

Decarceration Nation Episode 24

Hello and welcome to Episode 24 of the Decarceration Nation podcast, a podcast about radically reimagining America's criminal justice system.

I'm Josh, among other things, I'm formerly incarcerated a freelance writer, criminal justice reform advocate and the author of the book "Writing Your Own Best Story: Addiction & Living Hope.

First the news not too much to report. This week, I'm working on some exciting new episodes, including a series on some of the work that's being done to close or reform many of the jails across the United States. If you remember from my very first episode, one of the first stories I shared is my own experience in the McComb county jail in Michigan, which is one of the deadliest jails in Michigan. I think 15 people have died since in that jail or 2012. Regardless, one of the biggest we talk so much about prisons we sometimes forget about jails and a lot of The really bad things happen in our jails. So I'm still working on scheduling a few other interviews, including, as I mentioned one with James foreman, Jr.

Okay, let's get to this week's interview with Donna Hilton, author of the book a little piece of light

Today I'm humbled to welcome Donna Donna Hilton to the Decarceration Nation podcast. Donna spent over 25 years in prison after experiencing a childhood that could at best be considered horrific. Somehow, despite all of that and all the things that she confronted in her life, she transformed all while incarcerated in a high- security prison into an amazing force for change. A writer, a hospice worker and activist, a counselor and even a minister. Since she was released from prison in 2012, she has been working even harder to bring people back home and help the people who are home back from prison and ensure those and ensure that everybody has a path to a better life. Oh, and somehow even with all those things that she's doing, she also found the time to share her own story in her excellent book "A Little Piece of Light," it is a real honor for me to welcome Donna Helton to the podcast.

Welcome Donna.

Thank you for having me

Thank you

No problem

The title is full of hope but "A Little Piece of Light" the title, the phrase, was born in terror and also became a method you used to cope with trauma throughout your life. Could you share as much or as little as you feel comfortable sharing about your story from the first half of the book?

It is my memoir it's my truth about what happened before present during prison after present and so I started the book actually in a very dark place right a few places he's went from one to the other and I was the light to that are referenced that continue to hold me and to keep me grounded for me to know that there was something better something more than what was going on even as young as I was. So yes, I started the book when I was a young girl in Jamaica I was born on the island of Jamaica and I was you know I didn't have a very healthy childhood with my natural mother but it was okay because I was with my mother and then I was brought to this country sold and brought to this country by the couple and it just turned to even darker and more horrible and I was I started getting at the age of nine nine and a half and the adults that were in my life there around me and you know and whatever capacity whatever roles they played we're not there they were not positive influencers know where they anyone to help me and so it was really difficult for me as a child to navigate this, and I, you know, I flip back and forth like it's like a reflective kind of memoir, where I show that I'm in solitary confinement once I am in prison, and, you know, speaking to the victim and the crime, Mr. V, who, you know, I I honor and the work that I do, it's all that I could do at this point. You know, there's so many senseless things that happened. There are so many forms of victimization and abuse and violence and so I try to bring that out in my story because it happened you know, I hear constantly how oh god I can't believe how so much happen but I'm not unique sadly.

Yeah, I can attest to that a little bit myself.

Um, so you end up after getting through all that in your childhood getting into trouble. And so you end up in court because of what happened there. You don't talk that much in the book about the legal process itself or about your own lawyers. But you were given a sentence of someone who committed a pretty serious crime, despite very little evidence that tied you to that crime. Do you have any thoughts about the way our legal system works and things that you might have?

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I think, you know, what I wanted to do was keep the book I wanted to focus on people and what happens to people and why people do things or maybe just how things happen where you get involved or you're forced into situations that you are we don't have control over and that says a lot about our society how we neglect children and people and we don't we don't act on we know something is wrong, but we don't act on it. We act like it doesn't exist or we like blood doesn't affect us because it's us is them and

You know, we go wrong. When we do that we make a very egregious error when we do those things, and I didn't focus so much on the attorney and stuff like that, because this wasn't a book about them. This is a book about what happens to us and how easily it can happen and how it does happen. I wanted to humanize us he's we hear those stories a lot, right? But I also wrote it I went from the place of that child because I was still a young woman a young girl when going through that process and I wanted to be her in the moment and so she didn't know anything about the system she's never been involved with the system she's never been arrested never had any you know involvement with any kind of criminal legal system right and I said what we call it and so I I wrote it from her voice because I needed to honor her because she didn't know what was going on and about the attorneys First of all, in our in the in the system in our judicial

system when we go through court, what I realized and then I started speaking to the women and some of the men to I've asked when I, you know, was released their journey what it was like. And I mean, no one really can say that they bore humanized in any way in the system. They were actually present they were treated, we all were treated as a as an act right, the crime or number a notch on the belt, whatever the case may be, we weren't treated as other everything other than human being, you know, people argue that oh, well, you guys did the crime. So you need to time you know, human beings are less than put No, that's not true. And I think that that's one thing that tried to bring you know bring together in this in my in my walk in my book that we are human beings we are not our mistakes. We're not those horrible choices that we might have made right we're not that one act.

Thanks for saying that. And I couldn't agree with you more so you end up spending a little time in Rikers and then you go to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for women, and you pretty soon after that are in administrative, administrative segregation, or what most people know, a solitary confinement. So this is where I kind of start having a lot of questions. You did some pretty serious time in solitary. I talk. I talk a lot about my own short experiences in solitary, in your book. You say it was like being buried alive in a coffin without a coffin. What would you like for people to know about solitary?

Exactly what you just said, what I say in my book, there is no printing it up. There's no other way to put it in solitary confinement, being removed from anything that is that is devoid of humanity. Anything that is devoid of any kind of light, any kind of compassion, anything, anything that represents humanity is like being buried in a coffin. It's like it's being dead almost. It's being treated as you are no longer existing. You are stripped of everything you have no contact with anyone you don't. You are devoid of the human touch. You are devoid. Hello? I'm here. Okay. You are devoid of so many things. And so you know that is definitely it's it's it's horrible I mean it's just it's so indescribable people were screaming and crying. First of all when I was in solitary confinement the vast majority of the women that were in there with me at that time when I first went in there in 1987 they were there from mental health they were there was a lot of mental health issues that surrounded or basically were the reasons why women were acting out or doing whatever they were doing and that was not being treated.

Yeah I think it's a astounding because I spent my few days in solitary for the same reason. As part of a attempt at mental health treatment and just the entire idea that you could treat mental health problems with solitary confinement is so crazy to me.

Yeah

Just brutal, brutal, brutal experience. And I only did it for a short time I have no idea I mean, did you I guess it is there a way that you could explain how you coped with it?

Um. So as I you know, said in the book I went to my first encounter well my first actual encounter anything dealing with solitary confinement was not a Bedford Hills was at Rikers

Island, I was placed into this protective custody situation and protective custody those of us who've served time we know protective custody is the same a solitary confinement you're not around anyone, you're isolated to remove the they say it's for your protection or maybe the populations you know, protection but there's, it's solitary confinement and so removed from everything removed from the human touch removed from everything. What you have around you are people is for me was women screaming out crying out they were basically feeling I mean it sounded like they were being tortured because it was so riddled with mental health and so many other issues and so it can drive you insane a contrived you to a place that you probably weren't even at when you were brought into prison.

Oh definitely. So I was obviously incarcerated at a men's facility women women are the largest growing population as you probably know, in jails and prisons right now. Can you talk about some unique problems and challenges of women's prisons?

Sure. Thank you for that question. I often say when I'm out speaking to the you know John and Jane Q public that women have unique issues. And I say that to say that we respond to things differently. The vast majority of women that are in prisons and jails are mothers, right? And are we are struggling because and I was when I was a young mother didn't know you know where my child was how my child was doing. And so that was a story of so many others they didn't even know where their children or child or and often times what was going on was when you got arrested, your child was taken from you placed into the system and then you lost your child and your rights were taken from you without even knowing your consent without your consent. And so you didn't even know where your child was. I have a lot of women now who are still trying to find their children who are grown some of them you know because they've spent so much time in prison it horrible...

Yeah one of the one of the things I think that everybody can, you know everyone right now is connecting, and rightfully so, with immigrant children who are being separated from their parents. But as we know, a lot of people in this country are separated from their parents every single day?

We've been separated, been separated for years. And I mean centuries and one of the things in ice I my heart, my I feel for the families now the immigrants and I hate to call someone immigrant or anything so people that are running away trying to find something better because it's horrible where they're at, right they want a better way they want a better life. And we know America represents that and, and that's true. It's shows not against America in totality. But I mean, what's going on now is horrific. We've been doing this country has been doing it for I mean, hundreds and hundreds of years. This just didn't start to this just now.

Yeah, it's all part of one system. I would say, you know, I mean, I feel a lot of solidarity because I've seen much of this from what we've gone through.

Exactly.

So as I understand things, and I will admit that I don't know a lot about this, but one of the major differences between men's and women's facilities seems to be that people in women's facilities organized around family units?

Yes, well yeah, that's one of the first thing we do because we're nurturing by nature, we are nurturers and men respond differently. When a warrior is territorial and they come from a different place, right. And but when we go into prison, we're not looking to market territory or make a stance and in that way, we're looking for family. We're looking to feel like we're connected part of the the greater whole and because we've lost our families because we've been torn apart regardless of whether guilt or innocence is not a factor. You're still human beings and nessa humanity in us, right. We're looking to form relationships with natures by nature, that's just who we are. And so we're looking always to form families and we do

And, so you were instrumental in the late 80s, which is for America, even really pretty early, in creating an AIDS counseling and education program at Bedford, can you talk a bit about how that happened and how that program grew from counseling into hospice care?

Sure. So what happened was, we know what happened in the mid to late 80s, and AIDS hit, you know, hit our society and in in prison, we were the macro micro society outside of you know, within a macro and we were hit with it very harshly and it seemed like we were hit with it more harshly only because we were that micro society and we were at that time we were still at the 400 and change mark for women that were inside. It's more now but we were 400 something in Bedford and so we were blocking in at, you know, the count for the last count at the day. women that were locked in themselves did not get out or walk out the next morning to go to breakfast, waiting for sister to go to breakfast because you went to a programming together or whatever the case may be, and that woman didn't get up. And a lot of those women were dying, if not already dead in their selves. And so we didn't know what was going on. We didn't understand and administration was not telling us and I don't think that they were not telling us because they were just being me. They were not telling us because they were afraid they didn't really No, there's no one really understood and AIDS and so it took for us to really respond to and we responded to it in a way where we were we did what we do best we became natures we wanted to understand Okay, maybe we couldn't do anything to stop it. Well, how could we live with it? How could we work towards a good you know better good for the population for the women that were infected, and those of us that were affected, and what we did, we created a program that that represents that because it still exists today. And it became the model for other programs across the world. And out of that, we created a hospice unit out of that to focus, you know, wasn't just for and AIDS, but that was a reason why at the time, superintendent Lord allowed it to happen in it. And that was one of the first situations with my very good friend like a sister Helen, Why talk about in a book and I mean, it was just, oh my god,

I can only imagine, especially at that time when, you know, medicine didn't really have very good answers for any of it?

Well, no one had answers no one really knew what it was right we had, you know, keep the medical department was they didn't know who really knew it took time.

So one of the things that I really was impressed by the, in the book is the kind of recognition that so much of the prison population is all created in a sense in trauma. And I found this to be one of the most powerful passages in the book. It's later in the book, "for the first time I start, stop asking, why am I the only one? Instead, I asked, Why am I not the only one, the fact is undeniable. There's a link between rates of brutal domestic violence and a prison full of wounded, broken silence. Crying and desperate women is also infuriating to learn that not a single one of us was allowed to share our personal histories in court to reveal how the stories of brutal events in our lives might have led to our crimes." Can you talk Can you talk a little bit about first of all cycles of violence?

Yeah, well farm to take it from that place where you learn that at the beginning in the book, what I recognize for me when I went to and I guess this response to your prior question when I was in the go to court And all that I was not a human being, I was not even it didn't matter. All that was all anyone cared about all anyone cared about was just really getting getting a notch on their belt. And so getting a conviction either and really, they were trying to get please out of everyone. I didn't know this because I didn't know the system. And the attorney at that point didn't let me know that for whatever reason. Um, but that's what that's what the system does. That's what the system that that's how it feeds itself, right? Just to get people to, to, to plead guilty to things so we can keep going and going going. And those of us know the system doesn't want you to go to try to fight to try to argue that your your your innocence, as opposed to guilt because they too too guilty from the inception.

Right

But and so they don't they it's not designed for us to do that is designed for us to plead guilty. And if you don't they force you. They put you in situations and they do certain things. You just rather I just want to get out of the situation and you plead guilty to move forward. Right? And so we're trapped. And I'm not saying that people don't want to commit crimes and they shouldn't go away. That's not what my advocacy about because I stand that's not true because some people we do some stuff, you know, we see that people do some bad things, but how do you treat people how you treat people when they in front of you judge judges are supposed to be neutral arbiters they're supposed to be very neutral, not take sides and just be there to represent the law right sitting in that space. But we know that that's not sure they take and they have a way of swaying and manipulating manipulating court proceedings like what happened with mine, you know, because people look at them, they are like God in the courtroom. And so that ended up meaning that not only were they trying to get a conviction, but you never got to speak your whole truth is part of what I think you're welcome. No, I didn't. I mean, no one. First of all, when I forgot what the questions were, for this one, they create a pre sentence report. I didn't even know what it was. I've never been arrested, never had anything. I didn't know what the, the whole process was. No one explained it to me. And so, but I do remember responding to

question. And one of the questions was about my home. And so I said that I was born in Jamaica. And I remember this clearly because the most people do that. Oh, Jamaica, Queens. There's like, no, Jamaica, West Indies. And I said, I came to this country. I was like, almost eight years old. You know, my mother's in Jamaica. And so there's like, well, Who were you with? And I was like, you know, a couple that became my parents. And I said, then I went in to say that I ran away of 14 because they wanted to know my educational history right? When you do a PSA persons report they asked you about the educational and I didn't know what it was, but I know now and so I said, Well, I ran away 14 you know, I had a scholarship and so he ran away from 14 Yes. That was it at that point at that point at that point, come on, you ran away. 14. Why did you run away? What were second? What was going on? But, you know, I had become accustomed to that because nobody responded to it. No one helped me when I did before it. Even I got thrust into such a, you know, the crime and I couldn't get out of it. No one had helped no one did anything. I tried to tell. no one listened, a police officer had even rate to me took advantage of me being hurt and write to me also. So I had no trust. I didn't you know, but I was still looking for help.

Absolutely.

I was kind of obvious, but that was it didn't matter. The last. You know, the last part of that though, is this notion that out of trauma comes crime and a lot of sense...

And that's why I was asking a little bit about cycles of violence. Could you share a little bit about your thoughts about that?

Yeah, well, one thing I recognized was just a common theme was violence is at the root of a lot of people that wind up in prison to have this objective system form of violence or abuse, which go hand in hand in hand right there two sides of the same coin, and the trajectory led them to prison. Now, guilt or innocence be argued later, but the root causes of it, which we need to look at, as a people as human beings, right to what causes things, how people get into situations and, and we'd know though we know that violence is the strongest root cause. And violence can mean many things. violence can be emotional, you know, abuse, mental, physical, but also we have to know poverty is violence. Poverty is violence is a form of all a very strong form of violence because people are forced into situation poverty. Looking situations and doesn't excuse it, but it is a project three to pre determining factor.

Absolutely people.

Yeah, people are hungry, they're going to want to eat because why? Because we have instincts. We have five rooted instincts. None of us can do anything about it. When you are hungry, what are you going to do you want to fund yourself? And when you don't have the capacity to feed yourself in a way that's normal, right? Normal right? Then you start resorting to abnormal behavior to feed yourself and I'm not saying it's right but I'm just saying it is the human condition

Absolutely. A little bit of a change of subject we moved from there and you somehow managed I mean the amount of things that you managed to accomplish while you were inside is amazing. You earned several degrees while you're in prison that's correct yeah and and but right but you also were around when the Pell Grants were cut in 94.

Oh, please, though

we had a crime Bill 94 crime.

Yeah. first black president.

Yeah, thank you.

All right.

As someone who helped them build educational programs in prison, obviously we probably agree that they should restore the Pell Grants. But what else do you think people can do to bring more educational opportunities to the folks inside?

Well, it's you know it I think there are people that want to do that. But I think the system stops you like it was not it's not just the the crime bill that had a rippling effect and it took away the opportunity for Pell and Tap grants.

Right.

And it took that away if anyone understands what happened. The crime bill was created to address crime. The war on this the war I mean, there's so many wars I can't even keep count. It's just ridiculous but what it did was effect and most marginalized people. And marginalized people are communities that don't have the resources, the opportunities that others have. Right? And people and people from the other side who have these opportunities and resources never Don't, don't kid get how people that don't have this are like oh well the choices and you this if you don't know a person's choices because they didn't really have any the wall trusses that they have or are faced with or not, not one is not better than the other. There's circumstantial stuff that happens in in the moment. You have to figure it out. Right? And neither one is good. Absolutely. Again, it's not excuses, but it is a way of life. And that's why I say poverty is is is is violent. And so what the crime bill did was effective, most marginalized, of the marginalized as well, right. And that was prisons, those of us that were imprisoned at that time. And so as soon as that happened, Pell Grant was Taken, we were no longer afforded an opportunity for education, right? We had the basic stuff, very minimal basic stuff like, you know, God an AB, you know, basic education, stuff like that but to furthering your education as far as college and stuff that was taken away. And because we were faced with that in Bedford, you know, group of women that were like, wait a min where we're going to do and they were like, like really they wanted something better and they were angry about it because some of them had

actually started and so they were left right in the middle. It was like gone just like that one. I remember one person I just started her first semester and she was like, Oh, so I can't do you know, it puts you into place and so you know, they responded to like they wanted something better and I was able to, you know, join that and and because even though I had gotten my I had just gotten line when it was taken my bachelor's,

What did you all do to rectify that situation? or What did you all do to come together and create educational opportunities for each other?

All those women were crying out and then they were talking to people, certain people and had the same mindset and Judy Clarke and Kathy boating you know, they became part of it and they were actually started talking to them initially. And, you know, one of the things you know, that was really welcome was that Judy Clarke and Kathy both Dean had people outside who, you know, were very instrumental, you know, they had friends and it helped it actually helped. And what was even much more instrumental was the superintendent, which is the warden that we had at the time. Yeah, Elaine was the warden and she was oh my gosh, she was beyond the best thing that could have ever possibly happen. And we thought we had we had our We are issues because it wasn't easy to get this stuff done because Albany and others I felt like well you know women are having too much autonomy you know too much to say but you know her argument was well better else to tell you what they need and the woman themselves are we gonna tell them right what they mean it's really interesting I you know that i mean the both...

How often do you get a warden who's that you know thoughtful that's rare that's basically and you also had Sister Mary to right?

Yes my mother My God Im sue them part of the system but she was outside looking in and she was very entrenched in it because i didn't i don't know i don't think I made it clear in my book book Sister Mary was one of the first to really instigate the movement for domestic violence in this nation and so she was very instrumental in that and you know started here I'm like a lot of stuff does in New York

But it was her heart, her compassion, her understanding what was going on in women's lives and what happened and she, you know, she was why should women continue to suffer for being abused for being hurt and that something was wrong with that we continue to pile on her on top of her top or hurt and her heart I've never seen another human being with a heart as big as hers and, and really understanding unconditional love. Like she represents that for them.

And then you also at some point meet Eve Ensler and I assume that your experience in the Bedford Hills writing group had something to do with how good the book is?

Okay. Well, she love to hear about it. She wrote the foreword for the book. Oh, I don't make Yeah, and I think it has a lot to authors do what you have. I did get a masters degree out of that program. I was fortunate for that. But I know that, you know, finding my voice that was a, that was a very instrumental part of my, my growth and very instrumental part of my healing was

being a part of and being one of the first in that the writing group and what Eve did was have as go to some places, not even therapy takes you to, you know what I mean, and to just really address it and technology, bring it face forward, face it and talk about it. What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it smell like? How does it How does it you know, texture, all that stuff. And so, I'm very thankful. Very thankful for that. I know,

Didn't a documentary come out of that? I think it's called "What I Want My Words To Do To You." Is that what it's called?

Yes. And we went to Sundance freedom of expression award in 2003, 2003 and we want to MCC award, which is a National Council on Crime and Delinquency award in 2004, I believe. Yeah. So, yeah, that's pretty amazing. You also had, you know, people performing your words on like, it wasn't Lincoln Center?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yes. A group of actresses that Eve got together, we wrote and they performed it on the outside. And that was to benefit the college program. Because, you know, with all things, even though they're voluntary, you still need money. You know, you have to have money to make things work. And so we needed money, even though majority of the professor's volunteered their time after their old before their, their, their classes, the classes at whatever we had a cot we had a consortium of back then I think was 12 or 13 colleges and Universities that were part of the consortium, but like voluntary teachers, professors will volunteer their time and their resources. But we still needed money. And so he did that because she saw that we were really, really needed to get that done.

That's amazing. So I have one easy question and one tough question. We'll ask the tough question first, or at least it's tough for me to ask. I thought about how to ask this for a long time, you are the survivor of a large amount of violence, but you have well, not just worked with other survivors since you released you've also worked with men who are who have had sex offenses who are trying to reenter society. Given my own history, having been both abused and having been in prison this spoke pretty deeply to me. And so what I'm wondering and I think a lot of people are probably once they read the book or wondering is how you got to a place where it's possible for you to both deal with your you know, truth and past and also still have, you know, forgiveness and work toward healing and You know, those kind of things, if you could talk about that?

Thank you for that. And I just want to say thank you for sharing that, you know, I have to honor you in this moment for even saying that because it's not an easy thing to admit, especially for being a man we do. rags can respond to things differently and men respond definitely different when abuse when is perpetrated against them differently than women. And so I thank you for that. But with that, well, I think what what happened for me and I tried to think about that, right. I had a stroke while I was writing the book and in my stroke is a lot of things were going on and I was looking back at that, like, what was that about and what I read. I think what I came to

acknowledge and to face was that I couldn't possibly first of all the healing i'd know I hit and I forgave when I couldn't possibly really be honest and she was myself if I said I forgive anyone and and I still have apprehension because the people that I did forgive I feel nothing I don't feel any anger I can be around them I have absolutely no hate no anger none of that I promise you adult but then when I think you both then when I was told all you know what we want to promote you but this is the scenario and becoming like basically a case manager and a shelter for men in the vast majority are there for offenses I kind of gas deep technical only imagine that must have been I did I was like what do you think so you know in all honesty sorry to give that thought and I said well you know you don't have to but you know because my work ethics whatever so I was like okay so I thought I thought about it, thought about prayed on it meditated and whatever. And I said, You know what, I think this is happening. Because I am support I there's something left. I didn't get everything. You know what I mean? Like everything just I didn't get to everything. And so I did it but I went with and when I tried to be as neutral as possible was a little difficult wasn't easy but I did and I went with a heart that was open whatever that is to receive and I met some of the most amazing men young middle aged old and I actually met quite a bit that should not have offense as as a as a cloud is anything Shouldn't they should never been, they were young 16 & 17 year olds and they were what whatever it makes no sense, right? Um, and it was just too much but then I did meet some men who actually did prey on you know, on women or even young girls and I talked to them and what I found was those men had been hurt. And when I heard that, when I found that out my heart open up even more like oh my god, what have we done? What are we going to each other.

That takes us back to that cycles of violence thing.

Mm hmm. Right. And I faced it again when I came out as soon as I came out. And so I see that this seems to be a common thread, not in everyone. But you know, a great deal of us whether we women incarcerated and not and violence and abuse, and all that stuff is not synonymous to those of us who have been incarcerated or are incarcerated. It is something that permeates the very fabric of our existence.

That is so true. I'm also a person of faith and so I wanted to ask you there's part in the book at the very beginning or close to the beginning where you talk about reaching for a Bible only to find the Bible has been hollowed out like literally was hard that was...

in the crime Yeah, that was when I was in the apartment that like one of that only there few nights so well, that was basically the last night.

Yeah. So how did you manage to maintain even with something so stark happening is that how did you manage to maintain faith and find faith again, toward the end of your journey?

Because that light I just knew it was not that I just knew, I just knew, I just knew. I just know I held on to it. And I don't know how I held on to it, but I did. I held on to it deeply, strongly. And so

oftentimes it was like, it wasn't there, but I kind of knew it was but I couldn't navigate my way to find it to, to really grasp it. Hold on, and to to, you know, I mean it it enveloped me in moments because I was young and I didn't have help. I didn't have this stuff. And that's not an excuse, but it does say a lot and so I didn't know a lot of stuff was already abnormal in my life, but I knew that it was better I just knew I just knew what I wanted to hold on. I wanted to I wanted to find wanted to find that kid.

That child that was me that was not the ugly was not, you know, that hurt, broken, abused child I believed, I knew, I just knew. And so and that's what that's the gift that I would like to that will like this book and my just my existence to give other people whether you you've been incarcerated whether you've done something bad or not I mean it's all of us I just we have it we are born even my daughter is a product of she has the light she's a product of light, you know, as bad as ugly as it may be, but she has that goodness in her we all have it we all have...

thank you for that

and only that you're welcome. But if only we allow each other we've nurtured that in each other instead of looking at the bad and the ugly and looking at people insane on there. This in there that you know, I mean, we'd like again and I say this and I say this totally we do bad things that we do need to be in the time out. We need to be removed. When you do we hope people get that does happen for whatever the reason is, but again, how do we treat people where we take, remove them from the, you know, the larger part, you know, our society? Do we treat them as human? Do we treat them as animals that we treat them as less than we treat the week hurt more? Or do we try to help them recognize humanity in themselves, and so they recognize it in another person, and then they're able to see what they did wrong. That's the only way you're going to be able to do that.

Okay. I only have one last question. It's kind of a crazy question. So at the very beginning of your journey, you leave Jamaica because you were promised a trip to Disneyland. Did you ever got to go to Disneyland?

No, I didn't go I'm going. I'm telling you.
I'm doing it.

Awesome.

Yeah.

So. All right. So you

I wanted to go ahead to stroke and so that kind of threw everything off, and then I came right back when I just came out of that stroke Miss and almost died. And I came out of that. And I just continued on this path. And just, this is just what I'm supposed to do. But I'm going to go to Disneyland. And...

I feel like if anyone in the world deserves a trip to Disneyland it is you.

That little girl is gonna go I'm promise I'm gonna take pictures

I can't wait to see that. Oh, that's awesome. Thank you for sharing that.

I can't tell you how wonderful it is been to have you as a guest. Thanks so much for doing this.

Thank you, Joshua. Thank you for what you do. And thank you again for bearing so much of yours truth and just standing in and and owning it. That's the only way we're going to change when we become uncomfortable in the faces of uncomfortable truths because we've been too comfortable for too long. And change doesn't happen when we're comfortable.

I can't wait to see where the rest of your story takes you. You've done so many amazing things. Thank you again.

Thank you.

Have a great day.

You too.

Bye bye.

Okay now my take Donna is an amazing testament to the possibilities of the human spirit. She spent her childhood being traumatized, spent over 25 years in prison, being traumatized and somehow still found, despite all of that, the inner strength and grace to earn for herself multiple college degrees, create a counseling and hospice program for people with AIDS inside prison at a time when aids was still seen as a plague to create a domestic violence support group and to take play a part in a writing group whose work was so successful that it was presented both in a documentary and at Lincoln Center. And when you imagine that this happened for more than prison, it's just astounding the things that she's accomplished since her return for president, she has worked tirelessly to help other returning citizens reintegrate successfully and not just people who only suffered abuse but people who also were abusers, which is amazing to me, given her background, the just amount of grace and love that she shows and, and, and the insistence that at the core of every prisoner she sees a human being is just I can't tell you how, how moving that is to me most important to me. She has shared her life with all of us in our memoir, a little bit of light, which is powerful proof that there are even at the worst moments there was always a light inside of us. She explains how behind every prisoner as a person, and a story and a story that is almost always founded in a cycle of violence that starts with trauma. Donna, even while living through tremendous trauma herself has tirelessly worked help people heal and cysts on all prisoners always being treated with dignity and always being treated as human beings

when I talk with people about for instance solitary confinement I asked them to just put themselves in the shoes of someone in solitary and imagine having no contact with other people or books, TV telephones writing materials technology of any kind just for a few hours Donna did multiple years in solitary and it's a testament to Donna's character that if you put yourself in her shoes in her shoes as a child being abused as an adult being abused being separated from her child being put in prison for a crime that while she was part of had unquestionably just an unbelievably cool sentence put on her as not one of the direct perpetrators but as just one the people who was actually there and just imagining what she experienced and and to see what how she's come out on the other end with so much grace and with such a commitment to caring for other human beings especially other human beings who committed crimes to it's just astounding and she doesn't just like you know I talked about this a lot I talked about this on the ICSC episode and in several other episodes that the nature that the project isn't to say that people don't deserve to be held accountable, that accountability and responsibility are central to the process of healing. But that grace and forgiveness are also critical to healing and that if you don't create a place for people to exist in society, then you can't expect that they won't can continue to exist outside of society in ways that's detrimental to the society. What an honor it was to have done on the podcast. I hope everyone will read her amazing Book a little piece of light

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