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Arresting Survival

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Arresting Survival
Director/Videographer/Editor: Mariya Moseley

The short feature documentary 'Arresting Survival' examines the lives of previously incarcerated domestic violence survivors while exposing how the criminal justice system disproportionately affects women of color and women in low-income communities. While women are the fastest growing population within the prison system, the film aims to display the impact of the injustices of these women.

In 2010, Marissa Alexander, fired warning shots against her allegedly abusive husband. He fled and no one was harmed. She told police that she was being brutally beaten by her husband, who had violated a restraining order. Alexander was arrested and sentenced to 20 years in prison. The case received national attention and outrage, as communities across the country protested her conviction and advocacy groups continued to fight for her release. The Alexander case, which appeared to be unfair and unjust, is not uncommon, as millions of women who are victims of domestic violence are criminalized by the justice system, rather than protected by it.

This film examines this phenomenon through the lens of a formerly incarcerated survivor turned activist, and others who are fighting to change the laws to protect women. Through the lens of the disproportionate incarceration rate of women of color who have survived domestic violence, this piece aims to trace the connections between policing, mass incarceration, racism and sexism, through the stories of previously incarcerated domestic violence survivors as well as activists and scholars. In so doing, it further aims to deepen our understanding of the complexity of the prison industrial system. More specifically, this documentary focuses on the survivors across New York City along with organizations, advocates and researchers who have studied this issue. To broaden the discussion, I've included a montage of clips with women who have endured the same thing while nationalizing the issue.

The film follows a three-act story structure, in which the story will begin with a montage of the issue before opening with testimony from formerly incarcerated victims, experts, advocates and a previous correctional officer. The film was shot digitally on a Canon EOS C100 with variety of focal lengths during each interview to provide the aesthetics of a 2-camera shoot with a range of shots. The graphics and animation will be dispersed throughout the film to visually illustrate the intricacy of the women in prison population and how that disproportionately affects women of color.

The piece opens with an intimate story as Lady-Kathryn Williams, a Bronx native, who gives her testimony about being incarcerated for three years after killing her allegedly abusive husband. After her testimony about when, why and how she stabbed her husband as he attempted to strangle her to death in their home almost two decades ago. Rikers Island, which has been named one of the most

notorious and violent prisons in America, is where she spent three years at and overcame things like being sexually assaulted by women, attempting to commit suicide and enduring solitary confinement. The injustice of this woman is intertwined with statistics about how an estimated 75% of New York's women prison population has suffered severe violence in the hands of an intimate partner during adulthood. Lady-Kathryn shares how domestic violence was inherited into her marriage after witnessing it in her family including many accounts of her dad hitting her mom.

Anne Patterson, from the STEPS to End Family Violence program based in New York City, shares her experience with working with battered women and in what ways the organization works with both incarcerated and previously incarcerated women. Anne describes one case in particular about a Florida woman named Marissa Alexander, and puts into context how this issue is something that is occurring nationwide.

Lady-Kathryn describes how her time in prison and her relationship with the corrections officers and who many of them were not committed to her safety. A former North Carolina Corrections Officer, Jackie Mason Battle, says how prisons were originally set up as penal institutions set up for rehabilitation and how that is not happening today. She describes the nature of the prison system as a place to warehouse people. Jackie says that many of the inmates become criminally educated and perpetuate the system rather than getting better.

Afua Addo, a coordinator of the program Project Safe with The White House, says how there's been a significant turnover in terms of how procedural justice views victims of violence. She contextualizes the impact of racism, sexism, poverty, trauma and the impact of education, the foster care system and the criminal justice system. Lady-Kathryn reveals how incarcerated women who have experienced violence before are only be re-victimized by the system that's controlled by violence and how it does more damage. The experts continue to describe how the system disproportionately affects women of color and many communities with people are color are policed in a different way that other neighborhoods are not. Jackie notes that many of the women she saw in the prison system were Black women who varied in age.

The third act begins with Lady-Kathryn describing some of the psychological effects of her incarceration interwoven with visuals of her traveling to a tattoo parlor. This domestic violence survivor explains her reasoning behind getting her first tattoo, which is her way of paying homage to her deceased husband. She says that she wants to get his initials, birthdate and date of death on her wrist as a dedication to him. This scene illustrates the love that this woman has for her husband despite her criminalization for killing him and how she was forced to defend her own life.

After working with organizations like The STEPS to end Family Violence and The Correctional Association of New York's Women in Prison Project, I've developed

relationships with key organizers, advocates and experts who are diligently working to provide incarcerated and previously incarcerated women with valuable resources to live a healthy, full life. I've already secured one domestic violence victim/previously incarcerated whom I've been following for several months, however, there are at least two more women who I've reached out that are interested in sharing their story in the piece.

Although getting access to an operating prison has proven difficult, I'm planning to do an evocative recreation of graphics and shooting empty cells as a former Correctional Officer in Rocky Mount, N.C., walks me through the vacant facility that is now closed while sharing what she seen after more than a decade working there.

A key audience for the film would be domestic violence advocates and organizations who work with survivors. A secondary audience would be organizers who focus on social justice issues including activists like Black Lives Matter who seek justice regarding police brutality in the Black community. A third significant audience would be prison abolition advocates who seek to reduce or eliminate the prison system and replace them with more humane remedies.

In addition to the film, I plan to partner with a social media project Everyday Incarceration, which is an Instagram-based platform with more than 75K followers that displays current and archival images that tells personal stories of mass incarceration. Through the portraits I've taken of victims, experts and advocates in the film, I plan to share short vignettes of characters to share their story and promote the film. Working with this social media project is a strategy to attract a mass audience interested in the overarching topic of mass incarceration.

After filming for four months, I'm working to plan another trip to North Carolina to film the former corrections officer and get visuals of the now closed prison. Additionally, I'm working to schedule interviews with other victims, film events by organizations and possibly network with legislators to incorporate in the piece. In the future, I plan to find professionals to create illustrations for the story, compose music for various scenes and solidifying a team to assist with additional shooting and post-production duties.

Advisor:

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Organizations/Sources:

The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence
<http://www.ncadv.org/>
Denver, CO 80203
(303) 839-1852

The Correctional Association of New York's Women in Prison Project
New York, New York
(212) 254-5700
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