

An Evolution - From the Cradle to Life

- *Two Little Girl's Journey to Life in Prison* -

Addendum: Personal Communication

**At the time I encountered both interviewees, I was the Jail Administrator at the Davidson County Sheriff's Office Correctional Development Center for Females. Both interviews occurred post conviction at the Tennessee Prison for Women..

September 15, 2009 9:40 AM Interview with Rokisha Alderson

**When I first spoke to Rokisha, she had just been transferred to adult detention to be tried as an adult. She was sitting in a holding cell sucking on her thumb. I asked her if she needed to call family and in a very child like manner and clearly not demonstrating an understanding of the seriousness of her situation, she replied: "I like your fingernail polish."*

Q Talk a little bit about your family make-up. What was life like with your parents/siblings? What were your friends like?

A My mother – she was a crack head. She chose the dope over her children.

Q How many were there?

A Seven – two deceased - five living. She really too much didn't care about who she hurt and what she did with herself and her life. She just had child after child and abandoned them. My Auntie raised me from 18 months to age 15 when she died. She is the woman I looked up to as a mother.

Q Did you live with your siblings?

A We all lived together actually. My Aunt got custody of all of us. My brother was the oldest. My older sister ran away with my mother and got on drugs as well. She was unruly and my Aunt gave her back to the State. She was in and out of the State (custody). I'm next to the oldest. My baby sister was born with full blown AIDS because my Momma 'is HIV'. They gave my baby sister 8 months to live. She is now 6 years old by the grace of God. My other little sister was kidnapped when she was 4. Ain't seen her since – actually I just some pictures of her. I was doing good – it was me left. My Auntie did all she could. When my Auntie died, when I was 15, I got into the street life. My Pa-pa was handing me everything I wanted. I was just starting to get money hungry and it started leading into other things.

Q Now Pa-pa – is that your grandfather?

A Yeah.

Q And that's your mothers father?

A No- my Pa-pa is he my mother's sisters husband.

Q So, he was like your Uncle?

A Yeah – we call him Pa-pa – and I just got into the life that led me here.

Q What were your friends like growing up?

A Same as me. You know - did things that I did.

Q So they were on the streets for the most part.

A Yeah.

Q Now, when you were young if you did something wrong who sanctioned you? Who gave you order? Who gave you discipline?

A Nobody.

Q So, if you got in trouble or stole something or got into trouble at school or you did something wrong in the neighborhood, nobody said.....

A Before my Auntie died, she did. Real bad – she was a strict woman. You're in the house at 8'o'clock taking a bath – in the bed – you getting ready for school. After she passed, then I didn't get disciplined. I got the world handed to me on a silver platter basically.

Q From Pa-pa?

A Yeah from Pa-pa. You do what you want – when you want you know. He would get mad sometimes when I do things I know I'm not supposed to but he wouldn't be as mad as I'm punished. He didn't believe in it.

Q He didn't believe in punishment?

A Uhm-uhm (no).

Q So at 16, the whole world was handed to you. Go and come as you want, do what you want. No rules?

A Yep.

Q So, who were your role models beside your Auntie – after she died? Who did you look up to?

A I always looked up to my brother. He was the one I could talk to. But, he had been through a struggle himself. So, he would try to tell me right from wrong. Going back to the discipline - he would try to but, it would never work. I would just go to Pa-pa and he ...

Q Pa-pa would undo whatever discipline your brother tried to put in place?

A Yeah, in less than 5 minutes (smile). It wouldn't go through. In which now, I wish now it did. Yeah, my brother was the person.

Q Where is your brother now? What's he doing?

A Actually, I haven't heard from my brother since I've came here. He has a family now – I know that much. My nieces and n'em and he's working – staying out of trouble.

Q Does he visit you here?

A No

Q What about the faith groups in your community churches or community centers? Could you go there for support?

A No. I wasn't involved with that. I got baptized when I was 15 by Bishop Walker and I quit going to church.

Q Tell me about school. Did you like school?

A Somewhat – in middle school. When I got to High School, it just became fun and games.

Q Did you go to a large high school with lots of students where the teachers could not keep order?

A Yeah – Maplewood. It was wild. We'd run from one building to another. It was wild.

Q Would you describe your experiences in school as good ones?

A Yeah – some of them I remember. Old times. Half of the time I would go in the front door and then out the back. But, sometimes when I did stay, it was fun. I had some relationships that were fun with my teachers. We played. They would try to tell me

‘Rokisha you need to sit down and you need to learn.’ I would just throw paper balls at them. I have good ‘rememories’ of that situation.

Q What do you know about your father?

A He died on the same day I was born. I don’t know too much about him.

Q Who told you he died when you were born?

A My family. My father was a father to my older brother and sister. After my father died, my mother got back on drugs. She’s been on dope since she was 13. She got off for a while when she got pregnant with me. My father got shot to death. She went into labor on the same day he got killed.

Q And you say she is HIV+?

A Yeah.

Q She did not discover that until after your youngest sister was born?

A Exactly.

Q So, is your father the father to all 7 of you all?

A No (laughs). We all got different daddies – imagine that! We all got different fathers.

Q He is not their biological. But he stuck around even though he was not the father to your older brother and sister?

A Yes. He took care of my older brother and sister. So they know about him and they can tell me memories they have of him. He was my biological father.

Q Did you ever meet any of your family on your father’s side?

A No. I do have pictures of him though.

Q Did you finish school?

A No.

Q What grade did you stop in?

A 10th

Q Were you in regular school or special education?

A I was in resource, special education classes, and behavioral classes the whole time in school.

Q So, how did you manage to get there from kindergarten? Were there problems all along or did they just notice them in middle school?

A There was problems the whole way.

Q What kind of problems were they?

A I couldn’t catch nothing fast. I couldn’t comprehend things like or as quick as the other students. It took me a long time to learn one subject and one step. I’m really bad on reading and I can’t stay focused on one thing for a long time.

Q They put you in resource classes. Did they ever give you any kind diagnosis or did you have to take any medication?

A Naw.

Q So, resource classes - how helpful or not helpful were they?

A I didn’t never do nothing. I never tried to see how much it would work. I never participated in anything like that. I would go, but as far as me sitting down and doing work, I wouldn’t do it. I had my mind on street life. It wasn’t on ‘lets do work and get your education.’ It was nothing like that.

Q Were the resource classes orderly? Were the instructors trying to teach?

A The class was always jumpy – it was always hype. People playing and running around. The teacher never really had her foot down saying “this is what we gonna do.” I was the

type: 'well if you are not gone do it, I'm not gone waste my time sitting here with you.' That was my attitude about the situation. We never had a teacher who would just get up and teach something. She would every now and then. To this day, I remember all my teachers (laughs). It's amazing.

Q Did Child Protective Services ever get involved with your family given your mom was on dope?

A Yeah, because I sent them there a couple of times actually. I would go to school and see other people and their families. I would be like: This is wrong! My mom is doing dope and my momma got my Auntie on drugs before she died. Ain't no food in the house. I'm wearing dirty clothes. And my brother all of us are mixed but, my brother is white. He got more new shoes and more this and more that than we ever got. I wondered why he gets everything he wants on a plate and we get... the handys?

Q Where did his stuff come from?

A My Auntie actually. My Auntie – our bond & relationship got better as I got older. That's why she gave my older sister back to the State. My older sister would run away because she felt my Auntie was prejudice because she never did nothing for us but would always do for him.

Q Because he was the only one not mixed black and white?

A Yes. We have prejudice people in our family any way. My sister felt that. So she was like 'you not gone treat me like this' and she would run away. She tried to get me several times to run away with her. She would say: "Rokisha, she's prejudice!" As I got older, she (Auntie) was a big lady. My brother would hold me down cuz you could hit me in my face or anything and it didn't bother me. But you hit me on my back and it would break me down. So she would ask my brother to hold me down while she whup me. I always used to wonder "why would you do that to me? You my brother. We supposed to be thick through thin. You not supposed to do this." As I got older, I started to hit my Auntie back. "You not gone keep hitting me or throwing things at me." She was a big heavy woman so she would roll around. If she couldn't get to you, she would throw things. She would throw anything in her sight: a whatnot, an ash tray, her cigarettes, her cup and throw it because she could get to you. It got to the place if I could not sweep the floor good enough, she would make me do it again. As I got older, if she threw something at me, I would throw it back and hitting her back. She got to the point where she said "she's getting older and she is not gonna take this." I started running to my Pa-pa and he would say: "no you are not gonna hit them. Leave them alone and let them go." My Pa-pa knew how she treated us was wrong. He knew she gave my brother more than us. When she died, he tried to fix all the wrongs that happened to me. He tried to give it all back to me. In reality, he gave me too much.

Q Pa-pa was trying to make it right. All the stuff Pa-pa gave to you went to your head and got out of control?

A Yeah.

Q Maybe Pa-pa didn't know any other way to fix it but to give you everything and anything you needed. So, you called Child Protective Services on your family yourself because you knew things weren't right?

A And when they would come, my Mom & my Auntie would get together and smoke up all the dope. There would be no food in the house. They would fix everything and try to

make it right for when they come they can cover everything up. But when they would leave, it still was the same. That made me look like a liar. "Oh she's young. She lies."

Q So, CPS would tell your mother that you called them?

A Yeah

Q So they never kept your name confidential?

A No. I would tell my Principal: "Why am I getting whopped like this? My brother don't get this punishment. I know there is not food there because I live there." But they'd be like: "She fat. She's healthy, cant you tell? We feed her at least. She eats. So you know she's lying." They'd go to a church and gather up can goods and put them in the cabinets. They'd clean the house up real good like I was a complete liar – like I told a big ball faced lie. The investigators would look at me and laugh and they would leave.

Q After a while, you must have lost confidence in CPS.

A I just gave up. After the 2-3 times after I did it I was just like: "Hey. I'm wasting my time here. I'll just ride it on out."

Q There was physical abuse. Was there ever any sexual abuse?

A No. I was just a big girl and I would fight back (laughs). It was not working.

Q Did you ever abuse drugs or alcohol?

A Yeah.

Q How old were you when you started?

A 15

Q What kinds of substances would you abuse?

A Marijuana bad. Alcohol. Powder. Snort it. That was it.

Q Now as a 16 year old, how did you get the drugs?

A Friends

Q Associates would make it available to you?

A Yeah.

Q What about Mom? Would she make it available to you?

A Yeah. She'd supply it (chuckle). You smoke with her, she'd supply it.

Q What about any gang affiliation? Did you ever get involved with any of that?

A Yeah. (smiles) I was in an organization. Gangster Disciples.

Q How did that happen? How'd you get introduced to that?

A Street life. Some family. Friends.

Q How'd you get in? How were you initiated?

A (Smiles) I don't want to talk about that.

Q What about sex. How old were you when you first had sex?

A Actually, I have only been with 1 man (smiles). That was one thing I was always scared to do and I trip. I was 16 when I lost my virginity.

Q Why were you scared of that?

A Cuz I was scared of like diseases. My mom has AIDS and I was like, I don't want that. She's dying. I'm not ready right now you know? So, I always run from that. I'd do anything else. But that one particular thing – sex? When you say sex I'd run the other way.

Q When did you find out your Mom was HIV+?

A I had been knowing for a while – since I was young.

Q But when did you come to understand that HIV was a bad thing so much that you'd want to avoid sex yourself?

- A** When I was 13. My Mom, she would make us take classes because she was a very clean woman. She really was. When she would use the bathroom, she would keep a bottle of bleach and go behind herself. She wouldn't let us eat after her. She would not let us drink after her. She would not let us kiss her in the mouth – it was always on my cheek. She always carried bleach around with her. And, she was losing liver so, she would always eat raw hamburger and things of that nature.
- Q** Raw hamburger? What was that for?
- A** It helped her liver – built her blood up.
- Q** So you noticed at a young age, 'Ok my mom is cleaning everything with bleach. She's a clean fanatic. There's something going on.' So, did she sit you all down and say "Hey, I have HIV?"
- A** Yeah. Actually she told my big brother and them first. They already knew. I just asked her: "What's wrong with you?" And she was like "I want you all to take these classes with me." I started listening to them. That's one thing I would pay attention to. In school my favorite subject was Science. So, I would like ask questions of that nature. My dream was always to be a Nurse because I wanted to work with things like that. She just got us in those classes. We just had to take them and they taught us a lot about it. There on, I started learning what was going on.
- Q** So you knew sex was one way you could contract HIV. So on your first sexual encounter, did you use protection?
- A** Yes. I was really, really scared. I only did it with him one time. I was the type if you gone be with me, you gone be with me. If you think you gone have sex with me that's not gone work. And, he waited.
- Q** So, he was patient and waited. Is he still in your life?
- A** No. When I got bounded over, we cut all ties. He's young and I was young and we knew there would be no reason to try to keep pulling it through.
- Q** So, whose here for you now? Who is your support system?
- A** It's my Granny. She sticks around and helps me every now and then. But really it's just me on ten toes worrying about myself; me and God.
- Q** Now when you say 'my Granny,' who is that?
- A** It's Pa-pa's mother actually. She is no kin to me. But through my Auntie and my Pa-pa getting married, I call her my Granny. She's been with me since I've got here.
- Q** How long has he been married to the woman you call your Auntie?
- A** 56 years
- Q** So, she's your support system. Do you hear from Pa-pa much?
- A** No. Me and pa-pa cut ties when I got here. When I was in the County, me and Pa-pa was real close. I have to understand that he has a life too. I'm not mad at him but in a way I'm disappointed that he gave up. I hear from him every blue moon.
- Q** When did you first start getting in trouble and what did you do?
- A** 15. I would go to school & fight people. I would go to juvenile, make a phone call and then get out. The only thing I hated was I had to pay fines. My Pa-pa, every time I got into a fight, he had to pay a \$150 fine and I had to take an anger management class. I graduated that class 15 times and it still never worked. I would do it because I was like "ok you send me to juvenile, Pa-pa gone come get me. My family not gone leave me down there. That's what ya'll fail to realize." I remember the one last time before I did what I did to get here. I called my Pa-pa and said 'you gone come get me?' And he said:

“come get you from where?” I said juvenile. He said; “weren’t you just there?” I told him I got suspended this time and he said he would come get me. Time kept passing by and I didn’t see nobody coming. I called my brother’s cell phone and asked were they coming to get me. My brother said, ‘No, I’m not letting him to come get you. He’s dying to come get you and I won’t let him.’ My brother has been in and out of the system. My sister has been in and out of the system. Out of all the kids, they thought they would be the first one to go to prison. But push come to shove - baby did you know! My brother told me ‘Rokisha, I’m not doing it!’ I asked him why and he said: ‘Because one day you gone do something one day that’s gone be so bad that we not gone be able to come get you. You gone call us and say come get me and we gone want to come but guess what, those people not gone let us.’ And I said you don’t know what you talking about. He said: ‘I been down this road. You gone do something one day! I think you need to sit down there and do it over night.’

Q So, he was trying to teach you a lesson?

A Yeah. But unfortunately, I came out the next morning and it didn’t work. It was fun in there actually because I saw all my friends in there. I was like ‘Damn, I just seen you at school. What are you doing in here? This place ain’t so bad.’ I didn’t want to leave the next day actually because it was better than being out there on the streets. You know?

Q Being in juvenile was better than being out on the streets?

A Yeah. I missed my Pa-pa but I was tired of getting high. I felt it was harder on the streets than it was in juvenile.

Q That’s upside down isn’t it? It’s supposed be the exact opposite but for you, juvenile was a better place.

A Yeah.

Q So, what age were you when they transferred you to the adult system?

A 17

Q Almost 2 years after your brother tried to teach you a lesson?

A Yeah.

Q What was it like in the adult system?

A It wasn’t fun. When I did what I did to get transferred to the women’s jail, it was not the same as juvenile. It was a totally different ball game. You didn’t get pampered. You didn’t get everything on a plate like you did in juvenile. It was a reality check. My mother and them would run in and out of (the adult) jail and we would be there to pick them up and I would say ‘this ain’t nothing!’ When I got there, it was a scary thing and I said I was ready to go. But it was no looking back. It was a reality hit. This is a different ball game. This ain’t fun. This is really what it is.

Q When I met you in the adult jail, you were like a little girl. As I sit across the table from you today, you seem so very different. It’s almost like you have grown up in your mind – in your head – light years away from the little girl that I saw when you came into the adult system. What’s happened?

A When I came here, I have been in and out of the hole (punishment) a couple of times. Its like: ‘Why did you take life for granted out there? (tearful) Why did you waste your life like that?’ Even though I know I have a life in this prison, but it will be a miracle if I have a family, if I get married, if I have children. That’s what young people my age now need to understand. It’s not cake and ice cream in here. You have to live by these rules and you have to go by them. These people get paid to do their job and they gone do they job to the

fullest. Walking this compound every day – its reality. This is where I'm at. This is what I did to get here. On the streets, it's a lot different than being in here. You can do what you want to do - when you want to do it. In here it's a lot different than that. You have to dig down and ask yourself: 'When is this lifestyle ever gone change for me? When am I going to be able to go back out there to what can I do to get me a family?' I see these older people come through here and I have a thing about their kids cuz my mother wasn't there. My Pa-pa, by the grace of God tried but, it just didn't work. I ask them every day continually, 'how can you leave your child out there like that because right now, baby you just don't know what they going through.' It hurts. It really does because sometimes I sit and I dig and pull everything out that I been through and lay it out on the table and look back at it. If I could turn back the hands of time I would but I can't. I can't cry over spoiled milk. I just gotta to keep moving forward. I hope one day me talking to someone my age will help them know that it's not peaches and cream in here. It's never gone be. I will stay in this uniform for 54 more years.

Q 54 more years?

A I will never I ain't gone say never cuz I have faith. But, I'm .. its gone be a while before I get to what I want to. You understand what I'm saying? I don't know. You have to grow up at one point in time in life.

Q If there could have been any one thing present in your life that could have sent you down a different pathway, what would that have been? What could have kept you out of here?

A Listening. Being just a little wiser. Taking in what I was told by my brother. You know, I used to go to the projects a lot and I used to see people who didn't have nothing. I used to say: 'Well, I got this and I got that.' But now I see how it feels. Now I'm in them peoples shoes that don't have nothin. Now it's like it got stripped from me. Yeah, it was fun while it lasted but now it's gone. I'm empty handed.

Q How old are you now?

A 18

Q 18 years old in an adult system and you have 54 more years to go unless by God's grace things get turned around. 18 years old. What's your happiest memory and what is your worst memory in the 18 years you have been on this earth?

A Worst memory – being here. Happiest memory – seeing my family. When I was out there, I would settle down and go to family get togethers for Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Q If you could talk to young girls, which I heard you say that you hope to be able to do, if you could talk to them what advice would you give them to keep them out of a place like this?

A I have so much. I wouldn't know where to start (said with conviction). I would have so much because it's a couple of more children/well babies that came in this system that's here now. It would be so much to just talk to them and make them realize that this ain't a place you'll want to call home. It's not that bad you know? It's not horrible, terrible bad you know. If you have to live here, you gotta make something out of it. But if you have a choice out there, you'll want to stick out there than in here; if you have a choice.

Q Is there anything you want to add?

A Write something to make them understand because it's not peaches and cream.

September 15, 2009 11:50 AM Interview with Cyntoia Brown @ Tennessee Prison for Women

Q Tell me a little bit about your family life/make-up and friends?

A I was adopted at 8 months. My biological mother - I just got in contact with her when I was 16 after I got locked up. She is in prison now. She had a lot of issues with drugs and all kinds of stuff. It was a very bad situation. So I was adopted by her boyfriend's parents. They are an older couple. My mom just turned 58 and is a teacher in school. She was married to a retired military man for over 20 years. I think he was really messed up from the Vietnam War because he had some issues and was abusive. I would run away because of the abuse. I had an older brother and sister who were also adopted. I had no biological brothers and sisters. I spent a lot of my time on the run. When I would run away, I stayed with older people. I was surrounded around older people

Q What were your friends like?

A They weren't necessarily good influences (smile). They would steal and get high. At that time it was exciting to me. I would rather be on the run with them than stay at home with my mom or go to school and stuff.

Q When you were young when you did something wrong, who sanctioned you?

A When I was young both my Mom & my Dad (adopted) would.

Q Were the rules and punishment reasonable?

A The rules were reasonable. The punishment from my Mom was reasonable but not from my Dad. I was his punching bag when he was drunk, angry, or whenever. I would have much rather been punished by my Mom. But, it was reasonable. I would get spankings and grounded and stuff. It was rather reasonable.

Q Who were your role models growing up?

A I don't know that I had any role models growing up. When I hit 12 or 13, my role models were the people I was around who was doing the negative stuff. I didn't have any like positive role models.

Q So in your family structure, did you have people who encouraged you or who wanted to see you do well?

A Yes, my Mom (was very supportive and wanted me to do well. I just did not allow myself to get close to my family. I was always trying to run away from them. I never really connected with them.

Q What about faith groups? Were you ever involved with any of them in your community?

A Yes, my Mom would drag me to church every Sunday and Wednesday night. I wasn't really involved but I would go and fall asleep a lot.

Q What about school? Did you like it or have good experiences there?

A I was good at school and for a while I did really like it. And then for a while it's not that I liked it - it was that I did it and it was something I was good at. When I was in 2nd grade, they tested me and I was 'gifted' so they put me in advanced classes. So I was always really smart. After while when I started running away and doing what I wanted to do rather than following the rules it was much easier for me so my grades started to slip.

Q As you got to middle school and high school did you continue in advanced classes?

- A** By the time I got to middle school I was on that negative road so I was alternative schooled. In high school I was skipping when I wasn't in alternative school. I was on the run.
- Q** People often talk about a great guidance counselor or teacher who they trusted and who really believed in them. Did you meet anyone like that when you were in middle or high school?
- A** I had one – her name was Ms. James. She was my 6th or 7th grade teacher. She was like that. She would talk to me a lot about my behavior. I didn't listen. I just liked her because I could talk to her.
- Q** So, you weren't in special education because you tested gifted early correct?
- A** I was in special education – in a PASS program. It stood for: Program for Academically Superior Students back from the 2nd – 4th grade. I think I got kicked out because of my attitude. Then later on I got put in a special education behavior modification class in Middle school.
- Q** What is it like for a gifted person to be put into a special education class? Was this more a behavioral classroom?
- A** It was just behavior modification. I got put in a cubicle all by myself all the way in the corner. That's how bad it was.
- Q** So, where do you think the attitude came from throughout the years?
- A** I was very disrespectful to my teachers and that came out a lot when they tried to help me with my work. I didn't want nobody to help me. I'm still like that. I work well alone. I just get attitudes with the teacher if she would try to come & help me. Group participation – I did not want to participate. I had like this superior attitude where I thought I was smarter than everybody and could boss them around. I was kinda stuck on myself.
- Q** What is your cultural background?
- A** My Father is black & my Mom is white.
- Q** At home did you get everything you wanted? Did you want for anything?
- A** I had everything I needed.
- Q** So, Mom was pretty supportive but would you call Dad abusive or a just a disciplinarian?
- A** No, my Mom was the disciplinarian. My Dad was abusive. Not just physically but emotionally and mentally too. He would call me names. We really didn't have any kind of relationship. I can probably count on my hand how many times he hugged me or said he loved me. He was a truck driver and would only come home on the weekends. If he heard I did something bad, I would get beat. Then he would just sit there and watch his football games or do whatever and get drunk. There was no interaction. If he or my Mom would get in an argument, he would threaten that if I didn't want to leave with him or take his side that I couldn't come to him for anything. So, my father was a real a jack ass sometimes.
- Q** Was there any interventions or help out there for your family? Could you say to anyone: "I think my father crosses the line when it comes to discipline"?
- A** Oh yeah - the wonderful police department and DCS I went to. One time I was on the phone with the police while he was beating me. They heard it themselves. When the police got there, they see a knot on my head or maybe even a scratch. This man had his hand on my shoulder. He asked me was I ok and I said "yes" but I was mouthing the words; "help me." He was like: "What did you say? Did you say help me?" I said "uh-uh

(no) – I didn't say anything." My Dad just said "she's just getting a whipping" and they just left. They just left! Another time when I knew I was getting in trouble and he was coming home, I just skipped school because I didn't want to go back home. I had this little boyfriend when I was in alternative school. I was walking by the bus terminal and I seen his truck and I knew he saw me. So I just ran and hid in this little Porta-Pottie thing for 2-3 hours. I would look out the top of it and see his truck looking for me for hours downtown. A friend of mine's grandmother took me to the DCS office. They put me in a foster home for the weekend. Then, they sent me right back home even after all that.

Q So what was it like after you went back home?

A The same – I think it was worse though because I went to the police on him. Pretty much more of the same.

Q Do you feel like your Mom couldn't protect you from him?

A I don't know what it was. My Mom has always been a strong person but sometimes I feel she kinda turned her head the other way - sometimes. She said she didn't know it was as bad as it was. I find that hard to believe. I just think it was a really bad situation for both of us.

Q Have you ever been diagnosed with anything like Depression or Bi-polar disorder?

A Yeah. I have been diagnosed with Depression. I started taking different medication for depression even for ADD – like Ritalin and Adderol as early as 10 years old. I been on all different kinds of medication for that. When I first got locked up in juvenile, they did this social history thing and found that members of my biological family have a history of bipolar disorder. Dr. Burnett from Vanderbilt diagnosed me with Borderline Personality Disorder.

Q Any interventions for anger management?

A I just completed my 2nd round of anger management.

Q Since you've been here?

A Yes. I went to counseling (it was all over counseling therapy) when I was young. It worked for a while. When I stopped going regularly it didn't work. If I had gone regularly and maybe found a counselor who was.. I had a mentor who helped me for a while too . When I got out of DCS custody (the 2nd time) as a part of my aftercare plan, they gave me a Mentor. I think she helped me.

Q Have you abused drugs/alcohol?

A Yes. I started with alcohol. I would sneak to my parents bar when they would have parties. Then, I was somewhere around 10 – 11 years old. I would ignore the burn and just drink. It wasn't that I wanted to be under the influence. I just wanted to be grown – that's what grown people were doing. I wanted to do it too. At 12-13 when I started going to alternative school, I started really drinking, smoking cigarettes and weed. Around 16, I started popping Ecstasy pills and then I started snorting Cocaine- powder.

Q Did you ever receive A&D treatment?

A I attended groups when I was in DCS custody. I was in DCS custody from age 13 – 15 so I attended a lot of groups there.

Q So why do you think the A&D groups didn't help?

A It didn't help because I didn't want help. It doesn't matter if you tell a person what they should or should not do. It doesn't matter if they don't want to get help.

Q They have got to be ready to get the help?

A Right

Q How early did you get involved in sexual activity?

A The experimental phase started at about 10. It was with another little girl in my class. With little boys, it started around 11. By the time I was 12, I had sex with a guy who was 19 I think. That's when I started messing with older men.

Q Any sexual abuse?

A Yeah, that goes way back to when they said my biological Mom had issues. Not only did I have cigarette burns on me but they said the houses that she left me in, the men could do what ever they wanted to do to me.

Q Do you have any memory of any of this?

A Not really.

Q Did you say she had addictions or mental health issues?

A Both.

Q Is she still alive?

A Yes, she is in prison now for drug trafficking. She got caught with a lot of drugs.

Q What about your biological dad?

A She doesn't really know who he is. She knows it is a black man. Her logic is that since I was born January 29th, she got pregnant April 29th which is her birthday and she only had sex with 2 people that day. She thinks it's one of those 2. Basically she doesn't know who it is. It could be the 2 people the day after that or the 3 people the week after that. She doesn't know.

Q When you started having actual intercourse, did you use protection or did you know much about it?

A I knew about it but I wasn't like we had to do this but I think most of time we did. My boyfriend when I was 13, I think there were a few times that we did not.

Q You have no children?

A No

Q So, how does a beautiful little girl like you end up in a place like this?

A It was all that I talked about just adding up.

Q All of the stuff from the attitude, to being placed in places where you didn't feel protected, influences out in the street, the negativity...

A .. the attitude that I know what's best for myself, I'm just the smartest thing, and that I am grown and I can do what I want to do.....

Q All of that was leading in this direction?

A Right

Q And you started getting in trouble at a young age?

A Pretty much I have been locked up since I was 12. I caught my first charge when I was 12. When I was 13, I got out for like a couple of months and then got locked right back up. I didn't get out until I was 15. Then I stayed out about a year and then I caught this charge at the age of 16. I'm 21 now and I have been locked up since I was 16.

Q So you caught this charge at 16. You came in through the juvenile system and then was sent to the adult jail until trial. You stayed in the protective management unit because of your age until you were sentenced. After you were sentenced, you moved to the Tennessee Prison for Women. What was your sentence?

A They gave me a life sentence.

Q What does that mean?

A It means that I get out in 2063. My RED (*release eligibility date*) is 2063.

Q What did you find different in the adult system in comparison to the juvenile system?

A They care more about you in the juvie system. In the adult system, they just wanted to lock you up. The staff didn't care in the adult system.

Q Are you ever afraid in here? When you came in at 16, what kinds of feelings did you go through?

A I don't think I'm afraid of anything.

Q I remember seeing that same smile when I saw you in the jail. You don't look like someone who is afraid.

A No. I'm not afraid. I'm pretty strong and I can deal with anything that happens. No matter where they put me, what they do to me, or how long they keep me, it's all about me not allowing myself to be broken by anything. I still have dreams even though I'm in here. I have dreams of starting an organization that will help at risk youth in general to avoid coming into this situation. I don't think life is over. That's a big part of my attitude. I don't look at this as the end of the road. The feelings I go through in here – it's not fear but there is a big factor of loneliness. In this prison, everybody is so busy on promoting their own interests. They are so quick to throw you under the bus the first chance they get. It's so low in here. Even when you have people on the outside, they don't always write or keep up because they have their own lives to attend to. You have to lean and depend on yourself. You come to become very familiar with yourself. That takes away some of that fear too.

Q How do you stay out of trouble – out of SMU in here?

A At first, I was in trouble because I was like I got life and you can't do nothing else to me. For about 18 months, I stayed in trouble when I got here at the age of 18. I sat back there and regrouped. I started trying to get involved in positive things. I am involved in Lipscomb (college) classes now. I try to focus on positive things rather than allowing this situation to make me. Do you know what I mean?

Q So, you came here with a High School education?

A I got my GED in the county jail. Here, I am in the Office Technology vocational class and I also attend Lipscomb taking an Art Appreciation course. I have already taken courses in communications and the judicial process.

Q Looking back, what are your happiest and saddest memories?

A My saddest memories are thinking about my Mom when I was on the run. She would tell me that she prayed for me every night I was on the run. I wouldn't even call her. I turned my back on that. She is not my biological Mom but she never turned her back on me, stopped loving me or gave up on me. The happiest times – hmmm. I don't know that I can talk about happiest times. The happiest will be when I get released. I was happiest when I first got out of Woodland Hills and was on my way to my Mom's. She had divorced my Dad and it was just going to be me and her. It was going to be a fresh start.

Q If you had a chance to talk to young girls today, what would you tell them about avoiding coming to a place like this?

A If I had a chance, I wouldn't just tell them. I would tell their parents too. A lot of times the parents try to develop a relationship with their kids but get shut out of that. The parents say 'whatever.' I would tell parents to try to find new approaches to be involved with their kid's life and not to give up because they need to be there. For the girls, I would tell them to try to stay excited about school and the things they should be doing. For me, I lost excitement because I became excited about this other life. I'd try to fast

forward their vision to show them right now (you might) be having fun but these are the consequences of it. My old Warden, Debra Johnson, allowed me to talk to a girl who had been getting in trouble. She was surprised that someone my age could be doing life in prison. I still write her today as a mentor. I write her and encourage her and keep her focused on her progress.

Q You are a smart young lady and you had things at your disposal. You had food in your refrigerator and clean clothes to wear. You had a support system. The parents who say: "I keep trying but my child keeps shutting me out." What do you say to those parents who keep reaching out to a child who won't accept their help?

A Maybe they can try to get them involved in positive things. Maybe the church has activities or even can link them to outreach programs. I would tell them to get involved in positive extracurricular activities.

Q Can families really compete with what's going on in the streets? The streets pretty much have a hold on children

A Yes they can compete with the streets. My Aunt had this issue with my nephew. She took something he was interested in like Pokémon cards and found an activity for him.

Q Did street gangs attract you?

A No they didn't attract me because I like doing my own thing. I don't like nobody telling me what to do.

Q I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me. Did we (society) fail you?

A No. I think the justice system did. Rather than transferring juveniles to adult court, they could involve them in juvenile rehabilitative programs. Not just me. I think other kids should not have been sentenced to life in prison. There were probably programs that could have helped.

Q Do you still have support?

A Yes, my Mom visits every other week along with my sister and I talk to them on the phone as well. I hope you write a good article.