LOST IN THE SHUFFLE

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RACHEL LEVENTHAL

An inside look at women in prison
My only experience of jail was what I had seen on television. I walked into the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC), in July of 1998, thinking I would spend a couple of months hanging around the women’s drug-treatment unit between nine and five, photographing and talking with the women inmates, and then I’d have an answer to my question: Can a person really heal in jail? It took only a few weeks to realize that my approach was all wrong, and that a lot of what happened in jail was out of my reach. It happened after hours, happened in code, happened during the eleven precious minutes of daily allotted telephone time. It happened during the frequent, routine lock-ins, while women sat alone in the dark of their six-by-twelve-foot cells.

After a month of my visits, several women agreed to keep diaries and to share their personal writing with me. As we explored my question together, I realized that I’d landed in the right city and the right jail to tell this story.

“It’s hard to be in jail knowing I have kids out there. My son asked me was I going on a school trip with him. I didn’t know what to say. I ain’t going to be able to talk to him tonight cause I’m locked in for the night. He was waiting for my phone call.” — ELIA

THE DIRTY SECRET

This is a story about women in jail. The setting is Philadelphia, a city that, like so many other American cities in recent decades, has confronted urban blight, unemployment, rampant poverty, and drug-related crime. The women you’ll meet in this story are from the streets of North Philadelphia, an area I have best heard described as “Bennet with stop signs.” Many of the women are in jail because of urban policies—the mass arrests and the mandatory prison sentences that are part of the national “War on Drugs”—that have been created out of desperation and fear.

A quarter of Philadelphia’s population lives in poverty, and an estimated 150,000 people have fled the city in the past decade. Some forty thousand houses now stand abandoned, many serving as crack dens convenient to the open-air drug markets that are famous up and down the East Coast for being “the place” to cop some of the purest heroin in the nation.

Philadelphia is one of the few large American cities that have not experienced a recent renaissance, and it is now trying to catch up, with a vengeance. On June 15, 1998, an aggressive new police commissioner initiated a campaign that included sweeping addicts and petty criminals off the streets of North Philly—also known as The Badlands. The campaign, called Operation Sunrise, is modeled after a similar effort that has been credited with “bringing back” parts of New York City. In the first year of the new commissioner’s tenure, thirteen thousand more people were arrested than in the year before, and the police are continuing to sweep steadily from the east of the city to the west.

Many of the women in this story will return to the street, under the shadow of the EL train, after they are released.
Soon they'll be back in prison, passing once again through its revolving door as city authorities continue to use incarceration to solve the drug problem on the streets. Such policies have disproportionately affected women. The number of women living in Philadelphia's prison system has quadrupled since 1987. Consistent with a national trend, the rate is increasing at twice the rate of men.

During my visits to PICC I heard it said often: women fare poorly in jail. They are more likely to commit suicide, they report more incidents of depression, they take significantly more psychotropic medication, and they seek treatment for more physical ailments than do men. All of the experts I have talked to have told me basically the same story: yes, there is a difference between how men and women experience jail, but data on why are still scarce. Small studies have been conducted in individual jails, but researchers have reported difficulty getting inside prisons to interview women, and there are few facilities that actually compile information on how women react to being in jail. "Women in jail are kind of the dirty secret of corrections," one researcher told me. "Probably because jails house large numbers of mothers and pregnant women. It's like they're there but they're not there."

Most women learn and survive by establishing relationships, but jails are designed to confine, intimidate, isolate, and control. Women pose a minimal security threat, but they often are placed in high-security facilities, complete with perimeter fences, steel-and-concrete cells, and regular lockdowns. Prison policies are designed for men. One day, down in the PICC receiving room, I watched a woman who was eight and a half months pregnant waddle by me with her wrists cuffed and her feet shackled together. "Where am I gonna run to?" she cried to me later. "I can hardly walk." Routine procedures such as searches, restraint, and isolation have been found to retraumatize women who've been abused—and the vast majority of women in jail have histories of abuse. Women more than men tend to respond to abuse by internalizing its effects. Seventy women inmates in the drug-treatment program I visited were once asked as a group how many of them believed that women like to be abused. All but one raised their hands.

Incarcerated women are more likely than incarcerated men to be parents and primary caregivers, and about 10 percent of them are pregnant. Jail policies present substantial barriers to parenting "behind the walls." For example, in Philadelphia mothers in jail must surrender their newborns within twenty-four hours, are allowed only a few minutes of daily phone time, and have limited, nonprivate visiting hours, with only two children permitted at a time.

The women I met in prison matter-of-factly recalled for me the details of childhood rape, frequent beatings, and verbal abuse, often administered by family members. Abuse was almost always a precursor to drug use, which often began in a relationship with a man who used drugs, and addiction was almost always a precursor to the crimes that brought these women to jail—crimes like retail theft, prostitution, and repeated violations of probation. "Bullshit stuff," one prison administrator told me.

Today, as an unplanned result of national policies like the War on Drugs and local efforts like Operation Sunrise, jails are filling with women who have committed petty crimes that are only the symptoms of much larger societal problems: drug addiction and the abuse of women. Because the trend is still to incarcerate rather than treat, jails—typically dangerous and hostile places to be—have become the de facto setting for both treatment and refuge for women.

OPTIONS

It was my first day in PICC, and I was at "morning meeting." Seventy women were seated in an enormous circle, ready to begin an eight-week cycle of drug treatment. As the women were taking turns speaking and reading poems that they had written, ten newcomers walked through the door, dragging garbage bags of belongings behind them. The jail administration had just that day ordered that all units expand from seventy to eighty inmates. The order proved to be a turning point for the program: women were to be packed in tighter than ever; resources were to be stretched further than ever.

The ten new women joined the others in a drab sea of prison blues. Five staff members, all wearing bright, fashionable business attire, stood along the wall: Miss Lee, the counseling director; Joe, the program psychologist and the only man on staff; and three social workers. Two correctional officers were posted at a command console next to the door.

Miss Lee laid down the rules. No fights, no drugs, no sexual relationships—or you're out. Attend your meetings. Write your essays. Old-timers pull up the newcomers. "Everyone here signs a contract," Miss Lee said. "I don't want to hear anyone say you're here because a judge ordered you. If you don't want to be here, you tell me. I'll tell the judge and you can go. There are a lot of women who need treatment who want your bed. Please don't treat this as a joke. There's too many ladies dying out there." Miss Lee was specifically addressing the program's share of saboteurs, women uninterested in drug treatment who are trying

"A friend from the streets has finally made her life end up here. She is in the cell next to me and I talk with her through the socket. I get angry to see her in so much pain and I can't do anything to make her feel better. She cried all night." —KELLY
“The first thirty days are the hardest—just like the first thirty days in jail are the hardest, the first thirty days of OPTIONS are the hardest—so I don’t want you to come to me before thirty days are up and tell me you want to move.”

—DEBORAH LEE, COUNSELING DIRECTOR

to impress their judges to gain an early release. But for each woman I met who was manipulating the program, I met many more who were betting their lives on it. That day, for example, there were close to a hundred women on the program’s waiting list. Only a fraction of them would ever receive treatment.

The women’s section of PICC is divided into five distinct lettered “units”—with nicknames like “Psych” and “The Projects”—each housing inmates of a different custody level. E Unit, where my project was based, is the home of a nontraditional drug-treatment community called OPTIONS, one of the few jail-based programs in this country designed specifically for women. About a hundred women in the OPTIONS program gave me permission to tell their stories and to publish excerpts from their letters and diaries. The six women you’ll meet in this story could be any of these hundred women.

OPTIONS was one of the first jail-based programs to be funded by the Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance, as a response to the exploding population of women in prison. Since its inception, in 1992, it has been showcased by the BJA as a model program. Every aspect of addiction is related back to the inmates’ experiences as women: the program attempts to address abuse, self-esteem, body image, leadership, and parenting, all in a context of how women experience the world, with an emphasis on process and relationships.

Aware of all this innovation, I walked onto E Unit expecting to see a very structured program. What I saw instead on that first day looked more like a lot of women hanging around. Several were in the dayroom playing cards and watching Jerry Springer. Some were out in the cement yard, engrossed in an aggressive game of handball. Others were sunning themselves on the cement. I counted seven very pregnant women. At least half the women appeared to me to be about thirty—my age—and many seemed much younger.

Philadelphia’s prison system has made more efforts than most, but one has to be realistic about what can be accom-
plished in a jail. Jails take on a life of their own. Their mission is security. The dominant routines and rituals—counts, lock-ins, discipline, shakedowns, medication lines, inspections, meals—take precedence over treatment. Treatment requires change. But jails are designed to control and suppress the chaos of change. Resources are another limitation. Money for treatment programs is allocated by elected city officials, whose constituencies often don’t place a high value on treatment. OPTIONS is allocated no budget for materials or programming beyond the salaries for its five core staff members. Although the number of women on the unit increased during the year of my visits, the number of social workers did not—in fact, one resigned and was not replaced for several months. The outpatient version of OPTIONS was closed altogether. And then there is the subversive culture of jail itself—the lure of drugs and the constant fear in the back of the mind that bad things can happen when the lights go out.

Motivation, of course, has a great bearing on success. OPTIONS counselors will work with a woman, in and out of jail, for years, hoping that one day a switch will go off inside her head. I heard this first from Sherlene, one of the old-timers, just days before she was released from jail. “I’ve seen lots of girls come here and be put off the unit a week later,” she said. “Cause they’re not trying to change. A lot of women don’t get it the first time. Some never get it. But you hope that people see other women’s recovery, the old-timers’, and say, ‘I really want that.’ ”

Sherlene was talking to me in the yard, with a pile of old mail spread around her. She was worrying about her daughters. Amenah had decided to postpone school to get married; Sakinah slacks off whenever Sherlene’s not around to press her. And Sherlene was worrying, too, about the upcoming family-therapy session with her son, Antwine. Having dependent children to raise is one strong motivator for recovery. Sherlene kept repeating, “I’ve got to get back to them.”
Marilyn

Marilyn approached me almost immediately when I first arrived. She was a small, pretty Puerto Rican woman with a wide grin. Each word she spoke of English was a hard-won victory. "You're making a story about OPTIONS?" she said. "I want to tell you about how OPTIONS saved my life." She grinned and pulled me by the hand, out the door of E Unit and upstairs, via the elevator, to where she took word-processing classes, then to where her therapy group met, and then to where she worked in the law library. She proudly pointed to the phone she used to call the law clerks downtown when she needed to help out a fellow inmate. "I'm in here because my boyfriend was a dealer and I took the fall for him. But never mind. I am bettering myself in here," she said, working hard to get all the syllables in the right order. "I'm gonna be somebody."

We rode back down to E Unit, where she took me up to the top tier to show me her cell. We walked across a metal grate and passed a long row of open cell doors. I saw women lying in their beds or doing a little wash in their sinks. Marilyn pulled me along and beckoned me giddily into her single cell, as if to say, "Ta da!"

The cell was about six feet by twelve feet. The floor and walls were concrete, and the door heavy steel—as were the toilet, the sink, the mirror, and the bed. A small slit on the
far end of the room allowed for some natural light. Marilyn was a resourceful decorator, considering that everything she owned in the world could fit easily in the plastic bin that slid under her bed: five colorful beach towels served as wall-to-wall carpeting. “I’ve come a long way from that day I almost died in a bathtub with a needle sticking from my arm,” she told me. Grinning, she handed me three pages of a “lifeline” she’d been working on for her counseling group, an essay. “Take this,” she said. “Maybe it will help somebody.”

Marilyn and I sat on her bed for about half an hour as she pulled things out of her bin to show me: cards she’d made, a letter from a male pen pal in another jail, her OPTIONS contract and attendance sheet. After a while another woman strolled in and arranged herself on the metal stool that was bolted to the floor. She’d brought with her a picture of her three-month-old baby boy, whom she’d had while she was an inmate, and who was now in her sister’s care. We all took turns cooing at the photo, and I felt more like we were three women who’d met somewhere for coffee than two inmates and a reporter in a high-security jail.

Then it was six o’clock. The visiting woman jumped up to return to her cell. I heard doors slaming everywhere. Looking worried, Miss Lee came and found me, and told me it was past time to go. Just as I exited Marilyn’s cell, a correctional officer walked over, shut the door, locked it, and pulled the handle twice to check it. All the while, Marilyn smiled and waved good-bye to me through the small window. The banging of the door against its steel frame sounded like gunfire.

**From an OPTIONS essay**

*Life Line*

“Hi, my name is Marilyn Matos and I am 33 years old. When I started using drugs I was 14 years old and I started smoking marijuana, up and downers. I used to be physically and mentally abused when I was a child. Hiding my pain was a mistake.

In my life, just the fear of telling others was enough for me not to say a word.

“To be honest, I didn’t even know how to start writing because I feel it is too much but, I just started helping myself by dealing with my feelings.

“At the age of fifteen years old I became a prostitute. I thought I was all that by standing up in New York City on the corner of Forty-second Street. A lot of other girls were there and used to run me off the corner. I used to make a lot of money and live by myself. I got scared where I was staying at and I left because I thought somebody was following me to hurt me. So I left and I went to a bar and the owner offered me a job as a go go dancer. I remember when I first started dancing I didn’t know how to. It’s funny because I used to see the others dance, and dance like them trying to be sexy. But since I was a pretty young lady with nice body the owner told me I can stay working in this place. One day I had a problem with one of the customers and because he wanted me to go with him he beat me up. The owner got scared because I was too young and told me I had to go so I left.

“I begin to run around and I met people who likes drugs, like cocaine, pills and tranquilizer. I became addicted to it and one day I called my mother and I told her to come pick me up. I was so sick she came to pick me up. I decide to stay with her for a while, and because I liked the way drugs used to make me feel, I left. I felt everything around me wasn’t right. I felt totally different because I never grew up near somebody who love me. I was so scared to feel that someone like my mother did care and love me. I didn’t want to be treated right.

“When I came to Philly, I thought this was the place I was looking for to make money, easy money, so I started hanging out with the wrong crowd. Clubs and drinking. I started doing drugs like I never and ever did. I was running around all over Philly falling in love—in love with the money a man offer me, thinking I was gonna have it all (I did).

“But I lost everything when I turned 21 years old. I met man who is my children’s father who introduced me to heroin. He told me heroin was good to have sex so I did, and I became addicted to it. Before I knew it, I want to kill myself. I kept using it every day. I found out I was gonna have a baby. I didn’t know, I thought I was happy. I thought maybe I can change. I had my little girl. I used to treat her like she was a little doll that I can play with. I love her so much.

“Second child is a girl. I had her using drugs and drink alcohol. She was two pound, six months premature. We almost die. Doctors told me they didn’t know how we made it. I came back home feeling a lot of pain because my little 2 pound baby had IV needles all over little tiny body. Was so pain like seeing my little baby like my fault. I was deep in pain because what I have done to my child. I didn’t want to live. The only way for me to go on and go see her were using drugs more and more.

“I had another child and when I found out I was going to have a little boy I said to myself, it’s over. Time to stop using drugs. I had my boy and went to a program in the hospital. I was doing good, feeling happy because I was going to be back with my children. I love my children so much.

“But when I came back home, I didn’t want to deal with the reality of being a single mom. So I started shooting dope, I almost died. Thank God the hospital were near, because I never would have made it.

“The last time I used drugs I got out from prison and I went to get heroin with a friend. I went to a hotel, took four bags of dope, three Xanax, ready to kill myself. I shot three bags and before I knew it I was in the bathtub, immersed in the water, blood all over. I didn’t know what happened. When I looked in my arm, the needle was still in my arm. I got so scared. I couldn’t even stand up. And when I looked, my friend left because he thought I was dead and he didn’t want any consequences.

“I got up from the bathtub and I couldn’t even get up but somehow I made it. I thank my god because I should have been dead by now. I feel he always protected me.

“The reason I am writing this part of my life is because I would like to help somebody else who maybe went through the same problem. We don’t have to live like this anymore because we have a choice to live a better life. We don’t need to live creating the pain in our heart. We have to let go and let God and go on willing to change willing to make good decisions with our life.”
Alicia

When I met Alicia, she was among a group of women playing spades at one of the long tables in the dayroom. She was simultaneously writing a letter to her teenage son, Tommy, on the back of the score sheet. “My son,” the letter began,

I am writing this letter while I'm playing cards (spades). Well, I'm missing you terribly, missing everything about you. Mommy can't wait until we start doing things together. I miss you and your sister so very much, it's killing me. Tom, you should see the change in me, you wouldn't believe it. I hardly curse any more. Even the counselors and the staff tell me they see a change in me. Tom, I know I'm going to do the right thing this time, my son, because I'm tired of hurting you and your sister and most of all, hurting myself.

Tom, Daddy don't write me or nothing. Do you think he still wants us to live with him? And if not, Tom, where are we going to live? I want to come home and take care of you. And I swear, I will never leave you again, never. That's a promise.

Any of the OPTIONS women could have written this letter, replete with the usual victorious declarations of small steps made in the right direction, the unrealistic promises about the perfect people and parents they'll soon become. I heard mantras with similar themes often repeated by other women: “I promise Mommy will never leave you again,” “I'm through with drugs, I mean it,” “I promise you, everything will be all right”—golden promises forged in guilt about the past and an urgent awareness of the passage of time in the unwitnessed lives of their children. Then there is the fear. I believe it is fear that keeps women like Alicia coming back to jail. “Where am I going to go?” they so often ask themselves. “What am I going to do? How do I stop myself from going back to the abyss that I came from?”

“What do you want to do?” Alicia’s judge asked her, ready to let her go to complete a treatment program on the outside. Alicia begged him to keep her in jail, so now she and her judge have entrusted her recovery entirely to OPTIONS. Whatever treatment she receives here is all she's likely to receive. “GOD I am begging you to help this time around,” Alicia wrote in her diary right after her sentencing, long before she and I ever met. “I know everything will fall into place in time.”

Alicia says she feels safer on E Unit than she ever has in her life. She is away from abuse, temptation, and uncertainty. But in jail her physical safety and the opportunity for treatment come at a great cost. For one thing, her incarceration increases the likelihood that her children will end up in jail. Tommy has already had encounters with the police. Her daughter is slipping away from her and can’t be reeled in during just a few minutes a day on the telephone.

With each conviction, studies suggest, women become a little more institutionalized and a little less likely to make it on the outside. I could see the competing forces of desire and complacency in Alicia. Perhaps her awareness of this inner conflict was part of what gave her the sense of urgency to succeed. “This is my fourth time here and every time it gets harder,” she wrote in an essay. “And who knows. Maybe this time if I go out there, I may not make it.”
From OPTIONS essays

Anger and aggression

"The last time I really got angry was this past weekend. I went to class that was suggested to me. Boy am I glad I went. Well, I started talking about how my brothers were having sex with me at a very young age. I was very angry then but at 5 didn't know what to do. Well at this class, I cried, started sweating. I told my brothers they had no right to do what they did to me. I asked them why, screaming at the top of my voice asking them didn't or don't you love me, why was I the only sister that you touched and have sex with? I feel if they would of never done this to me I would never, ever sold my body or have sex with my two other brothers for money or drugs. They took my childhood away from me. I was cursing at them in this class, wanted to really beat them up and still with the question, why?

"I ran away when I was fourteen years old. Moved in with a man who was 21 and a junky, and used to let him beat me up because I thought I loved him. Today I still talk to my brothers. They have families now. You know what really kills me? When I look at them in the eye, they act as if nothing ever happened or they don't remember. But I know they do. Why don't they feel guilty, shame, why don't they tell me they are sorry? Why do they act like they love me today? Now they want to invite my son and I places."

My experience with drugs

"He started beating me up more and more every day. I thought that's how it was supposed to be because my dad used to beat my mom up all the time when he was drunk. So I let him beat me up when he was shooting heroin. Well, not let him. You know what I'm saying. I started doing pills, smoking hash opium. Well this went on for four years. Until I was tired of letting his friends always seeing me with a black eye. They were telling me to leave him, but that was my first love and I remember him telling me no one will ever love me as much as he did."

From Alicia's diary

January 30, 1999

"Well, it's Saturday morning. I got out of my bed and thanked God for opening my eyes again and breathing another day of life into me. We had breakfast and then we were locked in until about 2:30. I'm really depressed because I'm still here. I called my mom today. She told me my 13 year old daughter Tiffany called her. My mom asked where she was. She told her at K & A [Kensington and Allegheny]. I thought to myself, 'what the fuck is she doing down there?' My mom said my ex-husband told her she comes home with new sneakers and new clothes. I'm scared be-
Kelly

"You're just copping out!" Lakia yelled. "Blaming other people for your recovery."

We were in group therapy the first day of a new OPTIONS cycle. This is where I first met Kelly. She was sobbing in a circle of about ten women. Lakia, an old-timer, was yelling at her.

"What you saying?" Lakia yelled again. "If somebody getting high, you gotta go get high? Everything you see in here is how it is in real life. You have to learn to walk around it!"

Kelly had discovered that although she was on a treatment unit, all the trappings of the jailhouse—lying, stealing, verbal backstabbing, and drugs—were a part of life there. She wanted out.

"I just thought there would be more therapy groups," she said.

"You don't need no special group," Lakia snapped. "You have to be fucking tired—of your life! Not feeling the way you're supposed to. You can't just be sitting around waiting for no meeting to start."

And so it went, back and forth for the better part of an hour, with Lakia trying to "pull up" the newcomer, convince her that it was up to her to grab hold of treatment.

Kelly was thirty years old, but when I first saw her I thought she was much younger. Her blond hair was cut shaggy over eyes that stared out at the world with the look of a child left alone. Her face read as though she were perpetually saying to the world, "Please."

Several months after that meeting, Kelly committed a rule infraction and was moved to B Unit, called "The Projects" by inmates. Just before her removal from OPTIONS, she expressed in her diary her fear of moving. "In all actuality," she wrote, "I would be eaten alive."

Once in The Projects, Kelly became depressed, rapidly gained weight, and eventually had a friend's mother smuggle in a bag of heroin for her. She collapsed in her cell from an overdose.
the total emptiness, a void inside my soul screams out for help. But how do I know or begin to help myself. Some of life’s ways are unfair or the choices have are not what I want but the only ones I got. Most of what I’ve ever learned from life is that it’s unfair.

From letters to the author

“My name is Kelly. I now sit in prison called PICC from a direct affect from drugs. The last four years, I’ve been an IV heroin addict. I’ve lied, robbed, stolen, prostituted for money. Anything and everything I’ve worked so hard for, I gave it all away for heroin. I even lost my home and my ex-husband (who was the cause of my heroin addiction). I have a resume of detox and rehab programs, all which I failed. Every time I left a detox program I went straight to North Philly. In my last year of my addiction, I started to prostitute. I felt that life was OK. I was willing to continue that way until I died. Not fearing anything, I continued to get high every day all day. I was self-medicating myself to the point where I was a zombie—empty, lost.


“I tricked by myself, got high by myself. I would sit under bridges or train tracks and get high and cry. I would cry because I was alone and trapped in a life I didn’t know how to get out of. Even now, as I sit in PICC and look back at what I did and how my life changed so drastically, I can’t understand what happened. How could a college student who worked as a supervisor at the Sheraton hotel turn into a person who sticks needles in her arm.

“Sometimes I didn’t eat for days. I was spending around $100–$200 a day on only drugs. In two months, I went from a size 7/8 to a size 3. I lost 40 pounds. When I was picked up by detectives—since I was wanted—I weighed 108 pounds—and I’m 5’7”. I was dope sick all over again. The only thing left was death.

“After detoxing again in PICC, I decided to go to the Drug Rehab unit which is called OPTIONS. I didn’t really take it all seriously because most inmates in the program aren’t there to recover. They just feel it’s a way out faster to go to a program. I do want recovery. I feel stuck because I’m in jail and it’s (to me) not enough of the recovery I need.”

From Kelly’s diary

“Being in jail is like being in the streets. There’s just as much filth in here as on the streets. Racial, drugs, cigarettes, fights, jealous, and female relationships. It’s not permitted on E Unit but all are done on the down low (sneaky side) I’ve witnessed all and I’m even involved in most. People and myself work on the doctors—meaning we pretend to get medication. I was able to convince I was depressed, couldn’t sleep, and anxiety. So I take Sinaquions and Elavil, also Depacode. I was able to keep getting high.”
Sherlene

Sherlene was picked up by the police after a squabble on a street corner, she said. She confessed to the officers that there was an outstanding bench warrant for her arrest, issued nine years before. “I thought if I got locked up, I’d finally get some help,” she told me. Sherlene had been looking for help, actively and sincerely, for a while. She had even stored her belongings and checked herself and her son, Antwyne, into a homeless shelter. “I thought the shelter would get me into treatment,” she said. The shelter system is one of the few venues the city makes available to move addicts into treatment, but for Sherlene it was a dead end. Like many addicts, she had to leave her children and come to jail to find treatment. During Sherlene’s sentence, her two teenage daughters and the nine-year-old Antwyne lived alone in Kensington.

Sherlene described her vain search for help to me in a letter:

I was told I wasn’t bad enough for inpatient. All I was able to do was break down and cry to the man on the phone, I even begged him. I knew in my heart of hearts I needed a long term treatment program. I was literally dying inside and I wanted to scream out for help. When I got arrested for fighting on May 3, 1997, I thanked God for saving my life.

Phyllis, the family therapist, and I met Sherlene’s three children, Amenah, Sakinah, and Antwyne, in PICC’s lobby, where they were searched before being let in to see their mother.

The space used for family therapy is in a stark white corner of the prison’s packed visiting room. When we entered, a noisy collection of infants and spouses were dispersed among the orange jumpsuits. I hoped that young Antwyne didn’t notice the couple seated nearest the door: a man had his hands inside his lover’s jumpsuit and was pulling out her breasts.

Phyllis deferred to Sherlene, who finally let out the words she’d been awake all night practicing.

“You know, I’ve been in here because I’m being punished for something I did a long time ago, before you were born. Mommy’s addicted to drugs and alcohol. I used to like to smoke when I had problems. I thought I could get better on my own but I can’t. I need help. These people in here been helping me. You know, I’m going to be getting out of jail soon and I’m going to live in a place for a while where they’re gonna help me more to get better. And I want you to come with me.”

“With my sisters?” Antwyne asked finally, looking at the teenage girls who’d been his surrogate mothers in Sherlene’s absence. “Nope,” Sherlene said. “Just you and me.”

Away from his sisters. Away from the basketball hoop in the driveway. Again.

“What about my friends? I have to leave my friends?”

“Well, when I get out of this program, we’re gonna find a place to live upstate, anyway. Far away from our old neighborhood. You’ll make new friends there.”
Penny

Penny had been revolving through jails and halfway houses since she was twenty-two. She had committed the typical offenses, mostly involving drugs, prostitution, and robbery. She had also spent some time in mental hospitals, once after she had jumped out a window, and another time after she had swallowed razor blades in jail. Miss Jenkins, her OPTIONS social worker, was optimistic. She said that this time Penny had become a real leader on the unit. She had served on many committees and had tutored women in the computer-based learning lab. Women were always asking her for advice. She really had a chance. Penny frequently described to me how she was looking forward to continuing her treatment after her release, in a program for women with coexisting addictions and psychological disorders. But she had the problem many women face: there was nobody on the outside to give her support after jail. She had vowed not to return to her father. She said her Puerto Rican boyfriend, Angel, who was caring for her children, would not help her in her recovery. “I have to work on this,” she wrote in an OPTIONS essay. “Do I want to stay or leave? I have two children who need their mother. I have to make a life for myself and them.”

From an OPTIONS essay

Lifeline

“...I started using alcohol when I was fourteen. My dad seen me drinking beer. He told me if I wanted to drink I had to do it at home. Most of the time I wanted to be drunk before my dad got home from work at 5 pm. So after school I would start to drink around 2 pm. At first I would only drink wine. While I was drinking I would do my homework and make dinner. By being drunk before my dad got home, I could pass out, or be sleeping, so he wouldn’t ask me to have sex with him.”
Elia introduced herself by telling me this story. She is a member of a gang called the Latin Queens. Her brother, a Latin King, was killed when members of a rival gang broke his knees and elbows and threw him in front of a moving train. "I smoked some of his ashes so he would always be inside of me," she said. He still appears to her in dreams.

Elia had been a dealer on the street—following in her father's footsteps, she says. Dealers are trouble in the program. Their addiction is not to drugs but to power and control; they sabotage treatment, manipulating others' weaknesses. But when I heard that Elia had been removed from OPTIONS for tattooing fellow inmates, I feared for her: she was but a baby, playing at being a grown-up.

The last time I saw Elia on E Unit, she ran past me in the hall, wearing dark lipstick and makeup. She spun in the air and ran backward a few steps. "I got a visit from my Mommy!" she shouted. Then she was gone.

After that, I saw Elia a few times on B Unit, once right after her removal from OPTIONS and again a couple of months later. She transformed from the sly, mischievous, and charismatic soul that I had come to know into nothing more than a prisoner. She said she was suicidal, and was high on tranquilizers, antipsychotics, and antidepressants. She spent her days bundled up in bed wearing nothing but her boxer shorts and her bra. Each time I visited, I had to wake her.

The last time I saw Elia, she looked as though she'd gained about thirty pounds. She told me she'd asked to be moved to A Unit, to be with the other psych patients. She'd given her youngest son up for adoption. As we talked across the Lucite barrier in the visiting room, I thought about an article I had read about drug-treatment communities in jail. It cited several studies showing that when inmates spend six to twelve months in treatment it changes them. A very high percentage of even the most "hardened criminals" stop reoffending. OPTIONS wasn't the right place for Elia, but there was no other place in the jail to treat her. I wondered whether the system had to give up on Elia too quickly.

Whatever her condition in March of 2000, Elia will be released back to the community and her children.
SHUFFLING

One day in September, a few months after my project began, I went onto E Unit to visit Marilyn, only to find that she was gone. Relocated. She had first been sent to a modular housing unit, and then, a few weeks later, to The Cannery, a dorm-style lower-custody facility where she’d find little in the way of drug treatment.

I had been noticing for a while that each day I would come on the unit, I’d recognize fewer faces. On this particular day, I didn’t recognize a single one.

“We’re having a lot of turnover,” Miss Lee told me when I asked her about Marilyn. “Because of the overcrowding. They get all these new women down in the receiving room, and they gotta start shuffling.”

Shuffling usually means reclassifying women based on their charges and their prison behavior and moving them to units of appropriate custody levels. Sometimes it means releasing them. Because the women in OPTIONS are undergoing drug treatment, the program has an informal agreement with the jail that it will be the last place where women are shuffled. “But every now and then,” Miss Lee said, “when they really need the space, they’ll pull one.” Thinking back to Marilyn’s relocation, she added, “I think we lost five that night.”

I had known about the overcrowding, and that the prison is under a federal court order to manage its population. Warnings of a population crisis in the Philadelphia jails date back to at least Independence Day, 1976, when a riot broke out in Philadelphia’s crowded and crumbling Holmesburg Prison, and inmates filed a suit against the city, which is still pending. Still, I had come to think of OPTIONS as a place of refuge, far from what seemed to me to be a distant political hurricane.

In the past year, because of the new aggressive arrest policies, the jail population at PICC has repeatedly set and then broken its own records. In July 1998, on my first day in OPTIONS, the size of each prison unit, originally designed to house fifty inmates, increased from seventy to eighty. The population of each unit would eventually increase to one hundred. With each new group brought in, inmates and detainees were reclassified and shuffled around the jail, or simply released, to make room for the new ones. A population emergency, declared at 5,520, has been in effect for several years; the prison’s stated optimal maximum capacity is 5,600. Marilyn was removed from OPTIONS on September 22. Two days before, a new all-time record of 6,274 inmates had been set. The system was at gridlock.

By the time Marilyn was released, constant movement had become the routine. “It’s hard to focus on offering innovative, therapeutic programs,” one exasperated administrator told me. “The most pressing question is, Where do we put all the bodies?”

Back on E Unit

Both OPTIONS staff and inmates became rattled as the jail’s overcrowding became worse, as turnover on the unit became more frequent, and as things stopped working the way they were supposed to. There was little time to screen women before they were admitted, or to teach them the rules. Social workers didn’t know who their clients would be on any given day, or how many they would have. Therapy groups lost their continuity, and women’s close-knit support networks began to unravel.

Sherlene had been right about the unit’s needing more old-timers to pass on the example of recovery. What she didn’t know was that well after her release, old-timers would remain conspicuously absent. “We have about twenty women who are stable now,” Miss Lee told me. “Usually we have about half the community. When that happens, you get a lot of negative behaviors. Dealers wind up on the unit, and we get women who are judge-stipulated who aren’t really interested in treatment. A lot of women just walk around saying, ‘Why bother trying?’ ”

Discouragement led to a rash of rule breaking and mayhem. A few women were caught “cheeking” their medication—selling it on the unit in exchange for food that other women had purchased in the commissary. One woman, Diane, had to sit up all night taking care of her sick cellmate, who’d bought psych meds meant for someone else. Elia was removed for having given several women tattoos, which she had fashioned with crushed pencil lead and a safety pin. That same week rumors were circulating about a case of AIDS acquired from a tattoo given in one of the men’s jails. “Usually,” Miss Lee said, “I like the women to work things out between themselves. But when it comes to people’s safety, I’ll intervene.” To return to OPTIONS, Elia had to complete a disciplinary procedure called a “staffing,” where she’d have to come clean to the entire staff about her actions. At her staffing Elia twisted and screamed and panicked, and walked out of the room, leaving OPTIONS behind her.

DEPARTURES

Few of the women I followed left the way they expected to—that is, in a smooth transition from OPTIONS to community treatment, a crucial factor for success. What happened instead is best described in their own words.

Elia

“I was told to pack my things because I had made a couple of tattoos on other people for some commissary. It’s real scary over here. Some crazy shit happening on B-unit. I’ve just been trying to sleep my time away.

“Well I got staffed. My staffing was hard for me because it put me in a place that I thought I never had to go. See, when I was five I had got raped by my father’s best friend over and over. I had no control over it, and that’s how I felt when I was being approached by my counselors. I can’t even remember most of the questions. I remember being cruel. Cursing a lot. I remember sweating and seeing everyone that was there looking at me. I felt cornered. I just shut off and tried to hide my feelings by being mean, acting like I didn’t care.
"Women are in such a hurry to get out of here. Often, when they leave they have nowhere to go. I’m often relieved when women come back to jail. Because they could be dead. At least when they come back, I know they’re not dead."

—DEBORAH LEE, COUNSELING DIRECTOR

“I realized I did all this after I did it. I got up and left the staffing cause I knew I was wrong but I was not giving up to them that easy. So I just walked away thinking I had the power. That made me feel good at the time. When I walked out, I walked back in wanting to be stopped by one of the staff. But it didn’t work that way. When I got back, I went in my room and started to cry because I felt hurt by my own actions, and also because I felt no one cared for me. Sometimes I think I really did these tattoos because I wanted to be noticed. Now I think back on it and I see I was wrong.

“I cut my wrist one time being here in B-unit. Well I survive that. I sleep most of my time away. I’m on lots of medicine. I take Howdog, cinaquans, lenadrilis. I feel sleepy all the time and I stay in bed most of the time but I also think a lot about what I’m gonna do next and how can I deal with my feelings when I do feel. Cause most of the time I can’t feel anything.”

Marilyn

“When I left OPTIONS, I was sitting in a meeting. Suddenly, Mr. Tomes called ‘Matos’ and told me ‘pack your stuff.’ I started crying. I said, ‘Me, not me. I am not leaving. I refuse to go.’

“So the social workers all ran to see what was going on in the computer, but there was nothing they could do. I remember people saying the prison was overcrowded and that I had to leave.

“They gave me half an hour to go pack. I put my things in a garbage bag. A lot of other ladies came with me, but I felt lonely because I didn’t have nobody to talk to. So everybody got in my room. White, black, Puerto Rican—into my room. The ladies who were close to me, they were crying, hugging me.

“I was doing a great job in OPTIONS. People used to ask for advice, and even though sometimes I felt that my English wasn’t correct, I still took my time and listened to them, but I used to learn from them, too.

“I feel that the OPTIONS program and the people in the program and social workers have helped me to change. I see things different because of them. I should be dead but I am not. They helped me to go on in my recovery. Now they’re gone. OPTIONS really saved my life because it taught me how to live.

“I know and I believe that I still need help. And this place that I’m in right now [The Cannery], I don’t feel like I can trust people because the things that I see. Drugs they throw over the gate. I seen a lot of people high. People abusing pills. I have a lot of dreams about drugs lately. I wake up at the moment I’m starting to shoot a bag of dope, but it’s just a dream. It started to come when I left OPTIONS. But I’m not going to use.”

From Marilyn’s diary in The Cannery

November 10, 1998

“It’s a lot of negative people. They be on the hallways kissing with their woman as they think they are really mams. Sometimes I go to the showers and they be having sex like ‘nothing.’ I have never seen this on the outside, only in the movies.

“I need to make a change with my life. Just seeing these ladies come back and forth reminds me of myself, and it makes me tremble.”

December 2, 1998

“We had a ‘check down.’ Was crazy because the C/O threw a lot of personal belongings on the floor like pictures and underclothes. They were looking for drugs and cigarettes. It really bothered me and I got mad about it because I don’t like nobody to fuck with my personal belongings.”

December 7, 1998

“The Cannery is so overcrowded, it is hardly nowhere to sleep and they keep bringing women. A lot of people leave but they still come back 5 weeks later. The situation is getting
worse. I feel like I don’t want to meet another woman in this place. Well, it’s time for me to sleep. I just pray God to wake me up and to give me the strength to go on.”

December 8, 1998

“It is very difficult to deal with different personalities. You never know when they gonna explode the bomb. I see people who doesn’t want to change and scare the hell out of me. I have so much fear.”

December 13, 1998

“I Marilyn Matos am an intelligent, compassionate, respectful encourager who is considerate, generous, gentle, patient, caring, sensitive, personalable, fun-loving person. I am supportive, giving and forgiving, clean and kind, unselfish, affectionate. I am grateful for the opportunity life offers me. These are the qualities of a winner. I was born to be and I am fully committed to developing these valuable qualities with which I have been entrusted. God will be with me with every decision I make.”

December 31, 1998

“I’m starting to feel like I want to cry. It just hurt. Miss my family. I don’t want to be in this place. I suck! I just want to scream out loud!! But I have to control myself and go on.

“Happy New Year to myself and everybody else.”

Kelly

“I was doing OK, at least I thought I was until I got papers saying my detainers were lifted because of an emergency overpopulation in the prison.

“This was 8 p.m. on a Wednesday night. That night I was up excited and very scared. I was happy that I was going to leave but my problem was that I had nowhere to go. No rehab, no counseling, nothing. So, Thursday Morning I walked out with much anxiety. I had no intentions of using drugs because of the fear of coming back to jail. But as addicts do, I went right on the train to Kensington and Allegheny stop, still in my boxers and white T-shirt. I went right to the cop man and I was high within 30 minutes of leaving P.I.C.C.

“That started my addiction right where I left it before I went to jail. During the next four weeks more had happened to me than in the four years of my addiction. I was jumped by about 10 young boys with boards and belts because I use drugs and they think it’s fun. I was almost stabbed another time in McPherson Park. The undercover cops stopped it from happening. Some girls have been killed already and still we stay on the streets. We become lost souls with no feelings just walking streets in North Philly.

“Anyway, the last week I was on the streets I was stopped four times for drugs by the police. The night before I was locked up again, I was picked up twice but let go because I had no drugs on me. The third time that morning, I wasn’t so lucky. I proceeded to buy two ready rocks (crack) at Clementine and E. Streets. The police were waiting for me. They had watched me on cameras. So here I am again with a detainer holding me here. But oddly to say I’m glad I’m here. See, I don’t wish to be out there it somehow just takes you there. Hopefully someone this time can help me to remember how to live.”

Penny

Diary excerpts

November 29, 1998

5:00 AM

“Officer comes to my cell and wakes me up to tell me to pack, that I am going to Montgomery County. I started to cry, and I was very upset. I didn’t want to go because of my visit with my children. Would DHS bring my children to Morristown—about 1 hour or longer ride to see me?

“I gave Alicia everything I had. I woke her up and told her I was leaving and said I would write. She started to cry and kept asking me why. I was lost for words. Then the C.O. was rushing to lock her cell back. So we talk through the door for a while. Then it was time to go.”

11:50 AM

“Talked to the P.D. [public defender]. I got scared and explained to her what I and Philadelphia had planned. Ten minutes later, I went in front of the judge.”

12:50 PM

“He released me to the streets.”

1:00 PM

“Here I go. The Sheriff opens the doors and tells me to ‘enjoy.’ I say, ‘You don’t understand.’

“I start to laugh. Then it hits me. Here I am in Morristown with no way to get back to Philadelphia, and where do I go once I get back.

“ Went by to an old landlord to see if Angel really did go to Puerto Rico. I asked them at the house if I could make some local calls and told Diane what had happened. I tried to call

“So while you’re here observe your life. Play back some of those old tapes and I know it will bring tears to your eyes. Just allow yourself to go through it and no matter what, if you need help, ask someone. Believe you me, it’s not a pleasant feeling being alone.” —from Niki’s Good-bye Letter
Miss Jenkins about six times before I got her. I told her what had happened, that I was scared. That if I got nowhere to go, and if I didn't get off the streets, I didn't know what would happen. Miss Jenkins said don't worry, that if I needed to, she would come and get me.

"Diane let me call Puerto Rico to Angel I asked what happened to all my stuff. He told me they left everything in the house and he guess they stole it. I asked him why did he do that to me. I have nothing. Now, when the kids ask to see their baby pictures and pictures of their grand and great-grandparents, what am I to show them. I lost my high school diploma and all my achievement awards, my home health aide certificates. Everything I ever worked for, as far as clothes, dishes, etc. Memories. I think I could have accepted it more if I would have lost it in a fire. I had to stop myself and think of all the therapy I have gone through. Because I was ready to lose it.

"So finally Miss Jenkins called me back. She said I can go to Under the Safety Net and that was the only place that had beds."

5:30 PM

"I left my ex-landlord's house after I asked for $1.60 for the bus. Cause I didn't trust myself to walk the nine blocks to the program office. Arrived at the recovery house on Allegheny Ave. around 6PM."

While the recovery house is a few dangerous blocks from the corner where Penny used to turn tricks and cop drugs, it was the only program in town with a bed. I visited her there on the day she retrieved her children, Jonathan and Jennifer, whom she hadn't seen in months, and watched as, just moments later, she formally signed their physical custody over to foster care. I couldn't help noticing that Jonathan spoke no English and Penny no Spanish.

A couple of weeks after New Year's, I called the recovery house and asked for Penny, but the woman on the night desk said she was gone. "I don't know where she went," the woman said. "All I know is she was set on getting her kids back."

I asked Miss Jenkins at OPTIONS if she had any idea where Penny might have gone. Miss Jenkins just shook her head and replied, "Probably back with Angel."

ON THE OUTSIDE

This story could end here. With Penny having nowhere to live, signing over her children to foster care. With Elia, bloated, heavily medicated, and depressed, living in the jail's "Projects." With Alicia watching helplessly as her children follow in her footsteps on the other side of the wall. Or with Marilyn in another part of the jail, praying silently to God amidst the chaos, the crowding, and the flow of drugs, longing for the treatment and the community she knew in OPTIONS. But this story has a happy ending, too.

I hadn't seen Sherlene or Antwone since that day in the visiting room at PCCG. I went to visit Sherlene a few months after she had been released on parole to a treatment program called Gaudenzia Kindred House—a residential treatment program in West Chester, Pennsylvania, for parenting mothers and their young children. I saw what can happen when the system works the way it's supposed to.

At exactly five minutes to four, Sherlene walked down the winding path to a bus stop to collect Antwone, who leapt from his school bus grinning, his eye teeth still growing in, and ran into his mother's arms. Along with the half dozen or so other mothers and children, they strolled up a grassy hill, past picnic tables and wandering geese, and gabbed about school and homework. Antwone is in the fourth grade at Sarah Starkweather, one of the county's best public schools, and he's working extra hard on his reading. When I caught up with Sherlene and Antwone, their banter reminded me of what my mother and I might have said fifteen years ago as we drove home from school in the car.

"Why don't you read that other book, too? The one she gave you."

"'Cause she didn't assign that book."

"You want to get better at reading or don't you?"

"It sounds to me like you're assigning me extra homework."

Antwone grinned from ear to ear. Sherlene smiled at him like a proud momma bear. "Now go on and do your homework before you're late." She wrapped her arm around his neck, pulled him up next to her, and kissed him on the forehead.

Like OPTIONS, Kindred House operates as a small therapeutic community, emphasizing group support and individual responsibility. After six to nine months of rigorous in-patient treatment, Sherlene will be part of its "transitional living" program, designed to ease residents gradually back into the larger community. She and Antwone will live in a Gaudenzia-owned apartment while she finds job training and work, attends recovery meetings, and reports in weekly to her counselor.

Both Sherlene and her counselors commented to me on her progress—much faster than she could have made in jail. Sherlene said, "Jail just can't give you this much in the way of programming," she told me. "In jail, if I didn't want to deal with things I could just hide in my cell. Here, there's nowhere to hide. Every little behavior has to be addressed and corrected. Recovering from an addiction is like learning to walk all over again. And having Antwone at my side helps a lot."

We strolled across the grass. "I still don't know how much he understands about my addiction," she said.

"What about that day in jail," I asked, "when you explained it to him?"

"I don't know if he's blocked that day out of his mind or what. Once, a couple of days ago, he asked me why we were here. Why did we have to move? I had him look me in the eye. I said, 'Antwone, remember. I told you why. Mommy was using drugs.' This would be an uphill climb, but my gut told me Sherlene and Antwone would make it.

Everything worked like clockwork for Sherlene. It was her first incarceration, and she hadn't yet adapted to the "jail-
house ways.” She was one of the lucky few who found her way to OPTIONS. She was not released before she could make it to an outside program, nor was she shuffled out of treatment to another part of the jail because of overcrowding or a change in her custody level. Instead, she spent seven and a half months in OPTIONS. She walked a seamless path from the jail to Kindred House and will gradually be eased into a new community far from the triggers and the memories and the noxious relationships that comprised her life as an addict. She was motivated, and keeping her relationship with her son seemed to inspire her.

The program that allowed for Sherlene’s early release and transfer from OPTIONS to Kindred House recently funded an independent evaluation to determine whether the program is successful, and what it takes for addicts to succeed after release. It found that women who make it to a treatment program on the outside and remain in it at least six months have an 88 percent chance of succeeding—that is, of staying out of trouble for at least eighteen months after release. Sherlene fits the profile of a woman likely to succeed: over twenty-five, with custody of her children, and with fewer than four convictions. Like Marilyn, Alicia, and others, Sherlene was very motivated. She was also very lucky.

I asked her how she likes it at Kindred House, compared to OPTIONS. “Well, one thing is,” she said, grabbing at her head full of braids, “ain’t nobody out here know how to do hair!” We both laughed. Then she said, “I’m very grateful for OPTIONS. A lot of women who come here before they’ve done some other program, they leave. Can’t take the structure. OPTIONS planted a seed. Still, I’ll do a program in hell before I’ll go back to jail.”

The Macys! Bentley the photo salesman came to visit me. She took several pictures of my son and I playing basketball, making games at the school for kids.