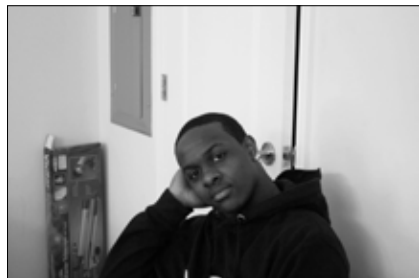
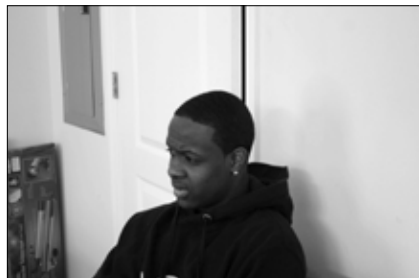
Everyone calls him Baby D. He was shy, but he was excited and interested in taking photos. Faith was nice and taught a lesson to these girls (us), whose backgrounds are not from the States. *"...One thing that you need to be careful about this American Culture. In the States, people are too independent that they sometimes forget about their family..."*



Snow was piled up all around Faith's house. On February 28, Su and Chanhee visited Faith's house for the first time. Faith was cooking and already there was some food on the table.

It was the first time seeing Maceo, her second oldest son. Her oldest son, Dominick is away now. Baby D was not there either. Faith wanted to go outside. She and Maceo began snow fighting, while we stood steadily in the middle of the fight.





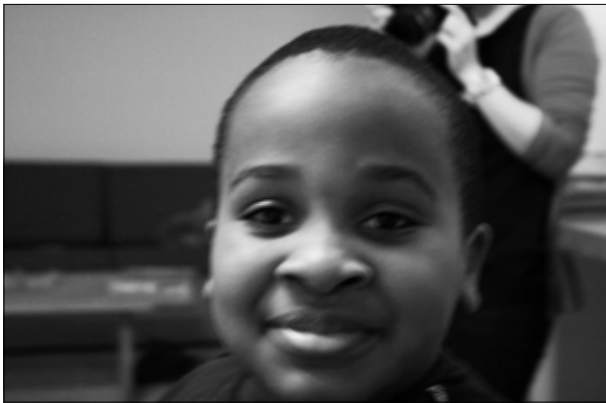
Maceo is a freshman in high school. At first, we didn't know how to approach the teenager, because we expected an 8-year-old boy. So we decided not to bring out the crayons and sketchbook that we had brought, and we saved them for later. We tried to break the ice with the camera. As soon as we began taking pictures and let Maceo use our camera, too, he started to feel more comfortable.

When Faith, his mom, took pictures of him, he posed and made funny faces. Those were the faces that we hadn't seen from Maceo.

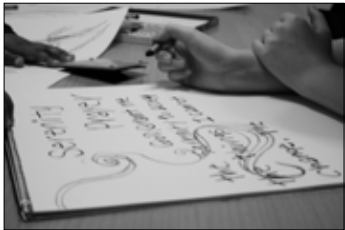
Maceo is a very gentle and mature boy.



Faith showed us the pictures that she had taken.
Baby D made dynamic and fun faces her, his mom.



Last time, Baby D told us that he likes coloring.
We brought him a sketch book and crayons.



We also met Faith's 3rd oldest son, DeAndre, a 13-year-old boy.
He just focused on drawing a self-portrait, quietly.

While Baby D finished three drawings, DeAndre carefully completed one self-portrait.

Before Faith began to take photos of her children by herself, she asked Su to decorate
the drawing and Chan-hee to write a serenity prayer on it.

Faith wanted to hang it on the wall.

On April 4, Faith and her three sons except Dominick were at home. It was the first day we visited Faith's house after the snow was gone.

It was a beautiful day. Faith called her sons to come outside.

While Baby D was scared of a bee following him, Maceo and DeAndre posed in front of our cameras.

Later, Baby D and Faith joined them to be in the pictures.



We asked Faith to write an introduction for the first page of our essay.

Three brothers posed for the camera.



On April 14, Faith asked to go to the park.

While she and Maceo were talking, Baby D had a fun posing in front of the camera.

The park was right behind Sojourner House.

Faith hit the pin number on the lock to enter.



DeAndre joined the family late.

Three brothers played, throwing pebbles to each other.

They went on the hill to be in the pictures.

Baby D stood in the middle of his two big brothers.



To her sons, Faith wrote,

Hello my angels.

You are truly a gift from God. When I look in each of your eyes I see a future filled with love, success and overflow of God's blessings.

Stay strong.

Always remember you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you!

Love always,

Mom.

On April 21, we visited Faith's house for the last time and took pictures.

At our last visit, Faith said that she did not have many family pictures.

So, the two girls (us) made Faith a family album and gave it to her as a gift.

Faith kept saying, "*I'm so pleased to see these. Thank you.*"



Rasheeda’s Family

by Victor Ng
and Alex Laskaris

For the last four months, we have had the honor of meeting Rasheeda Jefferson and her children Raheim, Rayquan and Raysha.

Precious Moments
by Rasheeda Jefferson

I chose this title because that’s exactly what they are. I came here a year ago. A lot of things have changed with me and my children. We had ups and downs. But mostly ups. I reach out and expect help when needed. A year ago I wouldn’t have been open to this project. I was closed to people seeing who I was and my parenting skills. Today I know I am stronger, brighter and willing to fight for who I am today. This project allowed me to realize that need to cherish every moment of my life and live it to the best of my knowledge. I am glad I did this project and glad you all caught these precious moments. Thanks Vic and Alex.



Victor, Raheim, Rasheeda and Alex















Thanks to Rasheeda, Raysha, Raheim, & Rayquan for letting us into their lives, however brief.

I think it is a hopeful notion that two people from different places at different stages can still come together, connect, and create something.

I hope they enjoyed themselves as thoroughly as we did, and we hope they like the pictures.

— Alex & Victor

Pregnant in Jail

by Allison Piper



Amy (l) is 30 weeks and Jen (r) is 14 weeks pregnant.

Jail is uncomfortable enough. You have no control over your own space. Your toilet is in your bedroom. The drinking water is brown. Now imagine being incarcerated and being pregnant. For many women, this is the reality.

The normal physical and emotional strains of pregnancy are compounded by not knowing where your newborn will live, not being able to eat nutritious food, and often, not even knowing if the infant is healthy or not. Pregnant inmates are constantly waging both a physical and emotional battle.

I observed a prenatal care class, which serves mostly as a support group for the women, and spoke with several women individually. The challenges of “the system” made it difficult to get photographs at times, and as a result, these women’s stories are told mostly through words.

Shay

My first day observing the prenatal class, I walk down the white-washed institutional halls of the jail with the teacher of the class. We sign in and head to the classroom, which is a small room with a grey desk and a bulletin board covered in magazine clippings of athletes. Before we reach the classroom door, the women begin to arrive.

I don't know what I was expecting, but something seems wrong. One woman, an African American inmate in her mid-twenties with close-cropped hair, is breathing heavily and can barely walk. She's very pregnant, and is being supported on either side by concerned-looking inmates.

As soon as we are in sight, one calls out, "She's in labor!"

I stand aghast as the teacher helps the woman into the classroom. Everyone is talking at once, but the teacher asks direct questions in a calm, soothing voice.

The woman, Shay, had gone into labor at 5 AM that morning- 8.5 hours ago. She felt contractions, and saw blood. She went to the infirmary, where she was told that before she would be sent to the hospital, she would have to fill up an entire sanitary pad with blood. This in spite of the fact that she is three weeks overdue and now the fetal heartbeat cannot be detected.

The teacher asks Shay to tell her when the next contraction comes. Not even three minutes later, her face is pained and

her neck beads up with sweat. "Is it another one?" Shay forces a nod.

The other women in the room look fearful. As the teacher escorts Shay outside to call for help, they talk in hushed voices. "That must be so scary." "I don't wanna give birth in here."

When Shay arrived at the hospital, she was already 8 cm dilated. It was too late for an epidural to work. Surrounded only by the doctors and nurses and one guard, Shay gave birth to a baby boy. He was healthy, 8 lb. 13 oz. and 20 inches long.

Shay knew she didn't have long to spend with her baby before she had to return to jail and her mother took temporary custody. Despite exhaustion from the grueling delivery, Shay didn't sleep for two nights in order to spend precious time with her child.

Saying goodbye, Shay says, "was the hardest thing I ever did in my life. [...] That's a really traumatic experience. I'd rather do 100 years in jail than do that again." Three weeks following the delivery, her pain is tangible, and her description is heart wrenching. "I wish I was pregnant again. Just to feel him."

She tells me of her attachment to her newborn and desire to support and protect him. "I'm so maternal now... I have to

be there. I am his mother," she says, discussing the changes in her life she plans to make upon her release. Her son, she says, gives her motivation to do better in life.

Shay's experiences with prenatal experiences in the jail were, to put it lightly, negative. She tells me, "It was very difficult to get my point across about the care I need." She points to a strong support system on the pod as helping her get through her pregnancy, but is nothing short of damning of the jail prenatal services. "I wouldn't send a pregnant *dog* up there."

Health Issues Among Incarcerated Women lists nine essential components of prenatal care: risk assessment; vitamin and iron supplementation; dietary supplementation; cervical cytology; complete blood count; urinalysis; bloodtype, Rh factor, and antibody screen; syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia screens, and HIV/AIDS testing.

According to Shay, the only checks performed during the jail prenatal appointments were weight, temperature, blood pressure, and blood screening. She never saw an OB/GYN or received a pap smear. Before the baby could be delivered, the hospital had to do many of the checks that the hospital neglected to do.

This experience is echoed by other pregnant inmates.

"I don't even know if my baby has 6 toes or anything... I'm not getting any kind of sonogram. I'm so worried."

"I did get a pap smear from McGee [hospital], but the jail didn't send over any of my bloodwork." "Prenatal care? We don't get none."

Nutrition is also a constant struggle. Though pregnant women are given a special "pregnancy tray," this food, too, is still largely devoid of nutritional value and sometimes contains food pregnant women should avoid, such as canned tuna or bologna. Many women rely on their commissary, which allows them to purchase additional food. These options, too, are by and large salty and processed, including mostly "chips, noodles, and candy." Says one woman, "I just want my vegetables."

An update: Shay has left the Allegheny County Jail since our interview, and is hopefully at home with her baby. For the other women, their future is uncertain. Day-to-day discomfort mixes in equal parts with fear. It is terrifying for a mother to have so little control over the well-being of her child.

Elise’s Story

by Amy Nichols



“Elise! That picture of you in the white shirt... you look beautiful. Very beautiful.” -- Carol Negley, 4D

When I walked into 4D for the second time, Elise saw my camera slung around my neck and decided to approach me.

I gave Elise a survey that asked, “How has your relationship with your children changed since becoming incarcerated?” Her answer, as would many of the things Elise would have to say over the course of my time with her, was heartfelt and surprisingly candid: *I believe this incarceration period shall help us grow stronger as a family. My sister was killed on my birthday last month—February 21. We are all mindful of how precious life is and the choices we make.*

Melissa “Elise” Burkes, 42, had been in jail for 3 months when I met her, though this was hardly her first visit. When Elise was 26 years old, her boyfriend of ten years died suddenly, leaving Elise and her three young children—Raynise, Anthony and TaRay—alone. Elise began drinking to fall asleep at night, and began to use cocaine in order to function at work. When she was fired from her job, she was incarcerated for the first time for stealing to support her young children.

On May 19, Elise will appear before a judge for release... she hopes for the last time.



No one assumed I was there for a class, doing a project. Rather, to anyone in the waiting room, I was there to visit a friend, a boyfriend, a parent or cousin. As I waited by the lockers for Antoinette to arrive, a woman nodded at me and said, “Excuse me, what pod you goin’ to?” I stammered that I didn’t know. As I continued to wait, an older woman asked me if I knew how to work the money transfer machine, and I responded again that I did not. I don’t know what about those interactions made me feel uncomfortable—that they assumed I was there to visit someone, or that I didn’t know the answers. I didn’t know, at the time, which position I would rather be in; I wished for a moment that I knew the answers to these questions, but on the other hand, I was secretly glad that I did not.

Sitting in the interview room, waiting for Elise, I realized that there was a very distinct smell in the pod that I’d come to recognize. It’s a dense, humid smell... like nothing in particular that I could put my finger on. I asked Antoinette about it. She wrinkled her nose and said, “It smells like lunch all day... smells like mustard...”

Elise told me that at first her oldest daughter didn’t visit. Then, Elise’s baby sister was hit by a car and killed in Homewood, on Elise’s birthday while Elise was still in jail. Her daughter started bringing Elise’s grandbaby around after that. Elise told me that she tried to occupy herself in jail; she took every program she could, she said. Some women didn’t do anything while they were in jail, and it looked bad when they went to court. She commented, “It’s just a waste of taxpayer money”—which impressed me, I think, because I think the last thing I’d be thinking about while in jail would be doing justice to the taxpayers.

That day, I told Elise she could take pictures with my camera if she wanted to. Her face lit up.

“Oh my GOD, this is the highlight of my week!”

That’s how it began. Elise started walking around with me, taking pictures of her fellow inmates—her friends. We went into the basketball court, where a group of women were sunning themselves.

Elise’s Story, *continued*

A bright, rectangular patch of barred sunlight fell on the floor, and the women told me that this was a rare treat for them; they were all gathered within this tiny rectangle.

The excitement was palpable. The women would take off their “reds” (uniform overshirt) and look in the reflection in the glass to comb out their hair, hoping that to the camera, they wouldn’t look as though they were in jail. Some of them saw their pictures and exclaimed, “We look so good!” Even for a moment, my camera had made these women feel beautiful.



Elise: on being a woman in jail



This decorative frame was made for Elise by a fellow inmate in 4D. Elise often works kitchen duty during the daily meals, and this gift was an expression of gratitude by another woman for Elise's work.

During my first visit to the jail, I noticed similar crafts on both the male and female pods. On many of the pods, inmates craft a curtain out of cardboard toilet paper rolls and small bath towels that can be fitted into the small window on the cell door. Many inmates also make braided toilet-seat covers out of cardboard.

Amy: What do you think is different about being a woman in jail versus if you're a man here?

Elise: Oh, it's just a man's jail. Things are geared towards men. And the men get a lot of privileges. Most of the guards are men, and they don't want to deal with the manipulation, and the cattiness and the chit-chatting, things of that nature. Men have water dispensers on their pod, they have games, they have a volleyball and a basketball... and they stick together. They get things done. Like, they just announced 'there's no toilet paper'... the men do a lot of writing to get things done; the women don't do that. The women write saying, 'Oh, she has extra something or she said this, she said that'—so much unnecessary things. I guess being a woman—most women are family-oriented. Not that men aren't, but women usually run the household, whereas men make the bread (supposedly). We miss our children, and things of that nature... Guys—they miss their families but they were on the street a lot. That's not—I don't think it hurts... well, I can't say that. It just seems to me... I see different things that they have that we don't have.

Amy: What are some things that women do here to feel more feminine?

Elise: *[One example]* There's a pad that they use to buff the floor. The middle part comes out, and you throw it away. But I use that for exfoliating, and I use that for my feet... and when I use that I kinda feel like—like I just got a pedicure or something *[laughing]*.

You can't feel like a woman in this place. – Makeup? Ha. [The women] use colored pencils. They rub it against a surface and use the color as eye shadow or lipstick... nahh, we don't get make-up.

There's not much you can do in here, because you're really not allowed too much. You use your razor to shave maybe... or some of the things you saw on my desk that you get when you graduate from a program... that has a different smell—that's really something. Like the body wash, the soap... things like that. That makes you feel... I mean, because other than that we all smell the same because everybody uses the same soap from commissary.



Elise: on being a woman in jail, *continued*

March 20, 2010

Thank you Jesus for this beautiful day. It was calm and relaxing; I had plenty of rest for myself and plenty of time to myself. I need to say thank you for letting me take some photographs. Maybe Amy and I could hook up on the outside to do some volunteer work, and she may teach me some things and I could help her and her friends with their research and surveys of the women who are incarcerated. Maybe even teach them some things about being an addict or being lost to yourself. It was a wonderful thing to see the world through the photo lens.

I like to take photographs, and when I'm at home, I have a camera everywhere. I have disposable cameras; I have digital cameras. I didn't realize how much I missed taking pictures until you had came here with the camera... Watching girls fix their hair, pose, and stuff like that: it was just different—looking at the pod and the women through the photo lens.

When you're looking with your naked eye, everybody looks the same, dresses the same. The only thing that's different is our skin, our hair maybe. But when I was looking at them through the photo lens, I saw beauty. I still see beauty, but I just seen a different type of beauty, I see a different attitude. They felt—I could see that they felt good about being photographed, and they felt pretty for the moment. Because we don't feel pretty in these uniforms, we don't feel pretty listening to this—

At that moment, an announcement blared over the loudspeaker that the pod had run out of toilet paper.

[laughing]—that doesn't make you feel pretty... you know?

— Elise



After giving her a photograph that I took of her, Rhonda McCrommon attached it to a school picture of her son.



Lisa, Jessica, and ... pose together in the gymnasium, 4D.

Amy: *How do relationships form in jail between the women? Do you get close to the women in jail—since you spend so much time together?*

Elise: You see all these women? They’re just all separate. There’s a few that are close... but even if you see some [women] playing cards together, that doesn’t mean they’re close or that they like each other; they’re just playing cards. All of them—sitting over there watching TV; they’re not watching TV together, they’re just watching television.

A lot of these women that are here—not that I’m better than anybody—but I probably wouldn’t socialize with them on the outside. I mean, my crime is just as bad. My whole record is retail theft, and they say if you’re a thief, you’re a liar and a cheat, and all of these other things... Some of these women are destitute, where drug addiction has taken them to prostitution and things like that; I’ve never experienced that. So, I probably—not probably, I wouldn’t socialize with them [on the outside]. And I probably would look at them as ‘less than’ on the outside. But getting to know them here... [it’s different].

I gravitate towards someone who’s more like you: quiet, who likes to read. Sometimes when I run the NA and the AA meetings, I get to know that 5 or 6 women that come in there a little personally. Those are the women I’d talk to about alcohol, or about my children, the things that I wish to accomplish when I leave here, and the regrets about the things I didn’t accomplish.

Elise: on friendships in jail

Those are women I would choose to talk to on a more intimate level... or the women who go to Bible study. Other than that, I don’t talk about myself.

When they leave, I don’t talk to anybody... I just continue my journaling. I don’t talk to anybody about anything. Because—you know how when you’re talking to somebody and you’re real deep, or you’re on another level, and they’re looking at you and don’t have a clue what you’re talking about? That’s how I feel a lot of the time. I listen more than I talk.

People talk to me a lot... more than I care for sometimes [laughing], but it’s alright. Everybody needs someone to talk to sometimes. It’s hard being close with someone. I did get close with this young girl... and I didn’t know what crime she had committed to be here, but she was my roommate, and we ended up being really close. And she went to court, and they gave her 5 to 10 years. I was devastated, because I didn’t know her crime was so severe... I didn’t know her crime was so severe to give her a sentence like that. A lot of the times, I don’t ask people what they’re here for, because we do judge. As much as we would like to think that we don’t judge, we still judge. And I try not to judge anyone, because—like you would think I learned my lesson after coming here quite a few times. So, I don’t ask anybody what they’re here for; I just try to be nice regardless, even when they’re not nice to me.

Amy: *Is it hard when you get close to someone, and reveal a lot about yourself, and then they leave or you leave...?*

Elise: It’s very hard... it’s hard if you don’t keep in touch. Most of the time we don’t keep in touch, because we go off on our own [when we get out]. It’s hard getting close to someone when they leave, because then it’s like you’re all alone again. Just when you’re feeling a little comfortable, and you can talk to someone and confide in them, and you have somebody that’s here, going through this difficult time in your life with you. It’s almost like death a little bit—it’s devastating.

It’s harder when you get close to somebody and you feel that you trust them, and they betray your trust. That shuts people down.

You really don’t want to tell anybody your charges because for some reason now they’re allowing letters to be accepted into court. [Women write about other women] maybe to get their charges dropped a little bit... do lesser time. And that’s more or less hearsay; you don’t know if that’s the truth or not. It doesn’t happen a lot, but it happens enough.

Amy: *Enough that it’s hard to trust people?*

Elise: Yeah.



Photographing the women together was difficult. Restrictions must be employed by the jail on photographs that appear to represent women “in a relationship” with one another; if the women were pictured hanging on each other in a particular way—touching, draping their arms around each other—the photograph was too risky to allow. Some of the women are manipulative, sexual psychological — sometimes too much for the guards to want to deal with.

The women are aware of the rules; sometimes paranoid of them. Elise told me during one of our visits that she felt personally responsible for the firing of a female corrections officer, after Elise hugged her without thinking.

“I don’t want people to get the wrong idea. Who knows, maybe they’re in a relationship; I don’t know. See that picture there? That’s OK... I don’t get a relationship ‘vibe’ from those two.”

— Jack Pischke (*Inmate Program Administrator*
Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections)

Women’s Writings

by Allison Seger



In the pages that follow, you will find the poetry, stories and essays from women incarcerated in Allegheny County Jail. These women also happen to be some of the most intelligent and passionate writers I’ve ever met. We started writing group to share our work and encourage each other to write. It worked. Each week, we sat around a small table in the middle of the chaos of pod 4F, while correction officers yelled names and women talked on the phone, styled hair or watched television. We brainstormed ideas for writing, wrote poems, wrote stories, wrote ourselves and shared. We snapped and clapped, some women sent envelopes of their writing to contests or publishers and some women slammed. Each week I am impressed by the writing, the breadth and resonance of their voices and every minute I am inspired by the women themselves. Writing with these women and getting to know Keesha, Jen and Lynne have enlarged my life. Their stories are important.

One day, I was sitting on the edge of my bunk, and I pulled on a pair of socks.
See, there are socks that they give us, from the jail... but these were socks from the outside.
Real socks.
Pulling them on, they felt different. I almost started to cry, sitting on the edge of my bunk.
I thought about what it would be like to wear pajamas, not these white panties...
this white t-shirt.



Elise receives her second-place score for a performance piece called "Music" at the Allegheny County Jail Poetry Slam.

In appreciation; we thank the following organizations that were integral to our class.

Lydia’s Place
www.lydiasplace.org

Our Mission : Lydia’s Place is a non-profit agency that helps female offenders and their children.

- Our Goals:
- Help incarcerated and recently released women in Allegheny County address their addictions and become stable, productive members of society.
 - Help children and their caregivers cope with the traumatic separation from a parent.
 - Strengthen relationships between incarcerated mothers and their children.
 - Assist mothers as they make permanency decisions for their children.
 - Promote policy changes that better address the needs of incarcerated women and the children of prisoners.

Sojourner House
www.sojournerhousepa.org

Our Mission : Sojourner House and Sojourner House MOMS help to rebuild families torn apart by addiction and poverty in the Pittsburgh region. Both programs share the mission of offering compassionate, faith-based recovery services to mothers and their children.

Long-term Housing for Families in Recovery —The MOMS (Motivation, Opportunities, Mentoring and Spirituality) Program builds on Sojourner House’s experience in providing a holistic mind-body-spirit approach to treating addiction. MOMS provides permanent, supportive housing for homeless, single dual-diagnosed women in recovery, as well as for their dependent children. Families are accepted from many agencies throughout the Pittsburgh region.

The MOMS program enables women to live independently with their children in a three or four bedroom apartment of their own. During their stay families receive:

- Assistance in developing a plan to achieve personal and family goals
- Assistance in finding and accessing needed resources
- Counseling and education on topics such as parenting and life skills
- Work-readiness/education/volunteer opportunities for the mothers
- Educational, recreational, and prevention activities for the children

Allegheny County Jail
www.alleghenycounty.us/jail/

Our Mission : The mission of the Allegheny County Bureau of Corrections is to protect the citizens of Allegheny County from criminal offenders through a collaborative system of incarceration which securely segregates offenders from society, assures offenders of their constitutional rights, and maintains diagnostic rehabilitative treatment programs to enhance the success of offenders’ reintegration into society.