"If She Can Do It, So Can I": An Ethnography of a Supportive Living Environment for Women in the Criminal Justice System and their Children

Regina Cardaci

Graduate Center, City University of New York

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“IF SHE CAN DO IT, SO CAN I”

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A SUPPORTIVE LIVING ENVIRONMENT
FOR WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND THEIR CHILDREN

by

REGINA CARDACI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Nursing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Nursing in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Barbara DiCicco-Bloom, PhD, RN

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Donna M. Nickitas, PhD, RN, NEA-BC, CNE, FNAP, FAAN

Date

Executive Officer

Lucia Trimbur, PhD

Edith Linn, PhD

Maureen Wallace, EdD, RN

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

IF SHE CAN DO IT, SO CAN I
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF A SUPPORTIVE LIVING ENVIRONMENT
FOR WOMEN IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND THEIR CHILDREN

by
Regina Cardaci

Advisor: Professor Barbara DiCicco-Bloom

There are now more women in prisons and jails than at any time in United States history. A large number of these women will be returning to the community. Women returning to the community after release from prison or jail face numerous challenges to successful reentry, e.g., securing housing and employment. In addition, following separation and care of their children by others, women with children struggle to resume their roles as mother.

This dissertation is an exploration of a program that assists women transitioning from incarceration to the community. This program helps women by helping to develop job skills and offering assistance in finding permanent housing. Another goal of the program is to facilitate mothering and thereby improve family relationships. In addition, these women are offered counseling, substance addiction services, and assistance in navigating the complicated parole system. This study aims to discover how the participants experience and conceptualize this program. Although the program’s success is of interest, this thesis does not constitute a formal evaluation.
An ethnographic approach was used to collect the data; specifically, the methods used included participant observation; and in-depth interviews with the women and the staff, as well as with the executives who are the administrators of this organization.

After a year of data collection through participant observation and interviews, three common themes emerged: *parenting the parent; the impact of competing demands, and power: If she can do it, so can I*. These themes recurred throughout the women’s stories.

*Keywords*: incarceration, women, reentry, mothering, ethnography
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I am forever grateful to the women who shared their lives with me, and have humbled me with their strength and resilience.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Mia-Anne Polizzotto. Thank you for your patience and understanding throughout this process. I will forever cherish the days and nights we spent studying together. You have taught me how to overcome adversity with grace and persevere toward reaching goals. You truly are wise beyond your years. I love you more than words can explain!
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Chapter One: Introduction

The number of women in prison and jails in the United States has been increasing; so too has the number of women being released and returning to the community. For a few of these women, the process of reintegration into the community will be smooth. Most, however, face numerous challenges to reentry, such as finding housing and employment. Women who reunite with their children must also try to resume their roles as mothers. Transitional or supportive housing, which incorporates job preparedness, supportive services, and rehabilitation if needed, is one method to help women reintegrate into the community. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of one such facility, where women live with their children, and receive supportive services that include job training, child care, and financial assistance, to facilitate transition from incarceration to the community.

Background

There are now more women in prisons and jails than at any time in United States history. Between 1977 and 2007, the number of incarcerated women increased by a staggering 832% (West & Sabol, 2009). According to the last report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (June 2008), 207,700 women were in state or federal prisons, or local jails (West & Sabol, 2009). Many of these women were first-time offenders, and typically they were incarcerated for non-violent crimes, such as property and drug offenses (Greenfeld & Snell, 2000). The increase is due in large part to the “war on drugs,” which resulted in increased arrests and instituted mandatory minimum sentencing for possession of small amounts of illegal and controlled substances. Additionally, there is lower tolerance for those driving under the influence of alcohol or other substances (Mauer, Potler, & Wolf, 1999).
The increased incarceration of women has had a direct impact on families; many of these women are mothers. Often, these women are the sole caretakers for their children, while others enter the corrections system already pregnant. The majority (71.7%) of incarcerated mothers were living with their children prior to incarceration, and most of them (85%) planned to reunite and continue caring for their children upon release (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

Studies from inside prison and jails (Bloom & Steinhart, 1993; Enos, 2001; Berry & Eigenberg, 2003; Celinska & Siegel, 2010; Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Shamai & Kochal, 2008) describe mothering as a main concern of incarcerated women; yet correctional facilities and policies have made mothering difficult. Celinska and Siegel’s (2010) qualitative study noted that although women’s individual stories and experiences differed, the central theme that emerged from the interviews was concern about mothering. Incarcerated mothers worry about how to parent from a distance (Loper & Tuerk, 2011). What happens to these women, and their efforts to mother after release, however, has received less attention.

Meeting basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, is of particular concern for women re-entering the community. Many offenders leave prison or jail with no savings, few job prospects, and no place to live (Petersilia, 2000). In New York City, offenders are commonly dropped off at the Port Authority Bus Terminal or the Queens Plaza subway station with only a few dollars and subway fare (Wynn, 2001, p. 33). Many do not even have photo identification, which is necessary for obtaining services. Safe, decent, and affordable housing is critical to women, especially if they are to regain custody of their children upon release.

Securing housing is difficult for a number of reasons. First, returning prisoners rarely have the financial means or personal references to find a home in the private real estate market. Second, federal laws (Section 9 of the Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act of 1996)
allow public housing authorities to bar housing for felony drug offenders. Lastly, these women may be rejected by their families, with whom they had hoped to find shelter.

Housing is critical to obtaining employment; without a place to live, it is difficult to keep a job. Many of these women have limited education and job skills prior to incarceration (O’Brien, 2001). Incarceration itself reduces the employability of released offenders. The stigma attached to incarceration makes it difficult for ex-prisoners to be hired. And being a convicted felon also makes some women ineligible for certain work, especially in fields that are predominantly occupied by women, such as teaching, child care, and nursing (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001).

For mothers, caring for their children is frequently the most stressful issue. Women must work to reestablish their parental role with young children who may not identify them as their mother, or with older children who may be resentful of their mothers’ absence (Severance, 2004). Many of these women reveal feelings of fear and uncertainty about how to resume a caregiving role (Severance, 2004). While the maternal instinct may motivate these women to achieve success on parole, the challenges that they had prior to incarceration, as well as the separation from their children while incarcerated, may make such success difficult. Past negative experiences with motherhood, be it how they themselves were mothered, or their own mothering history, may result in poor parenting skills upon reunification (Brown & Bloom, 2009).

Supportive housing is one solution to helping these women reintegrate into the community. Supportive housing is an effective and efficient approach to meeting the housing and specialized service needs of ex-offenders in one comprehensive program. In addition to a home, supportive housing provides services such as employment counseling, job training skills,
substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, and access to quality health care - all necessary if individual circumstances are to be addressed and independent living is to be possible. Indeed, the experiences of most service providers indicate that stable housing is a prerequisite for receiving and maintaining such services (Corporation for Supportive Housing, 2003). Supportive housing for individuals leaving the criminal justice system represents a social and ethical imperative. It has been shown to significantly reduce the rates of homelessness and recidivism in a segment of society so prone to both. In fact, the program that is the focus of this dissertation has shown a recidivism rate of 4%, compared with 30% in New York State, as reported by the Department of Corrections. Since there are already a large number of incarcerated mothers in New York State, it would be in families’ best interests to help these women transition back into the community successfully and avoid returning to prison.

**Problem**

There are more than 11,000 children in New York State whose mothers are imprisoned (Women’s Prison Association, 2009). Many are sent to live with relatives or foster families, and are passed from household to household. Many of their mothers plan to resume care for these children upon release. However, many barriers stand in the way of reuniting with and caring for their children; finding safe, affordable housing, and employment are among the greatest.

There are few facilities in New York State where women can live with their children and receive supportive services after release to ease the transition from incarceration to the community, and only one site in the state allows a woman on parole to live with her infant.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore the process of formerly incarcerated women, and those with involvement in the criminal justice system, transition to life in the
community. Many of these women are mothers reuniting with the children they were separated from during their incarceration, while others gave birth for the first time while incarcerated. Understanding this process of reentry can help guide programs to assist women in similar transition.

**Significance to Nursing**

Nursing is the protection, promotion, and optimization of health and abilities; prevention of illness and injury; alleviation of suffering through the diagnosis and treatment of human response; and advocacy in the care of individuals, families, communities, and populations (American Nurses Association, n.d). The American Nurses Association, in the Code for Ethics and Human Rights (1991) discusses the importance of nurses’ attention to social justice issues. It calls for nurses to act on a local, national, and international level to ensure health promotion for all segments of society. Incarcerated persons are among those marginalized in society who nurses and other health care professionals often disregard.

This dissertation also focuses on Healthy People 2020’s objective of Social Determinants of Health, which has a goal of “creating social and physical environments that promote good health for all.” Specifically, the goal is for all Americans to have opportunities that go beyond the provision of health care, including safe housing, access to education, and public safety. Social determinants of health are conditions in which people live, work, learn, play, and age that affect health, functioning, and risks (United States Department of Health and Human Services [HHS] Healthy People, 2020, 2011). These conditions have been referred to as “place.” Understanding how people or groups experience “place,” and the impact it has on health, including physical, psychological, and social dimensions is fundamental to the social determinants of health.
The “place” or setting of this study impacts the physical, psychological, and social health of the women and children it serves. The “place” also has an impact on the community and society as a whole. This dissertation focuses on how supportive housing can assist women in transitioning into the community and reuniting with their children after release from prison or jail.

Nurses, who are educated to understand the biopsychosocial factors that impact wellness, are in an excellent position to advocate for this vulnerable population.

**Theoretical Framework**

I began this study guided by the theory of maternal role identity (Rubin, 1967), which states that maternal role attainment is a process, involving development steps, which lead to maternal identity. This theoretical perspective changed as the data was being collected and analyzed. Following incarceration or other involvement in the criminal justice system, women have to develop a different way of existing in the community. Participant observation in the activities of the program under investigation demonstrated how the program provides knowledge and skills to assist women to learn how to adapt and live in the community. But more than this, the program helps women develop confidence in themselves; as a mother, and as a valuable member of society. Depth interviews revealed that the women were positively influenced by working with women in the program who themselves had been incarcerated and were now employed and living independently with their children.

Therefore, after reflecting on the data, specifically the depth interviews with the women, Barrett’s Power as Knowing Participation in Change emerged as the applicable theoretical framework consistent with the findings. This theory proposes that power as knowing
participation in change is being aware of what one is choosing to do, feeling free to do it, and doing it intentionally (Barrett, 1986).

**Definition of Terms**

**Mother:** A woman who was pregnant and gave birth while in a correctional facility, or a woman who gave birth to and had physical custody of one or more children prior to entering a correctional facility.

**Incarcerated persons:** An inmate who is confined to a prison or jail. This may also include halfway houses and boot camps. ([www.ojp.bjs.org](http://www.ojp.bjs.org))

**Jail:** Short-term facility that is usually administered by a local law enforcement agency and intended for adults, but sometimes holds juveniles before or after adjudication. Jail inmates usually have a sentence of less than one year, or are being held pending a trial, awaiting sentencing, or awaiting transfer to other facilities after a conviction. ([www.ojp.bjs.org](http://www.ojp.bjs.org)).

**Prison:** Compared to jails, prisons are longer-term facilities owned by a state or by the federal government. Prisons typically hold felons and persons with sentences of more than a year; however, the sentence length may vary by state ([www.ojp.bjs.org](http://www.ojp.bjs.org)).

**Prison nursery:** A living arrangement located within a correctional facility that allows an imprisoned woman and her infant to co-reside, with the mother as primary caregiver during all or some of her sentence (Goshin & Byrne, 2009).

**Parole:** The period of conditional supervision following a prison term.

**Reunification:** Refers to the formerly incarcerated mother coming together with her child upon release from a correctional facility.

**Supportive housing:** Free or affordable housing combined with necessary support services, such as family counseling, parenting groups, medical services, and educational and vocational training.
Method

Ethnography is a form of inquiry which describes and interprets cultural behavior (Polit & Beck, 2006). This method involves direct and indirect contact with human beings, within the context of their daily lives and cultures: watching what happens, listening to what is a said, and asking question (O’Reilly, 2009). It results in richly detailed accounts of the human experience, while acknowledging the researcher’s own role in this process (O’Reilly, 2009).

Contemporary ethnographic approaches are used to study particular settings or cultural events, giving emphasis to specific behaviors (Oliffe, 2005). The focus is on a culture-sharing group and investigating common stories, experiences, actions, and structure (Creswell, 2002). This sub-culture of an institution that provides housing for women recently released from prison or jail is part of the larger culture of the New York State criminal justice system which, in addition to parolees, includes parole officers, judges, and social workers, as well as members of the police department who are called upon to search for parolees who violate rules of parole.

A purposive sample included women who received services from this program, as well as the Program Director and the employment coordinators. This setting is a non-profit multi-faceted family service organization that provides housing and a wide array of supportive services, such as developing job skills, assistance with completing or continuing one’s education, providing child care, and offering assistance negotiating the parole system for women who have been recently released from jail or prison. However, the overarching goal of this program is to help these women successfully reunite with their children and learn how to mother. The program is located in an urban area, near housing, industry, schools, and commerce, and is well served by public transportation. The hub of this program is a residential facility that can house up to 25 mothers and children, as well as a building where women participate in job training activities and
other workshops. Other areas include the executive offices and a child care center that is located in the lower level of the residence; two thrift shops and a food pantry serve the surrounding community. The organization has five additional residential facilities. The women who live in these residences also receive services from this facility and were included in the sample.

I collected data by observing participants and performing in-depth interviews over a period of one year. Data was collected using both key information interviews and depth interviews. Relationships amongst and between the women, staff and others involved in the daily function of this program were observed. I observed, and at times participated in other activities that occurred in this setting, such as workshops, holiday events, and unstructured time. I also attended meetings with the women at the Correctional Association of New York, and went to Albany with some of the women and staff for “Advocacy Day,” an event sponsored by the Coalition for Women Prisoners.

Ethnography is a valuable method for this study. Ethnography uses both interaction and observation to describe and analyze life ways or particular patterns of groups or cultures in their environment (Leininger, 1985, p. 35). This study’s goal was to understand how these women are empowered to care for their children while developing other life skills to help them live independently in the community. This involves their interactions and behaviors with one another and the staff in this setting.

Assumptions and Biases

It is a strong bias of mine that supportive, transitional housing should be offered to all women upon release from prison or jail, and that children should be allowed to stay with their mothers in these settings. Furthermore, this researcher supports alternatives to incarceration that keep families together during a mother’s sentence. Mothering is critical to the well-being of
future generations, and should be supported by society. This is an important step toward “breaking the cycle of imprisonment” that occurs in many families.

Most importantly, it is my firmly held belief that this program works, notwithstanding the fact that some women do not stay in the program. They have difficulty adjusting to life on the outside in this highly structured setting.

This admitted bias is based upon experience in providing care for women with criminal justice involvement. Volunteering in this program for over two years, working closely with these women and children has put a “human face” on this issue. Prior to this, I participated in a program in a local jail, providing educational workshops on health-related topics for women. Additionally, I am an advocate for this population, as a member of the Coalition for Women Prisoners, Incarcerated Mothers Committee. In this position, I have gone to Albany to lobby legislators on issues related to the health care of childbearing women who are incarcerated, as well as to encourage passage of the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act. I have also worked to disseminate knowledge of these issues to other nurses and health care professionals through presentations at professional conferences, as well as publications.

It is my assumption that women who identify themselves as mothers have a strong desire to care for their children, and those interactions between most mothers and children are loving.

**Limitations**

In this study, only one residential program for formerly incarcerated women and their children was observed. Moreover, this is a voluntary program; the women chose to come here. Therefore, these women may be more motivated to reunite with their children and succeed in reentry. This study may not represent other types of reentry programs, or the experiences other offenders have upon release from prison or jail. In addition, women must meet strict criteria to
obtain a position here. They cannot be receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, as this precludes employment, one of the goals of this program. Most of the young women who receive such benefits do so due to mental health disability. Although this program includes two therapists, a woman with mental illness cannot be properly served by this setting.

Additionally, some women who gain acceptance into this program encounter obstacles resulting in their leaving the program, either voluntarily or at the request of the Director. I did not have the opportunity to interview all of the women who left the program to understand the forces behind this. But I was able to understand why this happened from key informant interviews.

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction to the issue of the increasing numbers of women involved in the criminal justice system, specifically women who are mothers. Mothering while incarcerated was shown to be a challenge for many of these women. After release, these women face additional obstacles to mothering. Additionally, these women encounter hardships such as finding safe, decent, and affordable housing and employment. There are few resources in New York in place to assist these women in reintegrating into the community and reuniting with their children after release. This study described a setting where formerly incarcerated women reside with their children upon release from prison and jail. An ethnographic methodology using interviews and observation was conducted to understand the culture of a setting in which women are reintroduced to taking responsibility for themselves and their children. This work sheds light on the everyday lives of these women within the supportive environment and how they are both assisted and challenged during their transition into the community.
The topic of reentry into the community and family life is important to research and support since those prisoners who are able to reintegrate successfully with their families after incarceration are less likely to be rearrested (Petersilia, 2003, p. 152).
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

This chapter discusses the literature regarding women in the criminal justice system who are mothers. It begins with an overview of the characteristics of these women, including pathways to incarceration. As the focus of this dissertation is the phenomenon of mothering after incarceration, different aspects of mothering are discussed. Many incarcerated women have been separated from their children for an extended period of time, which can alter the process of maternal role attainment, and interfere with attachment. Therefore, a review of theories of maternal attainment and attachment are included. Maternal sensitivity is then discussed. This is a broad term meant to cover the various attributes of caregiving, a process that must be taught to some women in the program, due to a knowledge deficit in this area. Women who did not receive sensitive care from their own parents often lack appropriate mothering skills. Next, the literature regarding mothering in prison is discussed. The second part of this chapter reviews the literature on prisoner reentry, specifically the challenges unique to women, followed by a discussion of supportive living environments which may help incarcerated persons transition to the community.

Barrett’s Theory of “Power as Knowing Participation in Change” is used as a framework in which to view the experiences of the women in the setting for this study. This appears to be the first time this framework has been used to understand the phenomenon of women in reentry and reintegration. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethnographic method of study.

Characteristics of Incarcerated Women

Currently, more women are incarcerated in United States prisons and jails than at any other time in our history. Women have been affected more than their male counterparts in the
criminal justice system by the “Rockefeller Drug Laws,” which established mandatory minimum sentences for possession and sale of controlled substances (http://www.prdi.org/rocklawfact.html). Since these laws were enacted, the number of women in New York State’s prisons (excluding jails) for drug offenses has increased 787% (Staley, 2008). African American and Latina women are particularly affected. As of 2008, the New York State Department of Corrections and Supervision (NYDOCS) notes that 78% of women in prison were African American or Latina, (Staley, 2008). And yet, a joint study by the Brennan Center for Justice and the American Civil Liberties Union (2005) notes that white women use, sell, and buy drugs in greater numbers than people of color. This phenomenon is true nationwide as well, especially in response to the United States’ “War on Drugs.” According to Bureau of Justice statistics, women of color were more likely than white women to be incarcerated, as two-thirds of women on parole are White, while two-thirds of women confined to a correctional facility are African American or Latina (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

Nearly half of all women in prison were currently serving sentences for nonviolent offenses, and had been convicted in the past for only nonviolent offenses. Many of these were drug-related. More than half the women reported committing the offense they were convicted of while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Nearly two-thirds of all female inmates had two or fewer prior convictions (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Three out of four violent female offenders committed simple assault (the threat to do harm, not actually causing harm). Therefore, it is apparent that most women offenders do not present a threat to society.

For the most part, women who enter the correctional system have had disadvantaged lives. More than half of the women in prison had grown up in a household without the presence of both parents. Women in prison were more likely than men to have a family member who had
been incarcerated. Women also reported having grown up in households where a parent or guardian had abused drugs or alcohol (Snell, 1991). Statistics note that 60% of women in state prisons had experienced physical or sexual abuse in the past; more than 30% had been abused by an intimate partner, and approximately 25% had experienced abuse by a family member (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Prior to entering prison, women offenders had more economic difficulties than males, with 37% of women reporting incomes of less than $600 per month prior to arrest, and 30% of women receiving welfare assistance at the time of arrest (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Additionally, women in the correctional system are much more likely than the general population to have never been married.

This general increase in female incarceration has a direct impact on families; many of these women are mothers, either with children for whom they are the sole caretakers, or who enter the corrections system already pregnant. Nationally, 62% of women in state prisons are parents to children under the age of 18 (Glaze & Marushek, 2008). Women in the correctional system reported an average of 2.38 young children (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

**Mothering**

**Becoming a mother.**

Some of the women in the research setting became mothers for the first time while incarcerated. Others had children prior to their incarceration, but did not mother them due to either drug addiction or prior involvement with the criminal justice system. There were other women whose incarceration forced a separation from the children they were raising. Despite the differences in when these women gave birth, many of them were actually becoming mothers for the first time in this setting.
Becoming a mother is a major developmental life event (Mercer, 2004). This process involves moving from one’s current, known identity, to the unknown. It can be facilitated or inhibited by circumstances such as the woman’s personal life conditions, socioeconomic status, preparation and knowledge, as well as societal and community support and conditions (Mercer, 2004). Mercer (1981, 1986) performed extensive research, and examined variables that have an effect on becoming a mother, e.g., age, social stress, social support, role strain, and health status. Becoming a mother is also affected by attributes of the newborn, e.g., health, temperament, appearance, and responsiveness to the mother (Mercer, 1981, 1986).

Rubin (1967), in developing the theory of maternal role identity, studied women during the antepartum and immediate postpartum periods to examine what processes were involved in attainment of the maternal role. Women were observed in natural settings, such as clinics, and in the postpartum units of two university hospitals that served women of different socioeconomic classes, races, and backgrounds. In addition, unstructured interviews took place an average 12 times during the antepartum period, and 11 times during the first postpartum month. Rubin (1967) noted that maternal role attainment was a process leading to maternal identity. Rubin first described the steps that occurred prior to birth as mimicry, role-playing, fantasy, introjection-projection-rejection, and maternal identity. Mimicry is exhibited by first looking for role models, seeking information, and then role playing. The woman introjects behaviors she observes in other mothers, projects how those behaviors would work for her, and rejects those she feels do not represent her ideas of mothering. This then allows the woman to develop her own image of herself as a mother, and this self-image of maternal identity is incorporated into her self-esteem.
Rubin (1976) later studied the behaviors that women exhibit during pregnancy during their journeys to maternal identity. Looking at these behaviors led to the identification of four maternal tasks that had to be accomplished during pregnancy for a woman to become a mother. These tasks were: seeking safe passage for herself and her child, ensuring the acceptance of the child, binding-in to the unborn child, and learning to give of herself. These behaviors are not sequential steps; they are completed equally and concurrently during pregnancy. Some ways these behaviors are exhibited include seeking prenatal care (safe passage), talking about the baby to family and friends (ensuring acceptance of the child), changing diet and lifestyle for the well-being of the baby (giving of oneself), and talking to one’s unborn baby (binding-in). These four tasks are worked through by each woman in her own manner during pregnancy and after delivery to form the qualitative essence of mothering. The behaviors observed by Rubin formed the foundation for her theory of maternal role identity.

In a meta-synthesis of nine qualitative studies on mothering, Nelson (2003) identified two processes that occur, sometimes concurrently, in the process of transitioning to motherhood. The first is engagement, described as making a commitment to, and being engrossed in, mothering, and exemplified by active involvement in the care of the newborn. The other process involves how the woman opens herself to the transformation involved in becoming a mother. Nelson (2003) noted four major themes in this meta-synthesis: making the decision to mother; feeling the bond; accepting responsibility; and learning mothering. These themes are consistent with Rubin’s theoretical framework.

In her qualitative study of women’s roles as mothers throughout the lifespan, Francis-Connolly (1998) described mothering broadly as the “activities involved in nurturing and caring for children in which women engage to ensure the growth of their children.” The predominant
theme that emerged from interviews of 17 women who were mothers to newborns, young children, teens, young adults, and middle-aged adults, was “mothering does not end, but lasts a lifetime.” The women in this study were all concerned about the continued well-being of their children, no matter the age of their children or stage in their own life. A second grounded-theory study by Francis-Connolly (2000) examined the work of mothering, the activities and tasks involved at different stages. She interviewed 20 mothers of young children, and 20 mothers of young adults. The mothers of young children described mostly physical caretaking tasks and activities, while the mothers of young adults were involved in more emotional and supportive types of activities. Although the tasks were different in mothering children at these different stages of life, caring and nurturing were common to both. These studies demonstrated that mothering is a complex process that continues across the lifespan.

**Maternal sensitivity.**

“Maternal sensitivity” is a broad term used to describe various affective and behavioral attributes of caregiving. Maternal sensitivity is the mother’s ability to recognize her infant’s cues and signals, and respond appropriately, by comforting, feeding, and talking to the infant (Amankwaa & Picker, 2007; Pederson, Gleason, Moran, & Bento, 1998). It is one of the major influencing factors of maternal-infant attachment. Many of the women in the setting of this study lacked these attributes. Some were separated soon after giving birth, due to incarceration or other issues, such as addiction. Some of the women had not been recipients of sensitive care themselves, nor had they been exposed to maternally sensitive role models.

A descriptive study by Shin, Park, & Kim (2006) sampled 198 women who completed a self-report questionnaire within the six-week postpartum period. The results demonstrated that maternal-fetal attachment, self-identity as a mother, and social support were statistically

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significant predictors of maternal sensitivity. The researchers concluded that the encouragement of maternal-fetal attachment, along with the provision of social support and enhancement of self-identity, all promote maternal sensitivity. An important finding was that maternal sensitivity continued for most women throughout the infancy of their children, continuing to add to attachment security (Bigelow, MacLean, Myatt, Gillis, & Power, 2009).

Positive maternal child attachment, as evidenced by sensitive and responsive care, is a requirement for healthy physical, psychological, and social development of the child. These positive caregiving behaviors have been related to positive health outcomes in children (Dunst & Kassow, 2004). It has been shown that children who are treated in a consistent and caring manner are capable of expressing their need for security. In turn, these children demonstrate greater self-esteem and ability to interact appropriately with other children (Erickson, 1996). A study by Madigan, Moran, Schuengel, Pederson, and Otten (2007) found that disrupted maternal behavior (as exhibited by poor communication) and lack of responsiveness to the infant’s needs correlated with poor affective behavior and behavioral problems in toddlers.

The bond between a mother and her child is important even as the child reaches adolescence. The changes from child to young adulthood can be exciting, yet frightening for a teenager. Children separated from their mothers at this crucial time in their lives have a very difficult time establishing a healthy sense of their own identities (Dunn, 1983). In addition, the intimacy and conversations between adolescents and their parents help establish the framework for intimate relationships of their own as they enter adulthood (Dunn, 1983). Some of the women who participated in this study were reestablishing relationships with older children they left behind due to incarceration or substance abuse.

**Maternal attachment and separation.**
Many studies in nursing and social sciences have supported the importance of maternal attachment and its impact on infant and child development, as well as the development of maternal role identity (Bowlby, 1977; Klaus & Kennel 1976; Mercer & Ferketich, 1994; Rubin 1977). Separation due to incarceration or substance abuse can negatively impact forming an attachment and developing the maternal role.

Maternal attachment has been studied by nurses for the past three decades due to its importance in maternal child nursing. Some of those studies resulted in nursing interventions and changes in practice in order to promote attachment, such as encouraging the mother to keep the newborn in the mother’s hospital room and “kangaroo care” in the neonatal intensive care unit (Dodd, 2005; Feldman, 2004; Johnson, 2007). Kangaroo care refers to the mother (or other caregiver) holding the diaper-clad infant to encourage direct skin-to-skin contact.

Much of the work that has been done on attachment theory has been influenced by the work of John Bowlby, who in 1951 was commissioned by the World Health Organization to report on the effects of maternal separation and deprivation among young children. His report, *Maternal Love and Mental Health*, was published in 1951. Bowlby’s major conclusion was that to grow up healthy, an infant and young child should experience a warm and loving relationship with his or her mother (or maternal substitute) that is satisfying to both mother and child (Bretherton, 1992). It is important to note that Bowlby stressed the importance of social support to help a mother develop this loving relationship with her infant; this factor is often overlooked in references to his work. It should also be mentioned that Bowlby’s work focused on maternal attachment only, as the role of the male parent was not considered significant in that era. Research that was the result of Bowlby’s perspective provided evidence that a secure maternal-
infant attachment relationship promotes the development of security and emotional health in the child (Ainsworth, 1989).

In nursing literature, the term “attachment” has become synonymous with the theory of bonding as proposed by the work of Kennel, Trause, and Klaus (1975). These two pediatricians hypothesized that prolonged contact between the mother and infant immediately after birth was critical in the formation of a bond. They based this hypothesis on the behavior of animals, where separation of the mother and newborn animal immediately after birth resulted in dysfunctional mothering behavior, such as butting the newborn away, or nursing her own and other newborns without distinction. Based on these observations, Klaus, et al. (1975) looked at two groups of mothers. The control group received traditional hospital-based care, where the baby was immediately taken to the nursery after birth, and was only brought out to the mother for (bottle) feedings on a routine, scheduled basis. Mothers in the experimental group had skin-to-skin contact immediately after birth for three hours, and had a more liberal visitation schedule thereafter, with an additional five hours each day for the three days while hospitalized. The experimental group showed more maternal behaviors that were operationally defined for this study. These behaviors included “en face,” a position in which the mother’s face is aligned on the same plane as the infant, or when the mother’s body is touching the infant’s and she is fondling the infant, described as any spontaneous interaction initiated by the mother, such as kissing or cuddling. This study and others, which are described in their seminal book on bonding, *Maternal-Infant Bonding: The Impact of Early Separation or Loss on Family Development* (Klaus and Kennell, 1976) had a tremendous impact on maternal-child nursing, as well as on the delivery of care in hospitals. Examples of practices to promote attachment include “rooming-in”
in hospital maternity units and “kangaroo care” in the neonatal intensive care unit (Dodd, 2006; Feldman, 2004; Johnson, 2007).

Physical closeness of mother and child has been shown to enhance attachment. The seminal work on maternal attachment by Klaus, et al. (1972), demonstrated that mothers who had additional contact in the early post-partum period exhibited more sensitive behaviors toward their newborns.

For women who become mothers while incarcerated, or who are separated from their children due to incarceration, there is a break in the process of maternal role attainment, developing maternal sensitivity, and forming a meaningful attachment. This separation may place mothers and children at greater risk for relational formation and well being in later life.

**Mothering from prison.**

The issue of incarceration of mothers has become increasingly important in the last 20 years, as the number of children under the age of 18 with a mother who has been incarcerated has more than doubled (131% increase) since 1991 (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). A qualitative study of incarcerated women (Celinska & Siegel, 2010) noted that although women’s individual stories and experiences may differ, the central theme that emerged from the interviews was motherhood.

There is a limited but growing body of research that addresses the special issues of women who are pregnant and deliver while incarcerated, with most of it related to outcomes, such as birth weight, gestation at delivery, neonatal mortality (Fogel, 1993; Mertens, 2001; Moses & Potter, 2008). Recently, research has focused more on the important issue of attachment. Borelli, Goshin, Joestl, and Byrne, (2010) studied children who co-resided with their mothers in a prison nursery, and demonstrated more positive attachments to their mothers than
children in the community, with no history of incarceration. There is little known about the experience of pregnancy and birth while incarcerated. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, approximately 6% of women in the correctional system are pregnant at any one time. However, some women do not disclose their pregnancies, a pregnancy test is not part of the routine admission physical, and some women are released or sent to other facilities, making documentation and recordkeeping difficult (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

This relatively recent increase in the number of women imprisoned as part of the “war on drugs,” as well as the lack of adequate programs for pregnant and parenting women, has had an unfavorable effect on family stability and the well-being of children. Prior to incarceration, 64.2% of mothers are likely to have been their children’s sole caretaker (Glaze & Marushak, 2008). Consequently, children of incarcerated mothers are more likely to be placed in kinship or foster care than children of incarcerated fathers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008).

In most cases where a woman delivers a child while incarcerated, she is separated from the newborn soon after birth. Unlike the usual postpartum practice of allowing mothers unlimited access to her newborn, imprisoned mothers may not see the baby until discharge, at which time the baby will be placed in the care of relatives or a foster family while she returns to the correctional facility to complete her sentence (Kowitz-Marglies & Kraft-Stolar, 2006). If she is allowed to see her newborn after delivery, she is under the constant supervision of a corrections officer. There are very few correctional facilities in the United States with policies allowing mothers and babies to reside together; currently, only 135 placements are available for newborns in prison nurseries in the United States (Villanueva, From, & Lerner, 2009; personal communication with prison officials at facilities with prison nurseries, September, 2011). Thus, separation during this key period can interfere with a woman’s ability to develop the maternal
role. In addition, such forced separations often result in feelings of loss, pain, grief, and anxiety (Schroeder & Bell, 2005). These policies go against the recommendations of the World Health Organization (2009) that programs allow incarcerated mothers to reside with their children in order to provide care and bond.

New York’s Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) almost always requires a foster care agency to file a petition to terminate parental rights if a child has been in foster care for 15 of the last 22 months. The median sentence for women in New York’s prisons is 36 months. Because more children of incarcerated mothers are in foster homes or agencies than children of incarcerated fathers, ASFA likely has a disproportionate impact on mothers in prison. As a result of the way that ASFA is implemented when a parent is in prison, incarcerated mothers are at serious and disproportionate risk of losing their parental rights – even in cases where the true best interest of the child is to keep reunification as the goal for the family. Termination of parental rights means that parents lose all legal ties to their children forever. After termination, parents have no right to find out about their children’s well-being, where they live, or even if they have been adopted (Correctional Association of New York, 2009). Recently, however, New York passed the AFSA Expanded Discretion Bill which gives the foster care agency discretion to delay filing termination of parental rights papers when a parent’s incarceration or participation in residential drug treatment program is a significant factor in why the child has been in foster care for the designated period, 15 of the last 22 months (Coalition of Women’s Prisoners meeting, September, 2011). Unfortunately, when such laws are passed, it takes time to spread the word and educate child welfare agencies, and then to enforce the law. To date, this is still an issue (Coalition of Women’s Prisoners meeting, October, 2013).
One of the most difficult parts of incarceration for a mother may be the separation from her children. Much of the research on incarcerated women has focused on the importance of the maternal role to women’s identities and the difficulty of maintaining a maternal role in view of the challenges while incarcerated. Incarcerated women perceive changes in their maternal identity as a consequence of incarceration (Shamai & Kochal, 2008). Incarcerated women are concerned about their ability to maintain their relationships with their children while incarcerated, and how they will regain relationships after release (Enos, 1998). They have reported concerns about their children’s well-being and sadness about separation (Loper & Tuerk, 2011). Research has demonstrated the pain and frustration that women feel as mothers due to the limitations on parenting.

A qualitative study using life-history interviews with 20 incarcerated women noted that these women placed a great deal of significance on their roles as mothers, and reminisced about their children. During these interviews, their pain was obvious. It was also noted that many of their crimes, such as writing fraudulent checks, were committed in order to provide for their children (Ferraro & Moe, 2006). Visitation was often difficult. For those women in prisons, distance between correctional facilities and children’s homes was the primary reason. The mother had to rely upon the caregivers’ willingness to transport the children to the correctional facility, and she had to consider the transportation costs (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Kennon, Mackintosh, & Myers, 2009).

Mothers are often incarcerated great distances from their families. A majority of mothers (and fathers) in state prisons (62%), and an even larger number in federal prisons (84%), are held more than 100 miles from their last residence. In federal prisons, about 43% of parents are held over 500 miles from their last residence (Mumola, 2000). For those women who resided
in New York City prior to incarceration, nearly 41% are held at Albion Correctional Facility, more than 370 miles away from their families (Correctional Association of New York, 2009). Travelling these distances can be a financial burden for caregivers who are trying to help incarcerated mothers stay connected with their children. Even when families are able to make the trip, visiting hours are limited; space is often limited as well, making it difficult for families to have sufficient privacy to interact with one another. In some facilities, mothers are not allowed to touch their children, and visitation takes place through a glass partition (Correctional Association of New York). Thus, geographic distance is not the only impediment to maintaining a close connection between mothers and children; the facility itself can pose barriers.

Even in situations where women are in local jails, restrictive visitation schedules limit physical visitation. For example, visiting hours may occur when children are in school, or caregivers are at work. In many instances, correctional facilities discourage visits from children and their guardians through restrictive visiting hours, invasive search procedures, long wait times, crowding and, in some facilities, limiting physical contact through the use of partitions. Although visitation is preferred, telephone calls can also provide mothers the opportunity to communicate with their children and participate in their lives on a frequent basis. However, in reality, this can be costly for the caregiver, as inmates are only allowed to place collect calls. In contrast, letter writing is the least expensive form of contact. Letter writing also allows both the mother and child (especially older children) to reflect on what is written. A study of parenting stress by Houck & Louper (2002) associated letter writing with increased attachment and an improved sense of parental competence.

Lack of contact disrupts the mother-child relationship and diminishes a mother’s authority to make decisions for her child from prison (Loper & Tuerk, 2011). However, some
women are so filled with guilt about what they have done to their children, that the thought of contact with them provokes anxiety, and they avoid contact altogether (Kennon, et al., 2009). These factors that limit contact may result in attachment disorders, as well as difficulty in maintaining maternal role identity and function.

In order to correct this, some prisons and jails have established parenting programs to facilitate and improve the parent-child relationship (Kennon, et al., 2009; Loper & Tuerk, 2011). The women involved have a unique need for skills essential to maintaining relationships with their children during the separation imposed by incarceration, as well as for when they return home and attempt to resume the role of primary caretaker. One systematic review of parenting programs produced a useful model for what such a program should provide (Kane, Wood, & Barlow, 2007). Kennon, et al., (2009) developed a curriculum based on providing parents with a strong sense of responsibility, as well as the skills they would need to carry out their roles as parents to whatever degree was possible while incarcerated. Topics covered included child development – and what parents should expect at different ages – so they would know how to communicate appropriately with their children about everyday issues, as well as about more difficult issues related to their incarceration. Parents also needed to learn how to communicate with their children’s caregivers. Additional skills include understanding legal issues concerning their children (Houck & Loper, 2002), and strengthening their self-esteem and self-efficacy as it relates to parenting (Kane, et al., 2007). After incarcerated parents learn these skills, they need to put them into practice via visits, letters, and phone calls. The curriculum was developed to be affordable and realistic for correctional facilities to deliver. The parenting program was evaluated using a pretest, post-test, and follow-up with 57 women incarcerated in state prisons. The course entailed 12 sessions which met for 2 hours each week and were taught by the authors.
(Kennon, et al., 2009). In assessments at the end of the course, and again at an 8-week follow-up, mothers showed significant improvements over their pretest scores in parenting attitudes, self-esteem, and legal knowledge regarding parents’ rights and responsibilities. The authors state that this was not the strongest intervention possible, as it did not include structured day-long visits with children, or workshops dealing with issues such as conflict resolution. The lack of these were due to some of the regulations imposed by correctional facilities. This program has been used widely in the authors’ home state, and has been modified for jails, as well as for fathers (Kennon, et al., 2009).

**After Release: Reentry and Reintegration**

In the past, most offenders were released after parole boards deemed them ready. This meant that the offender had been rehabilitated, or had a connection to the community which indicated they were ready for release, such as employment waiting (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Release to parole was formerly a privilege that had to be earned. Prisoners earned this privilege by attending programs, having a job, and following the rules of the prison. However, sentencing reforms that began in the 1970s have diminished the role and power of parole boards to make individualized release decisions (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). As a result of this change, offenders are most often released “automatically” under mandatory release, after serving their full term, with supervision to follow, while others are released without any supervision at all.

According to the Bureau of Justice statistics (Hughes & Wilson, 2004), 95% of all state prisoners will be released into the community. Considering the fact that most prisoners will eventually be released, incarceration should be viewed as an opportunity for rehabilitation – to provide job training, treat addictions, and prepare them for the outside world. These programs
have been associated with decreased recidivism rates; however, a majority of prison funding is allocated to operating costs, rather than additional rehabilitative and vocational programs. Fewer programs mean that offenders may leave prison without having addressed work, education, or substance abuse issues (Petersilia, 2000). In addition, the diminished role of parole boards has decreased the incentive for prisoners to attend these programs (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001).

The “moment of release” from prison, and the time immediately following can be pivotal to the transition to life in the community (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). Most people will be given a bus ticket and a small amount of cash (known as “gate money”) and told to report to the parole office in their community the next business day (Petersilia, 2003). Their community refers to the last known address before incarceration. However, most have no home to return to. Some states do provide a list of shelters or low-cost apartments (Petersilia, 2003). In New York City, offenders are commonly dropped off at the Port Authority Bus Terminal or the Queens Plaza subway station with only a few dollars and subway fare (Wynn, 2001). Many do not even have photo identification, which is necessary for obtaining services such as Medicaid and methadone maintenance programs. They are moved from a controlled environment where they had shelter and food to one of complete freedom, or minimal supervision. They may return to high-risk places and persons if there is no place else for them to go. Prisoners facing release often report feelings of anxiety about reestablishing ties with family, finding a job, and managing their finances; this has been referred to as “gate fever” (Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). This “moment of release” presents a challenge for prisoners to successfully transition back to the community and not return to prison.

Women returning to the community from prison face numerous challenges to successful reentry (O’Brien, 2001). Their greatest challenge, mentioned consistently, is finding housing
and employment once released (from a panel of formerly incarcerated women at a meeting of the Coalition of Women Prisoners, November, 17, 2011). The moment of release from prison, and the hours and days that follow, can be pivotal to the transition back to the community. There are many hurdles: basic needs, such as cash and identification; and access to more specialized needs, such as medical and mental health services. An exploratory study of the experience of formerly incarcerated women who had a successful reentry into the community noted five common factors that were important in their success: 1) finding shelter, 2) employment, 3) reunification with significant others, including children, 4) developing community membership, and 5) increasing self-confidence (O’Brien, 2001).

For women with children, reunification can be especially fraught with difficulty, as they have to try to resume their roles as mothers as well (Brown & Bloom, 2009; O’Brien, 2001; & Severance, 2004). While this may motivate some women to achieve success on parole, the separation from their children while incarcerated may make it difficult (Brown & Bloom, 2009). What adds to this difficulty is that although women reported that they were very much looking forward to reuniting with their children, they were not prepared for how stressful it might be (LaVigne, Brooks, & Shollenberger, 2009). Arditti and Few (2008) developed a grounded theory of maternal distress in women’s reentry into community life that was based on 10 interviews. Maternal distress was characterized by guilt and worry about children as well as about economic insecurity. Additionally, some of these women were dealing with continuing substance abuse and mental health issues.

Brown and Bloom (2009) used case file reports, as well as in-depth interviews, to understand the experiences of these women. Case file reports represented the objective context of life after prison, such as difficulties with housing and employment. Interviews suggested that
even when bonds with children remained strong during incarceration, women experienced difficulties with parenting upon release. Women felt that their parental authority was diminished, as the children regarded those who were the caregiver during incarceration as the authority figure. The women were unsure of how to relate to their children. These women also stated that they were not prepared for the difficulties they would face upon reentry. Although some of them had participated in parenting and other cognitive programs while incarcerated, the programs may not have been culturally congruent with their lives, and therefore may have not addressed the real conditions they faced upon reentry. As one woman in the study noted, these programs represented the “white man’s way of thinking.”

Another study of mothers reentering the community after incarceration evaluated how the experience affected family life. The study identified risk factors that impacted this experience and protective factors that were helpful to mothers (Arditti & Few, 2006). The researchers conducted interviews with 28 women who had been released from a state prison within the prior two months. These interviews were designed to gather psychosocial, health, familial, and economic information from the participants. The factors that blocked successful reintegration included mental health issues, such as depression; prior intimate partner violence; as well as substance abuse and addiction. Another risk factor was difficulty in maintaining relationships with children due to infrequent visitation during imprisonment. In this study, 54% of women had no visits or only one visit from their children per year, due to the lengthy distance from home and cost involved. Those women who did receive visits from their children reported that they were less than optimal due to harsh treatment by prison officials, limited time, and the glass barriers placed between themselves and their visitors. Factors that were helpful in successful reentry were social support and resources, e.g., housing, child care, transportation, economic
assistance, and emotional support. These women also reported great satisfaction with community resources, such as state or private programs that helped with education (GED or General Educational Development) completion or attending college), parenting classes, and counseling.

Bergseth, Jens, Bergeron-Vigesaa, and McDonald (2011) examined the needs of female offenders reentering the community from the perspective of community service providers who work directly with recently released women. One of their most pressing needs was securing safe and affordable housing. The need for housing is directly related to reunification, as many women are required to provide safe and adequate housing upon reunification with their children (Travis, Solomon & Waul, 2001). The process of obtaining secure housing is made more difficult by the many laws that restrict access to public housing, disallowing those who have a history of criminal activity, regardless of whether they were actually convicted. In addition, the federal government’s “One Strike Initiative,” part of the regulations of the Housing and Urban Development, allows public housing authorities to refuse applicants who have a history of a felony drug conviction. This same regulation allows for the eviction of those currently residing in public or Section 8 housing (Corporation for Supportive Housing, n.d.). These service providers cite finding housing a challenge for these formerly incarcerated women.

Recidivism has been shown to be related to success of reentry. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Bonzcar & Glaze, 2008), 58% of women were rearrested within three years of release due to violating a technical condition of parole. This report indicated that the first year after an inmate is released is critical to her success in reentry, since 66% of these women were rearrested within the first year of their release. Parole violations and new crimes are often committed because women lack the skills and support to adapt to community life.
Service providers also noted that these women needed assistance in reuniting with their children, especially since maintaining ties while incarcerated is complicated by restrictive prison policies and practical difficulties already discussed in this paper.

An interpretive phenomenological study by Oot-Hayes (2009) examined the phenomenon of reentry. In-depth interviews were conducted with six participants during the first year following release from prison. All interviews focused on the research question, “What has been your experience of mothering since your release from prison?” The researcher used van Manen’s hermeneutic phenomenological method to gain a better understanding of mothering after prison. Themes that emerged were: “Doing Mothering Right”; “Family: A Double-Edged Sword”; “The Honeymoon is Over”; and “Mothering Beyond the Honeymoon.” The results of this study demonstrate implications for anyone involved in the care of these incarcerated women, including forensics nurses working in the prison system, judges and parole officers who participated in the women’s release, and nurses working with these women in community settings. Forensic nurses can begin by teaching parenting skills during incarceration, prison officials need to prepare these women for employment, and community nurses need to continually assess these women and their children.

**Supportive living environments.**

Supportive housing is affordable housing combined with needed services to help ease the transition from imprisonment to the community, and ultimately provide skills so that the ex-offender can be successful and not return to prison. These can be short-term, long-term, at one specific site, or in scattered sites. They can be transitional or permanent. The services provided include counseling, both individual and family, to help with parenting and issues related to domestic violence. Medical services, including mental health and substance abuse services, are
arranged for those who may need them. Other services are in place to help these ex-offenders function in the community, including socialization skills and assistance obtaining vital papers such as social security cards and birth certificates. Beyond merely functioning, the goal is for these ex-offenders to learn to live independently and move out of the supportive living environment. To help achieve this goal, services assist ex-offenders in gaining employment, either by job/vocational training or education (Black & Cho, 2004).

These types of living situations for formerly incarcerated persons have been shown to be a successful strategy in reducing and preventing homelessness and recidivism (Black & Cho, 2004). An evaluation of one of the few supportive transitional houses for women, the Grace House in Chicago, found that over the first five years of operation, only 20% of the program participants returned to prison, as contrasted with the state’s recidivism rate of almost 44% (O’Brien, 2002). According to the results of a landmark University of Pennsylvania study (Culhane, Metraux, & Hadley, 2002), supportive housing significantly decreases the chance of recidivism into New York City jails and prisons. Moreover, these programs are cost-effective: the average cost of a New York State prison cell is $88 per day, contrasted with the cost of maintaining an apartment with supportive services at $34 per day. Additional costs to maintain an offender in prison must be considered when children are involved: foster care is approximately $20,000 per year per child (Black & Cho, 2004). The number of individuals released from prison is 300% greater than it was 20 years ago (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). In urban centers, such as New York City, 30-50% of ex-offenders are homeless (Petersilia, 2003). This is due to the fact that many ex-offenders are released without available housing, and few support persons or networks are await them upon release. Even those who had stable housing prior to incarceration have difficulty finding and keeping housing once released.
Many of the released prisoners have not completed high school, have histories of substance abuse and mental health issues, and limited job skills. In addition, many have not received services like job training or drug rehabilitation while incarcerated. At the time of release, most lack a valid form of identification, have little or no support from family, and have only a small amount of cash. Without income, identification, or treatment services in place, ex-offenders lack the credentials and foundation needed to find a place to live.

Support can provide an ex-offender with the encouragement needed to help ease the transition from incarceration to community, and lessen the risk of engaging in behaviors that can lead to rearrest or homelessness. This support is especially crucial in the first three months after release, when there is the highest risk of re-arrest (Nelson, Dees, & Allen, 1999). The Vera Institute of Justice (Nelson, Dees, & Allen, 1999) conducted a study of recently released offenders, and found that a supportive presence at the moment of reentry was an indicator of success in all aspects of reintegration, including securing employment and less drug and alcohol use.

Although supportive housing is a means of improving the outcomes for formerly incarcerated persons, few housing developments or supportive services exist, mostly due to lack of funding. This in turn relates to state and local governments’ spending more on increasing the numbers of people incarcerated and lengthening their sentences as they have become “tough on crime” (Travis, Robinson, & Solomon, 2002). States that in the past had allocated monies for transitional housing for ex-offenders have significantly decreased budgeting for these services. Meanwhile, more people are being released on parole supervision, while parole staff has not been increased and, in some cases, has actually been decreased (Travis, Robinson, & Solomon, 2002). The result is that more prisoners are being released with fewer resources to help them re-
establish their lives in the community, leading to higher rates of both homelessness and recidivism (Black & Cho, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

After analysis of the data, Barrett’s theory of Power as Knowing Participation in Change was found to explain the themes that arose from data analysis. Barrett’s theory of power as the capacity to participate knowingly in change consists of four dimensions: awareness, choices, freedom to act intentionally, and involvement in creating change. These dimensions do not have to occur in any special order. This theory proposes that power is being aware of choices, feeling free to do act on them, and doing them intentionally (Barrett, 1986).

This theory does not solely relate to change in an individual, but can also pertain to change in groups, still utilizing the four dimensions: the group’s awareness, the choices it makes, the degree of freedom operating within the group, and how the group is creating specific changes (Barrett, 1989).

Most theories of power are causal, and define power as the ability to cause change. Barrett’s theory of power differs from both traditional and feminist theories of power in that it is acausal (Barrett, 1989). Barrett’s theory defines power as the capacity to participate knowingly in the nature of change characterizing the continuous patterning of the human and environmental energy fields. Barrett’s theory is based on the spiritual, unitary worldview. In this theory, the results are not directly related to something an individual does in isolation, but rather what the individual is doing in relation to other people and other forces. This is what Barrett refers to as “power as freedom” (Barrett, 2010). Living life under the idea of “power as freedom” is in the best interest of the individual as well as those whose lives intersect with that individual, if that individual makes and carries out the types of choices that promote well-being (Barrett, 2010).
Living power also allows one to participate knowingly in making change in any situations in one’s life. Analysis of the data noted that for some of the women, power resulted not from what the program did, i.e, housing, workshops; which would be causal; rather, it resulted from what the women themselves chose to take from this program, working with others.

A growing number of researchers have used Barrett’s power theory and/or instrument in their work. Although a majority of these studies were quantitative, incorporating Barrett’s instrument, a small number of studies have been guided by the theoretical framework, both qualitative and quantitative. In those studies that used Barrett’s tool, many used Rogers Science of Unitary Human Beings as the theoretical framework.

Barrett’s framework was used in studies of populations similar to the women in this study. Rush (1997, 2002) studied the relationship among power, spirituality, and perceived social support in sober female alcoholics. The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding as to why Alcoholics Anonymous works for some women. A correlational design was used in this study to evaluate the relationship between power, as measured by the Power as Knowing Participation in Change Tool (PKPCT); spirituality, as measured by the Spiritual Orientation Inventory; and social support, as measured by the Social Support Network Inventory. The results demonstrated that power was related to perception of social support and spirituality. The researcher does, however, caution that women in this study self-selected; therefore, many were more motivated to succeed in Alcoholics Anonymous. In another study of women with alcohol-related problems, Hammond (2002) explored the relationship between spirituality, power, and change. This multi-method triangulation study used the PKPCT to measure power. This study concluded that spirituality and power appear to be closely related. The study also indicated that women who were more severely dependent on alcohol felt less powerful.
In another study of women with characteristics similar to the women in this research, Jones and Oliver (2007) explored reasons women engaged in unprotected sex with male partners they distrusted, thus increasing their risk of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) through such risk behaviors. Seven focus groups were conducted in public housing and neighborhood centers in a northeast urban neighborhood; 43 African American and Latina women participated. Barrett’s theory of power as knowing participation in change guided interpretation. Interpreted in the context of HIV sexual risk behavior, power involves women’s awareness of their own value as women; awareness of the choices they make and whether these choices are made intentionally; whether they feel free to pursue their choices; and the manner in which they are involving themselves in realizing these choices. Using this framework, the themes and relationships among themes were conceptualized as low-power sex scripts and high-power sex scripts in young urban women. According to the theory of power as knowing participation in change, the act of asking or stating that condoms be used involves women’s awareness of themselves as worthy of self-care, having diverse choices, and feeling free to state their position in the face of pressure to have sex.

Another study that focused on women looked at the relationships of contextual and relational factors to health empowerment in women (Shearer, 2004, 2009). The theoretical framework of health empowerment was guided by a Rogerian view of the person-environment process. From a Rogerian perspective, empowerment includes Barrett’s theory of knowing participation in the process of change. The PKPCT measured the women’s perception of participating in change. Results included a significant correlation between knowing participation in change with social support and professional support in empowering women to develop health-promoting lifestyle behaviors (Shearer, 2004).
In a study examining fatigue in otherwise healthy adult women, power, as measured by the PKPCT, was significantly and negatively correlated to depression (Dzurec, Hoover, & Fields, 2002). However, in this study, sample size was small (N=10), and the women were all middle-income white women. Malinski (1997), in a study of depressed women, noted that depressed women had significantly lower power scores on the PKPCT.

Barrett’s theory has frequently been used to study phenomena involving nurses and nursing students (Garrett, 1999; Mahoney, 1999; McGarvey, 2003; Lunney, et.al, 2004; Massari-Novack, 2004; Hurley, 2005, and Amicucci, 2011).

**Ethnography**

The aim of this study was to describe the culture of a setting that reunites formerly incarcerated women with their children. An ethnographer enters the participants’ lives, and collects detailed and descriptive data from and about them in different contexts over time. Ethnography differs from other qualitative methods as the focus is the cultural perspective. It results in the richly written accounts of the human experience, while acknowledging the researcher’s own role in this process (O’Reilly, 2009). Through narrative descriptions, researchers reveal the social actions, beliefs, values, and norms from the viewpoint of an outsider looking in (Wolf, 2011).

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Summary

This chapter began with an overview of the characteristics of women who are in the criminal justice system at this time and, since 62% of these women are mothers to children under the age of 18, a discussion of mothering followed. A review of the literature of mothering revealed that becoming a mother is much more than the physical process of pregnancy and birth; it is a major developmental life event, one that changes but is not finite. A majority of women are separated from their children while incarcerated; therefore, a discussion of attachment and separation followed to demonstrate the significance of this bond for both mother and child. A discussion of other situations where women’s experiences of mothering were complicated by adverse life events ended this discussion of mothering. This culminated in a review of the literature and current knowledge of the experience of mothering while incarcerated.

To understand the experience of the women in the setting, the literature on reentry and reintegration into the community after release from prison or jail was discussed. Reentry can be a difficult process for many ex-offenders, who often are faced with obstacles, such as finding housing and employment. For women, this process can be complicated further as they attempt to reconnect with the children from whom they were separated while incarcerated. In order to understand the setting where this study will take place, supportive living environments were discussed.

As the data were analyzed, it emerged that Barrett’s theory of Power as Knowing Participation in Change became the applicable framework for understanding how this program works to help women in the criminal justice system adjust to, and succeed in, the community. This process involves more than mere skill acquisition, but a change in these women’s attitudes.
and belief in themselves. This theory was discussed, from its development, to a discussion of its use in other studies.

This chapter concluded with a brief discussion of why the ethnographic method was used to describe the phenomenon of mothering, reentry, and reunification with their children for women in the criminal justice system. An ethnographer enters the participants’ lives and collects detailed and descriptive data from and about them in different contexts over time. The meaningful data that was collected served to expand the knowledge about this vulnerable population, as well as guide methods used to assist them as they seek stability in their lives outside of the criminal justice system.

Chapter three will discuss the elements of the ethnographic method, and how they were applied in this study.
Chapter Three: Method

Beginning with a discussion of methodology, this chapter details the method and design of this study. The methods of data collection, participant observation, and interviews are explained. Next are descriptions of the physical setting and the neighborhood. The organization of this program is described: its history, mission, staff, and the services it provides. The sample is briefly described; however, Chapter Four will provide details about the women who shared their stories. The chapter concludes with a description of how the data were prepared, managed, and analyzed.

Ethnography

Ethnography refers to living inside the culture or social situation one is studying and becoming a participant in it (Abbott, 2004). Participation can range from observation to immersion in this culture. These observations are often augmented with interviews, information from key informants, and review of official records.

Ethnography cannot proceed without purpose (Wolcott, 2004). Ethnographers’ questions are often not very detailed before the research begins; however, after some time in the setting, researchable questions arise. The question that prompted this inquiry in the beginning was related to the phenomena of mothering after incarceration. As the process proceeded, I became aware of its complexities, as well as of other factors involving reentry into the community.

Ethnography uses both interaction and observation to describe and analyze life ways or particular patterns of groups or cultures in their environment (Leininger, 1985, p. 35). The ethnographer cannot simply observe; something specific must be observed. (Wolcott, 2004). In this study, the areas of concern were the activities, behaviors and beliefs -- also known as the culture -- of a group of formerly incarcerated women, and other women involved in the criminal
justice system (non-offenders) who live and work together to assist these women as they adjust to their role as mothers and to life in the community.

**Design**

Participant observation and interview were the main methods of data collection. I spent an two to three days each week with the women over a period of ten months from November, 2012 through August, 2013. Most of this time was at the setting of the program; but I also accompanied them to events outside, such as to meetings of the Correctional Association of New York, and I traveled with them to Albany for Advocacy Day.

At the program, time was spent in workshops they attended, at their workplaces (within the institution, such as the Thrift Shops), at yoga classes, and sometimes just sitting with them inside or on the steps when the weather was nice. After ten months of participant observation, women in the program and key informants were interviewed. Having spent time in this setting with the women prior to the interview process allowed me to gain a better sense of the culture and “native language,” so that the information obtained during the interviews is relevant and based on shared understandings between the investigator and informant (Robertson & Boyle, 1983). The questions asked in this study were: How did you come to this program? What is your personal story about being a mother in the criminal justice system? What is it like being involved in (or living in, if appropriate) this setting? What experiences here have helped you and what have been the challenges here? What are some of your successes and accomplishments thus far in your reentry process?

Through this process, I developed a deep understanding of these women’s daily lives, and came to see patterns that defined their existence in this program.
Guarantees for the protection of participants and the setting.

Six months prior to beginning participant observation, I received permission from the program’s executive director to conduct research for doctoral studies at the setting. The two women with whom I had the most contact, who are the coordinators of the employment program, were also apprised of my research. Prior to beginning data collection in this setting, Institutional Review Board permission was granted by the institution which employs the Chairperson of my dissertation committee.

In order to protect the identity of the women and children involved, the name and location of the setting are not mentioned. The staff and the women in the program were made aware of the purpose of this study, how much time was going be spent collecting data, and how the information would be used. Consent was obtained prior to conducting individual in-depth interviews, and permission was obtained to record them.

The names of the women in the program were changed for the purpose of anonymity. Data was stored in my home office, in a double-locked cabinet; no one other than I had the key. A home computer was used for transcription of data collected, as other computers might not have been secure. The computer is password protected, and I am the only person with access.

Pre-fieldwork experience

I had previous experience with incarcerated women while working as a registered nurse in public health. I developed an interest in working to improve the health and well-being of this vulnerable population. Conversations with a faculty member in the department of Criminal Justice Studies at the institution where I am employed shared my interest. This faculty member invited me to an event at the program setting in June 2011; there, some of the formerly incarcerated women shared their stories of reentry in front of an audience of judges and lawyers.
who often hear these cases and make referrals to programs. At this event, I met the employment coordinators, Johanna and Ebony who, informed of my professional background, asked if I would be willing to teach a session of parenting classes. I was also introduced to the executive director of the program, who endorsed my participation. The same faculty colleague who initially referred me, also invited me to a meeting of the Correctional Association of New York.

After learning about the mission of the various committees, I became a member of the Incarcerated Mothers Committee, and have been an active member since that time. I was unaware until that first meeting that the staff, as well as the women from the supportive living environment, were active in this organization and attended meetings.

Soon after that first meeting at the supportive living environment, I began providing parenting workshops on a weekly basis. At this point in my doctoral studies, I had not thought about pursuing ethnographic research. In November 2011, conversations with a faculty mentor who had conducted research in a women’s prison led me to consider conducting research in this setting. At the same time, I had enrolled in a course on ethnographic research. After many meetings with the chairperson of this dissertation committee, we decided that an ethnographic method of study would be most appropriate to exploring the women and the culture in this program.

I realized it would be important to identify the “gatekeepers” at this organization. Ethnographers rely on gatekeepers to help them gain access to potential informants, participants, or subjects (Wolf, 2011). Gatekeepers are sponsors or individuals who give access or grant permission to the ethnographer to study in a particular setting. Gatekeepers may be official or unofficial leaders, managers, organizers or simply someone within the organization who has the ability to influence those in power (O’Reilly, 2009).
I first approached the employment coordinators, Ebony and Johanna, with whom I had the most frequent contact. These two women were very supportive, explaining that many students come here to interview the women for “reports.” In April 2012, I met with the executive director to formally discuss my project and I received her support. We also discussed the state of caring for this vulnerable population within criminal justice system, where one could wish for a demonstration of more concern. At the end of this meeting, it was apparent that my research would increase awareness of the complex needs of formerly incarcerated women as they strive for successful reentry into the community.

**Setting**

The setting for this ethnographic study is a residential supportive living environment that provides housing (permanent and transitional) and supportive services to assist women who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Today, this program comprises six residences that house approximately 60 families each year.

**The organization.**

This supportive living environment for formerly incarcerated women and their children is a non-sectarian, not-for-profit organization; its goal is to provide sustainable, affordable housing for women with a history of incarceration, to help reverse the downward spiral that results from incarceration, poverty, and substance abuse.

This non-sectarian non-governmental multi-faceted family service organization began in 1986 when four Sisters of St. Joseph led an initiative to provide for children whose mothers were in prison. From 1986 to 1995, they continued with the support of volunteers; in 1995, the undertaking officially incorporated into a nonprofit organization. The organization has provided a wide array of gender-specific services to this population for the past 32 years. During that
time, the organization has assisted more than 5,000 families in successfully transitioning from the program to independent living. Funding for this program comes mostly from private donations. Although the executive director (who was one of the founders), the program director, and others who work in this organization are women in religious orders, the Diocese of the area has no involvement in the program. It must be noted that during the time of this study, Catholic nuns in the United States had been accused by the Vatican of “radical feminism” for advocating social justice related to controversial issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and euthanasia. In fact, the pursuit of social justice is still under investigation by the Vatican under the leadership of Pope Francis. (Goodstein, 2012).

The success of the program is demonstrated by its low rate of recidivism; 4%, which is in sharp contrast to the statewide level of 30%. The organization attributes its success to the practice of providing a continuum of services – before, during, and after incarceration. In the words of the program director, “If you can’t make it here, you will have a hard time making it anywhere.”

This program differs from others in that it is the only one in New York State where children can stay with their mothers, as well as the only program that offers comprehensive job assistance, counseling, and of critical importance, child care services. The other large program in the New York area has 10 housing facilities, but is not solely for women in reentry; it includes men, as well as homeless men and women. This other facility has one residence that is for women only, but current employment is a stipulation for acceptance into the program. A woman who recently was admitted to the program that is part of this study had to leave the other New York city area program when she became pregnant, as there are no accommodations for children. The founder of the larger program, also a member of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, still actively
works with women in Bedford Hills Correctional Center, the only women’s maximum security facility in New York State; she was influential in developing the program under study. Another program in New York City is focused solely on women dealing with addiction (personal communications with Sr. Barbara, Program Director and J Velez, of the Coalition for Women Prisoners, New York City).

In 2001, the organization under study was awarded the Family Services Contract from the New York State Department of Corrections to establish the Family Services Program, which includes two prison nursery programs, as well as many advocacy and educational programs. By providing programs within the prison, the organization begins its work with all family members to prepare for reunification and the reentry process well before their actual release (Hour Children Program Proposal, 2011). Through this contract, the organization can refer women directly from the prison nursery to its supportive living environment to continue work on parenting as well as prepare for life in the community.

The program’s target population is families at risk of becoming chronically homeless. The women are single mothers who are heads of household and have children. Many of the women have limited educational and employment histories. Some women come to the program directly from prison, often with an infant to whom they gave birth while incarcerated. In some instances, mother and child stayed together in a prison nursery. Another group of women in the program were separated from their children while incarcerated and were reuniting, or working toward regaining custody. Recently, an increasing number of women are entering the program from the community, some time after being released into the community. These women may be in the shelter system, or otherwise have difficulty finding adequate housing. Some are also having difficulty regaining custody of their children. This is not due to a decreasing number of
pregnant and parenting women in the prisons. The prisons have significantly limited the number of women admitted to the nursery; in fact, the nursery program in the minimum security facility in Taconic has been closed. Many of the parenting programs, including the nurseries, have lost the support of the Department of Correction since the retirement of Elaine Lord in 2004, who was the superintendent of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for 20 years. Another effect of this change in power has been the decrease in referrals of eligible women to this program. The program director, Sister Barbara, shared her frustration with the “roadblocks” she encounters in her attempts to provide assistance. As Sister Barbara explained, it is difficult to work with women who either are not with their babies in the nursery or who had not maintained relationships with their children. Many of these women’s children are in foster care or kinship (where custody is given to a family member), so the program advocates for them, often accompanying them to court, “to get the kids back.”

The organization’s goal is to ensure that families have stable housing in a safe and supportive environment. This is achieved by assisting family functioning and stability, promoting family health and wellness, and enabling families to achieve the maximum possible recovery and integration into the community. In order for women to live independently, they must be gainfully employed. The organization offers many different avenues to achieving this goal, such as computer classes, internships and, for some women, education. Women who are receiving Supplemental Security Income, usually due to mental disability, are not eligible for admission to the program.

The organization operates three transitional residences for low-income families, basically single-room occupancies (SROs), which are convents the organization rents from the local parishes. These buildings are managed and maintained by the organization. The convents are
shelters for mothers either coming from New York State prison or jail nurseries with a baby or are in the process of reunification with an older child or children. The convent provides one room to each family and they share bathrooms, a kitchen, and communal living areas.

The organization opened its first house, known as “House I,” in 1988; it is devoted to the women who are coming out of New York State prison nursery programs with infants or young children. House I also provides shelter for the mother who is reuniting with older children. The women assume child care responsibilities with the help of program staff. They also must take turns preparing dinner (including buying groceries) for everyone who lives in the house.

House II is the next step for women who are ready for more independence and have demonstrated competence in caring for their children, as well as with general life skills. This is known as transitional housing. House II is located a short distance away from House I. Here, the women have their own rooms, but share a kitchen area, and they are only responsible for preparing meals for their families. For women who have completed the program but continue to need supportive housing, the organization developed a third residence that provides transitional housing for families. This transitional house is an SRO for women and children. It is located next door to the program’s offices and serves as a place for mothers to begin establishing her independence. The women are provided with a room or two, depending on the number and age of the children. There is a communal kitchen and living area. Women in this transitional house purchase their own food and see to their personal needs. Women who live in this transitional house continue to need low-cost supportive housing until they are financially ready to move to permanent housing when apartments are secured. Unfortunately, because it is difficult to find affordable housing in the area, most women live in the transitional shelter for three to four years. Each of these houses also serves as a residence for the Sisters of the organization.
In 1999, the organization opened a four-family house around the corner from its offices. Here, the families live independently but continue to receive a range of support services, such as day care, after-school care, therapy, and job training or education. In order to live here, the women must be able to pay rent to the organization, which maintains the building.

The program also manages a residence for older women who either have no children, or whose children are grown, but who need supportive services such as counseling. The women living here pay rent to the organization. This residence is the farthest away from the program. It is located in an area of the county that is suburban in feel, with large older homes on tree-lined streets. With white clapboard siding and a garden with a bench in front, the home has been converted from its original one-family use into a four-unit house. [One of the women I interviewed, who became a key informant, lived in this house. Her unit occupied the front half of the first floor. The original large brick front steps were the entrance to this unit. The participant had decorated the entrance and changed the approach depending on the season; when I first went here, in the summer, potted geraniums lined the steps to the door and a floral wreath hung on the door; in the Fall, pumpkins and potted mums had taken their place; and in December, white lights were on the bushes and an evergreen wreath hung on the door.]

In 2005, with complete financial support from the city’s Department of Housing, as well as tax credits, the program restored a 100-year-old apartment building that is now home to eight families living in supportive low-income permanent housing. This building maintains the historic look on the outside but inside, the walls have been covered with light wood wainscoting, or with light yellow painted walls, as well as brass sconces. In the basement is a laundry room and a recreation room, with simple white walls, a large table and folding chairs. In the process of doing fieldwork, I have been in the recreation room for yoga classes; I also used this space for
some interviews, as it is quiet. A door from here leads to a patio, with a large gas barbeque grill, and a wrought iron table and chair set. Along the brick walls that surround the garden are potted plants.

Construction was recently completed (in December 2013) on another apartment house that provides permanent low-income housing for women who have completed the program. This building, located across the street from House I, has brick on the façade, and new dark brown windows. It offers 18 one-, two-, and three-bedroom apartments. As this study was concluding, women began moving into the apartments, with executive offices moving into the lower level. The employment office gained much needed space by moving into the current space of the executive offices. The program manages all of its properties through maintenance staff; one staff member is responsible for collecting rents and paying the utilities.

Most of the data collection took place in House I and the employment office. House I is the only official site in the state where a woman on work release is allowed to live with her infant. This is a 25-bed facility, housed in a former parish convent. It is halfway down the block from the church on the corner, with the same light tan-colored brick on the outside. After entering an iron gate, a few feet ahead is a double wooden door; to the left of the door is a sign: “My Mother’s House.” One enters into a large foyer, with a wide open staircase that goes up to the bedrooms, and down to the afterschool program. Straight ahead is a large room that once was a chapel, and still has a raised altar and a large cross on the wall in front of the altar. Now it is a playroom, full of toys and small tables.

In the foyer area are two small rooms on either side of the hall. One is full of strollers and toys. The room across the hall has two worn upholstered couches, two upholstered armchairs, and a television set. There are two side tables with lamps on them. The furniture does
not match, and looks worn and dated; it has all been donated. There are no wall hangings, or any touches that would provide the room with a “homey” feel. The one window has an air conditioner in it. Further down the hall on the left is the large living area with a couch and two wing chairs which face a television set enclosed in a wood veneer entertainment console. This unit sits in front of a large window, covered in sheer curtains. Outside the window can be seen the backyard, which has been transformed into a play area, with modern playground equipment and an above-ground pool. I was told that this was all donated by a prominent actor who is a supporter of this organization.

The furniture in this room also does not match, and appears dated and worn. A large wood veneer shelving unit separates this large room into two areas. On the other side is an extra long wood veneer dining room table with 16 chairs around it, about half of which are matching wood with spindle backs. Against one wall is a dark wood veneer, simple style buffet and hutch with a selection of chinaware in it. One wall has a large triple window, covered with sheer curtains. On either side of this window are six high chairs lined up along the wall. Other than a wooden cross in each room, there are few adornments.

Past the dining area is a sizeable kitchen, with large, ceiling-height wooden cabinets painted a soft yellow, and black oversized black granite counters. On one wall are two white refrigerators. Against another wall are two white ranges. Most of the space is occupied by cabinets. There is a small table where two people can sit along the windowed wall. Beyond the kitchen is a pantry area and side doors to the both the front and back outside areas. Another stairway leads up to the bedrooms and bathrooms, and down to the after-school center.

Downstairs is home to both a licensed daycare facility and an after-school program. The daycare facility provides services from infancy up to four years of age. It is run by qualified
staff, as well as by volunteers who are carefully screened. The daycare facility comprises a large clean open space with tile floors. The area is compartmentalized for different activities. In the front near the door are light-colored wooden cubbyholes, with each child’s name on it. Each wall has cabinets and shelves in this same light-colored wood. On one side are high chairs, as well as a small toddler-sized table and chair set, for meal and snack time. On the opposite side are cribs and “nap mats.” In the middle is a play area, surrounded by a two-foot high plastic “fence.” The floor here is covered with rubber matting. There are sink areas at each side, near the eating and sleeping areas.

The after-school program is located in the basement at the other end of the house. It operates each day of the public school calendar. In addition, it offers six weeks of summer day camp. The after-school program offers homework assistance, academic enrichment, and creative arts, e.g., arts and crafts, singing, and dancing. It is run by screened volunteers, usually two adults and at times a teen assistant. This area is not as bright as the daycare. It has a tile floor throughout, with four large square tables, and cabinets and bookshelves for storing supplies. An area near the entrance houses cubicles for each student.

On the other side of this building, past the backyard play area, is a parking lot enclosed by a high metal fence. In one corner is a community food pantry. It is a relatively small one-story unit, with commercial type refrigerator and freezer units on the back wall. In the center are metal shelving units with grocery items, such as boxed pasta and rice, and canned fruits and vegetables. On one wall is fresh produce, the variety depending upon the season. There is also a table with fresh bread and rolls, no commercially packaged breadstuffs are carried. All of the food in this pantry is donated. There are no prepared foods, cookies, or other snack foods. The women in the program are allotted time, usually one hour twice a week, to do their grocery
shopping. The rest of the time it is open to those living in the community. These people must show some type of identification noting their eligibility, such as a Medicaid card. It is manned by a volunteer staff.

The other site where much of the data were collected is the employment assistance office which, prior to its recent move, was located in a corner storefront across the street from House I and the church. Here women receive services to assist them in entering the job market. It is also the “hub” where women come to complete forms to account for their time, whether it be employment-related, or attending a workshop. A comprehensive employment training program focuses on areas such as basic office skills/computer training, retail/marketing, and building maintenance. Some of the women work in the three thrift shops and the community food pantry that the organization manages, while others work providing building maintenance in the facilities (usually cleaning). Because a majority of women come from chronically unemployed families, they are unfamiliar with work protocol. All women must participate in classes and workshops conducted at this site. These classes include topics such as customer service, appropriate behavior and dress in the workplace, resume writing, interview skills, money management, conflict resolution, and time management. In addition to work-related seminars and workshops, the women also attend on-site workshops related to parenting and health issues; these which may include nutrition, hygiene, and safer sexual practices.

The organization maintains relationships with community organizations that can facilitate job placement. For example, Consolidated Edison recently partnered with the organization to provide job training and internships for some of the women. Goodwill Industries, another nonprofit that has two locations nearby, also offers internships, and recently hired three women for full-time employment. A large wholesale chain with a facility nearby has also offered
internships and has employed five women in the past year. When they are ready, these women are offered assistance in obtaining safe and affordable housing.

The one-floor storefront office has a glass door with a green awning and the program’s logo on it. A relatively small space, it measures approximately 20 square feet. Two walls have large windows, covered in blinds. The space is usually decorated for the season; at Christmas time, there is a tree, in addition to garlands around the room, and other decorations. In the front area are couches and simple armchairs; most of the workshops are held here. To the right are the workstations of the employment coordinators, Johanna and Ebony. The remaining space has three rows of counters, with four old computer terminals (not flat screens) on each and four desk chairs. On the back wall are shelves with books and office supplies. Large professional photographs adorn the walls. These are of women in the program; most are dressed in business attire with “an edge,” such as a black dress with heels, and a fedora, carefully made up and coiffed, holding their babies, or surrounded by their children. In December 2013, in need of larger space, this office moved to what was the executive office.

Prior to the move in December 2013, the executive offices were located two blocks away from the original employment office and House I. It is on an industrial block, and shared the building with an electrical company. It was on the upper floor of this two-story grey building, with no windows located on the front of the building. There was a small entry at the top of the stairs, with a receptionist sitting at a desk in front of a window in her small space. Once “buzzed in,” one sees a large glass-walled conference room with a large table straight ahead. To the right is Sister Tesa’s office, a large room with a window. Upon first entering this room, it is clearly cluttered, yet it gives a sense of warmth. Sister’s desk is in the middle of the room, facing the door. There are bookshelves behind her and along the walls, adorned with many photos of
children, and other mementos and “bric-a-brac.” A large round dark wood table with matching chairs provides a more intimate space for Sr. to have meetings. There are also two cats in residence in this office, with one in this office at all times. These cats are quite friendly, and often sit in on meetings. Next to the conference room is a space with two “traditional” style office cubicles. Around the corner from here are two larger work spaces, one which houses the Mentoring program.

Another door at this end of the building opens to the office of Sister Barbara who, as a social worker and the Program Director, is a key individual in the organization. She goes to the prisons to meet with women who might benefit from this program; she supervisors the therapists and counselors; and she carries her own caseload. Sr. Barbara’s office is similar to Sr. Tesa’s in that it is stuffed with personal items that make it feel homey. She also has smaller areas in the room for more intimate discussions: a small table seating two and, across the room, two flowered upholstered chairs facing each other, with a coffee table between them. All of these spaces were relocated to the lower level of the newest apartment house in December 2013; when I last visited at that time, the offices were still in flux, with boxes everywhere.

The program maintains two shops: the Fancy Thrift Shop, which sells donated clothes and accessories, some of which are new from vendors with an overstock; and The Attic, a larger space that sells furniture, toys and other children’s items (including clothing) and books. All proceeds from these stores support the program’s operation. These sites also provide hands-on work experience for the women in the program.

The Fancy Thrift Shop is next door to the employment office, across from a large municipal housing project that is adjacent to a bodega and a laundromat. On one corner is an industrial building. Rita manages this shop; she is not a formerly incarcerated woman, but
volunteers a great deal of time here, since she is retired and “wants to be busy.” She is tall, slim with teased red hair, a great deal of make-up, and speaks with a thick Spanish accent. She moves around the store with speed and energy, moving from one box to another. The store looks like many other stores; a glass counter, with small accessories and costume jewelry, a shelf in the window, showcasing the newer and better items for the season, such as boots and scarves for approaching cold weather. On the wall across from the counter are more shelves, also with some of the newer and better items. In the middle are round clothing racks, typical of what is found in department stores. On either side of the store are double and single racks of clothes, one side for women, and the other for men.

The other shop is located approximately one mile away on a corner lot. This is a much larger space, occupying two levels. The shop has a large glass storefront in which lamps, furniture, and formal clothes, including wedding gowns, are displayed. Upon entering the store, one is immediately aware of the wide open space; the ceilings are more than 20 feet high, giving a loft-like feel. There are large antique armoires, mantels, assorted tables, and more furniture situated in the center; around the perimeter are smaller items, such as china and lamps. The woman who manages this shop is a volunteer who worked as an interior designer, which shows by the way this shop is so carefully arranged.

The staff

The program staff consists of experienced professional social workers: one provides case management and two provide mental health counseling for the more than 40 families who reside in the residences. They are supervised by a Program Director, Sr. Barbara, who is a licensed social worker. The Program Director also has a key role in selecting women for the program – from prison, from alternative-to-incarceration programs, and from the community. Sister Pat
was the Life Skills coordinator when I began this study. She was an educator, having taught elementary and high school. She also had served as a principal. Midway in my research, she was reassigned to serve in an administrative role in her order, the Sisters of Saint Dominic. The sisters all lived in the different residences with the women.

As mentioned previously, the employment program is staffed by two women, both formerly incarcerated women who received services from the program. The mentoring program coordinator is also a formerly incarcerated woman who went through the program. This person does a great deal of public speaking on behalf of the program, and in fact, asked to be interviewed to “share her story,” when she found out about my research. The program also employs another formerly incarcerated woman, who cares for children whose mothers are still incarcerated completing their sentences. The day care center employs one director and four day-care workers. Due to the large amount of donations received, two truck drivers are employed to pick up larger items, such as furniture. Other staff include secretarial and superintendents to maintain the houses and apartments. However, may of the services, such as workshops, are provided by volunteers.

**The neighborhood.**

The program is located in a city that has long been industrial in nature, with some residential apartments and two large public housing projects. It was an area known for prostitution and drugs. In recent years, it underwent gentrification, with the construction of modern, high-end apartments and new restaurants and shops. However, the immediate neighborhood around the program has not witnessed such a dramatic change; it is still surrounded by many factories, fast-food outlets, laundromats, auto repair shops, and car wash facilities. There is also a large municipal sanitation depot two blocks away.
The program is in the middle of the two public housing projects; nearby are factories and a few small framed houses, many of which appear in need of repair. The neighborhood is served by public transportation, with many different bus routes as well as a train station blocks away. Parking a car here is difficult, due to the factories, apartments, and housing projects. In addition, in this part of the city, there are many street parking restrictions.

On the main street, two blocks away from the program setting, is a small supermarket, which is well stocked with fresh produce on the perimeter, and a fish section and bakery on the inside aisles. Next to this is a fast-food fried chicken establishment, a store selling Halal meat, a laundromat with signs in Spanish in the window, a barber shop, and a small coffee shop, which upon closer observation is a casual restaurant selling ethnic Latino cuisine. Around the corner is a large community clinic, gas stations, car wash facilities, and other automobile-related shops. There is one bank within a 20-block radius of the program.

The population of this area is diverse, with many Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, and Hispanic immigrants living alongside the mostly African Americans who make up the majority of the residents of nearby housing projects. This mix of people is reflected in the shops in the area.

The program is located in a two-block radius, the hub of which is House 1. The large Roman Catholic Church which was affiliated with the former convent is on the corner, occupying a large portion of the block. It is a relatively modern church with light colored brick on the outside; the sign on the brick wall says AD 1940.

The Sample

The sample included nine women I interviewed, two women with whom I spent some time alone, as well as six women who left the program during the period of this study. The nine
women interviewed as part of this study included those who had recently entered the program, as well as those who had been there for more than five years. The sample was chosen based on the women’s schedules; it was difficult for women who were employed full-time outside the program or who were attending college to commit the time for an interview, although they were contacted and invited to participate.

The women in the sample ranged in age from 23 to 56. Some of them were not incarcerated; Winnie had been sentenced to community service, and Virginia to house arrest and community service. Two participants, Faith and Valerie, came to the program after completing their sentences at inpatient drug treatment programs; however, both had been incarcerated in the past. All of the women were mothers except Eva. However, she is in a relationship with a woman (also from the program but not in this sample) with three young children. Eva and her partner were selected to live in one of the new apartment houses, in a three-bedroom apartment. The women’s children ranged from one year old to more than 20 years of age. At the time of the interview, seven of the women were living with their children, and of these only Faith had custody of her youngest child. Jodi’s children were adults, although she does have a relationship with them. [In the past month, two new women entered the program pregnant; I have not had much contact with them]

Kellie is employed full time by the program as the coordinator of the mentoring program, which connects volunteers from the community to children whose parents are incarcerated. Denise is working with Kellie as an intern. Valerie is also employed by the program; she cleans House I as well as the afterschool program and daycare center. Jodi had been employed outside of the program but was unemployed during the study; she was receiving unemployment insurance as she sought a new position. Virginia and Eva had been doing internships at the
beginning of this study, and both women obtained full-time positions with Goodwill Industries, a non-profit organization with two locations near the program, due to their customer service skills and their bilingual abilities. Debbie, who expressed interest in construction, had an internship with a local construction business where she did welding; she is now working towards obtaining a welding license. Winnie is doing an internship in one of the thrift shops operated by the organization. She is also participating in a program offered by Consolidated Edison to prepare for a possible internship and/or employment there. Faith is also doing an internship at one of the thrift shops.

The women in the program who were incarcerated had spent from one to 17 years in a correctional facility, with most spending between three and eight years. All of the women spoke English; however, Spanish was Eva’s and Virginia’s first language. Six women were African American, one was Black of Caribbean descent, four were White, and five were Hispanic. Two of the women had college degrees; Rosita had completed an associate’s degree while incarcerated, and had begun taking classes towards a bachelor’s degree, while Jodi held a master’s degree. Bedford Hills Correctional Facility offers college courses toward a degree through an affiliation with Marymount Manhattan College, while the other women’s facilities do not have any educational programs.

There were other women, not in this sample, with whom I spent time during participant observation. I did not have an opportunity to interview them or spend a great deal of time alone with them as they had obtained full-time jobs or were attending college. I did reach out to these women, but due to their busy schedules, they were unable to participate in the interview process.

During the year of fieldwork, some women left the program. One young woman, Mia, was not in the program’s housing; she was living with her partner who was still actively using
drugs. Over a period of two months, she had lost weight from her already thin frame, and looked pale and harried. She voluntarily left the program, but left her three-year-old daughter in the care of Florencia, a woman in the program who has cared for other children who were in the prison nursery with their mothers, but whose mothers were completing their sentence.

Mia was seen often around the neighborhood with a new man, although she did not live here, who she introduced to me as her “husband.” The two of them would just “hang out” and smoke cigarettes in front of the bodega. After not seeing her for two weeks, I inquired as to her whereabouts, and was told she was re-incarcerated for violating parole. Three young women, Toni, Margaret and Olivia, were asked to leave due to problems related to alcohol. Sister Tesa helped them gain admission to an inpatient alcohol rehabilitation facility. Olivia had a young daughter, not quite one year old; Florencia is currently caring for her. Margaret did not yet have custody of her children when she entered the program. Toni was referred to a day program, and her one-year-old son was cared for in the day care program. However, after completing rehabilitation, she left the program and is living independently with her son. I have seen her at meetings of the Correctional Association, where she is networking, hoping to find employment and other assistance. She has a very supportive relationship with her mother, who lives in Westchester County. Three other women left voluntarily to return to their families who lived in upstate New York.

There were some women with whom I spent time during participant observation, that I would have liked the opportunity to interview. However, when I began collecting data through the interview process, six of them women had obtained full-time jobs, and two were also attending college. I did see them sporadically at social functions, such as Professional Day and the Holiday party, and occasionally at the employment office. I reached out to these women by
phone email, and text messages but, due to their busy schedules, they were unable to participate in the interview process.

The Fieldwork Experience.

Key informants.

Key informants are those people in the culture who are particularly central to the study (O’Reilly, 2009). These informants are chosen after some time is spent in the field during preliminary data collection. While in the field, the researcher identifies these key informants that will be interviewed on an ongoing basis for the duration of the study. Questions that arise as the investigator is in the field can be answered by these key informants. These key informants are able to explain in more detail about the culture being studied. They are able to explain how things work within the culture (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Key informants must be willing to share with ethnographers by providing detailed explanations from an insider’s point of reference, and they must have the time and opportunity to be interviewed. The ethnographer must work to develop a trusting and collaborative relationship with the key informants (Wolf, 2011).

Key informants were selected based on their knowledge of the mission of the organization, the workings of the organization, as well as their close contact with the women. Two of the key informants were Johanna and Ebony, who originally served as gatekeepers, and who allowed me to spend time in this setting. They manage the employment component of the program. Every woman who enters this program meets with them within days of entering the program. These women were also responsible for organizing the workshop offerings. Program participants must advise their office each week of their schedules, including appointments with
parole officers, counselors, and medical providers. Johanna and Ebony answered many of the questions I had regarding the organization and management of the program.

After permission was granted to conduct this study in this setting, I approached Ebony and Johanna with my research proposal. They offered their support. Each week, they sent me a copy of the calendar program activities, as well as invitations to events like holiday parties and graduations.

After 10 months of data collected through participant observation, they assisted me in the interview process by providing me with the phone numbers of many of the women in the program, disseminating the invitation to potential participants via flyers, and offering quiet spaces for the interviews. It must be mentioned that these two women had been recipients of the program’s services, both having been incarcerated with young children. Other key informants included Sr. Barbara, the Program Director. Sr. Barbara meets many of these women prior to their acceptance in this program, and acts as a counselor for many while they are in the program.

Another key informant was Jodi, one of the formerly incarcerated women whom I interviewed. After the initial interview, due to her experience teaching parenting classes in prison, and willingness to share her insights, I decided to speak with her on other occasions. In this way, she became a key informant.

**Participant observation.**

Participant observation is the basis of ethnography and involves taking part as a member of a community while making mental notes, jotting down brief notes, and later transcribing them into full accounts of what was observed (O’Reilly, 2009). Ethnographers are participant observers as they gather data during fieldwork by observing and interviewing. The observations are open-ended, flexible, factual, and situated in the setting. Ethnographers may be strangers at
the outset of research, but through this involvement, they become temporary members of the
culture being studied. They learn from the participants, rather than about them. In participant
observation, the researcher’s roles can vary along a continuum from complete participant,
complete observer, participant as observer, or observer as participant (O’Reilly, 2009). While
performing ethnographic research, the researcher’s roles may vary along this continuum,
depending upon the situation or circumstances. Initially, the researcher may observe more often,
but as trust is gained of those being studied, and as more members of the culture are interviewed,
researchers may become more of a participant. Watts (2011) speaks of “familiarity” in the group
setting, which serves to enhance trust in participant observation.

I began the fieldwork experience through participant observation in November 2012. I
was well integrated into the setting due to my previous role in this organization. This led to
comfortable relationships with the women in these groups. By virtue of being available and
helpful, I eventually became a known, accepted, and trusted person in the environment. I believe
that one of the cornerstones of any trusting relationship is availability and honesty. However, I
was careful not to allow my participation to obstruct my level of observation, a risk in
ethnographic research (Wolf 2011). In the context of nursing research, conflict can arise in the
prioritizing of participant and observer tasks. The participant who is a nurse is expected to
“perform” in the research setting; this can make it difficult to focus on observer tasks, such as
writing in a field diary. This can present an ongoing issue in nursing ethnographies (Watts,
2011).

I collected data at different times and at different venues over a period of one year. I
observed the women during the various workshops that are held at the employment office where
job training occurs, as well as at most of the other workshops held. I observed activities in the
daycare and after-school centers when women came to pick up their children at the day’s end. And I spent time in the two thrift shops the program maintains.

My style of dress while doing this fieldwork varied, depending upon the forum. When I was working in the thrift shop, I dressed for “work,” in jeans and a tee shirt; when I was participating in yoga, I wore yoga pants and a tee shirt. Mostly, I kept a simple, professional appearance, as one of requirements of anyone working with these women is to serve as a role model for how to dress in the community. There was a fine line between observing and fully participating in activities with the women.

**Data management for participant observation.**

After leaving the program each day, I wrote extensive notes, describing the setting, the people, and the activity. I maintained a written journal of these experiences, as suggested by Creswell (2003). Creswell (2003) discusses that the journal should include much more than what is visually and audibly observed, but particular sensations ought to be noted, such as smells, tastes, and sounds. I described anecdotal information obtained through informal conversations I had with the women and staff. During this process I maintained a methodological log to record accounts of research activities I participated in, gaps in information that I hoped to close up, as well as my interpretative ideas that were beginning to emerge from the data.

**The ethnographic interview.**

Ethnographers rely on interviews to gain understanding of informants’ worlds. Cultural understanding and interpretation are the motivation for the ethnographic interview.

Semi-structured interviews are done outside of the customary events that occur in the setting, and are usually scheduled with a participant. These interviews allow the researcher to
obtain personal and intimate information from participants that may not come out during the usual fieldwork (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The researcher begins with questions that are open-ended, yet predetermined. In this study, the interviews were semi-structured and guided by an outline; however, as the participant spoke, the researcher sometimes veered from a planned approach. Other questions will emerge as the interview continues, according to the dialogue that ensues between participant and researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Ten months after being a participant observer in this setting, interviews with the women who received services from the organization took place over a period of three months. These interviews were audio-recorded after obtaining written consent from the participant. In-depth interviews were conducted in English only. Although I have a working command of Spanish, I am not fluent; this could have led to my missing or misunderstanding certain important aspects of the discussion. Translators were not used so as not to infringe on the privacy of these participants.

Four of the interviews were held in a quiet room of House I, one interview was in a participant’s home, two were held in the clients’ workspace in the main office of the program, one in a restaurant near the program, and one in the recreation room in one of the apartment houses that is a permanent living environment for some of the women.

In addition to the interviews with selective participants, interviews were conducted with the Program Director, Sr. Barbara. These interviews provided factual information confirming the details I obtained through observation and interviews about the obstacles women face in reestablishing themselves after incarceration or other involvement in the criminal justice system. Sr. Barbara also provided information about the prison system, specifically the nurseries and work release programs, and explained the process of how women are selected for this program.
Interview questions.

An ethnographer is usually attempting to learn about participants from their own perspective, and hear their own views on matters. An ethnographic interview is conducted in the context of an established relationship, where the researcher and the participant have gotten to know each other over time (O’Reilly, 2009).

Although the interviews were guided by an outline; they sometimes changed direction as the participant spoke. The interview should be relaxed and not forced into a framework determined by the interviewer (O’Reilly, 2009). The women chose what they decided to tell me about their lives. Most of the women were willing to openly share their stories; only one, Faith, was reserved. I did not attempt to validate the women’s stories, as it was important to hear the about their lives as they experienced them. This allowed me to learn about these women from their own perspective. According to Van Maanen (1980) the researcher does not need to venture into the participants’ world, as analysis is based upon their own verbal depictions of their experiences.

In many cases, the women continued to talk, some more openly in casual conversation, than they had during the actual interview. After each interview, I wrote detailed notes which included the setting, the participant’s style of dress, body language, disruptions, as well as what was said after the recorder was turned off.

The researcher must be respectful, sensitive, and ethical (O’Reilly, 2009). This was very important to me, due to the difficult situations these women had endured. The interview typically began with my asking “Can I talk to you about your experience with reentry?” instead of “Can I interview you for my study?” Other questions included: “How did you come to this program?” “Tell me about your experience with your children in this process of reentry.” “Can
you explain to me what about this program has been helpful, or not helpful to you?” “Tell me about your accomplishments, and what you hope for in the future.” In situations where the women felt uncomfortable, or became overly emotional, I did not press but tried to be sensitive and respectful.

**Data preparation and management of interviews.**

After leaving the interview, I wrote notes detailing the interview process, including setting, how the participant was dressed, emotions, body language, and what occurred outside of the actual recording. I downloaded the interviews to computer files and sent them for transcription, but I kept the audio to allow me to listen again. The transcription service provided a confidentiality agreement. All files, audio and transcriptions, were maintained on my personal computer and back-up drive only.

**Data Analysis**

In a qualitative investigation, it is common for data analysis to begin simultaneously with the initiation of data collection. This involves a detailed description of the setting and individuals, followed by analysis of the data for themes or issues (Creswell, 2003). It is an ongoing process during the study, involving reflection about the data. The first step involved reviewing the field notes and transcribed interviews, as well as my own journal entries. Throughout the process of participant observation, I sorted the data by type; for example, “parenting workshops,” “life skills,” and “employment workshops.” In this study, a provisional list of themes occurred after the first few interviews. It was important that these themes were derived from the results of fieldwork which noted the participants’ realities, not from my own biases, interests, and motivation. For example, in the early phase of interviewing, participants frequently spoke of how surprise they were when they realized that most of the women who
work in the program, some in high-level positions, were themselves formerly incarcerated women who came to this program seeking help. This gave the women the impetus, or power to continue doing the work involved, despite at times being overwhelmed with the level of responsibility, which emerged as another theme. These same phenomena were shared by a group of diverse women, coming from different perspectives; this added to the trustworthiness of the results.

One way ethnographers can end a study is to ask further questions (Wolcott, 2008). It was a surprising finding that for these women, a sense of having been given the power to succeed was described by every woman, which was reinforced by seeing the women who had been there before them. After spending more than a year observing these women and the program, I understand how such empowerment is the basis of the program.

**Reporting the findings.**

As this is a qualitative study in a natural setting, the results are presented in a descriptive, narrative form rather than a scientific report. Rich, detailed description was used to communicate life as it occurs in this setting of a supportive living environment for formerly incarcerated women. Women’s experiences in this setting, and what it has meant to them, allow the reader to understand the challenges they encounter in their endeavor to “make it” outside prison walls.

**Rigor of Qualitative Research**

Four factors determine rigor in qualitative research; truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. Credibility became the criterion for truth-value in this study. Credibility is met in the study when anyone recognizes the experience that occurred upon reading the study (Sandelowski, 1986). Credibility was achieved in this study through the length
of time spent in this organization, both during this study and prior to it, when I volunteered my time. Credibility was also achieved through triangulation. Triangulation refers to the need to corroborate findings (Wolcott, 2008). Through frequent meetings with key informants, this was accomplished. Applicability refers to when “the findings are well grounded in the life experiences studied and reflect their typical and atypical elements” (Sandelowski, 1986). Typical and atypical elements of the life experiences of women who were incarcerated or sentenced to an alternative to incarceration were found through in-depth interviews and observations of the different lives of women in this setting. In qualitative research, auditability becomes the criterion for consistency of research findings. A research study achieves auditability when the “decision trail can be reviewed for the study from start to finish” (Sandelowski, 1986). In this study, auditability was achieved through the use of field notes, interview notes, and a journal that was kept to describe my own thoughts and questions that I still had after leaving the field or an interview. Neutrality refers to freedom from bias. It relates specifically to the findings of the study, not the thoughts of the researcher. The findings of this study are based upon the participant observations and the stories told by the women in the setting. The data evolved around the lives and experiences as the women described them.

**Summary**

An ethnographic method was used to conduct this study of women who are in a supportive living environment as they transition to life in the community, and reestablish family relationships. This chapter described the organization and activities of this program, as well as my entrée into this program as both a volunteer and later a researcher.

This chapter described how participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and interviews with key personnel were used to collect the data. Themes emerged as a result of
analyzing this data. Chapter Four will introduce the women through their stories. The stories include those women I had the opportunity to interview, as well as women with whom I spent time during the course of participant observation. In addition, I have included the stories of the women who left the program during my time there. Chapter Five will provide detailed information that culminated in uncovering these themes.
Chapter Four: The Women’s Stories

This chapter includes the stories of the women who participated in this study, including a discussion of their entrance into the program and the experiences they had during their time here. Some of their stories were obtained by one-on-one interviews, while others were gleaned during participant observation. I have also included as much information as possible about the lives of the women who left the program. Unfortunately, in most of these cases, I did not spend a great deal of time with them; in one case only did I have the opportunity to get to know a woman well before she left.

Faith’s Story

Faith is a 28-year old Hispanic (self-identified as Puerto Rican) woman with three children; she was one of the newest women in the program, having been in it less than two months when I met with her. Unlike many others, Faith did not come to the program upon release from prison or jail. She had not been incarcerated, but instead was sentenced to an alternative to incarceration, a program for drug rehabilitation. She spent eight months in one facility before transferring to another for the remaining four months of her sentence. Both facilities are inpatient treatment facilities that work directly with the Department of Corrections. They assist women with addictions who committed non-violent felonies; both programs help facilitate family connections.

Faith maintained an “androgynous” style of dress. I had only seen her wear loose-fitting knee-length shorts with an oversized tee shirt, and a baseball cap covering a head of short braids, tightly wound on her scalp. She also had multiple facial piercings. Today, she wore shorts and a tee shirt, but not the baseball cap. Sometimes her hair was cut very short, with curly bangs in the front, making her gender more apparent. Piercings also seemed to come and go. Faith’s body
language, posture, dress, and manner of speaking evoked someone who had grown up on “the streets.” I did not know much about Faith from prior contact during participant observation. Every time I had seen her, she barely spoke and appeared uninterested, at times even dozing off.

Faith had three children, all boys. She had custody of and was living with her youngest, who was born soon after her arrest. This child, Alejandro, 15 months old, lived with Faith since his birth. Her other two children were in different homes; the oldest one, Ricardo, was with Faith’s grandmother, and the middle son, Felipe, was with a foster family. Faith lost custody of them due to her addiction but saw them frequently and usually brought her youngest son along. She said that she “had a chance” with her first child, but that she “stood in the streets,” because she knew her grandmother was caring for her son. After her second son was born, he was admitted to foster care due to Faith’s drug use. Faith herself was raised by her grandmother, who adopted her at age four, because her own mother had problems with drug addiction. In reflecting back on her mother, Faith states “I don’t hate my mother or blame her.” Faith dropped out of school at age 15 and began “hanging out with the wrong people.” In response, her grandmother asked her to leave, and she took to the streets, “not showering, eating, or caring.”

Faith shared that she was afraid of relapsing as she had in the past. She used the word “scared” many times during this interview. Prior to her arrest and conviction, Faith had been “clean” for more than two years and relapsed “just because….” She had been free from using drugs for 15 months. She was attending an outpatient rehabilitation program weekly; she felt that she should be attending more often, but stated that because of her internship at the program and her other responsibilities, it was difficult. She didn’t want to ask to go more frequently for fear that doing so might impact her custody. She believed her relationship with her youngest son helped her, as this was the first time she had one of her children with her. Many times during the
interview, Faith spoke of how she was enjoying motherhood this time. At one point, she stated that if she relapsed and lost custody of him, she “would pass away.” She mentioned that she was “in love with him.” He shared her bed (even though she knew he should be in his crib) because she wanted to feel him and hold him all night. Her favorite part of the day was picking him up from daycare, where “he smiles and comes running to me.”

Faith also spoke of how in this program she was learning to “deal with responsibility.” Specifically, she spoke of having to care for her son, “get him up and dressed and to day care,” and then go to her internship. Faith’s internship was in one of the thrift shops run by the program. Her plan was to ultimately obtain her GED and obtain a job “working with my hands.”

There were additional responsibilities in the house, such as cleaning up and sharing in meal preparation. But Faith did not speak of this in a negative light. She was happy living here, using such phrases as “it’s nice,” “it’s peaceful,” and “the ladies are nice you know,” in describing life in this program.

Faith kept referring to the fact that “things happen for a reason,” such as being held in Rikers Island (jail) for only two days, and being offered an alternative to incarceration: placement in an inpatient facility with her newborn son. Her time at Rikers Island was brief due to her having been almost at term in her pregnancy. (I know there have been some internal problems with that program’s nursery program, or perhaps the judge felt that Faith would be better served by an inpatient rehabilitation facility.)

She again spoke of how thankful she was to be in this program with her youngest son, and to reconnect with her other two sons. At one point, she spontaneously showed me photos and videos of her sons on her cell phone. There were more than 100 photos in her phone, of her
children -together or individually. In the photos, the children looked clean, well dressed, and always smiling. She seemed like any new parent who proudly showed off photos of her children.

Sadly, after completion of this study, I found out that Faith had relapsed. Sr. Barbara was fearful of this occurring when Faith’s girlfriend came back into her life. She is in a drug rehabilitation program, while her daughter is being cared for by Florencia.

Rosita’s Story

Rosita is a 38-year-old Latina with two teenage sons, 18 and 14. She was new to the program, having been there for two weeks at the time of this interview. Prior to coming to the program, Rosita had been convicted of manslaughter and served two sentences: seven years in New York and five years in New Jersey, and then had been home for four months.

She had light caramel-colored skin and large brown eyes; her short hair was styled in an afro with a headband framing her face. She was dressed in business attire, with black slacks and a short-sleeved white blouse, and closed shoes. Her tone of voice, language, and mannerisms reflected someone who had had work experience.

Rosita shared that she has been interviewed before, and that she was in the documentary film, “Mothers of Bedford,” which was about the prison nursery program in Bedford Hills Correctional Center.

She began speaking immediately after the tape recorder was turned on, needing very little prompting during the interview. She spoke loud and fast, as if she couldn’t get her words out fast enough. There were times, when she was speaking about her children, that tears would fill her eyes and her voice became soft and slower.

She was working as an intern in the employment office of the program. She sat at a desk in front of the room, greeting all who entered. She was also responsible for updating the weekly
and monthly calendar of events and sending theses electronically to all staff and volunteers. In addition, she handled general office work, such as filing and answering the phone.

Rosita did not live in the housing - provided by the organization; she lived in a different part of New York City with her mother and sons. She explained that she did not want to move her youngest son from the high school he was attending. It was Rosita’s feeling that this “might be too much for him, with me coming home and all.” Her long-term plan was to move into one of the independent living apartments with her son at a later date when she felt he could commute to school alone, and when she was gainfully employed, a requirement for independent living.

Like Faith, Rosita referred to there being a reason, “God’s divine plan,” to explain how she ended up in this program. She had been working as a waitress in New Jersey, which she “didn’t enjoy,” and stated “it wasn’t paying the bills.” While on a social media site, Rose came upon the ad for an office assistant/intern at the program. Upon calling, the person at the other end of the line (one of the employment coordinators) asked if she had been incarcerated; after answering affirmatively, Rosita was told to “come right in.” Rosita recalled coming to the employment office at the program, and seeing women she “had done time with,” as well as women whose children she had cared for while working in the nursery unit of the prison. She also met one of the women who worked in the mentoring program, the same program her own sons had been involved in during Rosita’s incarceration. Coming here “felt like coming back.” Her “passion” going forward was to work in a position to advocate for incarcerated mothers. Rosita explained that she was thankful to have programs in New York’s prisons to help incarcerated mothers maintain a relationship with their children, and further explained that in New Jersey, there are no such programs and even visitation with children is very difficult.
Although she was away from her sons for many years, she described the transition with coming home to them as “smooth.” She credited having maintained a relationship with them while incarcerated to the efforts of her mother, father, and husband. She spoke lovingly of her family, explaining that she was brought up in “a very good, loving home.” Her mother had been very supportive of her, despite her incarceration. Rosita explained that she “had no reason to get involved in the drug game,” further stating that her brothers were “productive members of society,” and that she should have been the same. Upon release from prison in New Jersey, Rosita stayed in that state, as she was concerned about returning to her home due to issues surrounding her crime.

While living in a halfway house in New Jersey, she saw her family frequently. While incarcerated in New York, Rosita’s father passed away. She recalls seeing the fathers of other women on visiting days, and missing her own father. She states that this was the impetus for her becoming involved in the prison nursery program; she needed to be “around life and laughter, and babies bring life.” She spoke of the babies she cared for, and the attachments she had; she especially enjoyed caring for the baby girls, as she was a mother to boys. While doing this work, Rosita obtained a certificate in early childhood development. She also completed an Associate’s Degree in sociology through a college program that is offered in Bedford Correctional Center in conjunction with Marymount Manhattan College. Other work that Rosita did while incarcerated involved training puppies to be service dogs.

During her incarceration in New Jersey, Rosita did what she referred to as “regular jobs,” such as “mopping the floors, and working the mess hall.” She was also a member of the chaplaincy, first singing in the choir, then being on the committee of the chaplaincy in the facility in New Jersey. Rosita spoke often about her relationship with God during the interview,
stating, “He is an active part of my life.” She recalled getting on her knees after being arrested and asking God to help her maintain a relationship with her sons. She credits God with her finding the position at this program as well.

Following her release from prison in New Jersey and before coming to the program, Rosita had been working as a waitress. Although she liked interacting with customers, it was not financially rewarding. She had spent time looking for other work as well, and described interviews she had gone to, where she felt she had made a good impression but then was denied work due to her “criminal history.” Prior to her incarceration, Rosita had worked as a medical receptionist. After multiple rejections, she decided to try “networking,” and came upon the website where the internship for this program was listed.

She had only been living “under the same roof” with her children for the past few months, and described “the little things” that has become important to her, such as grocery shopping with her sons. She described in detail situations she had with each of her sons, e.g., with her oldest, about his relationship with a girlfriend. She was not living with her husband, but was not yet divorced. He did not want to divorce, and Rosita explained that he was “having a hard time with the fact that I don’t wanna have a relationship – with him.” She spoke of her husband in a positive light; he “made her stay inside” easier; she did not give more details of why she no longer wished to stay in the marriage. Rosita hoped to obtain permanent housing through the program in one of the new apartments under construction. She would live there alone, as she didn’t want to disrupt her son’s schooling.

Throughout this interview, in addition to God, Rosita expressed gratitude to the program, and discussed her hope that it would help her become a “productive member of society, paying taxes, having my own place, my own housing, and finally having my boys with me.”
In the time since this interview occurred, Rosita began working full-time for Goodwill Industries.

Kellie’s Story

This interview took place in the main administrative offices of the program where Kellie worked. We had arranged for the interview to take place during her lunch break. When I arrived, she shook my hand and led me to a quiet, glass-enclosed conference room. It was a warm day in late summer and fittingly, she was dressed in a summer dress and sandals, with her red shoulder-length hair pulled back in a ponytail. Kellie was a petite white woman with large blue eyes and fair skin. She spoke with a strong New York accent. She was very open, having told her story many times.

Kellie had been in this program for six years, following incarceration at New York’s largest jail, Riker’s Island, on drug-related charges. She was seven months pregnant at that time, and was approached by an advocate from this program, who told her she would be a good candidate after her release. Her other option was to go home to Staten Island; she feared that would connect her to her previous drug-using life. She now lives in permanent housing, but first lived in communal housing, then moved to independent housing, which is the typical course for many of the women with children.

After giving birth in the hospital, Kellie returned to jail, where she was able to stay with her newborn daughter in the jail’s prison nursery for one week, before being released to this program. Upon discussing the birth, she became tearful. At that point in time in New York, it was routine for women to be shackled to the bed, and to be separated from their babies immediately after the birth. Kellie was not sent to the postpartum unit of the hospital but instead to the “prison ward,” in a different area of the hospital from the newborn nursery. (Note: In
medical facilities that have contracts with correctional institutions for the provision of medical services, this is typical).

Her oldest daughter is now an adult, and is living with Kellie’s sister on Staten Island. Kellie gave custody of this daughter to her sister and brother-in-law, when she felt her life was “spiraling out of control” due to her drug addiction. She recalled stories of meeting men in hotels just to smoke crack, not caring if this put her life in danger. Kellie did not speak to her daughter for five years during this time, but described how her then teen-aged daughter contacted her:

She had a gut feeling, tracked me down to the nursery over on (the) Hospital and spoke with the nurse and found out that I was incarcerated and had a baby. The nurse at the hospital handed the phone to me, and I’m like, my daughter? I couldn’t speak to her, but I was like I’ll call her tonight. And when I got back to Rikers with (my baby daughter), I called my older daughter and she was like, Mom, if you go to a program, I’ll be there this weekend and if you don’t, you know, um…. 

This daughter is now 22 years old, and still lives on Staten Island. Kellie credits the program with helping in their reunification. When she was first released from jail, it was very difficult to even have a conversation with her, but that after years of therapy, they are enjoying a mother-daughter relationship. Kellie went on to praise her older daughter, her words slightly choked by tears. Her daughter completed college, and has landed her first full time job “in the city.” The two speak often, and meet for lunch or dinner.

Kellie has worked for the program since coming there, and now is the Programming Coordinator of the Mentoring Program, where she connects volunteers in the community to children of incarcerated men and women. In this role, she goes to the jails and prisons, meets the
parent (the mentoring program is also for incarcerated fathers), meets the children, and then connects a volunteer. Kellie credits her ability to “think like a drug addict or a criminal,” in helping her in this position. She states that her “street sense” helps her evaluate whether mentor candidates are appropriate. She meets each potential mentor herself, as simply looking at credentials is not enough, “because I’ve smoked crack in hotel rooms with judges, lawyers, cops.”

Kellie had nothing but praise for the program, crediting it with changing her life. She stated that if it hadn’t been for this program, she would have returned to Staten Island and possibly her old life. Some of the women who lived with her in communal housing are still her best friends today, even if they have moved far away. She credits communal housing with helping her learn how to be a parent. For example, she referred to the difficulty of caring for a crying baby, and having other women help her calm the baby down. Kellie, in turn could then help someone else. She also stated how it was “empowering” to see the women who had come through this program after incarceration and are now working for this program, or have found gainful employment elsewhere. Kellie also credits the program’s offerings for children, such as the day care and after-school programs, in nurturing the development of her younger daughter, who she describes as “an old soul.”

Cognizant of the time, I did not want to interfere with Kellie’s work day schedule. Prior to completing the hour, it appeared that the interview was complete; it seemed as if Kellie didn’t have much more to share. Once the recorders(s) were turned off, Kellie sat forward in her seat, as if to arise, then pushed her body back into the reclining office chair. She started talking about “how tired” she was, as she felt that she could not “take a break, because there is no room for error in this job,” explaining the details of the mentoring program for which she is responsible.
When I asked if she would consider leaving this position, she exclaimed “never, this is my baby, this is my life.”

In addition to her work as the mentoring coordinator, Kellie shares her story with college students, parole officers, lawyers and judges, as well as journalists, who have published her story. I had the opportunity see her speak to a large group of criminal justice students who came to the program. Standing up straight, Kellie told her story, still tearing up at times. The audience was silent. Not one student even checked their phone or was distracted in any other way. She then spoke to the students as future district attorneys, police officers, and corrections officers, encouraging them to think of offenders as people, not just criminals. She also used this opportunity to “solicit” volunteers to be mentors or tutors in her program.

**Eva’s Story**

Eva is a 38-year-old Latina, who was released from prison in 2011 after being incarcerated for 17 years following a conviction for a murder she committed as part of a gang. During this period, she was transferred five times. From 1996 to 2004 she was in the maximum security prison at Bedford Hills; she then was moved to the Albion medium security prison where she stayed until 2007; from there, she was moved to Bayview Correctional Center, a minimum security facility; from here she went back to Albion and then completed her sentence at the Taconic Correctional Center. (This was common, as the governor of New York had been in the process of closing Bayview Correctional Center, now closed).

The interview was held in a coffee shop, which served Latin inspired food, two blocks away from the program offices. As we walked, Eva seemed to know and greet almost every person we passed. Upon entering, Eva told the gentleman behind the counter that we would be sitting in the back. At the front of the restaurant, behind the counter, were trays of cooked Latin-
style food, such as rice and beans, various types of meats, and other foods I could not identify. We headed straight to the back of the restaurant, where there were wooden tables; it was dark with paneled walls and dim lighting, perhaps to keep the heat at bay, as it was unusually hot on this September day. The ceiling fans buzzed above us. The restaurant was relatively empty, save for one person eating alone at one of the first tables. Eva led the way, and took a seat at a table along a wall, to permit quiet and privacy. A waitress came over, and in Spanish we both ordered coffee.

Eva speaks with a heavy Spanish accent, having been born in the Dominican Republic and raised in Puerto Rico until immigrating to the United States as a teenager. Her entire family lives in Puerto Rico, in what Eva described as “a big house with horses -- it’s real nice.” She had not seen her family in more than 17 years, but stated she would like to save money to go and visit. She appeared younger than her stated years, with clear olive skin, large dark brown eyes, straight white teeth and cheeks marked by dimples. Her teeth and dimples stand out as Eva always seemed to be smiling. Her medium-length dark brown hair was neatly tied back, as it always was. On this day, she was wearing khaki slacks, a tan and white short-sleeved shirt, and clean fabric sneakers. Eva was always well-groomed, even when she was doing an internship working in painting and maintenance. Around her neck was a gold religious medal of Mary.

During her incarceration, Eva worked in maintenance services and the “mess hall,” where she “cooked for 800 people,” and as a telephone operator for the Department of Motor Vehicles. Eva explained that when someone calls the DMV in New York State, the phone is answered by “an inmate.” This person then transfers the call to the appropriate department. Eva explained that the person answering the phone cannot obtain any personal information from the caller.
This is one of the highest paid positions in prison at 34 cents per hour. Of all the jobs she had in prison, Eva said she most enjoyed working in food services.

Eva’s entrée into the program was different than many of the other women, as she was a single woman without children. She had heard of this program while in prison, but felt she would not qualify; she thought it was only for women with children. However, there are a very small number of women without children in the program and one of them who had been incarcerated with Eva had come to this program upon release. Eva asked this friend to “put in a word for me.”

One day, while working on the prison grounds, Eva saw one of the Sisters who routinely traveled upstate to identify women who would benefit from the program’s services. Eva approached her, explaining that she had no family in New York, and no place to go after her upcoming release. Unfortunately, Sister E denied her request, yet Eva was persistent; she felt “at least I could try.” A few weeks later, Eva again saw Sister E, who then approached her for an interview; immediately, she was offered a single room in one of the transitional houses. A space had become available when one of the single women moved to a home the program owned further away. “I was so happy. It was the greatest day,” Eva recalled. Upon moving into the “big house,” Eva was “like wow.” She described the feeling of sleeping on a mattress “like heaven,” compared to the thin mattresses in prison. Having spent the last 17 years in prison, Eva had many changes to adapt to, in addition to a comfortable mattress. For one, technology had changed the world. She described how “weird” it looked to see everybody talking on cell phones, while she was still using pay phones on the street. Also, she had to re-learn how to use mass transit, since the system now used a MetroCard, not the tokens that Eva remembered.
Eva participated in as many workshops as she could while in the program. Although participation in these workshops was required by the program in fulfillment of parole, it was not uncommon for some of the women to be absent from some of the workshops. Eva participated in workshops on health, nutrition, resume writing, and computer classes, among others, and was one of the few women who showed up and actively participated in a series of yoga classes. “I am happy to get all the information and experience I can here,” she explained. She was always pleasant and willing to help the workshop leaders.

Eva has had three internships while in this program. The first internship was working in building maintenance. She worked alongside the maintenance staff, caring for the offices and apartments that are owned and operated by the program. In this position, she painted and learned home repair skills. In fact, when I participated in the yoga workshops alongside her, she told me she had painted and installed the floor and ceiling moldings in the room where the yoga classes were held.

After completing this “in-house” internship, Eva worked as an “intake person” for a community-service organization; her role here was to assist Spanish-speaking clients. Although happy for a position, she explained she was “not a desk person.” When the opportunity arose in a restaurant, she was offered an internship as a “line cook” in a well-known barbeque restaurant, due to her cooking experience in prison and the interest she expressed. The term of the internship recently ended, and Eva was told an opening was expected but she preferred not to sit and wait and instead is actively seeking employment. During her internship, she obtained a Food Handler’s License from the Department of Health of the City of New York, which she proudly took out of her wallet to show me.
In addition, she started working part-time providing cleaning services at the same offices where she did an internship; she did well and was offered employment. Eva preferred full-time employment in the restaurant industry, for which she had been trained. Eva’s passion for this kind of work emerged during our interview; she stated that food should be about the experience, not just to “put something in your mouth.” Education was another goal she actively pursued. Eva completed her GED, as well as 36 college credits toward a degree in sociology.

Since starting the program, Eva had been in a relationship with a woman, to whom she referred as her “partner.” This woman had three young children, ages three, eight, and 10. She was also in the program, but lived with her children in another of the transitional houses. Eva “has always been gay,” but reports that her partner “has little experience with girls.” The women did not know each other prior to coming to the program. Soon they will all be living together in one of the new apartments.

Eva spoke of now “being a mother,” and how that “changed everything, because now everything is for the kids.” She spoke lovingly of being “attached” to the children, and their “stealing my heart.” Although they were not yet living together, the couple spent most of their free time with each other and the children. Eva described taking the children to swim lessons, dance lessons, helping with homework, etc. She spoke happily about “being a family.”

As we left the coffee shop, Eva realized she had forgotten her handbag. At the same time, one of the workers came running out to her, holding it out to her. She thanked him in Spanish, and told me she believes that people are all basically good, if treated nicely by others. And as we walked back to the program office, she was greeted by almost every person we passed, switching easily between English and Spanish. It was obvious she was well known and well liked in this community.
Soon after this interview took place, Eva obtained a full-time job as a prep-worker in a local restaurant.

Denise’s Story

Denise is a 23-year-old Black woman of Caribbean descent with a three year-old daughter she delivered while incarcerated. This was her first pregnancy, which was discovered during the physical exam after the initial arrest and admission to a local jail. She was convicted of selling drugs. Denise acknowledged she was a “wild teenager, just rebellious, hanging out with the wrong people.” Her daughter stayed with her in the prison nursery unit, but as her sentence was longer than the time allowed for children to remain in the nursery, she completed her sentence and left her daughter in the care of her own mother and stepfather.

Denise was petite, standing just under five feet tall, and slight in build, probably weighing less than one hundred pounds. Her hair was straight, pulled back in a ponytail. She was always well groomed, and dressed in business attire, such as slacks or dresses and flat shoes. She was talkative in group situations, but not overbearing or controlling.

Denise spoke very positively about the program and how it “changed her,” even going back to her incarceration. She states that she was “privileged” to be accepted into the prison nursery unit. This was her “safe zone,” because as she explained, having her daughter and caring for her kept her out of “drama” in the prison, such as frequent arguing among the women, for “petty things.” Prior to her incarceration, Denise described herself as “carefree like I didn’t care about pleasing anyone or what anybody thought about me. I wanted to be wild.”

After completing her sentence, Denise did not go into the program directly from prison, as many women do; she went home to live with her mother and stepfather, who were caring for her daughter. She stated that she wanted to go directly into the program, but was dissuaded by
her family, who felt that she should be “with family.” During this time, Denise worked full time in a sales marketing position she enjoyed, and where she saw a future for herself. She was “suddenly let go, probably due to my felony history.” She was also attending college, and earned 12 credits, but “dropped out because life got in the way”; she had to work and she was trying to care for her daughter. The time with her family was referred to as a “struggle,” as she was “bumpin’ heads” with her mother. She stated that she and her mother always had a strained relationship, although as any only child, she was “spoiled rotten, getting everything I wanted.” Her mother was a registered nurse and frequently worked overtime. She felt that her mother was trying to “relive her life through me.” She wanted me to be “the perfect girl the best student, making me take dance and piano lessons.” She did state that her relationship with her mother was improving, and that “they are working on it.”

“As a mother now, I can kind of understand it, wanting the best for your child, but at the time I just felt pushed.” A fight with her mother prompted Denise to leave the family home and enter the shelter system. They spent one month in this shelter, which Denise describes as “very depressing, one room, surrounded by all of these homeless people.” Her daughter, who had become very close to her grandparents was constantly asking, “When am I going to see my gaga?” Denise: “I felt once again like I was in jail.” When she realized that this was not the place she wanted to be, nor did she want to go back to her family, Denise reached contacted the program to which she had been referred while incarcerated. After one month, her room there was ready.

Denise spoke positively about life in the program. “It’s really a journey,” is how she refers to the experience. “It’s just like they believe in us so much and they want us to do good.” She spoke of learning her own strengths, specifically related to work. At the time of the
interview, she was an intern assisting the coordinator of the mentoring program, herself a formerly incarcerated woman who received services from the program. This job entailed maintaining files, answering the phone, updating the calendar of events and assisting all workshop leaders. One of her responsibilities was to send out the events calendar electronically to all staff and volunteers. Denise always took the initiative to do this regularly without being asked. She also helped organize the events and meetings, usually attended them, and wrote correspondence. Prior to this position, she did similar work in the employment office. She was always professional in her appearance as well as her demeanor. Her desk was neatly organized, with labeled files in a stand next to the computer.

Upon entering the program and starting these internships, Denise did not know that the women for whom she worked had all been incarcerated, and had gone through this program. After finding this out, Denise stated that “it made me feel better, and seeing they made it so far, it made me push myself more.” As far as living in the program, Denise speaks to how this is “like family.”

I am happy here, it has been great. Like in the summer, after the kids are in bed, the girls, we just sit outside in the yard and talk; I’m so grateful to have these women around me.” This same camaraderie can be observed throughout the day as well. For example, if the women are all involved in a workshop or another activity together, afterward they go outside, smoke cigarettes, and make small talk, with a great deal of laughing.

Denise’s long-term goal is to become a paralegal, something she had not considered prior to her own involvement in the criminal justice system. She credits a positive relationship with a paralegal who worked with her on one of her cases. She successfully obtained a GED while in a county jail awaiting the outcome of her trial, prior to being transferred to state prison. Since
release from prison, Denise completed approximately 12 college credits. Prior to entering the program, Denise was working at multiple jobs, one in a discount shoe store chain, as another at a fast-food chain. Although these were not jobs that she wanted, it was important to build her resume, she explained. Her last position was in marketing for a “corporate company.” She explained that was a position that she “really liked” and “was good at.” She thought that she would have a future there; for example, her superiors had discussed transferring her to Florida in the future; Denise was excited about that prospect and beginning a new life with her daughter. However, after a few weeks, she was unexpectedly fired. Denise feels it occurred when someone realized she had been convicted of a felony. This event made Denise realize the stigma that followed her: “I was let down. It was just like it started to take effect on me like wow, I really have a felony and you know, I’m probably not even gonna get far in life.” She shared that she was “heartbroken about it,” and disappointed that her mother was not supportive. Again, she felt she was not living up to her mother’s expectations. This accentuated the problems in their relationship and resulted in Denise’s decision to leave and go to a shelter, where she then contacted the program asking if she could come there.

Living away from her mother had a positive effect on their relationship. Denise stated that they had developed “a very close relationship now that we don’t live together.” Denise is also “working on” her relationship with her daughter’s father. She stated that they were together for five years prior to her incarceration, and were “younger then,” so she felt a need to focus on her own life at this point. He, on the other hand, wanted to “jump off the roof and get married.” He visited Denise and their daughter during the week, and they saw each other every weekend. She spoke of the things they did as a family, such as go to the parks.
Denise spoke often and lovingly of her relationship with her daughter. She talked of speaking to her *in utero*, and “feeling her kick when I spoke to her.” Like many mothers, Denise raved about her daughter’s accomplishments, such as talking and walking at an early age. She described her personality, smiling as she called her “an actress,” because she “cries when she wants something.”

She spoke less positively about giving birth. Being alone, without her baby’s father or family for support was very difficult. Three officers were guarding her at all times, which “was not helpful.” She states that she was “in labor for three days, by myself.” Situations such as this are not uncommon for incarcerated women going through childbirth. Until 2009, women were routinely shackled to the bed while in labor. In 2009, a law was passed in New York State banning this practice; however, women are still shackled during transport to and from the hospital, as well as during the postpartum period in the hospital. At one point, Denise recalled, “I was asking God, was I being punished at that time for all my wrongdoings and my sins.”

Denise spoke many times of how “grateful” she was to this program, for providing her with shelter and support, as well as job training.

“I don’t regret what I did; because it changed me……for the better.”

**Jodi’s Story**

Jodi is one of the older women at the program who is not living with young children. She lives in a room in a large private home that she shares with two other women who like her, are not parenting young children. This home is further away from the program’s other offices and housing. Although it is still in the confines of the city, it is a more suburban type of neighborhood, with large older homes on tree-lined streets. The house is a very large colonial
which has been divided up into living spaces. Jodi’s living area has its own entrance, which is the original front door of the home. There are flowers pots on the steps going up to the door.

For this meeting, Jodi was waiting for me on the steps, smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a sundress and flip flops, and her curly dark hair fell down around her shoulders. She was in her late 50s, a bit overweight, with fair skin and blue eyes, and lines that showed her age. As we went into her living space, I first thought this was an apartment, as there appeared to be a small kitchenette which divided the room. Jodi explained that the women shared bathrooms and a kitchen space, except that she had her own half-bath, with just a toilet and sink, which was past a door in the back of the kitchenette, and in a hallway where the other women enter. She explained that she only needed to shower in the shared bathroom space upstairs.

She has a boyfriend “who is handy” and he created the kitchenette, which has a full-sized refrigerator, microwave, toaster oven and hot plate. This area is separated from the main living space by a half wall some of which has cabinets, and counter space which has been extended to make a breakfast bar with stools on either side. Next to the refrigerator is an antique style oak china cabinet, filled with floral patterned plates, cups and glasses. There were plates on wrought-iron hangings decorating this area. The room had wide wooden planked floors, beamed ceilings, and a large bay window, which was adorned with white lace curtains. There was a large wood-burning fireplace on one wall, with a mantle that held photos. Inside the fireplace were “Duraflame” logs. Jodie explained that she actually did use the fireplace. There was an air conditioner in one window, and a ceiling fan up above, which kept the space cool. A large wooden sleigh-type bed occupied the middle of the room; it was covered with a floral quilt. At the foot of the bed was a wooden chest. On one side of the bed was an end table with a ceramic lamp, and on the other side was a large wooden bureau. In front of the bay window was a small
light blue sofa with wood arms, and a wood coffee table in front of it. An old-fashioned wood rocking chair was to the side of the table, next to the sofa. Framed photos were on most surfaces, as well as a large collage on the wall above the mantel. No ashtrays were visible inside the home, only on the front steps, nor did the room have an odor of tobacco. Jodi told me she enjoyed decorating, and her room was quite homey, cozy, and feminine, with an old fashioned feel. She showed me some photos of her sons, now grown, as well as of the home she had prior to her incarceration, a large suburban house with an outdoor deck and an in-ground pool.

Jodi was a therapist, but her license to practice social work was revoked due to her crime. She received a Master’s degree in Social Work in 1986, and had been in practice from that time until her incarceration, mainly working in publicly funded facilities. She shared that she worked in the prison during her incarceration as a therapist, and as a facilitator of parenting classes. After her release, with the program’s help, she secured a position as a social worker for a well known charitable organization, and held this position for two years, but had recently quit due to “issues” with her superior. She explained it was a hostile work environment, and that most of the staff in the office had left. She was receiving unemployment, but was still “very upset and worried” about not having a job. With her unemployment, she was able to pay the rent for this room, but could afford little else. She shared that she wanted to secure a position helping other women in reentry.

Jodi showed me to a seat on the sofa, with her on the rocking chair. She offered me a cup of tea or another beverage, but I declined. She put her smartphone, which was constantly in her hand, on the windowsill. Once the conversation began, Jodi needed very little prompting. She was animated, and at times tearful. She veered off the subject often, but directed herself back to the original discussion.
Jodi’s entry into the criminal justice system, and eventually to this program, began in September 2003 when she was involved in a car crash that resulted in the death of a man; she pleaded guilty to vehicular manslaughter. She explained that she was speeding, on her way to obtain crack cocaine, to which she had become addicted in 1999. This, however, was not Jodi’s first addiction. As she explained, her first addiction was sugar, and she began therapy for this through Overeaters Anonymous at age 16. She drank and used Qualuudes and marijuana, for which she sought recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Jodie had 23 years of sobriety before she became addicted to crack cocaine. She related this to the stress from a divorce she initiated in 1993, and caring for two young sons while working full time.

Prior to the divorce, Jodi’s life was full; she held an administrative position as a social worker with a major provider of health-related services, and she had “all the trappings: the house, the pool, money.” After initiating the divorce, Jodi coped as she always had, through the skills she had developed in recovery, such as “making meetings” and sponsoring others. She described the first time she tried crack cocaine; she was in a bowling alley watching her son, when a man started “flirting” with her.

My coping skills were chipped away at and some guy was bowling and flirted with me and I knew I should not go out with him. He lived in a halfway house in Queens. I mean, this was my work. I knew that but I went and he was a crackhead. Then we left and I tracked him down, and I wanted to try something I had… I wanted to try something I had never tried. That was my logic. I mean, obviously, that wasn’t really it. I wanted to not feel the nightmare of what I was feeling. I was dreading initiating divorce. I wish I had been more mature…..In the face of losing everything, I couldn’t stop, didn’t stop. It is a drug that is different than any I’ve ever done.
Throughout her drug use, Jodi managed to work, getting high while in her office. She was also still attending meetings at AA while using crack cocaine. This went on for three and a half years. She described how upset the people at AA were; they felt that if Jodi, with 20-plus years of sobriety could relapse, then anyone could. At one point, her ex-husband asked her to leave the home, saying that he and his new wife would move in to care for the two boys. Realizing that her addiction was overwhelming, Jodi left, and subsequently lived in three different apartments, with two different men. At the time of the accident, she was living alone. Prior to the accident, Jodi tried to rehabilitate, but this only lasted a few weeks.

Due to the injuries sustained as a result of the accident, she was hospitalized at a large tertiary care center for one month. Rehabilitation was required; however, since Jodi had no health insurance, one of her previous associates allowed her to stay at a physical rehabilitation center located in a large psychiatric hospital, at no cost. Jodi was not formally charged immediately after the accident. But later, while in the rehabilitation facility, two sheriffs came and advised her of the charge of Driving Under the Influence (DUI), and advised her that unless bail was posted, she would be taken to the county jail to await trial. Jodi’s mother posted bail. Having completed physical rehabilitation, Jodi was transferred to the drug and alcohol rehabilitation unit of the facility. From here, she went to a group home that was across the street from a crack house.

I would love to tell you that I – I killed someone and never picked up again, but it’s not true. Who – I mean what I lost…I –who – would feel it? Who couldn’t let themselves feel it? I mean – I couldn’t. So I used a few times until a friend got me out of here and I was earnestly serious now and I began earnestly making meetings.
At the next court date, Jodi was charged with vehicular manslaughter and bail was now set at $25,000, which she was unable to make. She was immediately taken to the county jail to await sentencing. She plead guilty and was sentenced to a co-ed drug treatment facility (classified as minimum security), but due to physical disabilities as well as a hearing loss, was instead sent to a maximum security that had the medical facilities she required. She received a sentence of four to 12 years, of which she served eight. Jodi recalled having been depressed during the first two years of her incarceration. Previous coping mechanisms resurfaced as a result. She gained a large amount of weight, almost reaching 300 pounds; in addition, she began using drugs (drugs are readily available in prison). This depression was due, in part, to having no contact with her sons. She recalled only seeing her sons two or three times during her entire incarceration. Jodi’s explanation was that her ex-husband’s new wife would not let the two boys visit. A therapist who was working with Jodi in prison had contacted the home on her behalf and was told, “How dare you let a murderer see our children.” Jodi felt that the children heard this, and that influenced them; she also felt that their father did not encourage them to visit. Since her release, she had begun having a relationship with her sons, who were grown; in fact she was meeting one of her sons on the day of our interview. Being a therapist herself, Jodi knew that in order to overcome her depression, she would have to “find out what holes were inside of me that I didn’t know were there.”

She also credited another inmate, a woman who was serving a very long sentence and had undergone a “transformation,” with having reached out to her and helped her. Part of Jodi’s strategy in overcoming depression and addiction was to work; she became a staff member of the prison nursery unit. In this role, she was able to use her knowledge, teaching parenting classes. She also began working as an “associate chaplain.” This was not easy, but through a program
called “Clinical Pastoral Education,” which required 450 hours of education, she became one of a handful of inmates in the nation who went on to become associate chaplains. In this position, she began a mentoring program in the nursery; “but it was really just providing therapy,” she said. Through this work, Jodi “began to get meaning in her life.” Being a therapist was very important to her; unfortunately, her license to practice was revoked as a result of her crime.

Although the program typically accepted mothers with young children, Jodi was accepted due to her knowledge and skills. She completed an internship in the mentoring program here, which was prior to my involvement. After eight months, she found a position working as a therapist in a non-profit organization; she stayed in the position for one year, and then was transferred to another clinic where she worked for one year. Jodi left this position due to “working with an impaired boss.” She was looking for work. She had lived in two other homes in the program prior to coming to this last one, described earlier; “this one is the most beautiful – I mean I’m so happy.” After her release, Jodi again became very involved in AA, “making meetings and celebrating.” (Celebrating refers to the group recognizing a member’s time being sober.).

Jodi expressed sincere gratitude to the program. “I would have no place to call home if it weren’t for Sister T.” However, speaking as a therapist, she does state that “treatment is missing” in this program. Two therapists volunteer their time at the program. However, “it is not enough.” Her goal is to find a position where she can provide counseling to women in reentry.

Because Jodi is in independent housing, paying her own rent, I only had the opportunity to see her in the main offices of the program at a time when she was there for her own therapy appointment. She still maintains a relationship with the therapists here at the program, and
shared that she particularly needed it to help cope with her unemployment. While in the offices, she spoke only to the staff, not to the women receiving services. She approached me as I was sitting in a chair talking to Denise while waiting to meet with Sister Barbara.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met,” she said as she extended her hand to me. I rose to greet her and when she asked who I was, I explained that I was a volunteer here and that I was also working on a research study. She was very intrigued, and offered to be interviewed. After this initial interview, she offered to meet me at another time, to share information and proved light about her time working with these women in the prison. After discussing this with my advisor, I contacted Jodi and met with her multiple times in the following months. Details of these meetings are provided in Chapter Five, as the information she provided was instrumental in explaining the themes that emerged.

**Valerie’s Story**

Valerie is a 41-year-old black woman. She is of short stature, and approximately 50 pounds overweight, with poor vision requiring thick eyeglasses. Her usual style of dress is casual, such as jeans and a tee shirt and sneakers; her clothes are typically tight, and her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. Her gold teeth are noticeable due to the wide smile she usually has. She always has a cigarette in her pocket, always ready to go outside for a cigarette break. She has been in the program for five years.

Valerie describes herself as an addict since the age of 15. Involvement with drugs resulted in her having been incarcerated multiple times. She has spent time in almost every woman’s prison in New York State, as well as Riker’s Island, which is a jail. As she described it, “My routine really basically before was, you know, get out of prison and go back to the street.” She is the mother of two children, a 15-year-old daughter and a five year-old son.
Her first child, her daughter, was born during one of these periods of incarceration, in a setting where Valerie could keep her baby with her in a prison nursery. Since Valerie’s sentence was longer than the period allowed for a child to stay in the nursery, her daughter was sent to Hale House for the remainder of her sentence. (Hale House is a non-profit organization that offers many services to families, one of which is to provide care for children whose parents may not be able to do so themselves, due to addiction or incarceration). After her release, Valerie lived with her daughter in a house with friends. The first year together after prison went well. But Valerie began using and selling drugs again. This time, her daughter went to live with Valerie’s mother in law. For eight years, from the time her daughter was three, Valerie saw her daughter infrequently. “It’s sad to say, but I’m honest today, and I chose drugs over my daughter.” Although she and her mother-in-law didn’t have a good relationship, she felt that this was the best environment for her daughter, as her mother-in-law was a “strict Jamaican grandmother.”

In 2007, Valerie became pregnant again. She did not know she was pregnant until she was arrested during a raid on a neighborhood candy store. Valerie was arrested for a parole violation, and sent to prison again. She was ambivalent about another child but after hearing about this program, decided that this might be “a second chance.” So in December 2008, Valerie entered this program with her infant son, completing her sentence. However, also in 2008, she left the program, and she was arrested again in 2010. As Valerie explained, I still had demons,” referring to her drug abuse. When she first came to the program, it was because she didn’t want to “put my son through what I put my daughter through.” However, even though she was doing well in the program and had “advanced” to living in independent housing, she still “wanted to run the streets, still wanted to get high.” Being a mother was also stressful. So Valerie and her
son left the program voluntarily and they went to live in a shelter with her son’s father. Soon after, Valerie left the shelter, and left her son with his father, to go “run the streets.”

In November 2010, she was arrested again. Because of the large quantity of drugs involved, this time she was facing a long sentence: four to 12 years, of which she would probably serve eight. Although she had served many years, they were always fairly short, the most being two years. In the interim, the Administration for Child Services (ACS) had taken custody of her son, as the baby’s father was not maintaining required attendance at the shelter. As Valerie explained, this was his first child, and he didn’t know how to care for their son, so he was spending most of the time with his sister, who helped him. Prior to sentencing, Valerie met with her lawyer and the District Attorney and was offered an alternative-to-incarceration program, a residential drug treatment program where she could go with her son. The program mandated she spend 24 months in it, where she was to complete an inpatient program, an outpatient program, obtain her GED, obtain employment, save $1500, and find suitable housing. If these stipulations were met, the mandate would be lifted. While serving her time, she reached out again to this supportive housing program, and after 17 months, she was released, with her son, into the program.

The program welcomed her back, offering suitable housing and employment. At this point Valerie was not even on parole; she was “free as a bird.” After completing the outpatient program, she had not gone to meetings or programs. When asked about her addiction, Valerie just stated that she was “tired of everything.” She recalled having an “epiphany” after this last arrest, while in jail awaiting sentencing; she described many of the women around her as using drugs and fighting, and she was looking at the photo she had pasted (with toothpaste) on her locker and felt “what am I doing here, I can’t do this shit.” She also recalled a phone call from
her one of her maternal aunts, in which the aunt chastised her, telling her “to grow up,” which was also part of this epiphany. The following day, she went to court and was mandated to the drug treatment program.

Throughout her incarceration, Valerie stayed in contact with her family. Her father passed away when she was 12, and her mother passed in 2007. Valerie described her mother as a “workaholic” who worked two jobs after her father died. The absence of her mother on a daily basis is something that Valerie blames for beginning her drug use. She recalls feeling sad and “unloved,” and said that drugs allowed her to not feel this way. To Valerie, her mother “loved work more than me.” Valerie explained that her mother continued to work until a few months before her death from multiple sclerosis. Despite exhibiting signs of advancing disease, such as frequent falls, her mother did not seek health care. Valerie stated that she loved her mother, and holds no ill feelings. She said her mother “is looking down on her now and is proud of what I have done.”

Reuniting with her daughter has been challenging. As mentioned previously, her daughter was raised by her paternal grandmother, with whom Valerie does not have an amicable relationship. According to Valerie, this is because she is not Jamaican. Her daughter’s life “wasn’t easy,” due to the strictness of her grandmother. She attended private school, and attended church five times per week. Friends and even cousins were not allowed in the home. Thus when the daughter left private elementary school and entered public school, “she went crazy.” Valerie explained that she was “hanging out with the wrong crowd.” Her mother-in-law blamed Valerie for this behavior. Her daughter, in turn, blamed Valerie for having to live with this strict grandmother. Now, however, Valerie would remind her daughter to call her grandmother often because “you have to show gratitude because you coulda been somewhere
else.” As far as her own blame, Valerie spoke with her daughter frankly and talked about moving on, not focusing on the past. Valerie stated that her daughter was very close to her young brother, and that the three of them spent a great deal of time together, “watching movies, going to the park, boring stuff.” Boring, according to Valerie, is good. As she explained; “I know where my kids at, I’m not hungry, I have a home.” Valerie has maintained a relationship with her son’s father, although she did not want to live with him at this point. She wanted to focus on her children.

Coming to the program, or “living real life,” as Valerie said, was overwhelming at first. Freedom was overwhelming. As explained by Valerie, in prison, every day was the same: wake up at the same time, go to your job, meals, recreation, and bedtime. Outside of the program, “living real life” can be difficult, such as taking care of children and looking for a job. Finding employment could be difficult due to the stigma attached to having committed a felony. Valerie credited the program’s employment coordinators with having a positive influence on learning skills that are important in functioning in the community, for example, sending an e-mail to someone. If a woman in the program had a question or concern for the employment coordinator, they were advised to send an e-mail; this was a job skill to be learned. At first, it bothered Valerie, but she eventually acknowledged its importance. She shares this realization with women new to the program.

Prior to coming to the program, Valerie had very little work experience, as she was selling and using drugs actively. She had worked in retail stores for short periods of time; usually only “a few months before I was fired.” Most of her work experience since was through internships at the program. She worked in the three thrift shops that are operated by the program. Following the resignation of Sister Pat, Valerie was given the position of Life Skills
Coordinator. She ran different workshops each week, with topics such as time management, cleaning a home, and some parenting issues. Prior to starting this program, I had the opportunity to speak to her about her plans. Valerie explained that she does want to “do some stuff different than Sr. Pat. I want to talk about communication; I know they learn different things about communication, but you know, I know what these women need to learn. Like, how to talk to Jenny. Or Sister Tesa ‘cause sometimes she can be tough, and the women, you know, they don’t how to take it, or respond. So they keep it in, and take it out on others, or they kids. And also how to talk to each other without fighting. You know what I mean? And also men, because when you away, you not with your baby father, then you come here, and your baby father not living with you; you know women don’t know how to deal with this, and they act all crazy, so they need to learn how to deal with this.”

I had the opportunity to participate in the first of these workshops. Attending were the five newest women. The workshop was held at House I. Sister Pat had held these sessions in the dining room, but since this was a small group, Valerie decided to use the small room at the front of the house, the same space in which I had interviewed her. She was wearing tight jeans, a purple tank top, black sneakers, and her hair was “done” with long loose curls. The topic she planned to discuss was communication. She welcomed the women in the room, told them to “make themselves comfortable, and relax.” Upon closing the door to the room, she told the women that “what is said in here, stays here.”

Although Valerie was just like these women not long ago, she had a very professional and authoritarian attitude. Even her tone of voice was different in this role; gone were the articulation and tone that one equates with “the street;” instead, Valerie was soft spoken, with clear articulation, and an even tone. She asked all of the women to put their phones on silent,
and out of sight, and to move their handbags off their laps. She moved smoothly into the topic by asking the women what “was going on with them.” Three of the five women related stories of being overwhelmed with the work, as well as the difficulties in sometimes relating to the program’s officers. As the room sometimes became loud, with many women speaking at once, Valerie regained order immediately and calmly. She reminded the women that they “didn’t have to be here,” but offered a discussion of the alternatives, such as being in the shelter system, or worse, “back on the streets.” Without offending the women, she was able to teach them different ways of acting and communicating with “bosses or others in charge.”

“This is rehearsal for your life; these people here are going to be just like your bosses and co-workers in the future. You can’t roll your eyes at people. Just let it roll over you,” she said as she gestured her hand over her head. At the end of the session, she thanked the women, and offered to keep working with them. Prior to leaving, she asked me to stay afterwards so she could speak with me. After the women had all left, Valerie motioned for me to sit with her at the dining room table.

“How’d I do?’ she asked, as she held my hand. I truly was impressed by her professional demeanor in controlling the group, keeping the conversation on target, as well as allowing and even encouraging participation. However, her tenure as Life Skills Coordinator was short-lived. As the workshops continued, the staff observed her and noted that it ended up being “a rap group,” where the women would talk about their problems and issues instead of developing skills needed in the outside world.

Helping other women adjust to the program is something she did well. Even when “hanging out” on the front steps of House I for a cigarette break, she would talk with some of the newer women in the program about children, food, and boyfriends. Specifically, I remember one
conversation when Valerie was talking to Denise, who was again dating her daughter’s father. Valerie told her to “be slow, don’t see him every day. You need to get your life back together first, and your baby needs to adjust to life here with you.”

In helping women, Valerie states she could relate to what the women who were new to the program were feeling. She explained it was similar in that in prison, there was a strict routine that must be followed, and when a woman arrived at the program, there were rules and routines that must be followed as well. However, in the program it was different in that it could be overwhelming, because in addition to the routines and rules, there were responsibilities. For example, you had to wake up early and get ready for the day, as well as get children ready for school or daycare, prepare breakfast, and get dressed in something other than a prison uniform.

In addition to the responsibility, there was accountability: to stay in the program, the women must attend all required workshops, internships, and therapy sessions, in addition to meetings with the parole board. Moreover, the women needed to learn how to interact with people in the community, i.e., women in the program, as well as the outside community: employers and their children’s teachers. The greatest difference between prison and here, according to Valerie, was freedom; because, in spite of rules and responsibilities, you were free. When new women entered the program, and some were overwhelmed or upset by the rules, Valerie advised them to “stop fighting and let someone help you.”

The reason I’m here is because I couldn’t do it on my own. So now look, you know, I got an apartment. I got a good job, you know. Help is good. My kids is healthy. You know, everything’s great.
Debbie’s Story

Debbie is a twenty-seven year old Black-American woman who has been at the program since June, 2013, after serving seven of an eight year (flat) sentence for murder in the second degree. When she was first sent to a county jail in Upstate New York, Debbie found out that she was pregnant with her second child. She already had a thirteen-month-old daughter at the time she was first incarcerated. Due to the nature of her crime, Debbie was not eligible for the nursery program at the state prison, so she was remanded to stay in the county jail until the delivery. Three days after her second daughter was born, she was sent to live with Debbie’s family in New York City, a distance from the two state prisons where Dominque completed the rest of her sentence. Thoughts of her children occupied much of Debbie’s time.

“So my entire incarceration all I thought was, I want to see my kids so bad, however, when I do see them how awkward, how hard it’s going to be to build a relationship[,] how much it’s going to drain me or them cause it’s like letting a whole new person into your life that’s supposed to be your mother.”

She was concerned that by the time that she was released from prison, her children would have developed their own distinct personalities; one that was foreign to Debbie. As much as she longed to see them, she acknowledged that it wouldn’t be easy. She never saw her oldest child during her incarceration, due to the great distance. She lives in the Midwest with her father, who has full custody. Debbie does not plan on fighting for custody, as she does not want to uproot her daughter, who is now nine years old. She does plan on having her visit her on school vacations and in the summer. During incarceration, and even more since her release, Debbie and her oldest daughter speak on the phone frequently. Prior to her arrest and subsequent
incarceration, Debbie had a very close attachment to her daughter; as she explains; “that way my shadow….like my hip.”

Motherhood is something that Debbie takes very seriously, something that is full of responsibility, She was concerned about becoming a mother again, especially in her “situation.” She knew she was facing a long sentence, originally up to twenty-five years, but due to a plea bargain, she was able to decrease that to an eight year flat sentence. In addition to the responsibility, there was also the issue of attachment, or “the connection” as Debbie refers to it. Debbie acknowledges that the time after birth is crucial for a mother and newborn, and because of this, she is concerned that because her daughter has been with her mother since three days after birth, that she has become attached to her mother; in fact, her daughter refers to her mother as “mom.” In working to keep a connection, Debbie’s family took her daughter for visitation twice a month during her time at Bedford; however when she was moved to a minimum security facility which was hundreds of miles away, contact was maintained by” tele-visits.” Tele-visiting is an innovative partnership which enables children with a mother at Albion Correctional Facility, which is near the Canadian border, to come to the offices of the Osbourne Association in New York City to visit together via a television screen. Debbie was at Albion Correctional Facility at the time this program was introduced, so “visits” occurred “two or three times a week.” But, as Debbie explained, as they became more popular, these visits dwindled down to two or three times per month. During this time, four years, Debbie only had one face to face visit.

Both visits were not easy for Debbie. During the face to face visits at Bedford, her daughter would cling to her grandmother, her “safety net,” as Debbie explained. Around her, Debbie saw other children playing and happy, interacting positively with their mothers.
Although this somewhat discouraged her, she did understand that many of these children had a relationship with their mothers prior to the separation cause by incarceration. After being transferred to Albion (the women’s minimum security facility near the Canadian border), she had “tele-visits” with her daughter. In the beginning, her daughter “would get an attitude and walk out.” Although this behavior was upsetting for Debbie, she explained that the classes she participated in while incarcerated, helped her cope with and understand this behavior. After these episodes, her daughter began to talk to Debbie, but “not like a mother, more like an adult friend.”

Debbie did not reconnect with her daughter immediately upon release from prison. At first, she had visitation on weekends only. These weekends were “better than” what she had expected. Her expectations were that her daughter would cry the entire weekend; but to her surprise, this was not the case. Her daughter did exhibit signs that showed her fear of losing her mother again. For example, when she would return her daughter to her mother’s house after a weekend visitation, her child would ask. “if you go on the train, are you coming back?” Since living together full time these past two months, she no longer asks about her mother leaving. Her daughter’s father is not involved in her life at all. His sentence was only two years, compared to Debbie’s eight (of which seven were served), and since release, he has only contacted his daughter two times. Debbie’s brother has been a “father figure” for her daughter, in addition to support from other family members. For this, Debbie was grateful, as the alternative would have been foster care. After learning of the pregnancy soon after her arrest, her (then) boyfriend’s mother contacted Debbie petitioning to raise the child. This was not even a consideration for Debbie, as she did not know this woman, who lived in Baltimore. Even though she wanted custody of her grandchild, she was unwilling to come to visit and meet
Debbie during her incarceration. As Debbie explained; “it’s all about the better way to raise my child.”

Debbie spoke with emotion about her growing relationship with her daughter, because she expected it to be more difficult than it actually is. “It’s like she just loves me so much and I love her so much.”

There are difficulties, however. Debbie explained that her daughter was having a difficult time adhering to rules that Debbie had set. For example, bedtime can be a challenge. Debbie attributes this to her mother’s leniency, which is in sharp contrast to how Debbie herself was raised, due in part to her mother’s age and deteriorating health; decreasing the energy required to care for a young child. During some of these times, her daughter will say “I want my grandmother.”

The knowledge and skills that were taught in prison and in the program are the same skills that are helping Debbie now as well. She explained that instead of yelling and fighting, or just giving in to her demands, she gives herself a “time out.” This usually works to calm the situation. This wasn’t the case in the first few weeks, when Debbie “said yes to everything.” As she explained, that because you are “just coming back into your child’s life, you give them whatever they want, like ice cream at two a.m.” Debbie soon realized that this was not how she could be an effective parent. In addition to the parenting classes in prison, Debbie also credits the other women in the program for teaching her parenting as well as other coping skills. This is due to the fact that most of them have come home from prison and have reunited with their children, and been through similar circumstances. Speaking with her counselor in the program is another source of support for Debbie as she copes with the struggles of parenting and reunification.
Debbie has been concerned with her daughter’s schooling, as she received reports that her daughter was “misbehaving” in school; specifically not listening to instructions, and talking and playing with other children when she shouldn’t be. Debbie explained that as a child, she was “a nerd,” so she doesn’t understand this behavior. She shared that she “loved school,” specifically reading, and would read constantly, forgoing more popular pasttimes of her peers, such as video games. This changed, however, when she began playing basketball in junior high school, which led to “hanging out and getting into trouble with the team.” She began smoking marijuana at this time, and was arrested as a juvenile on a drug charge. Debbie did not use any other substances, including alcohol, and has not used marijuana since before her arrest. Although drugs are easily accessible and used frequently in prison, Debbie did not use because she was afraid of not making her board; in which she was successful, as she was released one year earlier for “good behavior.”

Although this has been challenging, Debbie is positive about the future. She is proud that she has reuniited with her daughter, and that their relationship is flourishing. In addition, she just received notification that she will be moving into one of the new independent living apartments that the program recently built. She completed an externship in welding, receiving a certificate, and is now working towards achieving her license as a welder. The program is working with community resources to help her find employment in this area; Debbie however, will be happy with any employment that will allow her to live independently with her daughter in her new apartment. In this apartment, they will each have their “own space,” instead of sharing a small bedroom with bunkbeds, as they do now in the program. In this apartment, it will also be easier for her to have her older daughter come and visit during the summer and school vacations.
Debbie has also become active in going to college campuses to speak with criminal justice students; to help them see the face of incarceration, especially with women who are mothers, in the hopes that they will have different attitudes as professionals in criminal justice. This is one way she feels that she can make a difference in the lives of other incarcerated women.

**Winnie’s Story**

Winnie is a 43-year-old African American woman who had been affiliated with this program for three years, but only recently had become a recipient of services. Winnie was convicted of mail fraud and sentenced to community service, as an alternative to incarceration. In addition, she had to pay restitution, which she did by having 10% of her pay garnished.

Her parole officer referred her to the supportive housing program as a place where she could complete the required 400 hours of community service. Winnie was asked to work each Saturday in the antique store operated by the program. She had a regular full-time job five days a week, a job she acquired after her conviction, working at a large food store which specialized in home grocery delivery. However, seven months before our interview, she was fired, after applying for a different position in the organization, which prompted a background check. In addition to losing her job, due to her felony, she was ineligible to receive unemployment benefits. To make matters worse, due to her felony conviction, she was evicted from her apartment in a public housing project. (As mentioned previously, the Housing Authority does not allow anyone with a felony conviction to live in public housing). Unfortunately, her crime had been reported in the local newspapers, so the board found out about it.

Winnie moved in with family members, occupying an attic room with her youngest son, who was 16 years old. Her oldest son, 19, was living with his father in the same neighborhood.
Winnie saw him frequently. She explained he was living with his father because there was limited space in a family member’s house, and also because he was working with his father, trying to start his own business making tee shirts.

Winnie found herself without a job, without a home, and still owing the remainder of her restitution. Although she was working at the antique shop, the only thing she knew about the program was that it assisted formerly incarcerated women; she was unaware that it also assisted women in the community whose lives had been affected by involvement in the criminal justice system. When she spoke to the women working alongside her in the shop about losing her job and her home, they advised her to seek assistance from the program.

Soon after she met with Johanna and Sister Tesa, she began participating in the program. She attended all the workshops, received a stipend, was getting help finding employment, and would soon be moving into one of the new apartments with her youngest son and her boyfriend, who co-signed the lease (one of the requirements for living in these apartments is the ability to pay a rent). I have seen her at some of the latest series of “Life Skills” workshops that were being taught by two registered nurses. At these workshops, Winnie was an active participant. At one in which kitchen safety was being discussed, she shared her experience working in the kitchen of city-run senior citizen centers. This was not done in a manner to show superiority to either the nurses facilitating the workshop or the other participants; she simply stated how she managed a large kitchen.

Prior to this, she was not aware that many of the women who worked alongside her in the antique store had themselves been incarcerated. This impressed her. It also made her thankful that she was not incarcerated and separated from her sons. She was even more impressed when she learned that most of the staff in the program offices, including Johanna and
Ebony, had themselves been formerly incarcerated. She praised the help she received from this program.

You know, they even walk you through certain steps. They even help you with problems in your house. If you’re hungry, you got a pantry you have to go to. They don’t see you without. If you don’t have a place to live, they make sure you have a place to live. As long as you’re willing and able, they’re willing to help you. If you’re not, then they can’t help you…. They are interested in my son’s schoolwork. So, it’s like this is my second home. Like, this is my family. I can say, is my family.

Prior to receiving services from this program, Winnie had sought assistance from other programs in the city. One offers assistance with employment and housing to the general population; it did not focus on those involved in the criminal justice system; another, a large, well-known organization, provides assistance to men and women in the reentry process with housing, mental health, substance abuse counseling, and job employment. This program assists more than 3,000 people annually. Winnie’s experience was that this program “had too much variety,” and did not focus on women’s needs. She also experienced “negative feedback” at these programs, such as “You can’t do that.” But at the supportive housing program, Winnie had a very different experience: “hope and self-esteem are offered.”

Many times during the interview, Winnie spoke of her two sons. At the time of her arrest and conviction, her oldest son was 16 years old, and her youngest 13. She sat down with her oldest son to discuss the situation but he couldn’t understand why “it was such a big deal” since she was not in jail. He also couldn’t understand why, if his mother had participated in a crime that made money, they were still living in “the projects,” and didn’t have a car or other luxuries. She explained that even though she was not incarcerated, this was a crime, and the consequences
could have been worse. She wanted to “set him straight.” She spoke of him with pride, how he graduated from high school, and was working in a restaurant in Manhattan, while trying to start his own business, selling tee shirts. His father was an “entrepreneur” and was helping their son. Her son gave her money each week, despite his meager earnings. Winnie was still in contact with his father, and had an amicable relationship; he accompanied her to court proceedings. She shared that he was “upset” over her felony, because he would have helped her if she needed money.

The situation was different with her youngest son. Although he was doing well in school and played sports, she was concerned that he did not “open up about his feelings.” He was receiving counseling services from the program and Winnie approached the mentoring program to set up a relationship with a male support system, as he was estranged from his father (a different person from the father of her oldest son). While living with Winnie and her sons in the housing project, this man had been selling drugs while Winnie was out at work. He actually was employed by the Housing Authority and was forced to leave his job. The courts ascertained that Winnie was not involved; therefore, she did not have to vacate the apartment. He has been involved in his son’s life until a few months ago, when suddenly he stopped calling. Winnie tried to speak to her son about this, but his response was “He don’t call me, so I don’t call him.” She hoped that counseling and participation in the mentoring program would help him.

Her oldest son, in contrast, had a very open relationship with Winnie. She explained that he even wanted her to accompany him to doctors’ appointments. Despite having a close relationship with her sons, she feared that they would be hurt or become involved in the criminal justice system. She shared that she had been working on “letting go” with the therapist. With the help of the workshops and working with a therapist, she states, “I’m still learning how to
raise my kids.” In general, she was still learning “how to grow” in this program. She credited the program with making her more aware of her feelings and helping her deal with negative thoughts, e.g., she now writes in a journal each day.

Another relationship that was important to Winnie was the one she had with her boyfriend. They met two years ago, at her previous job, where he still worked as a supervisor. Winnie said of him, “He’s a little younger than me. He’s 35…and he’s so good to me.” adding that he was emotionally supportive and he helped her financially. She only recently told him about her “situation,” and explained that he has been supportive. He had never been married and had no children of his own. He got along well with her two sons; Winnie provided details such as how he tutored her youngest son in math, and talked to him about his relationship with his estranged father. He encouraged him to call his father, telling him his own father died when he was a young child. They were not living together, but planned to move in together to one of the new apartments. He was actually the person signing the lease, as he was gainfully employed. Winnie stated that Sr. Tesa thought highly of this man.

Through the program, she applied for an entry level position with Consolidated Edison. Although it is not her “dream job,” Winnie felt this would offer the security of health benefits for herself and her family, as well as a pension. However, she was “dreaming of” having her own restaurant, as she “always wanted to cook”; she has experience and a food handler’s license. Prior to working at the job from which she was fired, she worked as a cook in a senior center run by the Housing Authority, until the program was closed down. To make additional money, Winnie makes “Pamper Cakes” and small gifts, such as “shower pens” for baby showers. She receives business through word of mouth.
As me even being 43, I’m still learning. I’m still learning how to raise my kids. I’m still learning how to budget. I’m still learning how to, you know, I’m just still learning how to grow, and with this program, it is making me see more. My eye is opening wider and wider…but by me being in the program I have really changed and opened myself up for the better.

She would like the opportunity to share her story with others in the community, so they can see the person beyond the felon. This is something that some of the other women in the program have done.

**Virginia’s Story**

Virginia is a petite Hispanic woman who is employed by this program in the largest of its thrift shops. This shop sells furniture and other home items, such as china, lamps, and artwork, as well as children’s clothes and toys. The store occupies a large corner property, approximately 7,500 square feet, with high ceilings and exposed brick walls, and gives the appearance of a “high-end” antique store. Virginia worked here on Saturdays and Sundays.

Virginia recently started working in a full-time position, Monday through Friday for a non-profit organization, doing data entry and assisting Spanish-speaking clients. The program referred her to this position. She was involved with the program since 2005, after an arrest for participating in a money laundering operation that occurred at her place of employment. Virginia’s employers were incarcerated but she was not. Instead, she was sentenced to community service and was referred to the supportive housing program by the courts, allowing her to stay home with her three children who, at the time of the interview were young adults and teens. (She also has a young grandchild.)
Prior to gaining employment at the non-profit during the week, Virginia participated in the program’s workshops and other services offered here. At these, I had the opportunity to find out about her history. She was divorced, and confided to me that her ex-husband had abused her. Two young women shared their own stories of living with and getting away from abusive partners, and Virginia had been very quiet during this session, which was typical of her.

When I first met Virginia at the workshops held in the employment offices, she was quiet, yet always polite. Due in part to age, language (English was not her first language) and cultural differences, she didn’t speak much with the other women at the program. Her background was also different from many of the other women in the program; she was older, and had always lived with all of her children. She also had a more “traditional” upbringing, having been raised with siblings by two parents. The fact that Virginia had not been incarcerated also set her apart from the other women in the program. But she did not separate herself from them. Virginia consistently offered to help the workshop leader set up and clean up afterward. She often was the member of the group to offer drinks and snacks to the other women. In fact, her empanadas were well regarded and in demand. When I congratulated her on her new position, she explained:

I am so very happy at this new job; they said they are very happy with me, and will definitely hire me after the probation period. I will have benefits too. I love customer service, it’s what I have done for 30 years. It was nice to be in an office, and get dressed up -- But I love this job [at the thrift shop] too; I love customer service. I will work here too, because my son will be going to college in Albany next month, and I need the money. I do miss going to church on Sunday, I love church, but I need the money.

The woman behind the register asked Virginia to “manage the store for a few minutes.”
“Virginia’s great, she does everything,” she tells me.

A dark-skinned woman approached Virginia and asked in Spanish about the cost of an item; Virginia was quite helpful, answering about the price and showing her similar items. Returning to me, she said:

Right now, I also have my mother living with me, and I am sad that I cannot spend more time with her. My kids are either working or studying all day, so they can’t do things with her. I took my mother in after my father died, because she was so depressed. I took off last Sunday to spend time with her. My sisters live in Paris, so she is alone here with me. I have to get her involved with some other older people.

Virginia went to the back of the store, and returned with a bottle of furniture oil and a rag, and donned a pair of gloves to begin her next task, cleaning a beautiful dining room table. A few minutes later, she spoke with a customer who showed an interest in the table; she explained that it had just come in, and demonstrated how to clean wood with furniture oil. She did this with pride in her voice. Soon, the manager asked Virginia to help her carry a couch out to a customer’s car. Virginia excused herself from this customer to help the manager. Virginia moved quickly around the large store, with the energy of someone half her age, and always with a smile. This same energy was apparent at each workshop that she attended.

Kathy’s Story

Kathy was living in House I with her 18-month-old son. She gave birth to him while incarcerated; he was able to stay with her for one year, first in the jail nursery, then at a prison nursery. State laws limit the amount of time an infant can stay with their mother. In such cases,
no family or close friend is available, the baby is sent to this program to be cared for by staff until the mother’s release, when they then reunite at the program.

Kathy was able to maintain a connection with her son, since the staff from the program took him to visit her in prison. In addition, Kathy’s father as well as the baby’s father visited the baby frequently. Kathy also had a 22-year-old son, who lived on his own. This young son was diagnosed with a heart murmur at birth. When physicians caring for her son concluded surgical repair was necessary, they intervened to with the judge, requesting Kathy be released on parole prior to completion of her sentence. Her son had the surgery, and “did well,” but Kathy told me she was still nervous because his last post-surgical visit was scheduled for a few days after this conversation. When I saw her later that week, she happily told me the pediatric cardiologist said her son could receive general pediatric care with his own provider.

Kathy was African American, overweight, with long braids. She was always amicable, and every time I saw her, whether while at work or at a group, she was smiling. She did not wear make-up, and was usually attired in sweatpants or shorts and a tee shirt, but neatly dressed. Although not unfriendly, she was quiet and generally reserved. At computer classes, she always sat in the first row, and if she had a question for the instructor, she would raise her hand. Other women at these classes would just loudly call the instructor for help, or would ask one another. They also would speak among themselves in this class, while Kathy quietly did the work. She often spoke of her son, and frequently opened her smartphone to show pictures of him.

Kathy’s job was cleaning the offices. Her “dream job” was counseling children with substance abuse problems, as she herself had “drug problems.” “That is a long way away; right now, I just want to find employment.”
She had recently been offered a position doing maintenance in buildings, but since it was for weekend work, she was advised by the program director not to take a job that would interfere with caring for her son.

As much as I want that job, I have to abide by the rules here. I believe in God, He made everything work out with my son. I am thankful that I am here, and have this opportunity, because I don’t ever want to go away again. Sometimes when I get down, I just think of how well the women here have done; they are like role models for me.

Kathy spoke of how proud she was of herself, her son, and her progress. She named some of the women who were her role models, whom she knew from prison, or with whom she had bonded due to their shared histories.

Kathy was required to clean the main office and the employment office, as well as the playroom in House I, which is also used for the Afterschool Program. She had to plan her day around cleaning the playroom after the young children from day-care leave to go outside, and before the room used again. On one such day, I spoke with her as she was mopping the employment office’s ceramic floors. She sat down occasionally to speak, or to show me pictures of her son, who had had cardiac surgery a short while before. When she completed her task and put all of the furniture back in place, she signed out, in the book in the office.

“If I don’t sign out, I don’t get paid,” she said with a smile. Kathy explained that she was required to sign in and out of each place she goes to clean.

Although she was not yet gainfully employed, the executive director of the program decided Kathy would be allowed to move into one of the new independent living apartments under construction. When I asked Sister Barbara about this, she explained that Kathy was bright and hard-working, and that they had faith that she would be employed. Sister Barbara did not
want Kathy to be overlooked in the process of deciding who could move into these new apartments.

**The women who left.**

Programs like the support housing organization, which are predicated on a rigid structure and rules, can be challenging for some women. During the year I spent at this program, seven women left, some voluntarily, while others were asked to leave. In this section, I will discuss these women’s stories.

**Mia’s story.**

Mia was a petite Latina, with long dark curly hair, and large brown eyes. Although not yet 30 years old, she had five children; all except her youngest daughter were in foster care, as a result of her drug addiction. Mia did not live in the program’s housing; instead she lived in an apartment in a different section of the borough with her “husband,” an older man who was also a drug addict. She had no family in this area; some were in another borough, while most of them live in a depressed area in south central Pennsylvania, where Mia had lived herself for many years.

Mia had had multiple arrests and spent time in jail prior to her last prison sentence, all due to either drug charges or violations of orders of parole. She was doing an internship in the thrift store that sold furniture, cleaning and moving furniture, so she mostly wore work boots and jeans. Once, during a job preparedness workshop, she shared that she wanted to find a job in a Home Depot store, as she had acquired construction skills in prison. Despite the commute on public transport, Mia dropped her three year-old daughter at daycare and arrived at her internship on time. She also attended every required workshop; however, she was quiet, and didn’t
participate in the group. She went to yoga each week even though she did not like it. “I’m just
doing what I have to, to stay in the program.”

Over a period of four months, I noticed that she was looking pale and increasingly thin,
and she was slight to begin with. She was also smoking more, and always smelled of tobacco. I
asked Ebony about these changes, and was told that they thought she was ‘still using,” probably
being influenced by her “husband.” After noting her absence for two weeks straight, I was told
she had left the program to “be with a man she met on the streets here.” She left her daughter in
the care of another woman in this program, and the child’s father visited often. I saw Mia on the
streets near the program, smoking cigarettes and “hanging out” with a man who looked
disheveled, in dirty jeans and undershirts; she introduced him to me as “my husband.” When I
asked what she was doing, she said that she was looking for work. I continued to see her in the
neighborhood of the program, with this same man over a period of about one month. After three
weeks passed and I hadn’t seen her, I asked Ebony what happened, and I was told she was in jail
due to a parole violation -- she had gone to visit her family in Pennsylvania. Her daughter is still
living in the program, being cared for by Florencia, one of the women who has cared for many
women’s children.

Donna’s story.

Donna was at the program for five months. I did not have the opportunity to spend any
time alone with her; however, her demeanor and actions were difficult to ignore. She was a tall,
lean, light-skinned African-American young woman, 23 years of age, with shoulder-length dyed
blond hair. She claimed to have worked as a model in the past, And she carried herself in the
manner of a model; straight posture, long strides, always dressed with matching shoes and bags.
(She said that her mother had been a model.) She had a three-year-old daughter, who was a
source of great pride. She would tell other women about her daughter’s accomplishments, such as “she is so advanced in everything she does, she knows how to get the music on my phone.” In group activities, Donna dominated, both verbally and non-verbally; she would arrive late, making a “grand entrance,” take a seat in the center of the group, sitting cross-legged, with ankles crossed leaning forward. When she spoke, she was animated, using her hands for emphasis. Due to her strong personality in group settings, the other women often did not participate actively; at times, some of the women would roll their eyes in response to Donna.

Donna’s need for attention was exemplified by her behavior on Advocacy Day in Albany. More than 200 people attended this event: formerly incarcerated persons, their families, lawyers, advocates, and concerned citizens. The group of women from the program were prepared in advance; they were instructed in how to speak to legislators, they informed about the important issues, and they were guided in how to behave and dress. All the women wore dark-colored slacks or dresses and flat shoes except Donna. She arrived late as usual for the bus ride, and she was wearing a pleated mini-skirt and high heeled shoes.

After the lobbying sessions, everyone reconvened in a large legislative conference room. When the leaders for the Coalition for Women Prisoners, who had organized the event, asked for volunteers to share their experience, Olivia raised her hand and stood up; she shared a compelling description of how her experience with the legislators empowered her. Donna, seated at the opposite end of this large legislative assembly room, immediately raised her hand, and said the exact same thing that Olivia had shared. Once on the bus to go back downstate, where there was no “audience,” Donna changed into sweatpants and flip-flops.
Donna’s words and actions did not indicate she was unhappy at the program. But when I inquired about her absence over a two-week time period, I was advised that she decided to live with her family in upstate New York.

**Toni’s story.**

Toni was one of the few White women in this program. Of average height, she was slender, with long hair, bleached blond, but with dark roots. Her face was scarred, either from acne or methamphetamine use (a common side effect of the drug). Her style of dress would be described as “rocker,” with black jeans, biker boots, leather jacket, and a lot of heavy silver jewelry with studs and rivets. She is 44 years old, and had come to the program from the nursery at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

Her pregnancy was discovered upon admission to prison. Toni was surprised to find she could have a child at her age but she was happy; she had not been pregnant before. The father of this baby was not involved, but Toni had a supportive mother who visited often, both in prison, and at the program. Toni grew up in a middle class neighborhood in Westchester County, New York, and had what she called a “normal” upbringing. She completed community college, and worked for almost 20 years in customer service for a large energy provider. During that time, she began using methamphetamines, heroin, and alcohol which, she claimed, did not interfere with her performance at work. She was arrested for possession of a controlled substance, and completed 18 months of her sentence, until being released with parole to the program.

While she was happy to be pregnant, her experience with giving birth while incarcerated were “horrible.” Toni had not been allowed to have her mother stay with her while she labored; she was under the constant watch of a male corrections officer. Immediately after the delivery, she was shackled at the ankles, making it difficult to walk to the nursery to see her son.
Rooming-in, where women can keep their newborns with them, which is routine in most hospitals, was not permitted, as Toni was not on the postpartum unit of the hospital but on a prison unit, with both male and female inmates. Upon return to prison after only two weeks, she was made to resume her work duties, which included cleaning that entailed heavy lifting. This led to bleeding, which was not addressed; in fact, she was not even allowed to have extra sanitary napkins. But she was happy to have her son with her.

While at the program, Toni worked in one of the thrift shops. I had the opportunity to spend two full days working alongside her in this shop. It was hard physical work: unpacking bags of donated clothes and, at this particular time, due to an overflow of donations in the aftermath of Super Storm Sandy, the shop was overloaded with bags. Despite this difficult task, Toni worked all day, joking and smiling throughout.

At the end of the day, she asked if I would like to accompany her to pick up her son from the day care center, as she wanted me to meet him. Eager to see him, she walked briskly. She bounded down the steps, and immediately upon seeing him sitting in a child seat, ran to him, unbuckled his safety straps, and picked him up, enthusiastically kissing his cheek. His arms around her neck, he smiled and laughed in response. He was fair and blond, with large blue eyes. Toni asked the workers about his day, specifically about what he ate and when he napped. She told me she was glad he was still napping, so that he would stay awake at home and she could spend some time with him. Her love for her child was evident.

After two weeks of not seeing her in the shop or in the employment office, I inquired as to her whereabouts. I was told that Toni had been required to attend alcohol rehabilitation as an outpatient on a daily basis, after she was observed drunk following a meeting with her son’s father. Toni and I met again two months later, at a Coalition of Women Prisoners meeting. She
explained that she felt she would be more successful obtaining employment on her own, and was living in a high-rise apartment with her son. She was at the meeting to “network,” she said.

Although she was no longer living at the program, I did see her there for computer classes. At one of these classes, she was wearing a pants suit because, she told me, she had had a job interview earlier in the day. I saw her a few times in the months that I spent writing this dissertation; she was still unemployed, but actively searching. She continued to attend meetings of the Coalition for Women Prisoners in search of job assistance. Her son attended day care in her apartment building. She explained that her mother who lived in Westchester County, was retiring so that she could help with child care, as some of the employment positions were for hours not covered by day care. Toni was interested in fitness, completed personal trainer certification, and had been asked to work in a gym, but the hours were early in the morning and late in the day. She seems very happy with this work, and wanted to complete her bachelor’s degree in nutrition or fitness.

**Shaniqua’s story.**

I had very little interaction with Shaniqua, due to her short stay at the program. Shaniqua was a light-skinned Black woman, heavyset, who appeared to be in her thirties. She did not yet have full custody of her two teenaged children, who were living with her mother. In working toward reunification, the children had come to stay with Shaniqua at the program on the weekends.

In workshops and other groups, Shaniqua would usually sit slouched in her seat, sometimes with her eyes closed, interacting very little with the group. The only times I heard her speak in a group was to complain about her children, specifically that they wanted her attention, or to talk about how she wanted to leave the program. The other women, especially Valerie and
Debbie, tried to convince her to stay, and spoke to her about how she needed to spend time with her children, rather than on her phone or listening to music. They shared their own stories of reunification with their children after incarceration, in an effort to encourage Shaniqua. After a period of about two months living in House I, she was moved to the independent housing where women without children lived, which was the farthest away from the program site. I was told that she was asked to leave due to disruptive sexual activity in her room.

Margaret’s story.

Margaret was a heavyset white woman, who spent less than two months in the program. Every time I saw, she appeared unkempt, with oily, uncombed hair, dirty clothes, and unpleasant body odor. In fact, during her stay here, the program nurses were asked to provide a lesson on hygiene; however, Margaret was asked to leave before the workshop occurred.

Margaret had three children, but did not have custody of any of them. She was very loud, almost disruptive in meetings and workshops. The first time I encountered Margaret was at a Wellness Day event held at a local community college twice a year. The women from this program learned about nutrition from the Health Science students, who served a nutritious lunch. Afterward, the Massage therapy students provided massages for the women. At this event, Margaret and Donna were both vying for attention, so much so that Eva, who was often quiet, asked them to be respectful to the students who were presenting. At many of the workshops and events, Margaret would sit with Olivia, and the two of them would be talking to one another, not paying attention; this was noted at every computer class, where the instructor would have to ask them to lower their voices.
After not seeing Margaret or Olivia for two weeks, I was told that they were both asked to leave after going out at night and drinking, and leaving Olivia’s baby daughter with another woman. Both Margaret and Olivia were sent to a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center.

**Olivia’s story.**

Olivia was a 20-year-old woman of Puerto Rican heritage, who was born and raised in New York; she did not speak Spanish. She was slightly overweight, which was accentuated by her usual outfit of tight-fitting workout pants and a matching tee shirt. Her trademark was to always wear the same color, top to bottom. Her hair was dyed dark blond, and she had many ear piercings as well as lip, eyebrow, and nose piercings. Olivia was one of the women who, like Donna, always had something to say, but unlike Donna, she usually tried to make a joke out of the topic, or would start dancing, behaving like a “class clown.” In Albany, however, she surprised everyone by standing up and clearly sharing her experience lobbying with a large group.

She had a baby daughter, her only child, who was living with her in the program. Olivia frequently spoke of her daughter in group meetings, and whenever the day care group would pass by the employment office during a meeting or workshop, she would get up and tell everyone to look at “how cute” her daughter was.

As mentioned previously, Olivia was asked to leave the program with Margaret due to her drinking. Olivia’s daughter was being cared for in the program until Olivia completed rehabilitation.

**Summary**

This chapter presented the stories of the women with whom I spent time during this study. Some of them had been in the program for a number of years, and were now employed by
the program, while others had only been in the program for a short time during the period of my research.

Two of the three themes emerged from interview data. The first one noted was; the power to change: if she can do it, so can I: that is, these women gained the power to succeed through working with other women who came before them and were living independently with their children, and working to support their families. The other consistent theme that developed from these interviews was the impact of competing demands: the women spoke often of having to cope with new responsibilities that accompanied living in this setting.

Chapter Five will discuss the interactions I had with these women and others in participant observation in this setting. The previously mentioned themes were supported by what I found in participant observation. In addition, another theme arose: Parenting the Parent, which refers to how this organization helps these women develop effective mothering skills.
Table I

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Time in program (as of 1/14)</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Length of Incarceration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1s month</td>
<td>3; custody of 1</td>
<td>Served multiple jail terms since age 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>2, both living with her</td>
<td>Served multiple jail and prison terms, all less than two years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2008-2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2011 current</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosita</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>2, lives with both</td>
<td>5 years in NY; 4 years in NJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodi</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>2 adult children; lost custody when incarcerated</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>1, lives with her</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kellie</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>2, lives with youngest; gave custody of older child to family while using drugs</td>
<td>Multiple arrests; one conviction, 2 months in jail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>2; 1 adult living independently; 1 toddler lives with her</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>2; recently gained custody of 6 year old; 9 year-old, who lives with father</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2 ½ years</td>
<td>0 biological; lives with and cares for partner’s 3 children</td>
<td>17 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winnie</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>2: lives with teen son; older son living with his father</td>
<td>Sentenced to community service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>1 ½ years</td>
<td>3 adult children; 1 grandchild</td>
<td>Sentenced to community service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>2; live with 18 month-old son; 22 year old independent</td>
<td>1 year</td>
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Chapter Five: Themes

Three themes emerged from the analysis of ethnographic interview findings: parenting the parent, the impact of competing demands, and the power to change: if she can do it, so can I. Time spent in participant observation supported these themes. Analysis of the field notes collected during participant observation allowed for enhancement of these themes, and the delineation of subthemes. Two subthemes that emerged regarding mothering were reliving childhood, and othermothering. Details about these are noted through the activities and events that occurred in this setting.

Through participant observation, I was able to see how the supportive housing program assists women in other areas, e.g., developing skills for employment, as well as dealing with the stressors and difficulties of life outside of prison. More subthemes emerged: preparing for life on the outside, becoming an advocate, and increasing self-esteem.

Parenting the Parent

Interviews with key informants, including Sister Barbara; the Program Director; and Jodi, who ran parenting programs in the women’s prison, indicated that many women who were incarcerated had poor or non-existent parenting skills. Some of the women in this study had poor parenting skills because they themselves had never been mothered. This was the case with Faith and Mia, whose own mothers were addicted to drugs. Valerie reported that her mother was a “workaholic, working two jobs, and leaving me to run the streets.” These three women, as well as Kellie, left their children in the care of others while they were actively using drugs. Other women lacked skills, but not maternal feelings; they had been separated from their children, which was the case with Debbie found out she was pregnant when she was incarcerated, and left behind a toddler.
Jodi is a therapist who developed and ran parenting groups during her own incarceration. She was appointed to this position by Elaine Lord, superintendent of Bedford Hills Correctional Center, known for her progressive programs to help incarcerated women who were mothers. Superintendent Lord believed in rehabilitation and sought to lessen the negative effects incarceration has on children (Lombardi. 2004). Although Superintendent Lord has retired, Jodi is still in touch with her; in fact Ms. Lord has visited Jodi several times.

Jodi reported that in some cases, the women did not even know they were pregnant until their incarceration, when a physical examination revealed the pregnancy. Thus one had to start by teaching these women about their reproductive systems, so that they would have power over becoming pregnant. Jodi stated that she was amazed at the lack of knowledge as well as misinformation these women had on the topic. Jodi’s groups were not based on the physical skills needed to parent, such as diapering, but instead on decision-making, emphasizing the poor choices that these women had made in the past, with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, since many of these poor decisions involved relationships.

Jodi spoke in detail about the self-centered attitude some of the women in her parenting groups had.

There was a…the thing…one of the things that struck me, and it wasn’t in my head. It was real ‘cause the…then Judy helped me process it. This is the entitlement…a sense of entitlement regarding the…what the state should give them for their babies.

In addition, many of these women come from dysfunctional families, so time was spent teaching them how to love and nurture a child. After speaking with the women, Jodi found out that some had visited their own mothers in this same prison.
Jodi also discussed “parenting on the inside out,” which referred to classes on how to maintain relationships with children while the mother was incarcerated. This was challenging due to a general “lack of civility.” She explained this as the unpleasant manner in which the women related to one another, both verbally and physically. For many of the women, it was their first instinct to act out if confronted. To work on it, Jodi tried to help the women focus on separating from their “gut feelings.”

Sister Barbara shared some of these same observations, noting that “many of these women had an attitude that they are always right and everyone else is wrong.” In her experience, it was more difficult working with women who left children behind, who faced the challenge of reconnecting upon release from prison. Although she did not teach parenting classes in the supportive housing program, she had taught classes as a social worker in similar programs throughout her 30-plus years in practice. It was her belief that the best programs were those where parent and child are together, such as alternative-to-incarceration programs, that allow women to stay with their children while completing their sentences.

Sister Pat discussed parenting in some of the Life Skills workshops she ran. (She was the Life Skills coordinator when I began fieldwork.) During one workshop, she handed out material explaining the development of children between the ages of one and two. The women appeared interested in these handouts as they passed them around the table.

“I need to see why my Precious sometimes has tantrums,” Elaine said. Elaine had an 18-month-old, Olivia had a baby less than one year old, and Rina had a very young child. Both Rina and Olivia left the program after a short time; Rina on her own accord, while Olivia was asked to enter an inpatient alcohol rehabilitation center. Virginia’s children were grown but she took the handouts, stating that she wanted to learn “for her granddaughter.” Sister Pat explained to the
women that although she had never been a parent, she had experience dealing with children as a teacher, aunt and great aunt. She acknowledged how difficult it was to be a single parent.

She used very simple language and scenarios about how young children act and, more importantly, how parents should react. For example, she discussed tantrums that often occur when young children don’t get what they want. She explained that the mother should first consider if the child is actually hungry or tired and, if so, meet those needs. If not, instead of yelling, cursing, or spanking, she should speak in a low, calm voice. Donna, in her usual way of monopolizing, kept interrupting Sister Pat and the other women, to share how she thought that her daughter was “advanced, because she knows how to play me.” Sister Pat was quick to note that this had nothing to do with intelligence, but that certain behaviors, such as throwing something to get attention, or whining, are normal at this stage of development.

She described discipline not as something a parent does in response to an action, but instead as a way of consistently engaging with a young child. She used examples of how she dealt with children during her years as a teacher and principal, such as positive reinforcement for good behavior and ignoring bad behaviors. She stressed consistency in how a mother deals with her child, and explained that young children mimic their parents’ behaviors. She reminded the women to be careful what they say and do in front of their children. She emphasized that children need to be loved, and parents want to be loved as well. She added that these feelings should not make the women tolerate certain behaviors, such as throwing things or hitting people. Sister Pat handed out a final prayer, “Bless Your Child Every Day,” which the group said together aloud, as a way of adjourning the meeting:

“Bless this child, oh Lord I pray. Love on her/him through night and day.”
Other types of assistance and guidance with parenting included a stress management workshop offered by social work students from a local university. The workshop focused on different stages of child development, and stressors involved. The students were all female, one African American, one East Indian, and the other two women were either East Indian or Latina. All but one appeared to be in their 30s. They were neatly dressed in slacks, shirts, and flat shoes. One was carrying a poster.

Ebony and Johanna, the employment coordinators, greeted the women and helped them get set up in the front area of the office. By their tone and body language, the students leading the group seemed very comfortable. They introduced themselves, then asked each of the women to do the same. Donna, as usual, was the first one to speak, talking about how tired she was from dealing with a young “needy” child. She explained that she, like many of the women who lived in House I, shared a room with their children, which added to her stress. One of the young women leaned forward, nodding to acknowledge Donna’s feelings, and shared some of the things she did.

I know it can be stressful dealing with young children, and I’m sure for you, who cannot just get away, it is even harder. Especially after a day at work or school, you probably feel the need to be alone for a few minutes to de-stress. You should try giving your daughter a coloring book, or other quiet activity. You could even color with her, as it can be very relaxing.

Debbie had responded, “I love to color with my daughter, it calms us both down.” In previous conversations, she had also voiced concern about her living situation, saying that one of the things she was looking forward to in the new apartment was having separate spaces for her and her daughter.
Three of the students shared that they were themselves mothers, acknowledging how difficult it would be. This was not a formal presentation, but functioned more like a support group, with demonstrations of rapport back and forth. The students asked open-ended questions, such as “Can you tell us, what about being a mother stresses you out?” The participants spoke as much as the students. Rosita mentioned the difficulties she was having with her teenage son’s procrastination, and shared what she did to improve the situation.

I just stopped bugging him and working so hard to get him up in the morning. It was making me mad, and I would just take it out on my other son. So I decided one morning I would only called to him once; then he missed the bus and had to walk. After this, he set his alarm and got out of bed. Sometimes you have to stop doing everything for them and let them grow up. I know it’s hard, because you feel guilty about what they’ve been through with parents being away. But it doesn’t help them.

One of the students, an African American woman, shared that she too was raising a teenage son as a single mother, and pointed out that procrastinating was normal behavior. She acknowledged that what Rosita did was effective in decreasing stress in the home. She emphasized the word “stress” verbally and by body language, raising her index finger and pointing in the air. She was quite vocal and at times funny, yet stern about what these women need to do for themselves. She guided the women through some meditations and other techniques, such as “me time” versus “time outs” for the children. She had prefaced her presentation by stating that she “came from a similar place that you all did.” Her speech seemed to go back and forth between “street” and professional in tone and delivery.

This stress workshop differed from others in that it was very relaxed, with extensive interaction and participation by all of the women. Perhaps it was the manner in which these
social work students related to the women in the program; they didn’t talk at them, or even to them, but with them. The seating enhanced this informal interaction, with the social work students interspersed with the women, all sitting in a circle, i.e., no one at the head of a table.

The students’ body language, leaning forward often, demonstrated their interest. They were not holding any papers or notes outlining topics to cover. Other workshops are much more structured. Or perhaps it was the group dynamic, as Donna, who tended to take over the group, had left early for an appointment. Prior to leaving, the students gave each of the women some coloring books and a small box of crayons for their children.

Reliving childhood.

In working toward the mission of reunification with children, many different activities help women, such as the parenting workshops described. Most of these were run by one of the program’s therapists, a petite white woman, about 60 years old, with a blond bob and sparkling blue eyes. She typically dressed casually, in jeans and moccasins. When I inquired about her background, she told me she used to work with women in prison as a social worker and, prior to that, she was an early education teacher.

When I asked about her parenting workshops, she said, “These women don’t know how to play with their children, they don’t read, they don’t spend fun time with them.” Instead of using a didactic format, the therapist used a variety of strategies. For example, some workshops focused on “things to do with your children.” During one of these, the women used magazines, newspapers, and other sources to make a “book.” Made from large index cards, the book was held together with yarn at the corner after a hole was punched. On each card was a picture from a magazine or newspaper, or hand-drawn, with a sentence about the activity depicted. The key was to find activities that were free or that charged a minimal fee. Examples included going to
the city zoos, parks, and libraries that had special children’s events. In addition to helping the women identify free or low-cost activities they might do with their children, the activity in itself was an example of an arts-and-crafts pastime a parent and child could do. The women had fun with this, sharing their pictures, ideas, and supplies, like glue and markers.

At other workshops, the women themselves sat around a table and played board games, while having juice and cookies. Many had never done anything like this as children.

We never sat and played games like this when I was a kid. My moms was always like you go on now an’ play outside, I got to clean,” said Elaine.

Elaine was a 44-year-old African American woman, with a young child named Precious, who shared that she was born at a time in her life when she didn’t think she would ever have a child. She obtained full-time work only two months after I began being a participant observer; therefore, I did not have the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with her. I did discover that Elaine had been in this program last year but had to leave, as there was a warrant for her arrest in another state. After serving that sentence, she returned to the program. Elaine was heavy-set, with short styled hair who frequently spoke about her daughter as “my Precious.”

Some of them said that they had never heard of classic board games such as Monopoly, Clue, or Candyland. Elaine was so overwhelmed by the rules of Clue that I sat next to her and explained each move. “Miss Regina, what do I do now? I am so confused with this game. Do I move to the kitchen or the pool room? ” She did much better at Candyland and Chutes and Ladders.

“I like this game much better, and this is a better game for my Precious,” she said.

The women enjoyed this activity and one of them suggested: “We should have a game night in the house for us.”
Another of these workshops was held in the large kitchen of House I in the weeks before the Christmas holiday, and involved teaching the women to making gingerbread cookies at home with the children. The therapist had brought the dough already made to save time. She also brought raisins, chocolate chips, and different colors of icing to decorate the cookies. The recipe for the dough was handed out so the women could do this activity with their children, and pictures of the decorated cookies were provided so the women had a good idea of how to proceed when on their own.

Since the dough was still a bit hard from being in the refrigerator, the therapist told the women to incorporate reading a classic children’s story, *The Gingerbread Man* to their children while doing this activity. She then began to read it to the women. Elaine knew the recurring line, “You can’t catch me, I’m the Gingerbread Man,” quite well, and read along. “I’m going to read that book to Precious.” While continuing to wait for the dough to soften, the therapist talked about the *Holiday Train Show*, held annually at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. She handed out information to each of the women about the show and told them that she would ask Sister Tesa about taking the women and children there. She voiced her concern about the cost, but stated that she would inquire about group rates. The women were very excited about this.

“I want to take my Precious there,” Elaine said.

“My boy would love that,” Valerie added.

“Twenty dollars a ticket, that’s crazy,” another woman said.

Later I learned that Sister had arranged for all of the women with children to attend this event, in the week after Christmas, when children were off from school.
The therapist started to roll out some of the dough, and the women all stood around the butcher block island, watching. The therapist encouraged them to dive in.

“Come on now ladies, get your hands dirty,”

She cut up the dough to give each woman a piece to work with.

“How do I use this thing?” asked Elaine, referring to the rolling pin.

The woman next to her showed her. The therapist then gave a cookie cutter to each of the women and they made two or three cookies each. The baking process was quick, as there were two ovens in this kitchen. When the cookies came out, the women began decorating them, some very simply, while others were full of icing and other adornments.

“What are you doing, you are putting so much stuff on your cookie, it’s gonna get all messed up.”

“I will wrap it up in plastic.”

Some of the women had put a hole in the top of the cookie, so that they could put a string through it for a Christmas tree decoration. This process seemed very chaotic, with the women moving about, looking for the tubes of icing, raisins, and chips for decorating. Elaine was the only woman who didn’t decorate her cookies. In fact, she sat down at the small kitchen table, and began eating one of her cookies.

“Why you eatin’ that cookie,” one of the women said.

“At least wrap up that other one for Precious,” said another woman.

“I think I will eat this one on the bus ride home,” Elaine said, laughing.

Mia was very quiet. She stayed put in one spot at the counter, and put a few raisins on her gingerbread cookie to make a face.

“I don’t want to put a lot of things on the cookie, ‘cause I want it to stay nice for Angel,”
she said, as she carefully wrapped up her cookies.

Although not all of the women were finished decorating, at five o’clock they started wrapping up their cookies while the therapist packed up her bag of supplies. A few of the women threw wax paper and other waste into the large trash receptacle, while others wiped down the counters and the island.

**Othermothering.**

On many occasions I witnessed or heard anecdotes of the women caring for other women’s children. Debbie, before her own daughter was living with her on a full-time basis, would often spend evenings with Valerie’s children, watching movies, or just “hanging out” enjoying some “quiet time.” Even after she regained full custody and had her own daughter on a full-time basis, she continued spending time with Valerie’s children. In discussing child rearing issues, such as discipline, Debbie would often tell Valerie and the others:

> You need to stay calm and persistent, not give in to whining. You need to stop yelling and pay attention to these children. That’s why they come to me. Because I talk to them and with them, not at them. It’s peaceful in my place.

Debbie also spent time with Kathy’s one-year-old son, who Kathy described as “difficult.” Debbie explained again that calmness and persistence were needed. In group situations, it was apparent that the women all had relationships with all of the children. One tradition that emerged in House I with this group of women was Sunday breakfast that Valerie cooked for all of the women and children. This was a large traditional American breakfast of eggs, bacon, grits, and bread. Debbie, who at this time only had weekend visitation with her daughter, said “This breakfast is becoming one of my daughter’s weekend highlights!”
There were also situations where the program took in the children of women who were completing their sentences prior to coming to the program. This usually occurred with women who were in the Prison Nursery program, because the maximum time a child could stay in the nursery was 12 months, and some women had longer sentences. The caregiver was an older Hispanic woman, Florencia, who had been with the program since its inception. Florencia herself had been incarcerated and was released more than 20 years ago. She met some of the Sisters of Saint Joseph who started this program when she was living at Providence House, an organization that provides shelter to homeless and formerly incarcerated women and children.

When Sister Tesa was starting the program, she hired Florencia to care for children here whose mothers were still incarcerated. She had cared for Ebony’s own daughter, who was now 10 years old, while Ebony was completing her sentence. Two of the women who left the program, Mia and Olivia, left their children behind to be cared for by Florencia. Olivia planned to return after drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Unfortunately, Mia returned to prison for parole violation. Her daughter’s father visited frequently and, according to Sister Barbara, ”was a caring father.” They were working with him to assist him in gaining custody.

The Impact of Competing Demands

All of the women expressed gratitude for this program’s help with rebuilding their lives after incarceration. However, many of the women also spoke of the level of responsibility they found at the program. One of its main goals is for women to become gainfully employed. Prior to obtaining full-time employment, women completed internships within the organization; examples included office work as well as cleaning the offices, day care center, and House I. Other women worked in one of the two thrift shops operated by the program, while others worked with the superintendents of the apartments maintained by the program.
The women’s days were highly structured from the moment they got up, usually by six a.m., until they arrived back at the house after five p.m. Everyone, including children, were expected to be at the large dinner table promptly at six-thirty p.m. Monday through Friday. Each night, one of the women was responsible for preparing dinner for everyone. Although they had to rise early in prison, usually by five-thirty a.m., they did not have to get dressed for work or dress and feed their children and take them to day care or school, almost always on public transportation.

The women’s time had to be accounted for. In addition to work or internships, some of them had to meet with their parole officers, or attend drug treatment programs if required, meet with their counselors, or go to medical appointments for themselves and their children. The women were required to keep their rooms and bathrooms clean, as well as pick up after themselves in the common areas. Other rules included no smoking in the house, no loud music after eight p.m., and no alcohol. Women were not permitted to leave the house in the evening, unless it was for something related to the program, and then they would leave their children in the care of other women in the house.

During interviews with the women, this sense of being overwhelmed by responsibility was discussed. For example, Valerie stated: “

Freedom was overwhelming. In prison, every day was the same; wake up at the same time, go to your job, meals, recreation, and bedtime.”

Outside of the program, “living real life” could be difficult, such as taking care of children and looking for a job. Finding employment was often challenging because the women had a criminal record. Valerie credits the program’s employment coordinators for having a positive influence on her skill development and ability to function in the community. The
example Valerie used was “sending an e-mail to someone.” If a woman in the program had a question or concern for the employment coordinator, they were advised to send an e-mail. At first, having to do this bothered Valerie, but she acknowledged the importance of learning how to do it. She shared this with the new women in the program. Prior to coming here, Valerie had very little work experience, as she had been actively selling and using drugs since she was a young teenager, and had been incarcerated many times. Most of her work experience had been internships at the program; she worked in all three of its thrift shops.

Valerie shared how working was difficult for women with young children. She said that once released, many of them had a hard time getting themselves and their children ready and out the door in the morning, and that coming back home to make dinner at night was difficult too.

“In prison their babies are all nice and greased, and now they’re a mess. So now they can’t get themselves and their babies out the door looking decent.”

Eva spoke about how other women complained about the rules, such as cleaning their rooms and bathrooms, and the kitchen when they used it. Her own view was different. She would not “abuse” her freedom; she would abide by any rules. Her biggest challenge was adjusting to life after being incarcerated for 17 years, e.g., modern technology, cell phones, and Metro Cards were an adjustment.

Denise spoke of how in a short time in House I, she experienced five women being asked to leave the program because they did not abide by the rules.

“This can be hard for some women, they just want to do they own thing. That’s how some of them ended up in prison in the first place!”

Debbie spoke of the difficulties due to the lack of space in House I. Sharing a room with her six-year-old daughter could be challenging, especially because they were sharing a bunk bed.
in a small room. Neither Debbie nor her daughter had space for independent activities, such as reading for Debbie, or coloring for her daughter. She was looking forward to moving to the new independent living apartment house.

Faith spoke of learning how to “deal with responsibility,” something she did not have to do in jail or the inpatient drug rehabilitation program she was mandated to as an alternative to incarceration. Prior to her arrest and conviction, Faith did not have any responsibility’

“I did whatever I wanted to. I am doing it now because I have to; I don’t want to leave this program.”

Rosita spoke positively about being forced to perform certain tasks. Specifically she mentioned the more mundane things, such as grocery shopping, which involved having to make decisions and to think about how she spent her money.

Preparing for life on the outside

A variety of workshops and activities, usually run by volunteers, assisted these women in developing skills that would help them function as members of the community, as well as find employment. For women who were new to the program, there were mandatory workshops and attendance was taken. If a woman were not present, they had to inform the employment coordinators of the reason. Because work preparedness was key to meeting the goal of employment, workshops were offered in computer skills, interview skills, resume writing, and dressing appropriately for interviews and work.

Although these workshops were designed to help the women, attending them could be overwhelming challenge, because the women had to fit them into schedules that were already full. I noticed a pattern of late arrivals, especially for those who were already in an internship and had to commute back to the program offices. Also, when workshops were held in the late
afternoon, sometimes the women would close their eyes and doze off. For some this provided a respite before heading off to pick up children from daycare or after school to begin the next set of duties at home.

Employment workshops.

I attended a series of computer classes, which were held once a week in the late afternoon. Because many jobs required some level of proficiency with computers, these workshops were among the most important. Both Virginia and Eva, for example, were hired for positions that required data entry. Prior to coming to the program, neither woman had computer experience. This lack was common among the women; in fact, some were incarcerated before computers were used in everyday life. Other women knew how to search the internet or use social media, but did not have the skills needed for the workplace, such as knowledge of Excel. These workshops were held in the employment office, where there are 12 computer terminals. After completing the series, the women “graduate,” and receive a certificate of completion. The series of classes I attended were taught by a volunteer named Mark, who taught various computer and graphics classes at a New York City college. He was a good-looking man who appeared to be about 40 years old, well dressed in a shirt and tie, with a thick accent (I could not discern its origin). For the first class, Vicky was early and as she usually did, she began to help Mark by handing out booklets he had prepared for the women. The women entered and began to take their seats at a computer terminal. All of them sat in the first two rows. Mark introduced himself and the women, responded politely. As he began his introduction to the course and handed out a syllabus, Debbie said,

“Wow, you seem much better than the last guy!”
“Yeah, that last guy was so boring, I didn’t learn anything, he put me to sleep,” Kathy added.

Mark interacted with the women, asking questions to gauge their level of knowledge and comfort level with computers. There was laughing and talking going on, both with Mark, and among the women themselves. Often, women were looking at each other’s computer screens and not paying attention to Mark.

“Ladies, we don’t have a lot of time, let’s get this done. We have a lot to cover.” He was able to regain their attention and get the class back on track. The women varied in their abilities to work with computers, as well as in their willingness to learn. Debbie always sat in front and asked many questions, while Faith always sat in the second row, against the wall, and never spoke. From my vantage point in the last row, I was able to see what the women were doing on their computer screens. Faith could barely keep up. Mark did his best to work with each woman individually, but it was difficult in a one-hour time frame. For example, when he explained how to copy and paste, he walked to each computer screen to see if the women were able to do this task. I noticed that the women tried to help each other; those who were more skillful with computers would help those who weren’t. Debbie would help Kenisha, and Margaret would help Olivia. Faith, however, sat quietly. Mark taught a weekly class for two months, in areas such as Microsoft Work, Excel, and Powerpoint. He always spoke to each woman by name, and always had candy to give them during class, “to keep them awake” he would say. The candy was a selling point for this class. Each Monday afternoon, as soon as Mark came in, the first question would be “what kind of candy did you bring today?”

It was interesting to note that as soon as the class ended, at five p.m., the women would get up and prepare to leave, as many had to pick up their children from day care or the after-
school program to be ready for dinner at six-thirty. Although they were in a rush, Debbie and Kathy always made a point to say goodbye to Mark and thank him. This was not the case with all of the women.

Another group of workshops that focused on the goal of employment involved resume writing. I participated in two of them. These workshops were run by social work students, seniors at a college in this city. The students were mixed racially and with respect to age, and they were all female. They were all dressed similarly, in business casual attire. They were not accompanied by an instructor. Because two of the women in the program had interviews scheduled for later that week, Johanna asked two of the social work students to conduct mock interviews. The participants sat face to face, to mimic an interview situation. At the computer terminals, there was a great deal of chatter and laughter.

As I walked around, I saw that some women had already prepared a resume, while others had no idea how to proceed, nor did they have the computer skills to accomplish the task. Virginia had worked as an accountant in her native Colombia, but had difficulty formatting a resume on a computer. One of the students worked with Vicki.

“‘I ain’t never worked a real job, so what am I going to put here,” Elaine said.

“What skills did you learn in prison?’” the student responded.

“I did a lot of work on the grounds, I like to garden. In fact, I built, with nails and a hammer and wood, a gazebo!” Elaine explained.

“That’s great, you can say that you were a landscape architect,” the student said.

“I like the way that sounds,” Elaine said.

However, she had limited computer skills, so the student did the typing.
After about two hours, the printer began printing out resumes and cover letters. Toni came to where I was sitting, at a desk in the front of the office, to show me her resume.

“I had one before, but the student really helped me make it look better, more professional.”

Toni stated on her resume that her goal was to find employment in the fitness industry.

“I’m studying for the trainer certification. Before I went away, I used to go to the gym every day. I would like to help other new mothers get back into shape.”

The other resume workshop I attended was similar but with two male students. These gentlemen were both white, both dressed in suits and ties.

“He looks like Dr. Oz,” said Elaine, referring to one of the men. The two men had four women sitting around and between them, while the female students were working with individual women. After this workshop, Johanna took a photo, and some of the women wanted to stand right next to the men.

Sister Barbara had mentioned that many of the women in the program were no longer with the partner they had prior to incarceration, and as soon as they came out, they were looking for someone to love them. Often, according to Sister Barbara, they met men in their drug treatment programs, “which is not in their best interest.” This is what happened with Mia, who left the program, and eventually was arrested and returned to jail.

*Life skills workshops.*

Other workshops were related to “Life Skills,” which ranged from kitchen safety and eating habits, to communications skills. During my participant observation, these groups were run by three different providers. When I first started fieldwork, Sister Pat was the Life Skills coordinator.
Sister Pat frequently reprimanded the women about their poor manners. At one particular meeting, one of the women came in eating something as she walked, holding aluminum tin and using a spoon to quickly put the food in her mouth.

“You know we don’t eat standing up shoveling food into our mouths,” Sister Pat said to Olivia.

“Quickly, go into the kitchen to finish eating; the floors were just cleaned. By the way, what is that you’re eating?”

“Pork, nice and greasy,” Olivia responded.

“Don’t you remember any of what we talked about -- nutrition, table manners?” Sister Pat asked, shaking her head. Olivia then headed to the kitchen and finished eating while standing at a counter. Donna came in eating a bag of chips. Sister shook her head as she spoke to her kindly about the inappropriateness of chips for a morning meal.

“Now you know that this is not breakfast.”

“I didn’t have time for real food,” Donna responded.

To the group, Sister briefly outlined what constituted good table manners, specifically that it is inappropriate to eat everything with a spoon. After the session, she explained to me that this was a chronic problem; some of these women never learned proper eating habits in their own homes as children. Another factor was that knives and forks were prohibited in prison, so the women became used to eating everything with a spoon.

In March 2013, Sister Pat explained that she was being reassigned to an administrative position within the religious order. For her last session with this particular group of women, she had planned a celebration. She invited me to participate, explaining that she would be making her special “Death by Chocolate” cake. During the last session prior to the celebration, Sister
asked the women to take a short quiz to evaluate what they retained from the workshops. Pieces of paper with the name of each woman and pens were given out. The questions related to activities of daily living, e.g., how to put dishes in a dishwasher, and how to set a table. Such activities were unknown to some of the women. They were asked to turn the page over and write down what they still would like to learn. Sister then collected the papers and gave the women a short 15-minute break, since we had been at the table for more than an hour. The women dispersed, going outside to smoke, all except Virginia, who sat in the living room.

In reviewing the answers, Sister was patient and did not scold; she used this opportunity to review what had been taught in the workshops. She then invited me to sit with her in the living room. Here she spoke to about her work with the women.

I am so sad about leaving. I really love working here with these women. There is so much more to do with them. So many of these women, when they come here, don’t even know how to eat. They eat everything with a spoon, because that’s how it is in prison. They don’t even know how to socialize and talk at a table. Forget about table manners. They don’t know how to maintain a kitchen or bathroom -- cleaning, sanitizing.

She explained that last week they had a “formal dinner” with the “good china” and had a pleasant meal with adult conversation.

“It’s so sad that some of these women have never learned how to enjoy a meal before coming here.”

She hoped that with these new skills the women could go out and eat in a restaurant “without everyone staring at them.”
The following week was the planned celebration. Sister Pat baked her specialty cake, and had certificates and small gift boxes for the women at each place setting. The table was festive with pink and white paper plates and napkins. At each place was a small yellow piece of paper the size of a card on which she had printed a poem about “ways to live life,” with sayings such as “Fast on anger. Feast on forgiveness.” Olivia then entered the kitchen from the grocery store to make cupcakes, something she had never done before.

“Olivia, do you know how to make cupcakes? Do you know how long it will take. It’s good to wait until the eleventh hour.” Sister said jokingly.

It was clear by watching Olivia, that she had indeed never done this. Although she was using a prepared mix, she was not looking at the directions on the back.

“Am I doing this right?” she asked Sister Pat.

“Read the box Olivia, the directions are right there.”

Some of the other women began to arrive. The table was set, the coffee made, and platters of food were prepared to put on the table; the only item not ready were Olivia’s cupcakes. Sister Pat and I entered the living room to wait. The women were all sitting together, but none were involved in conversation; each was involved with a smartphone. They weren’t talking; they were texting, emailing, or doing other solo activities.

“Can you believe this? All of them sitting here together, but no one is talking.” Sister Pat said.

“We are having conversations, just with other people!” Reggie laughed.

“If you had a Facebook page or Instagram, you would be on it too,” Donna said to Sister Pat. This stopped the women from interacting solely with their smart phones. They continued to talk to Sister Pat and me about social media, but some were still using their smartphones.
Finally, with Olivia’s cupcakes baked, Sister Pat summoned all to the table. As was done at the beginning at each session, she began by asking everyone to read one verse as we went around the table. Each person read a verse of the “Prayer for Understanding” (Appendix V). The women took this task seriously; there was no side chatter or laughter. Olivia, however, did appear to have some difficulty reading, as she spoke slowly and hesitated with longer words, specifically the word “influence.”

“I want to tell you how much I will miss you all. Thank you for the opportunity to work with you.”

Certificates were handed out, which the women would show to their parole officers as proof of their participation in program activities. Sister then handed each woman a small box, much like a “take out” container, but in pastel prints. Each had an individual woman’s name on it. Inside each one were a small stone imprinted with a word: “Family,” “Patience,” “Strength.” Virginia presented Sister with a gift from the group. Inside a floral gift bag was a mug with a saying: “Christ will lead the way.”

“This is so special. My mother said those exact words to me when I was young, and getting ready for my first teaching assignment. My mother knew that I was anxious and frightened. I am so thankful for this. I will take it with me to remind me of you all,” she said as she clutched the mug to her chest.

Sister invited everyone to begin eating, as she brought out the cake, and Virginia brought her platter of empanadas to the table.

“How about my cupcakes Sister?” asked Olivia as she brought a plate of them (plain chocolate, not frosted) to the table.
“They look beautiful,” Sister said.

There was a lot of conversation as everyone finished their snack.

“Please, take some empanadas for later,” Virginia said out loud to no one in particular. She went to the kitchen to get some aluminum foil to wrap up packages of empanadas.

“Take my cupcakes too,” Olivia said.

Cleanup was easy since paper plates and cups were used. Sister Pat brought a large black garbage bag into the dining room and put the waste inside. Donna put the coffee pot and the water pitcher back in the kitchen. Reggie wiped down the table with a paper towel. Cleanup took only 10 minutes; everyone helped out and some of the women hurried to help so they could then go outside to smoke cigarettes. One could see cigarettes in pockets, behind ears, and in their hands. Virginia, however, stayed behind to complete the task, which was typical of her. I spoke to Sister Pat alone to thank her for allowing me to participate.

“I am really so sad to leave here. I worry about these women. But I have no choice, as I was elected to this position in the administration of the organization (referring to the Sisters of Saint Dominic.)”

Following Sister Pat’s resignation, Valerie was given the position of “Life Skills Coordinator.” Like Sister Pat, her job would be to run different workshops each week, with topics such as time management, cleaning a home, and some parenting issues. I congratulated Valerie, and she explained that she wanted to “do some stuff different than Sister Pat.”

I want to talk about communication; I know they learn different things about communication, but you know, I know what these women need to learn. Like, how to talk to Johanna. Or Sister Tesa ‘cause sometimes she can be tough, and the women, you know, they don’t how to take it, or respond. So they keep it in, and take it out on others,
or they kids. And also how to talk to each other without fighting. You know what I mean? And also men, because when you away, you not with your baby father, then you come here, and your baby father not living with you; you know women don’t know how to deal with this, and they act all crazy, so they need to learn how to deal with this.

One week later, Valerie’s first workshop was held at House I, where the four newest women arrived. Sister Pat had held these sessions in the dining room, but since this was a small group (Denise, Kathy, Debbie, and Shaniqua), Valerie decided to use the small room at the front of the house. The topic was communication. As the women entered the room, Valerie welcomed them. Upon closing the door, she told them “what is said in here, stays here.” Although Valerie had been a program recipient in the recent past, she had a very professional and authoritarian attitude. Even her tone of voice was different in this role; gone was the articulation and tone that one equates with “the street;” instead, Valerie was soft-spoken, with clear articulation, and an even tone. The women were asked to put their phones on silent, and out of sight, and to move their handbags off their laps. Valerie started by asking the women “what was going on with them.”

“I am tired. It can be so hard getting to work on time and getting my daughter to day care,” Denise said.

“You have to get your daughter on a schedule. You can’t let her stay up all night watching TV. But we will talk about time management at another session,” Valerie said.

“I need that,” Denise said laughingly.

“Sometimes I hate when I have to ask Joanna something, and she tells me to send her an e-mail. That really bugs me. Why can’t she just talk to me?” Shaniqua demanded.
In response, Valerie reminded the women that they “didn’t have to be here,” but offered a discussion of the alternatives, such as being in the shelter system, or worse, “back on the streets.”

Shaniqua did not participate. She continued to sit in a wing chair, slouched with her eyes turned down.

“What is going on with you Shaniqua,” Valerie asked

“I don’t want to stay here, I can’t live by these rules. Maybe I should go back Upstate,” Shaniqua responded.

“It’s your decision, but you have to give it a chance. What’s there for you upstate? You’re going to get back into trouble up there. But it’s your decision in the end. Please try to stay. This place will help you. Believe me. Look at me.”

At the end of the session, she thanked the women, and offered to keep working with them.

The following week, Valerie discussed time management. The same group of women came. Valerie started out again by asking, “How is everyone this week?” She went around the room giving each woman a chance to speak. Because a party was being planned for Kathy’s son, who was turning one, everyone was talking about the party.

“What can I get him for a present?” Debbie asked.

“No presents, otherwise I am not having a party. He is only one. He doesn’t know,” Kathy responded.

“Ok, but I am getting the cake. What design can I get on it? What does he like?” Debbie asked.

This conversation went on for 20 minutes; the workshop was only for one hour.

“Ok ladies, we can do this later. Let’s move on here. Remember, last week, Denise
said she can’t get out the door on time? Let’s talk about how we can help her.”

Valerie offered that she would get her children’s clothes, as well as her own, ready the night before, to save time in the morning. Kathy said that she does the same. Valerie asked Denise to try this for a week and come back and report to the group. As soon as the hour was over, the women stood up and headed out of the door. Debbie headed down to the after-school program to pick up her daughter. Denise and Valerie stayed on the steps outside to smoke a cigarette before picking up their children.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Valerie’s tenure as “Life Skills Coordinator” was short. She is now in charge of cleaning House I, including the play areas. Valerie never talked about this on subsequent encounters. Every time I saw her, she was smiling. She always had the large key ring that held the keys to all of doors of House I, the day care, and the afterschool center, as she was responsible for cleaning these.

The next series of Life Skills was taught by two nurses who were working toward a baccalaureate degree at a private Manhattan college. Teaching the workshop was a means of fulfilling their course requirements. One of the session leaders was a middle-aged white woman, while the other was a slightly older black woman of Jamaican descent. Workshops were now held in the employment office, and met weekly for a period of three months, from September to November, 2013. The group was small, and included Debbie, Winnie (who was new to the program at this time), Faith, and Eva. Eva was not new, but had just completed an internship and was to begin her new job shortly. Eva had said in her interview that she wanted to “learn everything” she could while here. The two leaders were animated and seemed very comfortable working with these women. They wore nursing uniforms, and came prepared with handouts and visual aids. At times, they provided “gifts” for the women; for a session on oral health, the
participants each received a small bag with a toothbrush, floss, and a small tube of toothpaste. Debbie and Winnie were the most vocal, and liked to share their knowledge. Faith, as usual, sat quietly.

*Yoga classes.*

Aware of the stress these women were under, the program offered workshops to help them. Yoga was one method. Sessions were offered weekly from November 2012 until February 2013. They ended because the instructor was moving out of town, and because attendance was poor. Sessions were held at the end of a workday, at four p.m. in a quiet space in the basement recreation room of one of the permanent housing apartments maintained by the program. Unlike other workshops, yoga was not mandatory, which resulted in poor attendance, usually two or three women. Some of the women I questioned said they didn’t like yoga. Upon questioning Valerie, who never participated, her response was a joking “I don’t yoga.” Eva and Mia were the only two who participated in every session. In preparing for yoga, the two women would meet in the employment office, where they would get the mats and walk to the apartment building to set up, prior to the instructor coming.

The recreation room was a small clean room with tile floors, and despite being on the basement level, had a full-size door opening to an outdoor area, which provided both light and air. Mia and Eva prepared the area by pushing a table against a wall and laying out the mats. On the table was the portable stereo the instructor used. The women did not change into typical yoga attire; they just removed shoes and socks.

The instructor was a white woman, in her 20s with blond hair. She was aware of my role as researcher in the program, and agreed to my participation. Upon her arrival, after a brief greeting, she would put on soft Indian music and dim the lights. Her voice was soft and slow.
Deep breathing was encouraged. She guided the group through various poses, or vinyasas, for 40 minutes, with the last 10 minutes left for restorative deep breathing while lying supine on the mat (savasana). After the final “Om,” Mia would quickly get up and wipe down and roll up the mats, so that she could leave to pick up her daughter from day care. Eva was more relaxed, her typical behavior, and would complete the tasks, allowing Mia to leave. Yoga did not continue after this instructor left New York.

The preceding section describes the activities in which the women participated to prepare them for life on the outside.

**The Power to Change: “If She Could Do It, So Can I”**

Many of the women interviewed noted that it was the presence of the women in this program who themselves had been incarcerated and who had succeeded that provided inspiration for them to continue working toward their own successful reentry. This gave them hope for their own futures. Through participant observation, I noted activities that were geared toward developing confidence, thus providing empowering the women to make positive changes in their lives. These activities helped develop advocacy and self-esteem, sub themes which emerged.

Kellie felt empowered not only by the women who had been incarcerated and who now worked within the organization, but by the women she had lived with when she first came here.

It’s empowering because it’s hope, it’s inspiration all the time. You know what I mean? …..and it was empowering to me to watch Maria (a woman she lived with in House I) get up and go to work every day and come home and take care of three kids, cook dinner. You know, to me, it was like —if Mia can do it, I’m gonna—now I’m gonna be able to do it.
Eva spoke about the support given by the program which gave her the confidence and power to learn new skills and take opportunities;

And they know I needed that little support, that little push to start me up and send me to places to have that confidence in myself. So they helped me build the confidence, which I had, but sometimes shut down. So far nothing that they offered me I haven’t used it.

Kind of have to use it, even the yoga exercise.

Denise spoke of her surprise at learning that the women she worked for as an intern had themselves been formerly incarcerated; this gave her the power to continue;

When I first got here, I did not know half of these ladies was—had ever been incarcerated like myself. Like I just thought they graduated from school, they, you know, silver spoon, never walked down the jail cells row before. So knowing that they've all experienced some kind of incarceration, it made me feel better and seeing that they made it so far, it made me push myself more.

Debbie spoke of the power she felt in reuniting with her daughter, knowing that the women in the program had gone through it as well:

Like you know a lot of the women here throughout the program, mostly all have been incarcerated, they’ve all done the re-uniting, and honestly, I can say that I’ve learned more individually talking to the different staff members like Joanna, Ebony….I think I’ve learned more individually talking to the different people than anything, because they’ve all come home from prison. They’ve all re-united with their children. They’ve all been throughout (through it). But when it comes to somebody who’s been there, who’s been through that already, you understand it way better.

Advocacy.
In addition to offering assistance to these formerly incarcerated women, the program works to teach women to help themselves. One way is through involvement in the Correctional Association of New York. Women attended meetings of its Women In Prison Project (WIPP). The WIPP was created in 1991 to address the issues that are specific to women in the criminal justice system, such as having and raising children while incarcerated, and to ensure that women receive health care that is adequate and gender-appropriate in prison. WIPP also coordinates the Coalition for Women Prisoners, a statewide alliance of formerly incarcerated women and other advocates to ensure that the criminal justice system is responsive to the needs of women and their families. The Coalition works with the WIPP to develop strategic programs to advocate for legislative reform. For example, a current agenda of the Coalition and WIPP is to facilitate the passage of the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, which is a bill before both the Senate and the Assembly in New York State.

The WIPP has different committees whose members work towards different goals. These committees are the Conditions and Reentry Committee, the Incarcerated Mothers Committee, and the Violence Against Women Committee. The Conditions and Reentry Committee works to improve conditions inside prisons and eliminate barriers facing women when they return home. The Incarcerated Mothers Committee focuses on helping mothers in prison and their children maintain bonds and relationships, and the Violence Against Women Committee focuses on changing the criminal justice system’s response to survivors of domestic violence and abuse.

Meetings are held in the offices of the Correctional Association of New York, in Harlem, New York, in a conference room off the main office, on the second floor of a large office building. The room has two large windows on one side, a whiteboard on one wall and a table along another, where food is always set out. The food is “soul food,” consisting of rice and
beans, oxtails and wings, or coffee and donuts. In the center of the room is a large conference table, where attendees sit.

At one meeting I attended, Ebony was present with four of the women. They were well dressed in business attire, slacks and blouses. They quickly got up to get plates of food, as the room was filling up. Ebony said they could only stay for an hour, as she had to return the van in which they had driven, back to the organization. “It’s important that the program makes an appearance here to support Ms. T.” Ms. T was an administrative assistant who organized all the meetings and other activities. The day I attended was her last meeting before moving to another state to work in a similar program.

The meeting was called to order by Ms. T. Meetings began with attendees introducing themselves. On this day, however, we were also asked, as we said our names, to come up with one word to describe Ms. T. Some of the participants at the meeting included in their introduction that they were a “formerly incarcerated person.” None of the women from the program, including Ebony, did that. Since the room was so crowded, this process took 30 minutes. There was a great deal of commotion, as people were still coming in as the meeting began. After the introductions came the business of the meeting. This meeting provided a broad overview of all of the different things that the organization was working on, from trying to gain support for the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, to with the state of health care for incarcerated women. Many different forms and flyers were passed around the room; the women from the program picked up and read every one of these papers. They were quiet and attentive.

The following week a meeting of the Incarcerated Mothers Committee was held; it was much smaller and more intimate. This was held in the same conference room, but the atmosphere was different. It was quiet, with a smaller group around the large conference table.
As usual the meeting began with self-introductions. Present were three women who work as court-appointed attorneys (CASAs: court appointed special advocates); a representative from the Osborne Society; the two women who were the directors of the Women in Prison Project; their assistant (herself a formerly incarcerated woman and, at this time, in her last trimester of pregnancy); a graduate student who was working as an intern at the Correction Association; and two other undergraduate students (studying social work); as well as two formerly incarcerated women who would be discussing their experiences of being pregnant in prison.

NOTE: The Osborne Association is a non-profit that works with individuals who are involved in the criminal justice system. The organization provides services to current and formerly incarcerated men, women, juveniles, and their families. It was founded more than 80 years ago by Thomas Osborne, who is considered the “pioneer and prophet of prison reform.” The organization is known for developing effective programs that offer a broad range of treatment, education, and vocational services to more than 7,000 people each year. It operates at several sites throughout the state, including the Bronx, Brooklyn, Poughkeepsie, Rikers Island, and several state correctional facilities.

The president of this committee reviewed the agenda. The first item on the agenda was the state of health care for incarcerated pregnant women, following passage of the Anti-Shackling Act in 2009. According to the committee leaders, incidences of women still being shackled were known to have occurred. One of the women who came to speak to the committee about the health care incarcerated women received was Toni, who had left the program while I was there. During her self-introduction she stated she was a formerly incarcerated woman who was “happy to be out and raising my baby outside of prison now.”
Toni shared her story first. She spoke in a loud, clear voice. Although she wasn’t shackled while in the hospital, she was shackled during transport to the hospital, in labor.

“The worst thing was that one of the guards just stood and stared,” Toni said. She did praise one of the corrections officers, a woman, for actually helping her breastfeed. But, she felt her “rights were taken away.” She explained:

“I was pissed off that they showed my mother the baby before me, without even asking me….I didn’t care about my Mom, but I didn’t want the baby’s father to see him.”

She then talked about the experience of” being postpartum” after returning to the prison.

They made me go back to work and clean one week after. One day I was pushing a heavy broom, and started to bleed heavy again, and they wouldn’t even give me more pads, let alone take me to the infirmary or back to the hospital. They treat us badly, sometimes it’s not safe.

Two other women, who lived upstate, shared similar stories. Following a brief discussion, the meeting was adjourned. Toni came up to me, asking “How did I do?’ “Great, I said, your story is important.” She quickly put on her coat to leave, saying “Gotta go, I have to get back and take the baby to the doctor for a check-up,” and said her good-byes.

One of the “main events” of the Coalition for Women Prisoners each year is “Advocacy Day,” an annual day where supporters travel to Albany to lobby legislators on issues critical to the population of incarcerated women. This year, the issues were the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act and the shackling of pregnant women.

A group from the program would be participating in Advocacy Day, as they had in the past. Prior to going to Albany, everyone attended a mandatory training session. The coalition
hosted three sessions at their offices in Harlem, and the training was provided by Jackie, one of the program assistants from the Coalition. Jackie was a formerly incarcerated woman.

Virginia, Rosita, and Valerie were present. Also in attendance was a new woman, Margaret. She was a young white woman with long dark hair, overweight, wearing sweatpants and a tee shirt. (Note that Margaret did not stay at the program long; she and Olivia were sent to an alcohol rehabilitation facility). Jackie stood before the group and explained the issues that were on the agenda for this year’s trip to Albany; the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, and expansion of the Anti-Shackling Act. Virginia and Rosita were taking notes.

Jackie gave specific details regarding the bill’s number in the Assembly and the Senate, which committee it was in, and who was sponsoring it. She read a “script” that the women would bring with them, but she encouraged the women to share their own stories, because they were more compelling. Valerie discussed her experience of having been shackled while in labor. She shared about being restrained with belly shackles (a large metal “belt” attached to chains around the abdomen, gravid notwithstanding), as well as around the legs and wrists. She explained about “the box,” how the wrists are shackled together and locked with a square lock. Rosita and Virginia were shocked; they looked directly at Valerie as she spoke, with their mouths open.

Valerie said that she testified to “Mayor Patterson” (David Patterson was New York’s governor) in Albany at an Advocacy Day event prior to the Anti-Shackling Act being passed in 2009. Jackie then explained that this year the Coalition was lobbying for the law to be amended, so as to outlaw the shackling of pregnant women at any time during pregnancy. The state of California had passed such a law, and this would be presented to the legislators as well on Advocacy Day.
After this tutorial, Jackie went on to discuss the logistics of the trip, such as bus pick-up and drop-off. At this point, Valerie stood up and stated that she went “last time,” and wasn’t interested in going again. The other women signed the paper that Jackie passed around to secure a seat on the bus. There was quite a bit of chatter and excitement about this event.

On June 5, 2013, some of the women from the program, along with Ebony, boarded a bus headed for Albany to participate in Advocacy Day. The bus picked up this group outside the employment office. Rina, Margaret, Katrina and Olivia were there waiting. Sister Tesa came by to wish the group well, and offered a prayer for our safety. Today, the women were dressed conservatively in dark dresses and skirts. Even their demeanor was softer today than usual; this was especially noticeable with Olivia and Margaret, who were usually loud and talkative. The quiet was broken when Donna came rushing in, hands in the air, exasperated that she was late, because she “didn’t know we had to dress.” Donna had on her version of conservative: a gray pleated mini-skirt, a button-down white shirt and gray high-heeled pumps.

When the bus arrived, two young white women, dressed in skirts and flat shoes, who were interns at the Correctional Association, came into the office to assist in boarding. There were a few others on the bus who were picked up in Brooklyn prior to coming here. The women, Ebony, and I got on the bus and walked to the back, where there were seats available. The women were quiet while the bus leaders read off names of those who should be present. The bus ride was uneventful and quiet.

Upon arrival at the Legislative Office Building (LOB), the first thing the women did was smoke cigarettes. They also took photos outside. Upon entering, everyone went to a hearing room, to be prepped for lobbying. The hearing room looked like a lecture hall in college, with stadium seating and tables and a podium up front. The difference was that the walls were wood-
paneled, the ceilings high with ornate lighting, and in front were two large flags, one of the stars and stripes, the other of the State of New York.

As we entered the room, there were already more than 50 people seated. The women went to the back and sat quietly together. The leaders from the Coalition explained that we would be placed in assigned teams; everyone from the program, including Ebony and myself, was assigned to a different team. Ebony confided in me that this concerned her, as she would not be able to “monitor” the behavior of the women. The Coalition had arranged lobbying appointments for each team; we were each to see three legislators. So I would not see the women again until later that afternoon.

A few hours later, everyone reconvened in that same room. Within a few minutes, Katrina, Margaret, and Olivia found one another. Ebony and I had already arrived and were sitting together. The women sat down in a row behind us. When asked by Ebony how it went, Olivia immediately began explaining that she was “surprised at myself; I wasn’t nervous, I just spoke about my experiences.” After a few moments the room was called to attention by one of the leaders from the Coalition. When she asked for input, Olivia immediately put up her hand, stood up, and shared her experience with the entire audience in this legislative hall. Her affect was jubilant and proud.

This was such an amazing day. I can’t believe that I was able to speak to people in power, and they listened. I saw two different representatives, and they couldn’t believe that I was a formerly incarcerated woman talking to them.

While she was speaking, Donna came in and sat down. After Olivia spoke, Donna raised her hand. As soon as she was recognized, she stood up and shared her experience.

“I am so proud to be able to be a part of this day.”
Ebony leaned into me, and said she was “amazed at how well they did.” After a few other people in the room spoke, we were called to attention as one of the legislators who sponsored the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act bill came into the room. This was followed by visits from two other legislators who have been supporters of this cause. The women from the program sat quietly through these speeches. Afterward, everyone was asked to come to the front to participate in a group photo. Next, Ebony summoned everyone to start walking toward our bus. It was interesting that the women did not stop outside to smoke prior to entering the bus. Everyone spoke of being “wiped out” from this long day. The rest of the three-hour ride back to Queens was very quiet, with the women either sleeping or listening to music with headphones on.

Increasing self-esteem

In order to help women develop self-esteem, the program offers a series of workshops called SISTA: “Sisters Informing Sisters on Topics about AIDS,” described as a “A Peer-led Program to Prevent HIV Infection in African American Women.” The SISTA project is a social-skills training intervention that targets heterosexually active African American women. It is aimed at reducing risky sexual behavior and is comprised of five two-hour sessions, delivered by peer facilitators in a community-based setting. The sessions are gender specific and culturally relevant and include behavioral skills practice, group discussions, lectures, role playing, prevention video viewing, and take-home exercises.

This workshop, although aimed at African American women, was required for all women in the program, regardless of race or ethnicity. The facilitator, Ms. Burke, was a petite African American woman who always appeared enthusiastic. Each workshop started with the words “self-esteem” written on a whiteboard. The sessions included the use of culturally and gender-
appropriate materials to acknowledge pride and enhance self-worth in being an African American woman. To this end, poems by African American women were read.

Ms. Burke asked each of the women to read verses at the beginning and end of the workshop. One of the poems was about a mother and child. Ms. Burke asked the women what they thought the poem meant. They responded by discussing the importance of motherhood. She told the women that even though this poem had nothing to do with HIV, it was important because it highlighted women’s strengths. Some of the goals of SISTA are to teach women to communicate verbally and nonverbally in order to reduce their exposure to HIV and other infections. Negotiation skills and assertive communication skills were taught.

Ms. Burke then stood next to the board, and explained that more women than men were now infected with HIV.

“Why do you think this is? she asked.

“Men on the low down,” blurted Valerie

“Can you explain what that is for the group?” Ms. Burke asked her, as she wrote “men on the low down” on the board.

“It’s when men who have women go have sex with men, but they don’t want to be labeled gay. Then they go back to their wives and girlfriends. They should just be gay if that makes them happy.”

“What other things make women vulnerable to HIV?” Ms. Burke asked.

“Anatomy,” Valerie said again. “But I’m not sure why exactly.”

“Regina, you’re a nurse, can you explain,” Mia prompted me.

I explained as simply as possible that the mucous membranes of the vagina were more prone to damage, and that could provide an entry port for the virus.
“What other things?” Ms. Burke asked.

There was no response, so she wrote on the whiteboard “Self-Esteem.” A few women acknowledged this by nodding, while there was a slightly audible “yup,” and “ah-ah.” She then spoke about those women who need or rely on men for money or shelter and are afraid to ask them to put on a condom, even if they suspect that they are having sex with other women or men. The women were all nodding in agreement, but no one spoke up.

Women were taught how to effectively and consistently use condoms. Discussions focused on cultural and gender-related barriers -- and facilitators -- to using condoms. Ms. Burke began with a discussion about protection for women. She first mentioned male condoms, but stressed that women need to “take control and this may mean using a female condom.”

“Those are so big and ugly; who would want to have sex with that thing on!” one woman said.

Ms. Burke went to the bathroom in the corner of the employment office, and came out laughing

“I guess you all are using them, because the ones I left last time are all gone! Okay then, I will try to draw one on the board, but I’m not much of an artist.”

As she drew, she explained how “the female condom goes in the woman’s vagina.” The conversation moved to other sexually transmissible infections, such as herpes. This woman was not an expert on the topic; some of the clinical information she delivered was incorrect. For example, she stated that “there is only one drug on the market [for herpes],” and mentioned the medication that is advertised in the media. In discussing chlamydia, she stated that men exhibit no symptoms, also not true. It was difficult for me to stay quiet but I did.

“Okay, let’s get back to HIV,” Ms. Burke said.
What followed was a discussion of HIV infection occurring during pregnancy. Ms. Burke again provided misinformation, this time about HIV testing (which is mandatory for all pregnant women in New York) and medications, stating that women should stop all medications until they seek care.

“NO!” I shouted in my head, as this could be dangerous.

By this point the women had fallen silent again, with some closing their eyes and nodding their heads, as it was late in the day.

“Any questions?” Ms. Burke asked.

With this, Eva perked up. “No, thank you for the information.”

The women seemed to regain energy at the prospect of going home. Eva and Virginia put the room back in order, while the others put on their coats. Ebony, who was sitting in her cubicle in the back, came out with her coat on as well. I helped Ms. Burke pack up her belongings, thanking her for allowing me to participate. Ms. Burke hugged Eva and wished her happy holidays. Ms. Burke then did the same with the other women before they left. Ebony did the same. I too said my goodbyes and wishes for a happy holiday to Ebony and the women, as I didn’t think I would make it back before Christmas. I walked out the door with Ms. Burke, and helped her load her car before heading to my own car.

The following day, I returned to speak with Ebony and Johanna to share my concerns regarding the misinformation the women were given at the SISTA workshop. They asked if I would be willing to do a workshop on sexual health, to which I agreed. I did return after the holidays to do this.

Summary

This chapter described the details of the activities and events I observed and participated in over a period of nine months. By doing so, I was able to understand how the program
supports these women as they transition to living independently in the community with their children.

After analyzing both the field notes of these events, as well as the transcribed interviews, themes were noted. The major themes were: the power to change: if she can do it, so can I; parenting the parent; and the impact of competing demands. Subthemes included: self-esteem; self-advocacy, reliving childhood; othermothering; and preparing for life on the outside.

Chapter Six will discuss these findings in relation to the literature that has been written on these phenomena.

Figure 1. Schematic Design of Themes and Subthemes
Chapter Six: Discussion and Implications

This study described the lives of women involved in the criminal justice system as they transitioned to life in the community through participation in a supportive living environment.

After careful and thoughtful data analysis, three prevailing themes emerged: the power to change: if she can do it, so can I; parenting the parent, and the impact of competing demands. Additionally, there are several subthemes that were identified within the data including: othermothering, reliving childhood, preparing for life on the outside, self-advocacy and improved self-esteem.

The final chapter provides insight in how the prevailing themes align with Barretts’s theory of Power as Knowing Participation in Change (1986) as well as discusses the study findings in relation to the review of literature. The implications for nursing theory, practice, education and research are presented. Lastly, limitations of the study are identified.

Theoretical Perspective

The women who participated in this program were motivated to make changes in their lives, and as they did so, this commitment to change emerged as the theme of the power to change. After the often debilitating experience of incarceration, women often experience feelings of being overwhelmed or afraid. They must readjust or re-pattern their choices and learn to live independently within less structured environments. Following incarceration or other involvement within the criminal justice system, these women have developed different ways of being in their environment. For example, the supportive housing program offered structured processes and techniques which helped these women cope in new, more effective ways. However, a significant influence were often other incarcerated women like themselves who had been involved in the criminal justice system and now were gainfully employed and living independently with their children.
After careful reflection, specifically the in-depth interviews with these women, Power as Knowing Participation in Change emerged as a theoretical framework. The findings were supportive and consistent with the Barrett’s Theory (1986).

Barrett’s theory of power as the capacity to participate knowingly in change consists of four dimensions: awareness, choices, freedom to act intentionally, and involvement in creating change. These dimensions need not occur in any special order. These dimensions are how power is manifested by one and observed by others. The theory proposes that power as knowing participation in change is being aware of what one is choosing to do, feeling free to do it, and doing it intentionally (Barrett, 1986).

**Power to change: “If she can do it, so can I.” = Choices.**

The women in this program were here by choice. Some, like Valerie, Olivia, Toni, Kellie, Kathy, and Denise, came directly from prison or jail nurseries. One of the Sisters would visit a prison or jail nursery to acquaint the women with the program, and those who were interested were then interviewed.

Debbie, who came to prison pregnant, could not be part of the nursery due to her felony manslaughter charge (violent felons are excluded from admission to the nursery); however, she chose to participate in parenting workshops in prison. Through these workshops, she met Sister Barbara, who interviewed and accepted her. Faith was referred from an alternative-to-incarceration program for women with children who are suffering from addiction; she was referred to other programs after discharge as well, but chose this program too. Jodi knew about the program because she ran parenting groups in prison; she came for housing and to receive help in finding employment. Virginia and Winnie were sentenced to community service, and referred to the program to perform this service. However, after completing their sentences, both
women were unemployed and chose to become program participants to help them gain employment. Eva thought one had to be a mother to be accepted; however after one of her prison acquaintances, an older woman without children, was invited to join the program, she petitioned one of the Sisters to be selected. Rosita knew of the program because she worked in the prison nursery during her incarceration in New York. She answered an ad on social media for an intern to work in the employment office. Rosita could not come here directly from this prison, as she was had to complete her sentence in another state, where she had also been convicted and sentenced.

According to Barrett’s theory, the choices one makes is how power is observed by others.

**Impact of competing demands = involvement in creating change**

The program has many rules that the women must abide by. They may not like them or agree with all of them but they are fully informed prior to coming into the program. The expectation and requirements that would assist the women into the reentry process: attend workshops, work in internships, keep parole and attend counseling appointments. All the participants, whether or not they remained in the program, made their decisions based on knowing the program demands. The findings suggest that these women were creating changes while managing competing demands to re-engage in the world outside of prison.

Debbie completed an internship in a welding company, and was accepted into a technical school to prepare for the licensing exam and job placement. She is living in one of the new independent living apartments with her daughter, of whom she regained custody. Denise completed an internship in the mentoring program and is now employed by the Osborne Association, a non-profit that provides assistance to men, women, children, and families affected by incarceration. She is hoping to begin community college in the fall to begin paralegal studies.
Eva, who completed an internship in a well-known barbeque restaurant chain, is working full-time doing food prep in a local restaurant. She and her partner (who completed the program before and is employed as well) have also moved to the new independent living apartments with their three children. Virginia, Rosita and Kathy are employed full-time by Goodwill Industries. Kathy also was accepted to live in the new independent living apartment. Valerie is still employed by the program, cleaning House I and the program offices. She too moved into the new independent living apartments with her two children. Winnie, who was studying for pre-employment exams at Consolidated Edison, decided against going further, explaining that “the test was too hard.” She is now in the employment program. Since she is a licensed food handler, her goal is to find an internship or employment in food service. She chose to assess her strengths and she moved into the new apartment with her boyfriend (who works full-time and pays the rent) and her youngest son.

This demonstrates that by working within the demands of this program, these women created positive changes in their lives as they transition to independent living in the community.

**Parenting the parent = Freedom to act intentionally.**

The bonds of affection that a woman has with her children are not necessarily severed when she is incarcerated, despite the difficulties of separation. However, reestablishing a maternal relationship can be difficult, but many of the women desired to fulfill their parenting role and actively sought support and resources to become a better parent. They need strong role models and continued guidance to act intentionally within the duties and responsibilities of becoming an engaged parent. The program provides both role models and guidance to help these women intentionally develop healthy parental skills.
This was not always easy. It fact, it was especially difficult for those women who were not afforded the ability to reside with their children on a continuous basis (Brown & Bloom, 2009; O’Brien, 2001). Reentering mothers confronted many of the same problems that contributed to their incarceration -- what Brown and Bloom (2009) refers to as the “pathways” to prison: poverty, unstable housing, underemployment, and addiction. They state that while the maternal role may constitute a conventional identity “script” and motivate success on parole, the challenges faced upon release from a correctional facility make success tenuous. Richie (2001), in a qualitative study of 42 women, showed that the same overwhelming conditions that were present before incarceration exist again upon release. In this study, most of the women noted that their children’s suffering continued after their release, and that repairing relationships was stressful. In O’Brien’s (2001) study of women transitioning from incarceration, had not yet resumed their residential parenting role used the opportunity to slowly develop a relationship.

Exacerbating the issues of reentry are the feelings of guilt and shame related to the women’s offenses, especially for those with older children (Brown & Bloom, 2009). Winnie and Rosita, who both had older sons, described the shame they experienced. Incarceration “distorts women’s identities as caregivers, placing them in powerless positions.” (Frigon, 2006). There are often feelings of loss of authority and moral rectitude that are central to motherhood (Brown & Bloom, 2009, Frigon, 2006). Valerie, Denise, and Debbie described some of the difficulties they had in maintaining authority in caring for their children.

For some women, addiction adds yet another challenge to reestablishing relationships with children. Women who use drugs do not fit the model of a “good mother.” Women’s substance abuse is more stigmatizing than for their male counterparts (Radcliffe, 2011). While not all mothers who use drugs are neglectful, some observed that their interest in parenting and
their children was diverted by their involvement in drugs (Shantz, Kilty, & Frigon, 2009). This was true for Faith, Kellie, and Valerie.

For some women, drugs and alcohol were used to deaden the pain associated with traumatic life experiences or feelings of loss, as was demonstrated in this study through the narratives of Jodi, Valerie, and Faith. However, their substance abuse caused further pain in the form of incarceration and separation from their children. Another impetus for entering treatment is the strain that is experienced in the street addict role (Robbins, Martin & Surratt, 2009), which was the case for both Valerie and Faith. There are women for whom mothering while coping with addiction and recovery is frustrating. They may be unable to meet expectations, which can lead to relapse. In these situations, relinquishing the care of their children to family members is seen as “positive mothering” (Hardesty & Black, 1999). Valerie, Kellie, and Faith did relinquish care of their children to family members; they acknowledged they were not able to care for the children due to addiction. In this way, these women intentionally made a decision which provided the best parental care for their children.

While separated, many of these women longed for their children, which they saw as a sign of caring (Hardesty & Black, 1999). To cope with the loss of her children due to incarceration, Jodi kept a journal. She incorporated this tool into the parenting classes she taught in prison as well. Again, the intent was to learn to become a better parent by freely choosing and intentionally acting to overcome significant barriers.

Maternal roles appear to be a motivating factor for women to participate in correctional substance abuse treatment (Robbins, Martin, & Surratt, 2009). For some women, the discovery of pregnancy was a “turning point” that caused them to reevaluate their lives and seek treatment (Radcliffe, 2011).
In helping women reestablish relationships with their children and recreate their roles as mothers, the program does indeed “parent the parent,” one of the themes emerging from the data. The program provides role models and experiences that the women can refer back to when they are mothering their own children. During workshops, the women are provided with demonstrations of some of the skills needed to parent effectively. The process of “parenting the parent” gives the women information, and skills through the experience of being parented themselves. This is something they may not have had as children; thus providing the freedom to act intentionally as mothers.

Analysis of the data on parenting led to the two subthemes; reliving childhood and othermothering. The subtheme of reliving childhood developed after experiencing activities that were implemented during the parenting workshops. Othermothering referred to how the women in the program help one another in developing parenting skills.

**Reliving childhood = Freedom to act intentionally**

It was shown in chapter five how the program uses play and other child friendly activities as a tool to help these women develop healthy parental relationships with their children. These women in turn intentionally incorporate these same activities into their own lives as they change their prior ideas of what healthy mothering is.

Research has also demonstrated how parenting is enhanced through play therapy. The importance of play in developing cognitive and language development in children has been validated by research (Kenney, 2012; McKinney & Power, 2012; Stephenson, 2008; Strom & Greathouse, 1974). Play has also been shown to help children develop conflict resolution and sharing values (Strom & Greathouse, 1974). In a study of play training of adult mothers and caregivers, it was demonstrated that teaching adults to play with children was an effective
mechanism that enhanced preschool language development (Graul & Zeece, 1990). In addition
to play that is encouraged in educational and care settings, parents play an important role in this
process (Grace & Zee, 1990).

**Othermothering = Freedom to act intentionally**

Women also help one another with parenting in this program. The literature refers to this
as othermothering, where a woman accepts responsibility for a child not one’s own, in an
arrangement that may or may not be formal (Case, 1997; Edwards, 2000). In this setting,
othermothering was both formal and informal. For women who were completing sentences,
awaiting reunification, their children lived with and were cared for by a woman in this
organization, Florencia, who was formally named guardian of these children. The women
intentionally made this choice for their children, when in some cases; there was family who
could have cared for the child until the mother’s sentence was complete. This was true for
Ebony, one of the employment coordinators. Ebony’s mother and siblings are nearby, but she
intentionally decided for her daughter to live in the program, cared for by Florencia, who acts as
a surrogate mother. Ebony explained that her own mother, though capable, suffers from
depression, so she felt it in her daughter’s best interest to stay in the program until her own
sentence was complete.

Informally, it was not unusual for the children to leave the room they shared with their
own mother to spend time with another woman. In House I, Debbie often spent time with
Valerie’s, Kathy’s and Denise’s children. Debbie explained to these women that the children
enjoyed spending time with her because she was “calm,” and “talked to them, not at them.” In
addition, the experienced mothers would share their childrearing knowledge with new mothers.
This notion of “othermothering,” aligns with Barrett’s dimension of the freedom to act
intentionally, as these women felt free to share information to help another, and to help with child rearing.

**Self-advocacy and self-esteem = Awareness and choices**

Through participant observation, it was observed that the women develop confidence, a lifelong skill of human development, to become more aware about themselves, increasing their self-advocacy and self-esteem to make better choices.

The program helps the women it serves, by providing housing, assistance with custody, counselling, and referral to substance abuse treatment. Another important component is that women are encouraged to advocate for themselves. Workshops focusing on communication and assertiveness training provide women with insight and skills to advocate for themselves. For example, through involvement with the Coalition for Women Prisoners, women network to find jobs, and in turn help other women like themselves. This provides greater self-awareness. Greater awareness increases the capacity for advocacy and improved self-esteem.

In a study of women who considered themselves successful in reentry, one factor cited was “confidence in self” (O’Brien, 2001). This confidence resulted from being able to “manage everyday life, making decisions to promote physical health, and using internal resources to cultivate hope” (O’Brien, 2001). Chapter five discussed the workshops that promote managing everyday life, and physical and mental well-being. Employment has been shown to increase self-esteem. Young and Matucci (2006) describe a vocational education program in a state correctional facility for women in New York that focused on teaching plumbing skills; qualitative data were positively related to self-esteem and confidence building. One of the main goals in the program setting is for the women to become gainfully employed. Employment is a
source of power for the women in this setting; once they are employed, and can provide for themselves and their children, they are ready to move on to independent living.

Observing this awareness of self in the women was a manifestation of how some of these women gained power through knowledge.

**The power to change not exhibited by all.**

Although some of the women made positive changes, others did not. Some have not enjoyed the same degrees of success. Jodi is still unemployed. She had been encouraged to participate in the program’s computer classes, because her computer skills are limited. To date, she has not attended any of the employment workshops. She was referred to join the Coalition for Women Prisoners, as they have an active reentry program. She has not done this either. Unfortunately, Faith has relapsed and is in a drug rehabilitation program, while her youngest son is being cared for in the program by Florencia. The program director was concerned when Faith’s partner came back into her life, as she is also is an addict. There was also concern that Fallon was prostituting for money for drugs.

Thus, the power to knowingly participate in change was not equally experienced by all the women. Just as in life, choices are complicated and as diverse as the women themselves. Some of the women were able to become more aware, use their knowledge and develop skills to change their lives, while others remained in their existing situations, or resumed their previous patterns of living.
Figure 2: Correlation of Themes with Dimensions of Barrett’s Theory

- Power: If She Can Do it, So Can I;
  - Increasing Self-esteem
    - Advocacy
  - Awareness Choices

- Parenting the Parent
  - Othermothering
  - Reliving childhood
  - Freedom to Act Intentionally

- The Impact of Competing Demands
  - Preparing for life on the outside
  - Involvement in Creating Change
Implications

Nursing.

This research demonstrated how Barrett’s theory of Power as Knowing Participation in Change can be used in practice to develop and inform programs to assist those vulnerable and marginalized members of society. Barrett postulates that the four dimensions of the theory; awareness, choices, freedom to act intentionally, and one’s involvement in creating change occur in numerous forms. This study showed how these dimensions coincided with the themes that emerged. Nurses can use this theory to guide research, practice, and policy.

Nursing research.

This study offered insight into how women experience and perceive a program that assists in the process of transitioning to life in the community after imprisonment or other criminal justice involvement. In the course of this study, a number of women left the program. Follow-up of those women who are neither incarcerated or in a substance abuse program may provide insight into other ways to help women in transition. The information about mothering demonstrated the difficulties some women face with reunification, due to the women’s own lack of skills or because the children were having difficulty adjusting to living with a parent they hadn’t known. A follow-up study of the families who reunited after separation could provide valuable information to better inform healthy familial relationships.

The data also revealed that women often felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities of daily living, such as commuting to work or school, preparing meals, and doing laundry. This data can be used to incorporate change in the routine, or strategies to help lessen the causes of these feelings. Perhaps anticipatory guidance in prisons and jails could prepare women for life
after release. Future research might evaluate what program-specific factors aided or hindered transition, e.g. strict scheduling.

Interest in researching the population of incarcerated women has increased; however, there are difficulties in conducting this research. It has been my experience working with women in a large county jail that gaining “gate access” is a time-consuming process, and it does not always guarantee entrance into the facility. “Gate access” is the process of sending personal information, such as a driver’s license or passport to the jurisdiction, completing a detailed application, and fingerprinting. This process can be lengthy. Even after gate access has been obtained, physically getting into the facility can be difficult. The exact date and time of the prison visit must be approved. This information is then sent to the front gate; if this has not been done, or is not exactly as proposed, entrance is denied or at least delayed. This process must be endured for each prison visit. Once inside, spending time with the women is also challenging as they (and the researcher) are given a limited period of time to visit.

Just as this dissertation was being completed, I attended a national conference focusing on correctional health and policy. This same difficulty in conducting research in correctional facilities was expressed by many. However, it was noted that if the researcher can demonstrate that this research will provide a service to the facility, access will be facilitated (Guyton, March 20, 2014). This is an advantage for nurses, as we are in a position to use our knowledge to develop program, as well as be involved in correctional health care.

*Nursing practice.*

Because this study provides in-depth information about the experiences of newly released women who have been incarcerated, it can help sensitize nurses to the critical role that motherhood plays in the women’s identities during recovery and reentry. Research has
demonstrated that parenting skill development and support is a critical treatment component for mothers in reentry, and that rebuilding parenting skills and relationships with children can be an important factor in relapse prevention (Andreas, Ja, & Wilson, 2010; Kubiak, Young, & Siefert, 2004). Findings from this research and others who studied mothers who have been incarcerated confirm that motherhood plays a central role in defining their lives, challenging public images of them as uncaring and unconcerned about their children (Hayes, 2009). The negative effect of separation on maternal role development and attachment was discussed in chapter two. Nurses with expertise in parenting are in a position to work with reentry programs either directly or indirectly by informing program development, to positively affect this important developmental milestone.

This research demonstrated how programs which support women in reentry help them develop not only the skills, but the power and determination to succeed. Barrett’s theory could be used to explain that these women gained power by the changes that developed from within; they made conscious choices, and were involved in creating change.

Nurses can participate in such programs, sharing their knowledge in areas like parenting, stress management, and healthy lifestyles. Nurses’ experience working with this population of women has been reported; Johannaber (2006), a childbirth educator who teaches prepared childbirth and prenatal yoga as a volunteer in a prison described her experience, and stated, “I receive more than I give” (p.11). Through participation in mentoring programs, nurses can serve as role models. Nurses who work in school settings can provide services or develop programs for children whose parents are incarcerated. A study of teachers who have contact with such children noted that those children whose mothers were incarcerated frequently visited the school
nurse for a range of complaints, e.g., stomach pains and headaches. These teachers believed the students were seeking care and attention from the nurse (Dallaire, Ciccone, & Wilson, 2010).

Indirectly, nurses can advocate for these women through political involvement. This can be as simple as contacting legislators, who may not be aware of the statistics which demonstrate decreased recidivism rates for those who received support after release. Nurses can also advocate for women who are incarcerated; for programs that help women maintain relationships with their children, and prepare them for reunification. This process correlates with Barrett’s dimensions of awareness and choice.

**Nursing education.**

Nursing education has recognized the importance of preparing students to think globally, and open their minds to different world views through transformative learning (Kear, 2013). This is important to prepare students to provide care to clients whose world views are different from their own. An important aspect of nursing education is the opportunity for students to work with vulnerable populations (Kear, 2013). Service learning is a pedagogical approach to providing care to vulnerable populations, as well as educating nursing students. Service learning promotes outreach to, and partnership with, a particular community and an academic group. Experience in service learning allows students to reflect on services provided and broaden their sense of civic responsibility (Eymard, Breaux,& Dozar, 2013).

Schools of nursing can partner with programs such as the one described in this study for a service learning project. Students can prepare and lead workshops on issues of health and wellness. Senior level students can create a capstone project as mentors to formerly incarcerated women or the children of incarcerated parents. Through such experiences, students will be exposed to these vulnerable populations, and may develop a sense of civic responsibility.
Policy

Allowing incarcerated women and their infants to remain together in prison nurseries is associated with positive long-term outcomes. Women who spent time in a prison nursery are less likely to recidivate than those released from the general prison population. (Byrne, Goshin, & Joestl, 2010). Although prison nurseries have demonstrated positive outcomes, many women have other older children they left behind. In addition, women often serve sentences that exceed the length of time a child is permitted to stay in a prison nursery. The best programs are those where families are not separated; such alternative-to-incarceration programs allow children to stay with their parent in community-based settings, while offering child care, employment assistance, as well as services to assist with substance abuse. Policymakers have maintained that including children in residence with their mothers removes barriers by providing childcare and removing the threat of foster-care placement (Oliveras & Kaufman, 2011).

In a report of a unique alternative-to-incarceration program developed within the supportive housing framework, it was demonstrated that participants completed court mandates and did not recidivate, while children’s performance in school improved (HOUSE, 2011). This program provides an appropriate home environment for women with felony offenses and their children. It began as a small pilot project through a collaboration of the District Attorney’s office in a borough in New York City and a non-profit housing program, and is funded by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. Although the evaluation of this program noted positive results, it was a small sample; only nine women and their children were housed. Funding is needed to replicate such programs, but there needs to be change at the judicial level, allowing courts more sentencing options; such as an alternative to incarceration setting as described above, community service, house supervision (where the offender must
remain in their home, wearing a monitoring device). In cases where the offense is drug related, women can be sentenced to a rehabilitation facility. All of the above options would allow families to stay together.

Maintaining the health of these women is another issue that must be addressed. As mentioned previously, these women come to prison with many underlying health issues; many of which are not addressed by a gender-neutral correctional system (World Health Organization, 2009). At the recent Academic and Health Policy conference on Correctional Health, data demonstrated that females in the community who have been incarcerated have a significantly greater chance of dying as a result of cervical cancer than those with no history of incarceration (Biswanger, I, March 21, 2014). Simple screening with the Papanicolaou (Pap) test can dramatically reduce this. Nurses are in a position to advocate for gender-specific care in correctional settings as well as educate women in reentry.

In addition to the psychosocial costs to families, incarceration is financially costly. Alternative-to-incarceration programs would significantly reduce costs to taxpayers. In New York State, the annual average cost of incarceration is over $60,000 dollars per inmate (Henchinson & Delaney, 2012). In addition to food and housing and staff, indirect costs, such as employee health benefits and pension funds, add to the total. Moreover, Corrections departments use outside contractors for delivery of certain services, such as health and food.

Other indirect costs to taxpayers include the costs of social services and child welfare. For the most part, these indirect costs are borne by government agencies other than the Department of Corrections. In comparison, the annual cost of probation supervision (also known as community corrections) is less than $4,000 (Henchinson & Delaney, 2010). O’Brien (2004),
who has done extensive research on women’s reentry, recommended federal and state funding be allotted in order to increase community-based programs, instead building new prisons.

Until such changes are made, it is important that mothers who are involved in the criminal justice system be aware of the difficulties they may face, including regaining custody and problematic reunification with children and other family members. Existing parenting programs in prison can be expanded to include education regarding the process of regaining custody, where women can meet with legal counsel while still incarcerated to expedite this process.

Current practices regarding the incarcera
tion of women impact families and can have deleterious repercussions for future generations. Hence, there is a need for major changes in policy in this area.

**Limitations of the Study**

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to explore the lives of formerly incarcerated women returning to the community in the context of their experience in this program. The findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the participants and the program studied.

The stories the women told were based on the information they chose to share about their lives. I did not meet family members, significant others, or parole officers, who might have provided more information about the lives of these women. Such information would have provided support in triangulation of the data in this study.

Although I met most of the children, I did not have the opportunity to spend a great deal of time with the women and their children together to observe the relationships. Direct observation would have enhanced the findings.
Summary

This study explored the lives of women involved in the criminal justice system who were involved in a program to assist independent living. Through this process, I developed an appreciation for the difficulties these women have endured before, during, and after their involvement in the criminal justice system.

This study provoked thought regarding how the criminal justice system prepares women for life outside of prison. Offering assistance through the provision of housing and job skills is important in helping women succeed in reentry. Programs that encourage the power to change may have the greatest impact on their success in reentry.
Appendix I

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Graduate Center/Nursing Doctoral Program

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title
An Ethnography of a Supportive Living Environment for Formerly Incarcerated Women and Their Children

Principal Investigator: Regina Cardaci, M.S., R.N., C.N.M.
Doctoral Student
718 640-5674
RCardaci@gc.cuny.edu

Site where study is to be conducted: Hour Children 13-07 37th Avenue New York, NY 11101

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is to be conducted by Regina Cardaci. The purpose of this study is to examine a community-based program for formerly incarcerated women returning to the community; and for some women, reuniting with their children.

Procedures: You will be asked to participate in an interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, about your experiences at this setting, and your experience with reentry. This interview will be audio-taped, and your permission will be obtained.

Possible Discomforts and Risks: There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. However, if you become anxious and upset when discussing certain things, you can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions without penalty. You will be compensated with a $10.00 gift card for the time you gave to be interviewed, regardless whether you decide to continue participating or stop at any time in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits. However, understanding more about the process of reentry for women may guide interventions for other women in the future in the reentry process.

Alternatives: N/A

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without penalty or loss of benefits or services which you normally receive.

Will You Be Paid to Participate in This Study: You will be compensated with a $10.00 gift card for the time you gave to be interviewed, regardless whether you decide to continue participating or stop at any time in this study.
What Are Your Rights If You Decide To Take Part in This Research? You understand that you have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You understand that you should not sign this form unless you have been given a chance to ask questions and are satisfied with the answers you have received to your questions.

Confidentiality: To protect your confidentiality, names will be changed. The researcher will tape the interview, but on one but the researcher will listen to the tapes. The tapes will use identifying codes. Your name will not appear on the transcripts. Tapes will be destroyed after the tapes are transcribed. No personal identifiers can be linked to the data. All materials will be kept by the researcher in a locked cabinet, and a password protected computer in her home office. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. After that, all materials will be destroyed.

Contact Questions/Persons: If at any time, you have questions about this study, you can contact Regina Cardaci at (718) 640-5674 or RCardaci@gc.cuny.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a subject or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of your participation in this study, you can contact the Lehman College Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Office at (718) 960-8717.

Statement of Consent:

“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and had the opportunity to ask questions. Any questions I had were answered to my satisfaction. I have also been assured that questions I have during the time of this research will be answered by the investigator. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing this form, I have not waived any of the rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement.”

Printed Name of Participant ____________________________ Date ____________
Signature of Participant ____________________________ Date ____________
Printed Name of Researcher ____________________________ Date ____________
Signature of Researcher ____________________________ Date ____________
Appendix II

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is to be conducted by Regina Cardaci, RN, a doctoral student at the City University of New York. The purpose of this study is to examine supportive living environments for formerly incarcerated women returning to the community; and for some women, reuniting with their children.

Being part of this study will not disrupt your daily routine. Participation is voluntary. Everyone who wants to participate will be welcome. You may be asked to be interviewed about your experiences at this setting, and your experience with reentry.

Understanding more about the process of reentry for women may guide interventions for other women in the future in the reentry process. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without penalty or loss of benefits or services which you normally receive.

You will be compensated with a $10.00 gift card for the time you gave to be interviewed, regardless whether you decide to continue participating or stop at any time in this study.

If you have any questions, you can contact Ms. Cardaci at 718 640-5674.

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Appendix III

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Graduate Center/Nursing Doctoral Program

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

**Project Title**
An Ethnography of a Supportive Living Environment for Formerly Incarcerated Women and Their Children

**Principal Investigator:** Regina Cardaci, M.S., R.N., C.N.M.
Doctoral Student
718 640-5674
RCardaci@gc.cuny.edu

**Site where study is to be conducted:** Hour Children 13-07 37th Avenue New York, NY 11101

**Introduction/Purpose:** You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is to be conducted by Regina Cardaci. The purpose of this study is to examine a community-based program for formerly incarcerated women returning to the community; and for some women, reuniting with their children.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in an interview, lasting approximately 60 minutes, about your experiences at this setting, and your experience with reentry. This interview will be audio-taped, and your permission will be obtained.

**Possible Discomforts and Risks:** There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. However, if you become anxious and upset when discussing certain things, you can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions without penalty. You will be compensated with a $10.00 gift card for the time you gave to be interviewed, regardless whether you decide to continue participating or stop at any time in this study.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits. However, understanding more about the process of reentry for women may guide interventions for other women in the future in the reentry process.

**Alternatives:** N/A

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without penalty or loss of benefits or services which you normally receive.

**Will You Be Paid to Participate in This Study:** You will be compensated with a $10.00 gift card for the time you gave to be interviewed, regardless whether you decide to continue participating or stop at any time in this study.
**What Are Your Rights If You Decide To Take Part in This Research?** You understand that you have the right to ask questions about any part of the study at any time. You understand that you should not sign this form unless you have been given a chance to ask questions and are satisfied with the answers you have received to your questions.

**Confidentiality:** To protect your confidentiality, names will be changed. The researcher will tape the interview, but on one but the researcher will listen to the tapes. The tapes will use identifying codes. Your name will not appear on the transcripts. Tapes will be destroyed after the tapes are transcribed. No personal identifiers can be linked to the data. All materials will be kept by the researcher in a locked cabinet, and a password protected computer in her home office. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. After that, all materials will be destroyed.

**Contact Questions/Persons:** If at any time, you have questions about this study, you can contact Regina Cardaci at (718) 640-5674 or RCardaci@gc.cuny.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a subject or if you feel you have been harmed as a result of your participation in this study, you can contact the Lehman College Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) Office at (718) 960-8717.

**Statement of Consent:**

“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and had the opportunity to ask questions. Any questions I had were answered to my satisfaction. I have also been assured that questions I have during the time of this research will be answered by the investigator. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

By signing this form, I have not waived any of the rights to which I would otherwise be entitled.

I will be given a copy of this statement.”

Printed Name of Participant_________________________________________ Date______________

Signature of Participant_____________________________________________ Date______________

Printed Name of Researcher___________________________________________ Date______________

Signature of Researcher_______________________________________________ Date______________

CUNY UI - Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: September 24, 2012
Expiration Date: September 23, 2013
Coordinator Initials: TMP
Appendix IV
Prayer for Understanding

May I come to Understand,
that blessings are everywhere,
that my attitude will effect outcomes,
that challenges are often gifts in disguise.

May I come to Trust
that most things can get better, with time,
that my instincts & gut feelings have value,
that a positive attitude makes things go smoother.

May I come to See
that I have many skills & talents I can use,
that I am a positive influence on many people,
that there are those around me who wish me well.

May I come to Value
that today is a blessing to be enjoyed,
that each person is unique & important,
that each moment of my life has meaning.
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