- If they kick you or whatever they had to do, this is what they would do.

- What did they call you?

- Excuse me?

- What did they call you?

- Bitches, hoes.

- You name it.

- You name it. That's what you get called there. Pussy eater, everything.

- That's normal. I mean, that's like old Fang and Mills prison. Oh, fine, go do this Oh fine go do that.

- That was kind of polite.

- Yeah.

- That would be--

- We never got called those things over there.

- No, not quite that.

- What did prison do for you?

- It made me cold and hard. Real hateful.

- No, that's what it did to you. I'm looking for something that prison might have done for you.

- Nothing. It made me learn how to survive better.

- Yeah.

- It made you be more of a fighter.

- Not giving up, for one. As for myself, like I said, for my first time it was more like, this is what's going to happen. You would hear some of the ladies that's been there for four or five years come in, they would tell you this, like, except for the first time you're like really scared. It gives me a lot to look at, this is what's going to happen, this reality. So it's like a reality check, something might happen in front of you. OK. So you never know when it's going to happen to you.

For me, it made me be aware of a lot of things. You always have to be alert. It's a trip. More to me, it reminded me of being out on the streets sometime. Some things that go on there are just as worse there. The only think was probably didn't have a gun in there. All the sting guns or whatever it was. But so long you had a little bit of everything in there.

- All kinds of weapons you can make.

- Survival is not taken for granted.

- Right.

- But you know, in there, you have to learn how to survive because out here, you can relocate, get up and walk away. There, you can't do it, you have to stand up for yourself or they're going to punk you out all right. That's how I got the name Silent Rage.

- Silent Rage is a nickname that you carry?

- Yes.

- Are any of you are afraid to go back to prison?

- No.

- Yes, I am.

- No, I'm not.

- Yes, I am.

- I don't want to go back, but you know, I'm not afraid of it.

- I know I can do it this time, but I know I don't want to do it because I can't stand the pain and the hurt that I put my children and my family through. But if it was just me, I could do time, that's what it made me realize, I can do time.

- And as for myself, why I said, yes. For myself, if I go back, I'll be there for a long time, and that's scary to me.

- Yeah.

- Very scary. Because--

- Is anybody afraid to get out?

- For myself, I went through a lot when I was here, and by me being and doing the things that I used to do, now that, like I said, I'm in recovery now. If I hadn't went through and learned a lot of things, I probably would have been scared to come out because I'd probably end up doing the same thing. But today, I wasn't afraid to come out because I had set in my mind what I want to do.

- I didn't think I could make it out here. [INAUDIBLE] I've been out 20 years. I'm not afraid to go to prison. A cop asked me the day, aren't you afraid to go to jail? I said, listen here, sucker, I've been sentenced to 160 years in the worst Texas prisons that they ever had, being run by the meanest convicts that they could find. And you think going to afraid to of your little funky tin can jail, get out of here, you're crazy.

So I'm not afraid to go to jail, I'm not afraid to go to prison but I was as afraid to get out after four years and four months as I had been to go in because I didn't know I could make it out here. But I do damn well I could make it in there.

- Yeah. There's a lot of people that do feel like that.

- Do you?

- Oh well, in the women's units, are there any opportunities to advance your education? Is there high school, college or any shop type courses or anything?

- At Hobby, yes, you could. But when I got moved to Hackberry, you couldn't go to college no more but you could still go to school to get your GED. But they cut all the college out.

- And vocationals too, all that was cut out.

- They're cutting back-- even as we speak they're cutting back.

- Right.

- Right.

- Even the probation department has been gutted, just gutted here in Harris County because of the money situation. But how many of you found recovery programs?

- I did.

- I did.

- I did.

- I did.

- All of you?

- Yes.

- Uh-huh.

- What was that like? How did you get involved? What effect did it have on you?

- I got myself involved in it. TDC offers it to you, it's there for you if you want it, but that's anywhere for anybody. If you want it, it's there. And then a lot of people it's forced upon, but it's something I chose, it's something that I wanted for myself in life.

- I'll add this, right, whenever it was time to turn out for AA or to a group or any type of activity that was to better ourselves, so to stay clean, we were harassed, we were told that we couldn't turn out. A lot of the officers on the Riverside unit did not want to see us go to try and better ourselves or learn another way of life. That was life for us and that's the way it was going to be.

I mean, we went through a major hassle just to get turned out to go to one of our programs.

- [INAUDIBLE] is when you get to leave your cell and go to--

- Right, leave ourselves to go to AA in a group, church, whatever it was that we were wanting to go to.

- And so there was resistance to doing that at the lower level officers?

- Oh, yes. Yes. Well, even the lieutenants and the sergeants. I must say all of them, from the lieutenants to the sergeants to the CO3s, they just didn't want to see us better ourselves. Because you have there, most of the officers, they have more problems than what we would have.

- Yeah.

- Also, if you better yourself, aren't they afraid that if you better yourself you will not come back so that they can hold it over you again?

- Right.

- Exactly. Exactly.

- Are they interfering with that or are they smart enough to see?

- I just think that I'm ragging back and forth with some prison employees from another state on the internet right now. And this guy writes in that these are the trash scum of the Earth. And yada yada yada, all that other crap. Well, on the other side are me and some other prison employees who have a whole different attitude about this. And what comes out is the guy starts out as a guard then becomes a counselor in a rehabilitation program.

And so he has a whole different look at this from the redneck who is still working as a mulligan on the run. But I am concerned about what the institution does to your womanhood. Anybody want to tackle something as complex as that?

- Could you repeat that question?

- What does the institution, what is the process of going to prison do to your womanhood? Do to your femininity, your humanity as specifically applied to women?

- Well, Ray, I'll have to say it takes everything away from a woman. You're treated like a man. You have to become sort of a hard-- well, not really hard, but I guess, the domineering type like a male would be. You have to get-- show them that you're not weak, you're not-- you put yourself sort of like, I'm not a woman anymore, I have to be tough, I have to show them that they can't just do anything to me and it's going to be OK.

- Well, do you ever get that back? Is that something-- you've been out longer than the other women by a few months.

- Well, Ray, I've been out seven months, and I still, I do for myself, I open the door, I do everything for myself. After 5 and 1/2 years, I'm used to doing for myself.

- Well, there's got to be some anger here. And I have not heard--

- Lots of anger.

- Talk about that anger.

- The anger is, sometimes in there it was unbearable because I have a son who is HIV positive. He tried to commit suicide and he was very, very sick. I reached out for help, I could not get it anywhere in the system. From the warden to the CO3s, I couldn't find out about my son, I didn't know if he was going to be alive or if he was dead. I didn't know anything. So anger, I have a lot of anger.

- Did they seem to just not understand, not have any care at all? Or did they seem to, worse than that, enjoy your misery?

- They enjoyed it, right. They told me he's an inmate, we can't tell you anything. That's my son. It's really a sad, sad place.

- Any other women have any relationship to people on the outside? What about family, want does family do to you while you're in prison?

- You can see the hurt in their eyes. I have three sons, and they come to see me all the time. And at first, you couldn't see them, but through a window. You couldn't hold them, you can't touch them. And they would be sitting there crying for you, and there was nothing you could do but sit there and look at them.

- How old are they?

- 8, 4, and 2.

- Now? How old were they when you went in? 5, 2, and 4 months.

- 4 months?

- Yes.

- And so that child was two years old before you got to hold him?

- Yes.

- You know, where they have the women's prisons located, it makes it so hard for families to get up and see people, and the inmates really need that family support.

- Well, all Texas prisons, whether men or women prison or plantation.

- Well, they've got them so far up there. Like, my family had to drive from Houston all the way to Gatesville, I didn't get to see my family but maybe every four to five weeks. And it was real hard because I have two children. And I was fortunate enough to get contact visits with my family. But when they would leave, my daughter would scream and cry and carry on. And it made it real hard for me when they would leave.

But you've got to be a trustee for that to happen, is that true? Women have to be trusted to have contact with you?

- Well, I get-- every one of my visits, yeah, I was a trustee, but every one of my visits were contact, but I think that stat 4s get one a month.

- Yeah, one a month. And you only get two hour visits, and your family's driving four or five hours, six hours to come see you for two hours.

- And how do they treat your family?

- Not very well.

- Like inmates.

- Yeah, just like inmates.

- I was going to say, I'm a mother of seven. There was a time I didn't want to see them come. You know. And it's more like-- like I said, I have seven, it was like, they were like, get those kids somewhere and sit down. You know what I'm saying? And the kids be excited, the family be excited when they come to visit you. They have little things, paper there for the kids to play with. They're like, they need to put that down. And that's kind of hurting. You can't really say really want to enjoy your visit, but when you're getting distracted and told what to do on your visit, it's kind of aggravating.

- You know, when you're going out there to see your family, and before you get out there, they strip you down to nothing. They strip search you. Then you get out there and you see your family, coming back they strip-- there's so much of it that's degrading, humiliating, what they do to you just to get to see your family for that short period of time.

- And of course, it's always women guards that strip searched you, right?

- Uh-huh.

- Really?

- Well, at Hobby when we come in from the fields, all they had was the little plastic around them. The little fenced in area.

- Mm-hmm.

- And there was all the guards to fill baths was standing there, and the wind would blow and they would raise them, the garbage bags up. So they might as well have been right there, in there with us. They were seeing everything we had anyway.

- How many of you work with other women now? I mean, some of you work at New Directions.

- Yeah, I work there. I do.

- And you deal with other women that are getting out more recently than you?

- Right.

- Mm-hmm.

- And you're dealing with people in recovery efforts of their own?

- Right.

- And of course, Jeanette is working with the national equivalent of the prison program, the Prison Life Magazine. How long do you expect this sort of thing to be sustainable, or at some point you're going to have to go out and find a job?

- As for myself, I'm working now. And my supervisor has been out now for like four months, and she's also in recovery. And it's kind of hard because we're sitting on lunch break talk about things that went on while we were there and what it's like now. And to me, that makes me feel good because when you're treated like that and say, you're not going to be this and you're not going to be that, for me to come out and go in to a job and get interviewed by someone, I just got to doing time with made me feel and think that, hey, I can do anything.

But when you're growing up and you're told you're not going to be this, you're not going to be that, and you're getting ready to come out of the penitentiary and you're told this, then that's scary. And that's what happened to me. But like I said, it made me feel real good to see somebody that just got a penitentiary as a supervisor, that somebody that was told they wasn't going to be shit.

- But she's making it?

- Yes, she's making it.

- And you're going to make it?

- I'm making it.

- Anybody in there not done enough time? Anybody that needs some more time to get their point across?

- Oh no.

- I've done plenty.

[LAUGHTER]

- I've done too much.

- You know, that's like when I left reception that day, we sat out there and waited for the bus to come get us to take us on to the bus station. One of those officers, Tony, said, I'll see you back, [INAUDIBLE]. And I thought, oh, God, don't ride this broom on me. Anyways, but I went to work for New Directions and it's been real good for me because I've been able to see lifers there that are out and have been out for years.

And if they can do it, I can do it. And it's been a real good inspiration to me to see other convicts out here making it and doing it.

- Well, it's not just them. I have this strong belief that everybody who walks out of there and shakes the shackles off, the most important thing they will do every day is role model not going back. The most important thing each of you women will do is role model for those sorry old prison guards who told her you'd be back. That there is a line to role model for the next generation, your children, and their friends.

That, yeah, you can pick up a number, but it's not the end of the world and you hold your head high and go on. And role model for your sisters who are getting out and those who are already out, that you don't have to go back. The second most important thing you can do is offer support to one another because nobody understands but us.

- That's true.

- I don't care what they say or how many books they've read or how many television shows they've seen, they don't know what it's like to have the hot breath of that horse on their back.

- It's very true.

- Well, let's fast forward about five years, and go around the table, and where will each of you be in five years?

- Where am I going to be in five years?

- Sure.

- Getting up and going to work every day. And I'll be off parole.

- Yeah you only go to 99?

- Till 99.

- Yeah, yeah. You'll be offered parole the same time I've got to go renew my driver's license.

[LAUGHTER]

- Yeah, and I hope-- well, I will be. I want to be working with other women coming up out of the penitentiary and letting them see what I have done for myself. Helping them out. I want to be doing something for society, something positive.

- Well, Ryan, in five years I'm hoping that I'll be sitting in a big office somewhere with Prison Life Magazine and the Prison Show and all of the people that I work with. One thing I especially hope that I see is to be working with the HIV men and women that are incarcerated, that I can help and show a little love and a little kindness because they're really discriminated against.

- All right, let's go back on the roundtable.

- My name is Laurie and I want to be working with children, I want to be an adolescent counselor for children that's been abused or out on drugs. I want to give somebody something that somebody gave me, and that's my sprite to have my life back.

- You understand about the money? You understand money's not going to be as easy for us as it is for other folks.

- Right.

- I've been out 20 years, still ain't got rich yet.

[CHUCKLES]

- Being rich is not real important to me right now. Just as long as I'm with my family and my bills are being paid, and I'm still sober and clean, and not in prison, then I feel like I am the richest person because I believe in myself today.

- You ain't going to stay-- I've got this old thing that convicts don't stay out of the joint for their mama's or they wouldn't go in the first time.

- Right. You had to do it for yourself.

- You have to decide that you're worth the effort.

- Right.

- And of course, all y'all in recovery understand that in aces because that's the bright light that happened in your life that started you getting serious about recovery. The last time I got drunk was January the 4th 1959, and that's been a few years ago.

- Push up.

[CHUCKLES]

- There's of course, who's listening out there, for the most part are convicts. Then we have this captive audience. There's more lawyers out there listening up and then there's a whole lot of people who have friends and relatives in prison. Any advice from your sage experiences?

- Just write them, go see them, give them all the love and support that they-- you can handle and giving them right now because they really need it. I'm going to say this, I'm going to get emotional, [CHUCKLES] it's very hard, I stayed there for a while, like you say, you don't use the phones that much, and it's OK to pick up a pen a pencil and write sometime.

There's a time when the kid or your child has done wrong. It's OK to forgive them because everybody needs somebody. And I always had that attitude, well, I didn't need nobody. And at the time, I really needed to hear from my family. And I feel like-- I think y'all need to really sit down and think about this because you don't know what it's like until you've been there. And I can say this, and me, myself, I would advise y'all to do that because you never know what's going through a person's mind.

- You're getting drove every day. I had a friend there sit in OD off of her own high blood pressure pills because she felt alone. Her family down her for this and that. Sit down and tell them you love them sometime. That'll help a whole lot.

- Just a card, right? Just a simple little card saying, I love you, you're somebody, we miss you, you can make it. That means so much. Mail is one thing you look forward to in there. Especially, from your family.

- Yeah.

- Yeah, mail calls are very important. Pictures, anything you can do because our self esteem is so low in there that just the least little thing. I would get stuff from my daughter. She would draw. That was the best mail I could have gotten.

- Mine too.

- [INAUDIBLE]

- As soon as I get a microphone here in a second.

- All right.

- Even the officer's, you would be standing there for mail call and they would laugh and say, ha ha, you didn't get anything today. They would just trying to degrade you a little more. Like, they wanted to say, no one loves you. You didn't get shit. But just everybody, y'all write to whoever is incarcerated because it's so very important. Just say, I love you, if you say nothing else.

- Me, I remember the officers would just hold the mail back. One excuse after another not to do mail call for us.

- And sometimes they would call your name and you would get up there, and they'd say, oh, sorry, we made a mistake, you don't have no mail.

- Yeah.

- And that was very hard.

- What about the racial pressures and the straight, gay, pressures and the other kinds of prejudices that are so rampant in male prisons, same true of women's prison?

- Not so much the racial, but the officers was real down on the homosexual there. They call it bulldaggin' instead of relationships.

- Ray, I was even given a case for homosexuality because I hugged a little girl that was young enough to be my daughter. And because I did that, I was accused of bulldaggin'. You can't even touch them for no reason whatsoever. We're not allowed to touch one another. Girls are more affectionate than the males are, and they just-- there's just nothing, you can't do that.

- There's nothing wrong with a hug from anybody, actually.

- Hugs are good. At least one hug a day.

[LAUGHTER]

- We don't hug there.

- Anybody from a recovery program that know the value of hugs. That sort of thing. Of course, I don't think the males outside of a bonafide accredited AA meeting do a lot of hugging. But the females, I think, they're probably harsher to women about those things than they are to the men.

- Yes. Especially, the male officers.

- Yeah.

- Sometimes I think they're a little jealous.

- Yeah, there's a whole story I can tell on that.

- I could tell you, right?

[LAUGHTER]

- But I'll let that slide. I want to invite you women back from time to time because we like to follow people and you know, Dewey has managed to stay out for six years. I managed to stay out for 20. And I think the radio program and being able to sit down and pour my guts out to those strangers out there is one of the ways that I've been able to accomplish that.

I want you to know that I appreciate you coming down. You've been very, very open and candid with us. I know it's been difficult sometimes to talk that close to home, especially for convicts.

- Yes.

- Well, thank you for having us.

- Yeah, thank you.

- And y'all go back and give my regards to New Directions, and of course, Jeanette, you go back and help us with Prison Life Magazine and the continuing relationship there. But you're welcome to come down and hang out.

- Love it.

- Just come hang out with us.

- Just come hang out with us.

- Well, it's a date.

- And give us some pointers because it's been too damn long since I've been in the joint, I'd go to jail every once in a while to keep my hand in.

[LAUGHTER]

- And somebody with a little less seniority on the outside than I can help me. I want to thank all the women. Could we have your names again?

- My name is Rolanda Wright.

- I'm Laurie Bennett.

- And I'm Jeanette Sherlock.

- I'm Sally Reneau.

- And this is Ray Hill, and it's been wonderful working with these women. And we'll be back with this part of the program. We'll be back in just a few minutes. Dewey's got something.

- Yeah. I would like to say that people on the radio don't have the foggiest idea of what these ladies look like. And they are ladies, believe me. I hope I don't embarrass y'all but it would not bother me in the least to be seen in public with any of them.

- You wouldn't even bother about that ex-convict tattooed on their forehead?

[LAUGHTER]

So let's all go out and do it.

- I don't well mind doing.

- How about a date?

- I could've sworn I had one on my forehead when I first got out. I said, how does all these people know that I just been to the joint?

- I know, I always felt like people are staring at me, looking at me like, I know where you've been.

- I was told that last week.

- Uh-huh. You've been listening to radio station KPFT in Houston, and radio station KEOS, a wonderful station, in Bryan College Station. Dewey's going to stick a couple of things in your ear, and we get back with the telephone calls in a flash.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

- Enfoque is moving to a new time. That's Thursdays from 11:00 PM to 1:00 AM. We will still have interviews and commentaries about Latin American issues, as well as the Latin American news. Plus at midnight, we will have speeches by progressive writers and activists, such as Noam Chomsky, Michael [? Parinti ?] and Molly Ivins. That's Enfoque on Thursday nights from 11:00 PM to 1:00 AM here on KPFT, 90.1 Pacific radio in Houston.

- This is the prison program, where are you calling from?

- Phoenix, Arizona.

- Hi, there.

- Hi, how are you doing?

- Well, I'm getting away with most of it.

[LAUGHTER]

How's the weather out there?

- We just had a little land blowing, up and they're promising us a good dust storm tonight.

- Well, we've been getting a little water off of these half ass hurricanes around here.

- Uh-huh.

- And we've been needing it. And right now, they're getting a little water down the valley where they've been parched dry.

- Well, we haven't had any rain, I believe, in 70 some odd days if not more. No measurable rain.

- Well, wait, well, you live in the desert, so that ought not be a big surprise.

[LAUGHTER]

- No, but it sure does get a husky sometimes.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, I'd like to say, Hello, to my son George.

- Well, I'll get out of the way and let you do that.

- Thank you. George, this is your mother saying, Hello, and letting you know I'm OK. Trust you're OK too. Hey, it's cooled off just a little bit. We didn't hit 110 today. First time in 17 days. No rain yet, but may get a sprinkle tonight. I talked to [? M and M ?] earlier this week. Last information I had was that they plan on visiting you tomorrow. The visit last week was a maybe, which, as you know now, didn't materialize.

Hope you have a good visit tomorrow. And say hello to them for me. saying hello to John Steele, Big John and Pete. And I think of you guys often. I'll say, good night now, and remember, I love you very, very much. Bye bye.

- Well, listen, we'll try to ship you some of this rain.

- Oh, I'd love it. Send the oars to the boat too.

[LAUGHTER]

- Thank you, ma'am.

- Thanks, Ray.

- Bye bye.

- Bye.

- Line 4, where are you calling from?

- This is Shirley from Houston.

- Hi, Shirley, you're on the air.

- OK. I'm calling for Michael [INAUDIBLE] at the Wind unit.

- Yes, ma'am.

- Hope he's listening. I just want to let him know that I'm thinking of him, and I love you, Michael. There's someone else here that wants to say hi.

- Hey, Mike, this is Robert. I hope you remember me, your brother. I was in with you, and I want to let you know something, that as soon as you put me on your list, I'm going to be right there. I'm looking forward to looking for you-- looking at you. And I've seeing a picture of you in them boots you got.