



A Woman's Journey Home

STORIES OF HOPE &
EMPOWERMENT



A Woman's Journey Home

Stories of Hope & Empowerment

A joint collaboration between



**SINGAPORE
PRISON SERVICE**

SANA

SINGAPORE ANTI-NARCOTICS ASSOCIATION

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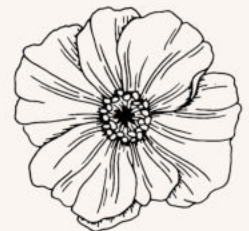
Foreword

I would like to thank the women who have summoned the courage to share their stories. This book depicts the challenges of these women and their eventual triumph over drug abuse, as well as the struggles of their loved ones. It helps readers appreciate the difficulties faced by women drug offenders over the course of their recovery journeys.

The stories are filled with hope, victory and kindness. Let these stories inspire and encourage all drug offenders and their loved ones to never stop trying. Through these stories, I have gained a better understanding of what these women faced. I am heartened by their tenacity to overcome tribulations, with the help of support systems available to them. I hope this book will encourage the wider community to support women offenders with compassion and kindness, and help them reintegrate into society.

Let us break the cycle of drug addiction. We can help these women increase their social and emotional capital. For drug offenders who are mothers, we should support them as they navigate their parental responsibilities to their children, who are the innocent and indirect victims of circumstance. It is my hope that these stories will help women offenders gain the strength and resilience to forge a better healing path for themselves. I also hope that the stories will encourage more support for these women offenders and their families. As a society, we can do our part to help them rebuild their lives.

Halimah Yacob
President of the Republic of Singapore



Foreword

To the sixteen women who took a step of faith to be vulnerable in sharing your past, I thank you for your courage. Your change journey of how you overcame your past of crime and drugs is a powerful source of hope to others who may be facing the same struggles.

To inmates who are currently incarcerated and other desistors in the community, I hope that these stories will inspire you to press on, for yourself, your families and loved ones. Your past can turn from stumbling blocks to stepping stones when you persist. To the families whose loved ones may be stuck in a cycle of addiction or crime, I hope these stories can also encourage you when you are wavering.

To the volunteers, counsellors and employers, your support have a far-reaching impact that extends beyond the individual to his or her family and the society-at-large. Your supportive relationship with the inmates and desistors gives them hope and motivates them to take charge of their lives and be the change they want to see in the community.

To all readers, I hope that the life stories of these women have given you hope and encouraged you to show support and extend a helping hand to inmates, desistors and their families to restore broken relationships and rebuild lives.

Shie Yong Lee
Commissioner of Prisons



Foreword

The stories in this book captures the unique struggles that women have in their journey of recovery from drug addiction. Beyond trying to free themselves from the snares of addiction, they grapple with feelings of guilt, shame, regret, and helplessness while receiving treatment at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre. Upon release, they face the uphill tasks of re-establishing themselves within their families, their jobs and the society. Even years later, some will still continue to face stigmatisation and scorn from family and friends, and also persistent temptation to return to drugs. Ask any recovered addict, and they will say the road to recovery is one without an expiry date.

So, what helps an offender change and how can this change be sustained? These questions anchor the rehabilitative work we do in prisons. Some believe that it is the offender's willpower and commitment to change; undergoing an epiphany-like moment in their lives. Yes. Some believe that the offender requires tangible help in giving them skills to get better jobs and cope with drug triggers. Some believe the offenders need support, in the community and perhaps in the divine realm, for them to go the distance. Yes and yes. There is no magic ingredient and no magic formula. Guided by research, we provide offenders a safe and secure environment, motivate them in our daily interactions with them, have them undergo evidence-informed rehabilitation programmes, strengthen their prosocial support and network in the community, and increase their employability before release. Yet, while these are necessary, they are insufficient to maximise the offenders' chances of staying drug-free.

Foreword

The accounts you read here show us that the support the offender gets while she is back in the community is equally important in cementing her resolve to change, particularly in times when even she has given up on herself. I invite you to immerse yourself in these stories and catch a glimpse of their journey of change. In turn, it is my dearest hope that you will be encouraged and moved to give support to anyone you might know who is on their road to recovery. Singapore sees an average of 550 female drug offenders a year^[1] – each and every one of them needs a helping hand. Will you be one of them?

“If you can’t feed a hundred people, then feed just one” – Mother Teresa.

Ng Kailin

Superintendent A4 (Female Prison and Drug Rehabilitation Centre)



[1] Data from data.gov.sg, 'Drug Abusers by Gender'.



Foreword

These raw and unvarnished accounts of struggle, growth and redemption were both painful at times and deeply inspiring to read. Whether it was Kelly's account of being handed money to purchase drugs by her own mother to keep Kelly from ending her life or Venus' account of visiting her father in an ICU ward while she was serving a prison sentence, the stories are both textured and complex, revealing the multi-faceted challenges associated with addiction and the often checkered journey to recovery.

I am in awe of the brave women who shared their experiences, deepest fears and triumphs for this book. From their stories, I gained insights and a deeper appreciation of the challenges and struggles faced by female addicts, both in battling their addictions and in carrying out the many roles women take on - as daughters, wives, mothers and friends. At its core, this book is a celebration of courage of the 16 women featured, all of whom desire to see a better future for their children and loved ones.

It is a privilege to be part of an organisation like SANA that provides support to persons in recovery, including women and their families, to encourage them to turn their lives around and stay drug-free. Through this work, I have had the opportunity to meet a number of women in recovery, some of whom have joined SANA as Peer Leaders to provide support to other recovering drug addicts and at-risk communities. There are indeed heroes in our midst.

I hope this book will also encourage the many men and women who serve in the helping profession as well as society as a whole to support former drug offenders and SANA's work. Together, we can heal and build a stronger future for Singapore and for each other.

Gillian Koh Tan
President, Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association

Acknowledgements

We have worked with women in the justice system for a number of years and they have truly opened our eyes to the struggles that are unique to women. In their struggles, we saw resoluteness, determination and hope. We then set out on this journey ourselves to seek out women who have desisted so that we can share their stories and motivate the many women who are still struggling.

We are indebted to the women who so kindly volunteered their time. They freely shared their life stories, experiences of prison, and hopes for their futures. They opened up their most personal aspects of their lives with significant emotional challenges. At the same time, they were motivated to improve the support for other women and their families. Each time we revisited the interviews, we too were amazed by their resilience, and the eloquence with which they were able to reflect on their experiences. These women have also stopped condemning themselves and so too should we in recognising if we have also inadvertently continued to punish them.

We would like to thank our supervisors at SPS and SANA for their encouragement and support. They gladly contributed to the book in too many ways to mention. A big thank you to all who supported this band of merry women. Our hearts are filled with gratitude.



Charlotte Stephen
Camelia Liow
Marilyn Lee
Lowshanthini Panesilvam
Isabel Tan

About the Authors

Hi, I am Camelia, someone who has great interest in trauma and understanding how the human mind works. It has been a joy working alongside fellow women, understanding their childhood experiences, and how it has shaped the way they think and who they have become. Everyday, I am humbled that I get a glimpse of their life through their sharing. As much as they are learning from me, I am learning from them too, especially about resilience.

Besides work, you can find me chasing sunsets or taking long walks from east to west. Nothing beats a good workout, some music in the ears and an awesome scenery.

Camelia



I'm in the business of dreams and second chances. I support individuals in pursuing the life they desire, out of addiction and into living their dreams.

When I am not at work, you can find me at the beach or scuba diving in the deep blue. If not, I am probably at a nice cafe drinking coffee, doing fun personality quizzes, having conversations about life and society or enjoying live music. I believe that stories can capture the essence of people's lives - their joy, pain and resiliency. I hope to inspire all women through this book to keep fighting the good fight and for society to do better and love better.

Marilyn

About the Authors

“Life is about picking people up not putting them down.”

I enjoy a cup of tea as it helps me unwind and appreciate what I have - my wonderful family, friends and opportunities to support my clients.

I am a full-time therapist and see my work as supporting individuals and families struggling with drug addiction.

Being able to explore as a therapist is so important, as it opens up ideas, possibilities and hope for us and our clients.

At the end of the day, we all could do with more cheering each other on. Inspiration for me flows while having a cup of tea, relaxing and planning my next project. We worked together supporting and encouraging each other, knowing that we were standing on the shoulders of giants, the 16 women in their wisdom and trust in us.

Charlotte



About the Authors



Hi, I am Shan! I am a psychologist with the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association, and my area of interests include desistance amongst drug offenders, the impact of incarceration on families and gendered pathways to crime and desistance. It has been really fulfilling thus far to be working with these women and being with them through their ups and downs as well as being given the privilege to witness their metamorphosis. I am truly grateful to have been given the opportunity to work with these women and be part of the process that allows them to live empowered and meaningful lives. Apart from work, you can usually catch me at the gym or catching flights (not feels!) as I am busy exploring what this great world has to offer.

Shan



As someone who has worked extensively in the field of mental health, it's amazing to observe and gain a deeper understanding of why drugs become such a viable alternative when a person is feeling despondent. The more I work with and listen to the stories of these women, the more I realise that it's often circumstantial and never boils down to a single "choice". With addictions, it's never as simple as "to consume or not to consume" - and I hope to help educate others in understanding that. In my free time, I'd be huddled up in bed surrounded by speakers, allowing myself to get lost and immersed in music (much to my neighbours' chagrin!).

Isabel

Introduction

The stories in this book are by women who have shared a part of their life that was difficult, painful, but also joyful and triumphant. It is easy to look at the successful end and imagine that most women would be able to address their addictions and life struggles. Unfortunately, many women struggled and continue to struggle with their unhelpful entrenched behaviours. These women share their experiences of victimisation and trauma which was a significant part of their life leading up to their offending behaviours. They have also spent time detained in a Drug Rehabilitation Centre as well as at Changi Women's Prison. The narratives shared trace the path of women offenders into the justice system and their journey towards change and long-term recovery.

Research from 1980s and afterwards have gathered evidence that women and men enter the criminal justice system through different pathways. Factors contributing to the risks for women offending were found to be either: (1) not usually characteristic of men, (2) characteristic of men but occurred in a greater frequency with women, or (3) found to be relatively gender-neutral but with distinct personal and social effects for women (Brennan et al, 2012).

Pathways to crime highlight the differences between men and women. For women, the adversity is weighted more on issues such as trauma, childhood abuse, intimate partner abuse, relational stress, and socio-economic disadvantage as significant in women's pathways to crime (Brennan, et al 2012). The pathway out of prison is equally hazardous as women still have to contend with limited vocational training, work experiences, re-establish a home and likely regain custody of her children (Cobbina, 2009).

Desistance is about continual ceasing and refraining from crimes, coming out of prison is just the first step, the challenge is staying out while leading a meaningful life. Desistance research is understanding the pathways out of crimes with a focus on the individualised processes. It is when a person is able to stop the criminal behaviours and develop more law abiding ones. However, the reason to stop can be varied for each individual. The individuals' lives, their personal trajectories, and social contexts which are embedded into their social networks offer subjective interpretations as keys to understanding long-term life change (Maruna and Mann, 2019).

There are levels to desistance, firstly, primary desistance, as described by periods of crime-free behavior. Secondly, secondary desistance which are periods when the individual is free from criminal behavior which are supported by a shift in personal identity (McNeill & Weaver 2010). More recently, McNeill (2012, 2014) has introduced the further distinction of tertiary desistance to refer to the acceptance of change by others, resulting in the achievement of belonging within a moral community and access to its resources.

Desistance research has developed over recent decades, and the collated evidence suggests that people are more likely to desist when they have:

- strong ties to family and community
- employment that fulfils them
- recognition of their worth from others
- feelings of hope and self-efficacy
- a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives

The gendered perspective provided in this book are the rich testimonies of women who have undergone hardship and their insights into their recovery journeys. The book hopes to fill the gap in the knowledge of women's experiences in committing offences and highlights the oversight of understanding in this area. The journey the professional takes with the person coming out of crime is both supportive, hopeful but all practical. Housing and jobs are important too. These experiences are unique to women. Their pathways into crime as well as their pathways out.

The field of successful rehabilitation is still a developing one. These women in Singapore are of different races, religion and socio-economic status, however they articulate clearly the challenges they faced growing up, very different from a male perspective. Their stories will feature more of struggles with relationships, abuse and limited access to resources.

It is our hope that their voices are heard and not omitted because women make up only a small part of the justice system. Yet they are responsible in a big way within Singapore's society for the next generation.



Glitz and Glamour

Ann

Glitz and Glamour

written by Ann

I like pretty things. Night gowns, make-up and smiling at the camera are things I am very familiar with. I became a model at 18 years old. Currently, I hold a few pageant titles and am both a model and a photography model. However, my current identity is more than these titles.

I was exposed to the modelling industry after I participated in my first pageant at 18 years old. Although I did not win anything during the pageant, I caught the attention of one of the judges. She was from a modelling agency and asked me if I was interested to join the agency to learn more about modelling. It was a whole new world for me because I got to learn so many things, from Basic Etiquette and Grooming to Professional cat-walking. Those who know me now will see me as someone very feminine, but when I was in my teenage years, I was very boyish and loved sports. I did not know how to sit properly, much less talk about walking or posing.

At around 20 years old, I was working as a waitress at a lounge and modelling at the same time. I was introduced to pills and heroin by my friends at the workplace. I was interested to try because my friends told me that it would make me more courageous, which was something I needed for my job as a waitress to get me more commission. I tried and it really worked, especially for someone like me who is shy by nature. However, I regretted starting heroin because of the bad withdrawal effects, something that no one warned me about. Since I was working, I had the money so there was no reason for me to stop the drugs which helped me with feeling confident and coping with the withdrawal symptoms.

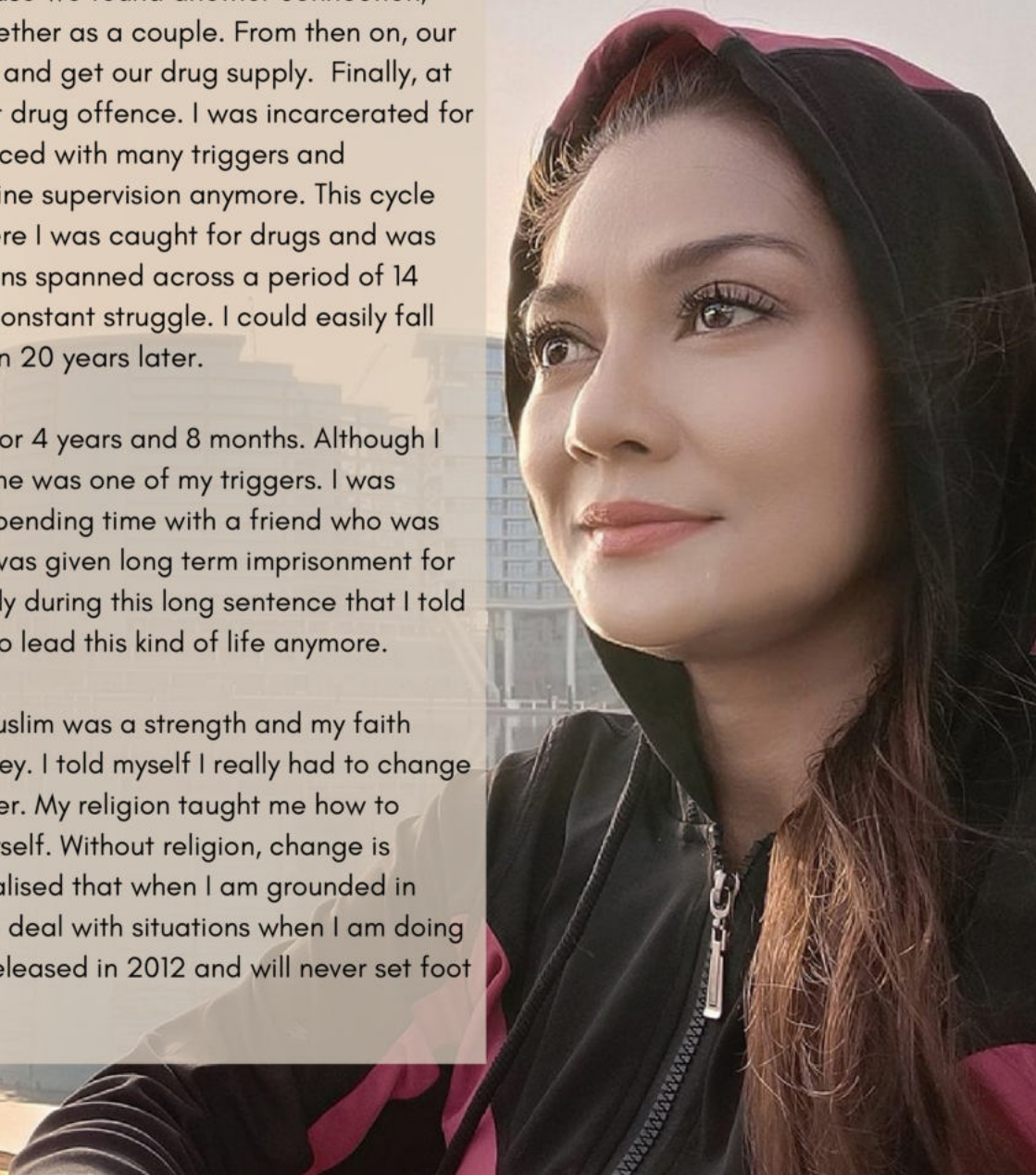


During this time, I was also introduced to my husband through mutual friends. It was after I was engaged to him that I realised he was also on drugs for quite some time already, just that we both had not told each other about it. It sounds alarming when I think about it now but at that time, when we found out about each other's drug-taking behaviors, we were happy because we found another connection, something that we could do together as a couple. From then on, our common goal was to get money and get our drug supply. Finally, at age 22, I was caught for my first drug offence. I was incarcerated for 1 year. After my release, I was faced with many triggers and eventually I did not attend my urine supervision anymore. This cycle went on for another 4 times where I was caught for drugs and was incarcerated. The 4 incarcerations spanned across a period of 14 years. I'm clean now, but it is a constant struggle. I could easily fall back to drugs anytime, 10 or even 20 years later.

My last admission was in 2009, for 4 years and 8 months. Although I was no longer with my husband, he was one of my triggers. I was dealing with a lot of stress and spending time with a friend who was taking drugs as well. This time, I was given long term imprisonment for drug consumption. It was also only during this long sentence that I told myself that I really did not want to lead this kind of life anymore.

I realised that my religion as a Muslim was a strength and my faith helped me start my change journey. I told myself I really had to change my attitude and manage my anger. My religion taught me how to control my anger and cleanse myself. Without religion, change is possible but not sustainable. I realised that when I am grounded in faith, I have more helpful ways to deal with situations when I am doing something bad to myself. I was released in 2012 and will never set foot in prison again.

"But having said that, I know sobriety is a challenge. I pray every day that I will not go back to prison or drugs ever again."



In the beginning when I left home with my two sons, my husband was unhappy and he took my elder son back with him. It broke my heart when my elder son, who was about 7 years old then, would take a very long bus ride to the west to come and find me. He wanted to stay with me and he told me that he did not have enough to eat for every meal, so I fought for my son to stay with me. Yet, I did not treasure this opportunity and was not able to spend most of my time with my children as I was in and out of prison. There was a time when my sons were separated and placed in different Children's Homes. It impacted me greatly because in my heart, I knew they did not deserve this. It was because of me that they were not able to lead a normal life, their freedom was also affected. It was not a smooth journey when I was released in between my multiple incarcerations because my sons were very smart and they knew I was not doing good.

"My elder son saw me consume Subutex before and he directly questioned me when he saw the pills, telling me that he did not like it when I was on drugs."

My mother passed away when I was serving my sentence and it had a strong impact on me. At that time, I thought to myself, "My mother cared for me, but I was a disappointment.' She often scolded me to better my ways in life and I would just agree saying 'Ok, Ok' but I continued taking drugs. I felt that I did not fulfil my responsibility as a daughter and did not have a chance to prove to my mother or ask my mother for forgiveness. As a Muslim, we believe that if our mother did not forgive us, we are not forgiven in the after life. I told myself that I cannot let history repeat itself for my father. Thus, I was determined to stay out in the community to care for my father for as long as possible.

My elder brother and I had a similar past, we were both into drugs. Even before his current drug sentence, he offered me drugs. However, I had learnt to be different and would reject him, sometimes telling him that I was fasting. This was when I also realised that I have really changed, and I am firm about what I want to do and what I do not want to do.

My sister also saw my change and told me how proud she was of me. I did not do anything special, but I think the biggest confirmation that I changed was when we were able to travel together. When I was on drugs, I was not able to go anywhere, I kept going to the toilet to fulfil my addiction. I was always high, in my own world and paranoid of everything. The first time I was able to travel without any worries, was the day I realised what true freedom felt like. I realised how beautiful life is without drugs. I did not need drugs anymore.

THE SINGAPORE
HINDU SOCIETY
DEEPA VILAS

SPONSORING
SARIS
SHOW



Truth is, after being in and out of prisons 6 times, it is not easy to reset my life in the community. It was like being a toddler again, I needed to learn how to walk, I needed to be worried about how much money and CPF (savings) I have. Naturally, I found myself comparing with my peers who had never been incarcerated and was sure they were successful in their careers and had much more CPF than I did. However, comparing did not help, I knew I just had to work hard for myself.

I spent my first 5 months of being out in the community taking care of my father and also volunteered at a welfare organisation. After he passed on, I started working. I started at Geylang Bazaar as a part-timer because I wanted to see if I could manage it. After being able to hold down the job for 3 years, I then had the confidence to change my job. I realised that the jobscope did not matter, I wanted to continue working because I wanted to feel responsible. I wanted to work and earn money just like everyone else.

I wanted a routine that I could occupy myself with. I previously worked as a supervisor at an oil rig company and that is my current job now. I was open to trying different jobs as it helped me learn new things and most importantly, if a company does not want me, I will not read too much into it. I will just apply for other jobs. I am still a work-in-progress. Amidst my constant struggle in the community for the past 10 years, I have come to realise that life is beautiful and there is always something I can look forward to. If I had continued down the path of drug-taking, nothing good would have come out of it. Instead, it will ruin my life, my body and my mind. As I continue on my journey of new beginnings, I would like to share with you, you who are reading my story, my favourite verse from the Quran,

“Which then of your Lord’s blessing you deny? Which part of the Lord’s blessing you deny?”

What it says here is that we have to learn that there is blessing everywhere, even the air we breathe is blessed. Every little thing is a blessing and that is when we are able to see life as meaningful. If you have 10 cents, tell yourself that at least you have 10 cents. Give thanks to God for everything.

Own Greatest Enemy
Kasmawati

MAN IS HIS OWN
WORST ENEMY.

CICERO

Own Greatest Enemy

written by Kasmawati

Having been incarcerated 6 times throughout my life, I have met many inmates from all sorts of backgrounds. People tend to assume that those who consume drugs all have similar stories - thinking we might have had poor family support or might have been exposed to drugs growing up. However, I've learnt over the years that we believe what we choose to perceive; we sabotage ourselves because we believe the story and script in our minds.

I was surrounded by love and support growing up. Even through all 6 incarcerations, that love, and support remained constant and never faltered. However, it was me that refused to accept that love and support. I estranged myself in my own mind, stubbornly believing that I was alone and that nobody cared about me or understood me. People loved me, but I did not love myself.

"I was my own biggest enemy."

Living in a household with 10 children, my parents had to be strict with all of us. I was the fifth child, right smack in the middle. People often believe that middle children are often overlooked or neglected - but that was not the case. I was daddy's girl, and my siblings would often come to me if they needed anything from my father. Though I was the fifth child, I was the first when it came to being the most mischievous - this was because I knew that I could get away with most things, since I was daddy's girl. I was smart too, I passed most of my exams without trying and never needed to put in much effort. However, I took all of this for granted and didn't take anything seriously - perhaps this was when the seeds began to take root.

I dropped out of school when I was in Secondary 2. School was too boring, and I refused to study - I believed that school was pointless, and that earning money was better. The principal even came to my house, to appeal to my parents to encourage me to go back to school. The adults all agreed that I should, because I had the potential. I refused flatly, and there was nothing they could do about it.

So I went out to work, in a bid to prove that I was independent. My parents were strict and enforced curfews - I blatantly stayed out late and refused to return home, as a show of rebellious power and because I did not want to follow their 'regulations'. I would sleep at the void decks nearby, even though I had a home and a bed to sleep in. I just insisted on having things go my way. Even then, my parents never once hit me - they'd only lock the door so I couldn't leave, but I would always find a way.

At its peak, my older brother even shaved my head in a desperate attempt to stop me from leaving the house - especially after my mother spent many nights crying and searching for me when I refused to come home. I would work around it by wearing a wig and leave home unapologetically. Around this time, was when I first started experimenting with drugs. I was a force to be reckoned with and nobody could stop me. I was my own biggest enemy yet again.



At 17, I was matchmade with an Australian man and got married. I lived there for about a year - but the rules and expectations of me as a wife were even worse than at home. At such a young age, I had a new set of responsibilities I was not prepared for. My desire for freedom and independence increased even more. I filed for a divorce as soon as I could and came back to Singapore. My mischief began all over again, but much worse than before.

At 18, I deep-dived into my old ways and met my boyfriend, who is my current husband - he was a drug pusher then. Drugs were expensive and I could have them for free - that was when I began taking more drugs than before. This was the first time I was sentenced, but laws at the time were not as strict as they are today. I was released within a month and barely learnt my lesson. Again, I was my own biggest enemy. Despite all this, I was still living with my parents, who continued to plead for me to change but they also provided for me. I took their support and refused to listen to them. After my first sentence, my 2nd Older Brother revealed that he was caught for drugs when he was 16 (I was 11 years old at that time). He was sentenced to Boys' Home and subsequently served a drug sentence in prison. After seeing me going in and out of prison several times, he repeatedly reminded me that he too was a rebellious kid. Yet he was able to change, why couldn't I?

I listened, but I couldn't seem to believe it. My own self-doubt drowned out the voices of support. I was still stubborn and naïve. The harder they were on me, the more I wanted to run the other way. Nothing they said or did would help me realise the error of my ways. I continued doing what I wanted to do, continued consuming drugs and continued going in and out of prison. Every time I had to do time, my family continued to visit me. Yet, I never tried to change, until it was nearly too late.

"I decided, I wanted change."

In 1993, my mother passed away while I was serving my 5th sentence. My brother told me that she cried every day, wondering where she went wrong with me. My heart was broken, knowing that she still worried about me till the very end. I thought about my father - about how I was his precious daughter - and was afraid that I'd miss spending time with him as well. I was determined to do better and be better. I was determined to look after my father and be that daughter he always wanted me to be.

I got married for the fourth time in 1999. It is really a mystery how fate works because I am back with my ex-boyfriend who was a drug pusher in the past. However, we made a pact to stay clean together and we were determined to build a better life together. Alongside my son from a previous marriage, we had another child - and wanted to build a loving home. Unfortunately, my husband picked up the habit again along the way and I was furious. Out of spite, I picked up drugs again - hoping that this would help him "quit". Everyone around me told me this was ridiculous and silly, but once again I refused to listen, determined to do things my way. Yet another example of how I was my greatest enemy. Eventually, we were caught together in 2009 - which would be my last and final sentence. I was released in 2013.

Once again, everyone visited me without fail - but the wake-up call came in the form of my sons. My younger son was angry at me. He confronted me and said that I ruined everything. He always thought his family was happy and complete, until we returned to prison. He did not try to hide his disappointment. It was then that I realised after all those years and multiple sentences - that I only cared about myself and my welfare and neglected those around me. Years later, I realised my elder son was also smoking drugs and is currently incarcerated for a drug sentence. I blamed myself for setting a bad example for him. Thus, I am also determined to support him in leaving the drug life.

"I want to be SOMEBODY."

Being determined doesn't necessarily mean that I no longer faced obstacles - I was still very much my own greatest enemy. I had a constant dark cloud looming over me, telling me not to trust people and to always doubt others. I believed those thoughts, which made me quite a stubborn person. I had an opportunity to do a job that I enjoyed but struggled to find my footing at work because I believed my own colleagues were looking down on me. I felt the young 15-year-old Kasma come out again, even though I was already 50 - wanting to lash out, be rebellious and run away. In my head, I was sure that they did not trust me and took the opportunity to 'bully' me due to my incarceration history. However, there was a part of me that was also fighting strongly, telling myself that I need to change this attitude because "I want to be somebody". It was fortunate that I had a supportive boss who also reminded me that if I wanted to succeed, I just have to try, no matter how hard it was. If you ask me, having a stable employment with a monthly salary is an important factor for me to stay away from my old life. It helps to not have a daily rated job because it forces me to plan my finances and not spend money on 'unnecessary stuff'. It was definitely a struggle then, to change my habits and to start seeing the good in others.

It took a long time before I allowed myself to let my guard down and open my heart up to those around me. Time has proven that they are not out to harm me and only have my best intentions in mind. One of whom is my counsellor, Ms Janet. I met her when I was in a counselling programme at Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA). She gave me such good support that I continued to contact her even after the mandatory 6 months follow-up. She goes beyond her call of duty and would even counsel my children. She continues to be my counsellor till today. Through her, I realised that I was the one hurting myself all along. She brought a fresh perspective to me when she asked me, "For how long do you want to be branded?" and corrected my thoughts that the society is not like before, they do not look down on drug addicts anymore so I should stop my negative thinking.

It has taken me close to 40 years and all these struggles for me to come to terms with the self-doubt in my mind. I was incredibly lucky, that nobody gave up on treating me with kindness and compassion despite my resistance. I fought these self-depreciating thoughts by repeatedly telling myself good and kind things - even if I didn't entirely believe it - until I was able to truly embrace and embody that attitude. Now I can boldly tell myself, "Good job, man!"

"We (ex-offenders) are not alone. Your hand is not holding air, it is holding a hot palm."

Y₄ O₁ U₁

Today, I do my best to help my community in whatever way I can - through volunteering at my district with the town council and being a peer leader at Ms Janet's after-care programmes.

A₁ R₁ E₁

I want to be a living example of how we are often a victim of our own minds; how we go around to seek comfort and love, only for us to pull our hand away whenever someone offers it to us. I often felt that the community is not helping us, but now I see that the society is actually open-minded.

S₁ A₁ F₄ E₁

They are always helping and giving second chances. It is what we choose to focus on. Thus, if I have the strength now to do something for the community, I will help.

Love and support will never come to us, until we learn to make peace with that enemy in our minds and learn to love ourselves - only then, will our eyes finally be able to see the amount of support we've been receiving all along.

H₄ E₁ R₁ E₁

POSTCARD



A Letter to My Daughter

Venus (not her real name)

"YOUR MAMA IS A BETTER WOMAN.

YOUR MAMA IS NOT WHAT THEY SAY.

YOUR MAMA LOVES YOU."

A Letter to My Daughter

written by Venus

To My Dearest Daughter :

I see so much of myself in you. I see your strength and resilience. I see how you have been able to adapt to what life has given you - even though you're so young. But you had no choice; you were a little child, who got caught up in the struggles of your mummy. There's so much I want to share, but I'm afraid that you may not accept my story. I'm worried that you may point fingers at me and say, "You did the same thing!"

I share my story nonetheless - because I want you to be a better version of me. I want you to know that I understand your pain. I want you to be happy.

When I was younger, my parents were very strict. I had a curfew where I had to be home by 6pm every day. If not, I will get beaten up with anything they could get their hands on. Sometimes, it would be a cane, a belt, or a hanger. Your grandparents were never on good terms. They would always fight and I felt so suffocated by it all. I just wanted a sense of belonging, somewhere that has love and peace. I wished every day to be able to go home to a loving family that we can share our ups and downs together and not quarrel, fight, and get beaten up when things didn't turn out the way they wanted. I didn't have any good role models either, my parents had their own dark past to deal with. The love I had at home was transactional. Everything was about money and what you could bring back, I wondered if I mattered at all. I looked for "home" elsewhere - I hung out with my friends during most of my free time.



One night, the club I was working at was raided. I wanted to leave, but the police were already on the premises. I just surrendered and decided to serve my sentence without resistance to avoid delay such as appealing for extension for court sentencing, I just wanted to quickly get through my sentence and be done with it. I knew I was wrong and had to face up to that.

However, something tragic happened to my father during the time of my incarceration; he met with a very serious road accident. He was hit by a bus and was in a coma. Upon hearing the news, my whole body started shaking and my tears rolled down uncontrollably. Special arrangements were made for me to visit my father in hospital. I was escorted by 2 prison officers.

I watched him lie there with tubes all over his body. I was filled with remorse. I was angry with myself; I was so sure that it was me who had made him so worried that he lost focus while driving. Back in prison, I was still very depressed and cried almost every night to sleep. I prayed every day for my father's recovery, telling God to let me be the one to suffer and not my parents. Thankfully, about 3 months later, my father recovered and visited me via tele-visit. I was so happy and told him I was sorry for making them worried and I promised that I will be a better person.

At around 2-3 months before my release date, an officer offered to put me on a programme so that I could go home sooner. But I rejected her. I didn't want to waste any more time and just wanted to finish serving my sentence completely in prison. I wanted to change and I tried my best to look for a job but having a record made it challenging. I was blessed and somehow eventually landed a good job. I learned to avoid negative friends and focused on my job. I settled into work quickly and smoothly and I started a relationship. He was to be my husband, and later your father.

The relationship between your father and me did not work out so I left him to raise you myself. I was really unprepared - I wanted to give you the world, but I didn't know how to. I struggled hard to earn money to take care of our living expenses, to give you everything.

I was sued for bankruptcy and left with nothing to my name as your father had used my name during the time when I was pregnant with you. Sadly, he was unable to look after himself and I too ended up being declared a bankrupt. I had to make ends meet, to earn money for us and make monthly payments for the bankruptcy. I was carrying you with me from place to place, as I was trying to figure out this difficult time. I thought a stable home would be the right thing to do, so I left you in the care of different friends while I went out to work and earn as much money as I could for a better life for us both.

Sadly, I couldn't shield your eyes or cover your ears during that time. The adults were angry with me but took it out on you. I wonder if you were ever happy during that time. People told you that mama didn't love you, that mama didn't want you, that mama was a cheat and got played out by men. That was the angriest I have ever been in my entire life.

**I hated that they tried to sow these lies in your little mind.
I knew that everything they said was untrue...
but what if you began believing it?**


And you had to keep changing pre-schools because you were misbehaving; teachers didn't know how to handle you. I was blinded by fury and rage. I desperately wanted those words to stop. I fought with your grandma - I even took a chopper thinking that I just wanted to scare her. In the end, I begged her to please stop saying toxic and hurtful words to you.

4576

03/02/99

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That's when you came into my life.
You were the most beautiful thing
I've held in my arms.
Your life was so much more precious
than my own.



I scolded you. I shouted at you. I was harsh in my discipline and even hit you. I was afraid that I would lose sight of you. But I wasn't being a good role model - While other kids cuddled a teddy bear to play, you only knew how to beat it. Because that's how I communicated with you and that really hurt me so much, knowing that you were learning and expressing the wrong behaviour.

Yes, on the surface I changed. I quit drugs and my old lifestyle. But I was still learning to adapt to this proper new life. It might sound silly, but sometimes I feel undeserving of the happiness I have today. Sometimes, I worry about the shadow my past has left behind. There's so much I need to learn still, so much I don't know. Things seemed stable at one point, and I let things go unnoticed. I found drawings and writings. You drew a little girl who felt unloved.

You talked about wanting to end your life.

Knowing that you had these thoughts and feelings shattered me. I thought about how you had not have received enough love. I thought about how you were moving from place to place, without a sense of home. Life was scary and unstable for me. and unknowingly, for you too. I know you're the type to keep things to yourself and I wish I could hear your thoughts. I remembered all the times when your teachers called me repeatedly to complain that you were naughty. I had to come down and scold you harshly. That was the only way I knew, thinking I could reach out to you.

Were you only naughty because you knew that meant you could see me?

I see so much of myself in you. And I'm scared. You are just as headstrong as I am, and I am worried that you may be led astray. Your life has so much meaning and I want you to see that. Because of you, mama is a better person. From the moment you were born, you've given me motivation and drive to stay strong in my desistance journey.

I want to be the best mother I can be for you and give you love, protection, and security. You're young now, and there's still time to make amends and rebuild broken bonds. Now a miracle has brought us a man that truly accepts, loves and is willing to take care of you and me, and you call him Daddy. He puts in all his effort working hard to earn money, he loves us so much that he tries to make sure everything at home is clean and ready for us. For the sake of a better future for you and your little brother, I have quit working and decided to dedicate my time to spending time with you as you forge your own identity as you grow into a young lady and that your little brother is growing up happily together with you. So much time has passed, but I am still learning.

I believe you will become a person with a heart of gold, smart, responsible, and happy.

***With all the love in the world,
Mama***



“

I inherited my parents' troubles, but I am determined that you do not inherit my wrong path. Together we learn, share, love and grow our blissful future as a family together.

”

Double Time

Wendy



***"I was rebellious for 20 years,
I need to give my family double the time
to forgive me."***

Someone once told me, 'If you want your family to accept you, you need to give them double the time.' I remembered replying that if that were so, I would have to wait until I am 60 years old to gain their acceptance. However, this mentor of mine told me that it is not a problem, as long as I show my family that I have changed with my actions. I reflected upon myself and realised that I used to like to blame others, my family included. We always think that others are at fault, that I am not at fault. I would blame them for not trusting me and not giving me a chance but in actual fact, I did not give myself a chance to change. I realised the community that I needed was my family, not the 'family' I had in prison.


I first met drugs when I was about 17 years old and working at a nightclub. At that age, my friends were a large part of my life. They started to smoke drugs and therefore, I was also introduced to it. It was a new exciting 'friend' that I have never met before. The first few times I could start and stop whenever I wanted; or so I believed. Before I knew it, stopping didn't seem like an option.

When I was released from my 2nd admission in my 20s, I met a guy and we got married. We smoked together during the course of the relationship and I found myself incarcerated again. This time round it was different, I found out that I was pregnant and was granted early release to give birth in the community.

I became a mother but it did not stop my relationship with drugs. It did not help that my husband was also smoking in the same house, so I was not motivated to stop. In fact, I was just more triggered. We had a new identity as parents, but we both chose to retain our past lifestyle. I was caring for my newborn daughter but I was also smoking.

"I knew it was not healthy for my baby but I just could not stop."

When my daughter was 13 months old, I was forced to leave her because I was incarcerated again. She had to be in the care of my mother because my husband was also incarcerated. It was also the start of the 'Hide and Seek' between my husband and me. I would be released when he was still incarcerated. When he was released, I would be incarcerated again. At that time, it was very hard to hold the family together. He knew that my mother was caring for our daughter, but he never once went to visit her and was not a father to our child.

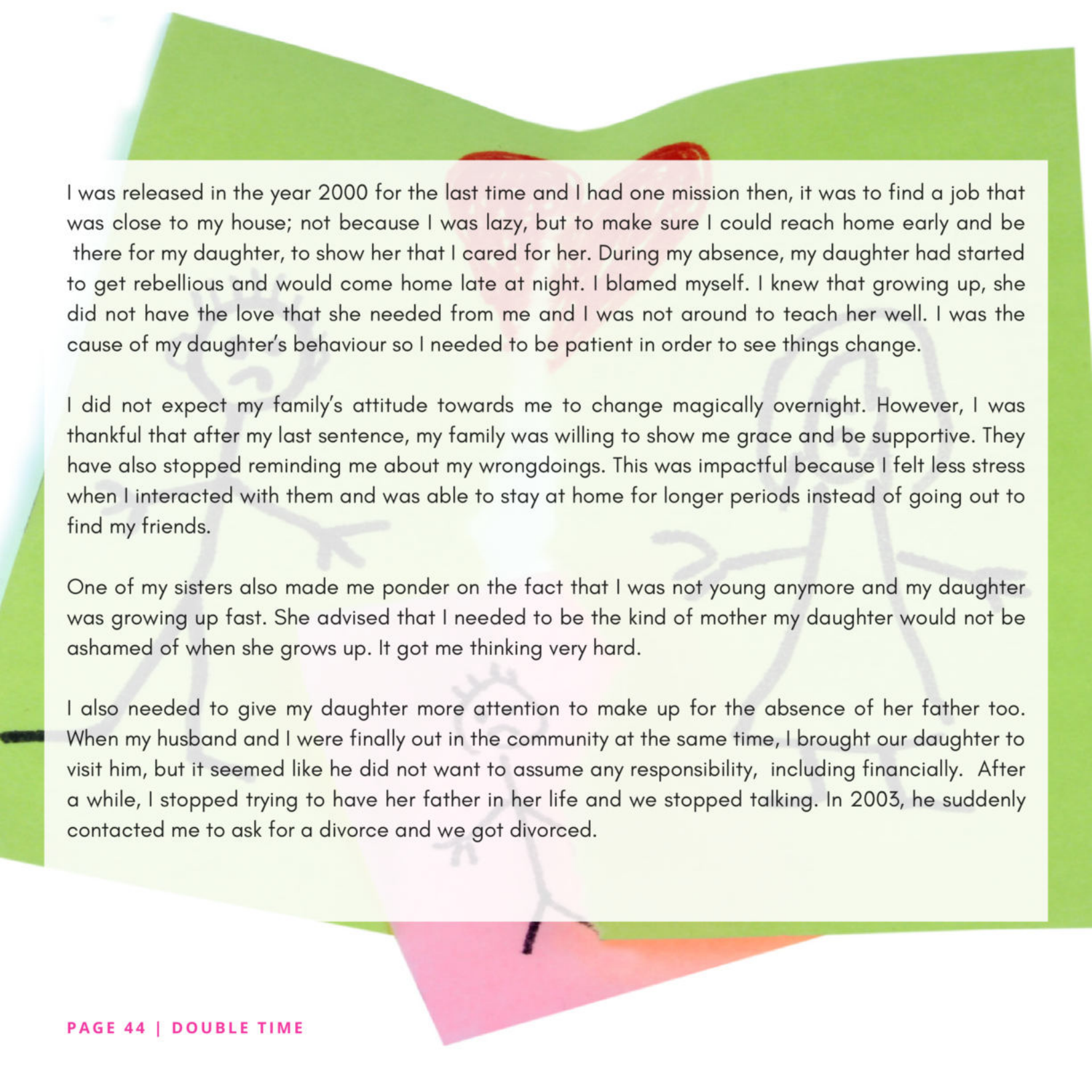


I knew I had to pick up the pieces and start life again. This was what I told myself, but it was a different story every time I was out in the community. My remission period was often very short. I was unable to adapt to the outside world and I did not know how to face the world and my own family did not trust me; but I gave them every reason to doubt me because I really did go back to drugs. When it got tough outside, I would think of my friends and the community I had in prison.

"It was easy to go back to my old ways."

SEVEN is the magic number. I was in prisons for a total of 7 times due to drug consumption and my last sentence was because I absconded from urine tests. The last sentence was a game changer. It may also be due to a change in environment from the old prison to the Changi Women's Prison. I used to see the old prison as a 'chalet' as I had many friends there. However, after the move to Changi Women's Prison, I lost the sense of community that I had.

It was a blessing in disguise because I could remain quiet for the whole day and I also started reflecting on myself. I realised I was emotionally tired from repeating the same mistakes and going in and out of prison. I began to make plans to stay out of prison because I no longer had a sense of belonging in prison anymore.



I was released in the year 2000 for the last time and I had one mission then, it was to find a job that was close to my house; not because I was lazy, but to make sure I could reach home early and be there for my daughter, to show her that I cared for her. During my absence, my daughter had started to get rebellious and would come home late at night. I blamed myself. I knew that growing up, she did not have the love that she needed from me and I was not around to teach her well. I was the cause of my daughter's behaviour so I needed to be patient in order to see things change.

I did not expect my family's attitude towards me to change magically overnight. However, I was thankful that after my last sentence, my family was willing to show me grace and be supportive. They have also stopped reminding me about my wrongdoings. This was impactful because I felt less stress when I interacted with them and was able to stay at home for longer periods instead of going out to find my friends.

One of my sisters also made me ponder on the fact that I was not young anymore and my daughter was growing up fast. She advised that I needed to be the kind of mother my daughter would not be ashamed of when she grows up. It got me thinking very hard.

I also needed to give my daughter more attention to make up for the absence of her father too. When my husband and I were finally out in the community at the same time, I brought our daughter to visit him, but it seemed like he did not want to assume any responsibility, including financially. After a while, I stopped trying to have her father in her life and we stopped talking. In 2003, he suddenly contacted me to ask for a divorce and we got divorced.



Fast forward to 21 years later, my daughter and I are living together with my grandchildren. We are both divorcees but our relationship has been restored and we now have each other.

I am also a volunteer who helps care for the senior citizens who live alone. I found a larger community for myself with other recovering persons and together we continue to give back to those who also need our love and support. I started volunteering because it made me feel that even as an ex-offender, I can make a difference in someone else's life. Volunteering is one way, but definitely not the only way. There are many ways to make a difference and give back to society.

There was a time in my life when I thought my life was destined to be spent in prisons because a fortune teller told me so. It really changed how I viewed myself because if that was my destiny, then there was nothing much I could do. It's funny looking back, because I actually am still going in and out of prisons. Except that now, I have a new identity as a volunteer for Christian Counselling.

The Price of "Freedom"

Angel



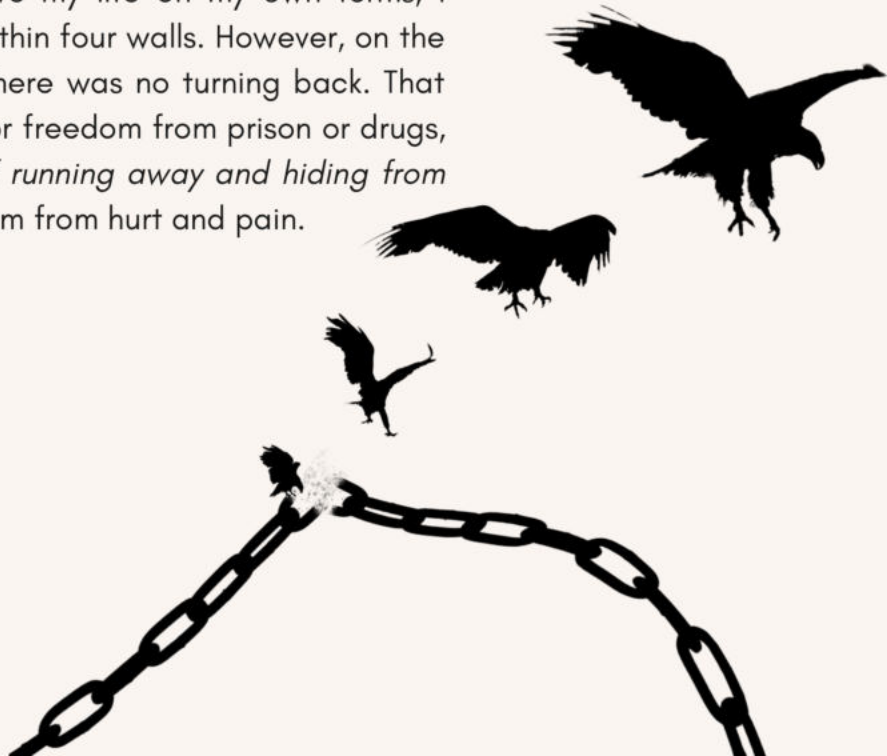
The Price of "Freedom"

written by Angel

"I yearned for freedom on my own terms. I later learned that freedom comes in many forms - not just through an outlet or an escape."

I entered prison 8 times, with my first-ever sentence at 17 years old. I am writing this account of my life at 55 years old.

I have wasted so many years of my life in and out of the system. Based on my experiences, I believed that freedom was short-lived. I didn't understand it until much later in my life. Each time I was caught, I constantly yearned for the taste of freedom again. I wanted to live my life on my own terms, I wanted to be physically free and not stuck within four walls. However, on the day of my last sentence, I told myself that there was no turning back. That was when I realised that I yearned not only for freedom from prison or drugs, but also I yearned for freedom from fear (*of running away and hiding from the police*), freedom from my past and freedom from hurt and pain.



"I craved it - heroin, specifically. I lived for it, I craved it and I was willing to serve time in prison just to get a hit. I couldn't live without it."

The allure and power that drugs had over me was so strong that I couldn't live without it. It was so bad to the point where I was never out of prison for more than 2 years. I might be clean now, but I still catch myself thinking about drugs; but I'm now able to quickly come back to reality and remember that compromising my current life is not worth it.

My first foray with drugs began when I was working in a night club. I met people from all walks of life, including those who abused drugs. I was given my first "kick" by a girlfriend - there was no turning back. Drugs became a necessity for me, I was completely addicted.


Between the years of going in and out of prison, I met my current husband who was also consuming. My life truly revolved around drugs back then. We were not only a couple but we were business partners. He was my accomplice and we were partners-in-crime. The life of a trafficker was exciting because we earned a lot of money but we were constantly on the run. The relationship felt like a constant high too. Eventually, we both got caught and a large chunk of our relationship was spent serving our sentence. Romantic, don't you think?

One day, my husband decided to turn over a new leaf - I scoffed and thought it was impossible. We had been living this lifestyle for years and I thought it was all empty promises. But he proved me wrong. He worked hard at his job and constantly encouraged me to do the same. From my partner-in-crime, he became my role model. I aligned my goals with his and we both worked hard towards change. However, my family was skeptical, just like how I was initially. They didn't like us together because they (*understandably*) thought that we were a bad influence on each other. Over time, they saw our change and even looked to us when there were any issues in the family. When they saw us, they saw 'success'.

My husband wasn't the only one that encouraged me to change. My mother played a huge part in my life as well. I still remember the time where my mother had a cancer relapse. She told me that her one desire was to see me change. It hit me. It hit me... hard. I thought to myself, "We constantly think that as humans, nothing is fair. But guess what, all is fair, we each have a life. It is how you manage it and how you take responsibility that matters. Drug addicts like myself are super irresponsible." I love my mother very much. She took care of me single-handedly since I was young. What was I doing all this while? Ignoring her advice and just living for myself. How selfish! This was a huge turning point for me. At this point, memories of my prison experiences started to pour in as a stark reminder that I could no longer continue living this drug-fueled life.

Let me rewind a little - I was pregnant and I had to give birth before going into prison. I suffered from pre- and post-natal depression. Around this time was when the news first broke about my mother suffering from cancer. The treatment was so expensive and I kept encouraging her to go back to Malaysia to seek treatment. She refused, she insisted that she needed to care for my daughter. I felt like an absolute useless human being. I couldn't care for my daughter and sickly mother, because of my own choices. I was so stressed out that I did not eat or drink much and I wanted to die. I hurt myself with whatever that was around and I even tried to end my life. It was painful and I had no will to live anymore. I even questioned myself about how useless I was that I could not even end my life properly. I constantly fought with officers, those were dark times.

Never again.

A woman in a white dress is dancing in a field of white flowers. The background is a bright, hazy sky with soft light rays. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

As I reflect on my life story, I was a lost sheep for a very long time. I constantly felt useless and was trapped in the cycle of drugs. However, God helped me change the way I see myself. I thank God for his forgiving grace and for giving me the desire to change. My desire for change started in prison during my last sentence. I was given the opportunity to work and I worked really hard to pick up whatever skills I could. Three days after my release, I was offered a job and I had to start from scratch. It was a huge struggle managing sales, human resource, presentations and the list goes on... but I didn't give up. Apart from that, I also started on some volunteering work and realised that there are so many others like me. There were people from different backgrounds, many who were in and out of prison and are huge role models to me today. I found my safe community and most importantly, I found God. Or rather, HE found me.

This is my story and I am proud to share it with you. We all walk different paths but I know with the right desire to change, we will eventually make it home. It is an ongoing journey and there are times I catch myself thinking about the drug world again but I cut the thought out and walk away from any dangerous situation... because right now, I have found a better life, a better world and no one can take that away from me.

The Real Second Chance

Chris

**Another Chance
Just Ahead**

The Real Second Chance

written by Chris



“A second chance doesn’t mean anything if you didn’t learn from your first.”

Everyone says they want to change after prison, but the truth is, it’s not that easy. It’s not easy to walk away from a life you’ve known for so long – away from old friends, old habits, old mindsets. There is a saying that goes, “A second chance doesn’t mean anything if you didn’t learn from your first.” That was a hard lesson that took me years to learn.

I grew up in a regular Singaporean family. I was the fourth of 5 children, with an elder sister, 2 older brothers, and a younger sister. My parents worked hard to put food on the table – my father was a taxi driver and my mother worked in construction – leaving my grandmother to take care of us. My parents worked long hours and rarely cared if I got into trouble. My older siblings were working too, so my younger sister and I were alone at home a lot. I felt like I was nobody’s child, and with this revelation came the freedom to do whatever I wanted and whenever I wanted.

The first time I learned how to smoke, I brought my younger sister with me. I bought a pack of cigarettes and we went outside together. Like many other kids in my neighborhood at the time, I was also in a gang, and it was through these friends that I was first introduced to substances like glue and sleeping pills. I used to skip school too, although my parents didn't know. Once, I ran away from home because I felt that my father liked my sister more than me. Whenever she asked him for money, he would assume that she was going to buy school books, but when I asked him for money, he immediately thought that I was going to buy drugs. Needless to say, he was right and I was indeed rebellious.

But I knew it was wrong; I had children, I shouldn't be taking drugs.

I stopped my education when I was 13 years old. When I was 18, after discovering that we were pregnant with my son, my boyfriend and I got married. My daughter was born a few years later, and soon after that, my marriage started to fall apart. We separated and eventually got divorced a few years later. I realised that I couldn't take care of 2 children by myself yet we weren't allowed to split the children. During that time both of us were struggling through the divorce and did not look after the children.

When I was about 25 years old, I started a relationship with a guy who was using drugs. He was taking ecstasy, a new drug to me, and he offered me some.


The only excuse I have is that the stress from the divorce was getting to me, so after awhile, I succumbed and took ecstasy. Initially, I was taking the drugs about twice a week as I was working to support my daughter. Some time later, my boyfriend started trafficking drugs so that we could afford to pay for our own consumption. With the money he earned, I soon had the choice of any drug I wanted.

I stopped working and moved into a one-room rental flat with my boyfriend, leaving my daughter in my mother's care. I still saw her every weekend, but for the rest of the week she stayed at my mother's house.

As much as I loved her, I didn't want her (or my mother) to know that I was doing drugs.

As my boyfriend and I earned money from selling drugs, we began to gamble as well. We lost a lot of money, and I had to borrow money from my mother. Even as we spiralled deeper, it never crossed my mind that we could be caught by the police. The thought of going to prison wasn't much of a deterrent either; I knew guys who had gone to prison and said it was like a holiday. So my first arrest came as a shock.

My daughter was with us when the police came. They had to take her to the police station because there was no one else around. My family was shocked to find out that I'd been taking drugs. I was sentenced to a year in prison but they still came to visit me. My parents, brother, and sister all took turns to visit. My mother blamed my boyfriend for teaching me how to take drugs.



Prison was different from anything I'd ever experienced. I wasn't scared, yet I knew and respected the rules. I'd always had something of a quick temper, but in prison, if you were told to sit, you would sit – even if you weren't happy about it. That's just the way it was. I spent my time there making friends and working. My job was to pack milk powder, and to take care of mothers and their babies and the elderly too.

After a year in prison, I was released. My mother, who was extremely supportive, welcomed me back into her home. My boyfriend's sentence was two years longer than mine, so while I waited for him, I worked hard and saved up to buy a house. I was all ready to start anew. But like I said, it's not so easy. Stepping out of prison and back into the world was difficult. The moment you come out, there are so many things to face.

My eldest brother came to stay with us when my boyfriend and I moved into my new 3-room flat. He was having money trouble and he gambled a lot. Once, I agreed to be a guarantor for his car, but he ran away from the loan, so I had to pay \$20,000. That was just one of the things I had to face. But I still love him a lot, because he's my brother.

After that, my daughter wanted to stay with me, so she moved in with us. It was difficult because I had never really known her before that. I didn't know how to care for her, and I struggled to understand her. It was difficult for her too; she was used to having my mother bring her to school, but with me, she had to go to school by herself, and when she came home, I wasn't around. She felt alone. When she was 12, she ran away and refused to come home. So she went back to live with my mother.

With the family problems and stress building up over the years, I turned back to drugs again to feel better. But things only got worse. As we bought more drugs, my boyfriend owed more and more money. Our income wasn't enough to pay the loans so I sold my house to pay off everything. We were left with a hundred thousand dollars, and within three months, we had used it all up and were back to gambling. My boyfriend also beat me a lot - it was so bad that there were mornings I couldn't get up because of the excruciating pain. I was sick of the drugs, and I didn't want to carry on with this kind of life anymore. So the second time we got caught - 11 years after my release from prison - it felt like a godsend.

My family was livid. My second brother, for one, had declared to everyone that if I landed in prison a second time, they wouldn't be coming to visit me. My daughter was equally furious that I hadn't changed. She scolded me, and we quarreled. She eventually agreed to visit with my mother. But my mother was older now and couldn't visit as often, so I only saw her once a month.

After so many years of struggling with drugs, my second time in DRC was different. I saw how much hurt I had caused my family and I was sick of my old life. "Maybe I can change," I told myself.

During my time in DRC, I heard stories of friends whose parents had passed away while they were incarcerated. The idea of losing my mother like that, while I was in prison, was unbearable. I thought about my children, too - what if they got married and I couldn't attend the wedding? I knew I would live to regret it. My love for my family, combined with my fear of losing them, created a new resolve in me. I told myself that this was the last time - I would not be coming in again.



I received counselling in prison, which helped a lot. The counsellor taught me problem-solving skills and helped me to keep my eyes fixed on my goals. I wanted to be a good person. I wanted to have a good job, earn money, and bring my mother on a holiday. When I was released from prison one year later, I went to The Turning Point, which is a residential halfway house in Singapore. I stayed there for nine months to finish my rehabilitation.

After more than a decade of wrestling with drugs and addiction, I was finally free. I still had to face the same challenges as before - but this time, I knew I could do whatever it took to overcome them. The only friends I had were from my old life, and they were still doing drugs, so I stayed away from them; I didn't want friends like that anymore. I paid careful attention to my stress levels so that I would know when I needed to get help before things went downhill.

"After more than a decade of wrestling with drugs and addiction, I was finally free."

I started going to church and volunteering there. Slowly, I made new friends. These were friends I could cry with and talk to when I felt stressed. I met a man - a good man, who wasn't a drug addict - and we got married in church. Today, my relationship with my children is good, and I'm very close to my younger sister. I talk to my mum often, although her memory is getting worse. When I got my first bonus, I brought her to Hong Kong for a holiday. That was a dream come true.

Today, I am thankful for second chances, and for the people who believed in me enough to give me those chances. I won't be taking them for granted anymore.



Set Me Free

Hannah



Set Me Free

written by Hannah

I grew up in an emotionally unhealthy and toxic environment. I only have a few happy childhood memories. My parents fought constantly and would throw things at each other. Finally, when I was 8 years old, they got a divorce, and my mother left the house but their problems persisted. My mum was bitter and often felt sorry for herself. She would drink heavily and often threatened to commit suicide. I did not understand her. She hated her life and when I was with her, it felt like she kept pouring hatred on me. There was little encouragement at home and my school life was affected. The friends at school were kind but they did not have the problems I was going through, so I felt that no one understood me. I just wished to manage our lives better and not be constantly worried about the bills but at the same time, I also wanted to not shoulder the responsibility. I started smoking, drinking, and taking drugs hoping to fill the void inside. I desperately needed money and thus, I started working at a night club as a hostess at 13 years old. I pretended to be 19 years old then.

We were all similar, all school dropouts but most of them were older than me. I finally felt in control, no one to push me around. I felt I could do anything and so I started to sell drugs. I made close to \$1000 in 2 to 3 days. I hardly went home, and I stayed at hotels for long periods of time. I also took care of the bills at home.

My mother blamed my sisters and me for what went wrong in her life. She would come home drunk and refuse to work. There was so much drama with her that we could not deal with any of our own emotions. We could not scold her because she would threaten to jump down, and her emotions were just so overwhelming all the time. I worked all the time and used drugs and alcohol to have fun, it also helped me to run away from my problems.

I was 16 years old when I got caught with drugs the first time. I still thought that I was too smart and while on bail, I continued to take drugs and was caught again. Eventually, I was sentenced as a young prisoner for 18 months. I kept telling myself that I would be different when I was released.



I recalled coming home thinking of a new start but within a few days, my mum gave me a stack of bills to settle within a week. I was stressed and felt desperate again.

Then after 6 months of freedom, I went back to drugs and was caught and sentenced to 3 years. This time, I was pregnant and gave birth to my son inside the prison. He stayed with me for a month and then my eldest sister took him. My sister came back home after 5 years. Her life was not any more stable than mine.

I wanted to be different, and I decided to take the N levels. Many times inside the prison, I would tell myself to be a good mother, a reformed person when I got out. When I finally came out after 2 years, I had not taken the N levels. I was then 20 years old and needed to look after my son.

I started taking sleeping pills and eventually went back to drugs. I needed it daily and although it was affecting me, I could not stop. I had given up on myself at this point and felt totally depressed. I was so thin. I started to have health problems, my hair was falling out, my skin was a strange tinge of yellow and I had a serious urinary tract infection. The nightclub fired me.

I started to go to church one day - I remember sitting there week after week listening to testimonies from drug addicts and drug traffickers. I was hopeful that maybe I too could be free from drugs. It seemed to work at first and I would flush the drugs away but not even half a day later, I would go out to get some more drugs.

"It was a never-ending vicious cycle."

One day, I could not get my drugs and I was desperate, so I called everyone including my contacts in Malaysia. I was worried as I had been taking drugs daily but amazingly I felt fine. When the drug was available a month later, it did not taste and feel the same.

After some months, I gave up taking the drug for good. I felt free and felt good about myself. I attributed it to the miraculous one month pause on drugs and the reversal of my body's craving for the drugs. I felt that my emotions and choices were much better and that I could focus on the teachings in my church. I eventually learned how to forgive myself, my mum and my dad.

Finally, a few years later, I reconciled with my dad. He too had returned to church and had been attending the same church the past few years. We were able to look forward and I did not need his apology as I had found my peace. My sisters and I reconnected and my 2nd sister was a leader at my church.





*Just said that
if you can*
Believe
MADE WITH

**NO TURNING BACK
#BELIEVE**

**NO TURNING BACK
#BELIEVE**

*Just said that
if you can*

*Just said that
if you can*

Meeting new friends was challenging – they would ask me which year I completed my education or if I had entered university. I had done neither.

"How do I tell them that I studied in prison? "

It was a harmless question but I worried that people would think differently about me if I told them about my story. Over time, I felt confident to tell people the truth about myself. At times in the past, I would catch myself behaving like my mother. I felt like her shadow, wanting others to pity me and feel sorry for me. I also used to get terribly angry when I encounter people who behaved like my mum so I learnt to be aware of my overwhelming emotions and step aside to let myself be healed before talking to these people. I am a work-in-progress even after so many years. I've since learned to be mindful of the people around me – I don't know their life story and they do not know mine. I've learnt to be more empathetic and I'm trying to be a better version of myself everyday.



Full Circle

Kelly



Full Circle

written by Kelly



'She braved the heavy rain to come and visit me.'

This was the haunting memory that has lingered within me ever since my mother's trip to visit me in prison 27 years ago. I will never forget the frail and drenched figure sitting opposite me in the visiting room. Despite the rain, my mother felt compelled to visit me as she was afraid that she may not have the chance to visit me in the future. I was a survivor of drug abuse who traded being caught in order to turn over a new leaf. Others unfortunately didn't see it that way and chose to take their own lives. My mother, on the other hand, was thankful that I had chosen the former. After returning to my cell for the day, memories of every quarrel, every lie, every incarceration and every bad decision came flooding back. That was the day I decided to mend my ways and make that incarceration my last.



“

*Once I go out, I won't
come home already.*

*My mother would say,
'Once you leave home,
you don't know your*


roots anymore.' ”

I was born in 1965 into a traditional Buddhist/Taoist family. Being the middle child I guess I was naturally more prone to being rebellious than my older and younger sisters. As we were very poor, my parents would constantly be quarrelling about the financial state of the family. The tense atmosphere caused me to seek solace in my friends, so as to get peace of mind, away from all the drama.

My rebellious streak did get me into a lot of trouble, especially so with my father. Till he passed on, my father and I never shared a good relationship. His treatment of my sisters was very different from his treatment of me. They certainly did not receive the beatings I was subjected to. I remember how he would beat me till my skin would split open and would occasionally restrain me with a metal chain so that I would be unable to leave the house. I suppose his idea of discipline varied vastly from mine and most humans.

My mother instead, was my biggest cheerleader till the day she passed on. She would always stand up for me despite the circumstances. I knew she constantly worried about me and my future. She also could do little as I was out of control too.

I was quite the rebel in my teens and would usually stay out past curfew. I did not care that I did not go home and would spend more time with my friends than family. My friends and I led a carefree life, doing whatever pleased us. We used to work as towel girls in the casinos and would use the money earned to have late-night suppers. If we were tired, we would just sleep outside the casinos and continue our activities the next day.




Despite my blatant rule-defying behaviours, my mother always strove to keep me in check to the best of her abilities; especially so after each incarceration as she did not want me returning to my wayward ways. She would send people to look for me on the streets and force me to come on home. I recall her passing me \$20 at random times to score some drugs as she knew I would not kill myself if I had the means to buy and use drugs. Strange isn't it, enabling the drug habit of your daughter? Maybe she too did not know what was best and how to keep me safe, at least if I came home, she could help me.

“If I give you \$20, you will not feel like dying anymore because you will go and buy drugs.”

I have heard my mother question herself and her purpose of giving birth to me. This has led me to wonder why my mother loved me unconditionally despite my misdeeds. In my case however, I guess mothers were created specifically to love middle-born children, unlike fathers.

I was first incarcerated for a drug offense at 16 years old. Surprisingly, it was not for consumption as most people would assume, but rather for trafficking. Yes, you read it right. At the tender age of 16, I was charged for trafficking 2 straws of drugs for my uncle who was also a drug user. Naïve me (no tattoos, no drug-taking behaviours) was witness to the terrible withdrawal symptoms of the drug users in my neighbourhood. I couldn't help but feel sorry for them and decided to help, by supplying them with the drugs they required. In retrospect, I may have helped my uncle get a reduced sentence. I was sentenced to 16 months and had to report for urine tests on my release. Being inside a prison at the age of 16 is a shocking experience for some. It was certainly an experience for me, but more so it opened my eyes to the dangerous yet enticing and exciting world of drug use.



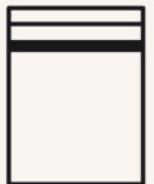
“Drugs are like that, when you start; the kick and the HIGH was very good. However, once you are addicted, the effect is no longer as strong. It is like taking medicine and you feel like stopping but you cannot because once you stop, you suffer from the withdrawal symptoms.”




I was introduced to drug consumption at the age of 19 by my prison cellmates with whom I kept in contact upon my first release. Being young and naïve did not help me when succumbing to the peer pressure when I was offered drugs. It was difficult to say no, especially to people whom you thought were your real friends and with whom you had a bond inside prison. Apart from drugs, I was also introduced to tattoos and drug parties. All of these came at a price!



My husband whom I married a few years later was also a heavy user of heroin and cocaine. We used to smoke together and were able to get along well when high. This is not how a good relationship is supposed to be. The drug use hid the realities of marriage, and my husband and I were blinded to see this. It became a cycle of consumption followed by incarceration for the next few years. My family was increasingly unhappy with my incarcerations and my sisters especially would start avoiding me when I was around their homes. I have seen them switch off the lights in their houses when I was below their block as they did not want to lend me money and contribute to my habit.





After I gave birth to my daughter, I still did not think of changing.

I gave birth to my daughter a year later. I was pregnant with her while serving my 3rd sentence. I admit I smoked drugs while pregnant with her. That was how severe my addiction was, as I did not even care about being responsible for the health of my baby. Even after my release, having a child of my own at that point in time did not deter me from drug use, as my husband was still smoking at home. When my daughter was 4 years old, I was incarcerated again for drug use and had to leave her in the care of my sister-in-law. I was unable to depend on my husband as he was still an active user and did not even have money to support himself, let alone a young child.

Upon my release, I still chose to stay with my husband despite my misgivings as he was the father of our child. However, I made a decision to remain sober for the sake of my daughter. The visit from my mother during my last incarceration was the catalyst I needed to live up to the title of 'mother' thrust upon me after the birth of my first child. I gave birth to my second child, a son, in 1998. I made the conscious decision to be a better mother to my child. I took my daughter back from the care of my sister-in-law and brought her back to my home. Though my husband was still an active user, in some misplaced sense of responsibility and affection for our child, he volunteered to smoke only in the vicinity of the bedroom while my daughter and I slept in the living room or other rooms in the house.

Looking at my husband's addiction unfold, I realised that I had to be the one to change for the better in order to bring sobriety to the household.

I felt that both of us were going in and out of prisons so I thought I should be the one to change first so that I could be a role model for him.

It was difficult to be in a home with an active drug user as I would be constantly triggered by the presence of the drugs in the house. I tried not to look at him and focus on raising my daughter as well as maintaining my job at Old Chang Kee. I had to persevere with my sobriety, for the sake of my marriage as well as for my daughter. I thought that if I could show my husband that it was possible to remain sober and lead a happy drug-free lifestyle, he would follow in my footsteps.

Apart from fighting temptations, I also found it difficult to form a bond with my daughter. She was not close to me upon my release as she had been cared for by my sister-in-law for 2 years. She also did not have her father taking care of her at all which led to a distant relationship between her and us. This did not dampen my spirits, but instead further motivated me to work hard at providing for her, and showing her how her mother could change. We are closer now as I believe I had put in the effort to change and did not expect her to accept me as her mother with nothing to show for.

Outside the home, I had to contend with my old drug-taking peers whom I would bump into occasionally. It was good practice in creating excuses and I became an expert in it whenever I would meet these friends. Sometimes, they would pass me their number on a piece of paper, which I would promptly throw away after they left. It was not that I thought I was better than them, but it was more of protecting myself and my family from the perils of drug use. I also deleted the numbers of my old suppliers on my phone. This was an important step to begin my journey of recovery as it meant that when I was feeling down, I would be unable to call them and instead call up a reliable friend. You could say that the throwing away of the piece of paper was symbolic of me cutting ties with the drug scene and my old self.

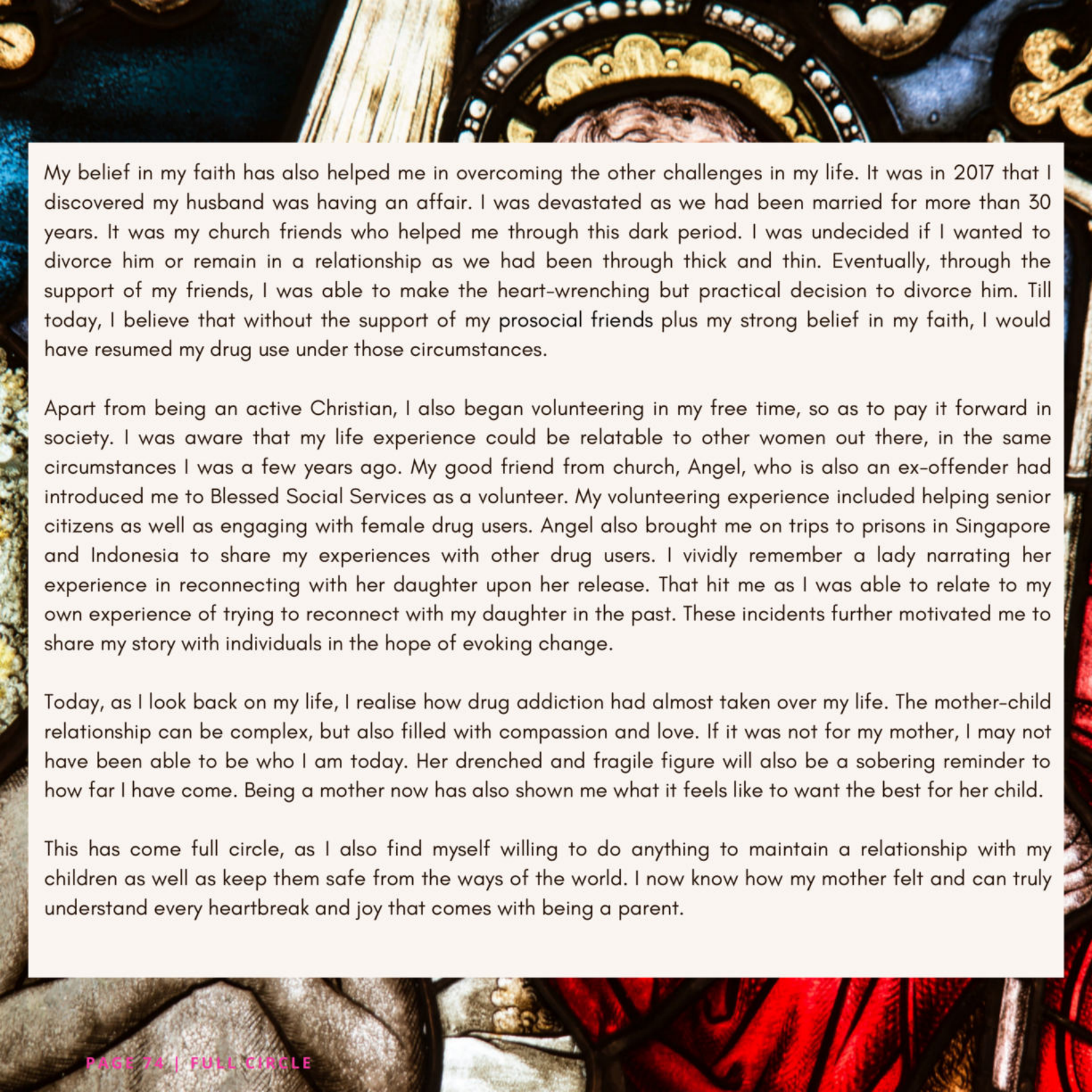


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***A mother's heart always
wants good for her child.*** ”

Though I had put in the effort to stay sober, I cannot describe my journey of recovery without including my faith. I decided to follow Christianity after my third incarceration but did not practice Christianity till 2003 when my husband came out after his last incarceration. Surprisingly, it was he who encouraged me to return to City Harvest Church. We attended church service together and I enjoyed sermons delivered in Hokkien. City Harvest had also been a great help in helping my son out with his education by enrolling him into tuition classes. I did not want my children to end up like me, thus I made the decision to provide for them, as best as I could.

Ironically, I also had a supportive Uniformed Officer from Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB). She was a great help in motivating me to maintain my sobriety as she would constantly remind me to be obedient and report for my urine tests regularly so that I can be recommended for a shorter urine test supervision period in the community. She was also supportive in reducing the amount of times I had to report for a urine test since I was working. Her belief and support for me paid off, as I was one of the first supervisees to have my urine test reduced from 2 years to 8 months.



My belief in my faith has also helped me in overcoming the other challenges in my life. It was in 2017 that I discovered my husband was having an affair. I was devastated as we had been married for more than 30 years. It was my church friends who helped me through this dark period. I was undecided if I wanted to divorce him or remain in a relationship as we had been through thick and thin. Eventually, through the support of my friends, I was able to make the heart-wrenching but practical decision to divorce him. Till today, I believe that without the support of my prosocial friends plus my strong belief in my faith, I would have resumed my drug use under those circumstances.

Apart from being an active Christian, I also began volunteering in my free time, so as to pay it forward in society. I was aware that my life experience could be relatable to other women out there, in the same circumstances I was a few years ago. My good friend from church, Angel, who is also an ex-offender had introduced me to Blessed Social Services as a volunteer. My volunteering experience included helping senior citizens as well as engaging with female drug users. Angel also brought me on trips to prisons in Singapore and Indonesia to share my experiences with other drug users. I vividly remember a lady narrating her experience in reconnecting with her daughter upon her release. That hit me as I was able to relate to my own experience of trying to reconnect with my daughter in the past. These incidents further motivated me to share my story with individuals in the hope of evoking change.

Today, as I look back on my life, I realise how drug addiction had almost taken over my life. The mother-child relationship can be complex, but also filled with compassion and love. If it was not for my mother, I may not have been able to be who I am today. Her drenched and fragile figure will also be a sobering reminder to how far I have come. Being a mother now has also shown me what it feels like to want the best for her child.

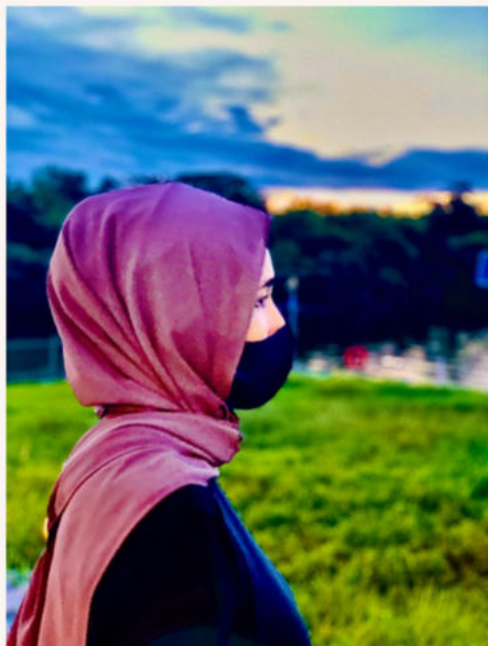
This has come full circle, as I also find myself willing to do anything to maintain a relationship with my children as well as keep them safe from the ways of the world. I now know how my mother felt and can truly understand every heartbreak and joy that comes with being a parent.

SHIT HAPPENS

I Am
Ernie



AND SO DO MIRACLES




"Whatever, I'm not going to think or give a care, because when I am released, I've got no place to stay.

I will use (drugs) again; I know I will end up back in prison." - these were my thoughts during my last incarceration. I thought this would be my life.

**"My worst fears did not happen.
I did not set foot into prison again."**

Looking at me now, I might seem like a success story - looking back, I truly have come a long way. I am happy to say that I have a job that I love and am passionate about. I am about 2 years into my current job and I have been loving it. I care for vulnerable senior citizens who are staying alone, taking care of their necessities and interacting with them. Through this job, I realised that I have compassion for seniors, and I resonate with them because it reminded me of my days in prison where I too, was isolated from society. The responsibility I feel for these seniors helps me stay away from unhelpful behaviours that might compromise my job.

I have also reconciled with my children, I got married again with the blessings of my family and I am currently applying for a flat. If you ask me what helped me achieve all these changes, I would say it is really a 'campur' (mixed) of many factors.



I wasn't always like this. I was physically abused as a child and still bear resentment. I'm an angry person and I used drugs to numb the anger – I still carry the negative feelings till this day. I needed love from undesirable partners and struggled to find the strength to love myself. But I'm doing my best everyday, I'm healing everyday from my own fears and history. Coming to terms with my situation and my pain has helped me live my life meaningfully and honestly.

I first got married when I was 18 years old. However, the marriage did not turn out well as both of us were unfaithful in our marriage. We tried to work things out but eventually it was not successful and by that time I really wanted a divorce. In this marriage, I have three children, and at the time of divorce they were then aged 16, 15 and 7 years old. After my divorce, I really felt like a heavy load was lifted off my chest. I think I was too tired caring for the children and providing for the family, so I just wanted time for myself. I literally left the marriage with nothing as my husband wanted the house and care and control of all my children. However, at that time, I was so tired that I didn't bother how my husband explained the divorce to our children. This resulted in our three children having negative thoughts and feelings towards me.

I started drugs in 2007. Eager to start a new life, I moved on quickly and met a new person. We got married in Batam and after the marriage, he started showing his true colors. He shared that he was using drugs. He offered me and I rejected it in the beginning. After a few rejections, I became curious and eventually gave in. Soon, the marriage revolved around drugs and we were high on drugs all the time. He was eventually caught and subsequently I was also caught in 2009.

I found out I was pregnant (by another man) and had to give birth to my youngest son in prison. I thought no one wanted to care for my newborn because my family members were all disappointed in me. Yet, my sister was willing. She went out of her way to remind my son through photos about my existence and that I am his mother despite not being around. I was thankful for her.

After my release from my first admission in 2013, it was a difficult struggle. I went to a home of 11 people and had to sleep in the living room. I was working in the F&B industry and befriended an ex-offender at my workplace. As you would have predicted, she was using drugs and I started smoking drugs with her after rejecting it for the first few times. I was unable to complete my urine supervision and within 4 months I relapsed and found myself running away from home. I was fearful that CNB would find me. Eventually, I was stopped at a traffic police roadblock which landed me my second sentence, a DRC sentence. As I reflected on this period of my life, I realised that I did not focus on my recovery during my first release. In addition, I did not have the privacy that I needed to work on myself, so I ended up repeating my old ways. This kept replaying in my mind during the second incarceration and I was convinced that I will never change because my circumstance was still the same. This cycle will just keep happening.

Closer to the end of my second sentence release, I was so convinced that I had no family support that I rejected the offer for a community-based programme. At this point, my family had not visited me even once because they were frustrated by my relapse and re-incarceration. I was not even hopeful.

The counsellor assigned to me was determined to help me and she called my family. To my surprise, my daughter was willing to give me a second chance and visited me for the first time. I was released on the Work Release Scheme. I was relieved - I did not want to grow old in prison, I wanted another chance at changing my ways and my daughter represented that hope. I truly begun my recovery journey and did not let anything, nor anyone disrupt my focus. My family was observing me on the side and even though I did not explicitly tell them that I had stopped drugs, they were able to see my change. I understood my triggers and patterns, and did my best to talk to those around me about them.

Despite my daughter being forgiving towards me, I was not eager to care for my children. I missed them dearly and I would often cry alone when I thought of them. However, I was so afraid of disappointing them further if I relapsed, which already happened in 2014. I thought keeping them a distance away from me was the right thing to do. I was only brave enough to reach out to my children in 2018, 3 years after my last incarceration. Naturally, my children were very angry and upset with me for not trying to communicate with them all these years.

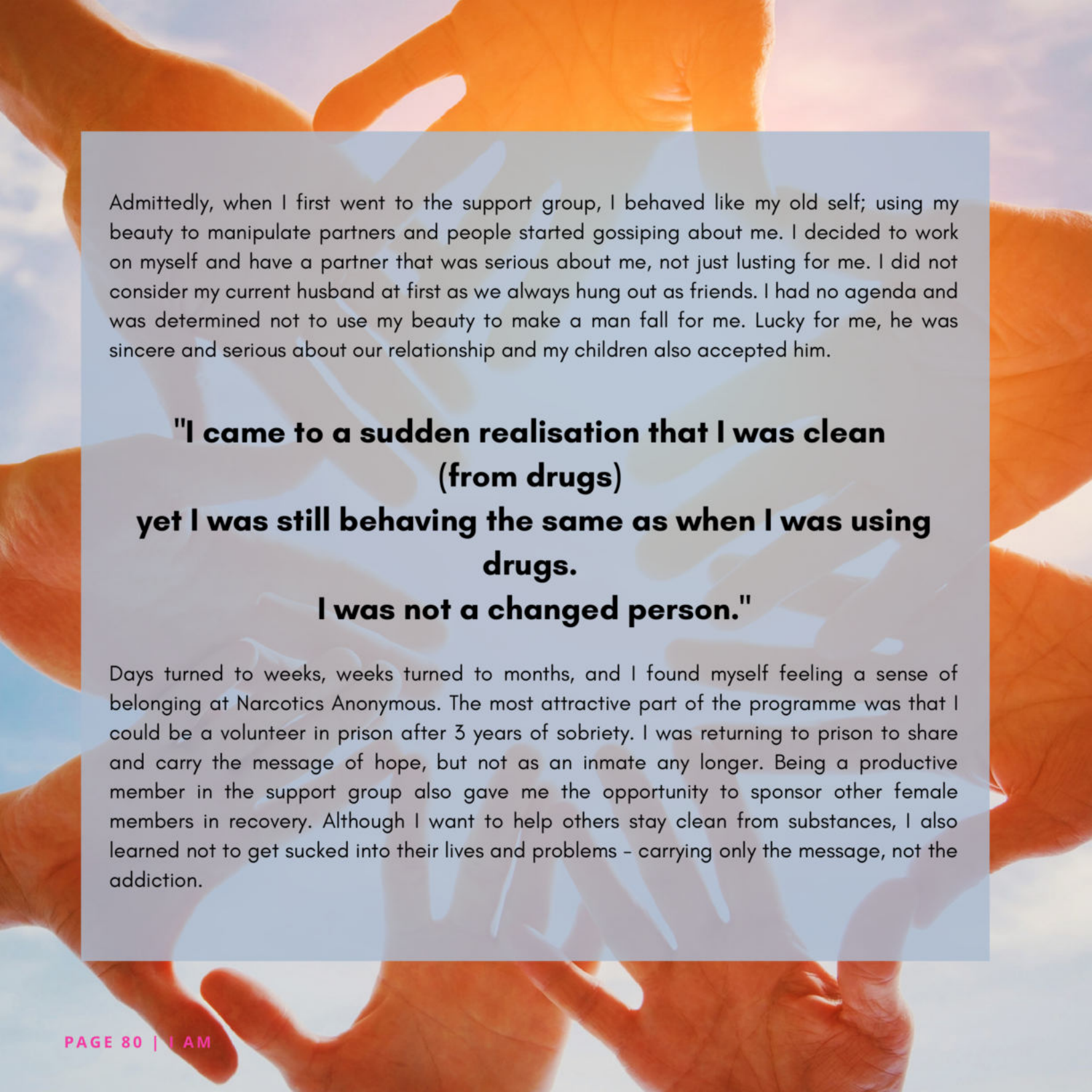
**"They understandably struggled to acknowledge me
and lacked trust in me."**

My youngest son looked up to my eldest sister as his mother. Despite her support, it was still hard for me to see my son call someone else his mother. Being able to shift my thinking helped me accept that my youngest son is loved, and it is a bonus that he has two mothers!

I never gave up and I chose every opportunity to show them I was a different person and it paid off – Now, they are very supportive of me and will ask for my advice, which shows that they trust and respect me. I encourage all mothers who have not reunited with their children to be patient, work on yourself first and make sure the change is long-term. I cannot wait for the day when I get my own house so that my children can come and live together.

A big part of my healing journey is also attributed to a 12 Steps programme that I regularly attended. Other than my aftercare counsellor, I felt that I needed a community to help me in my recovery. *(I also get to go back to work release camp a little later than usual !)*

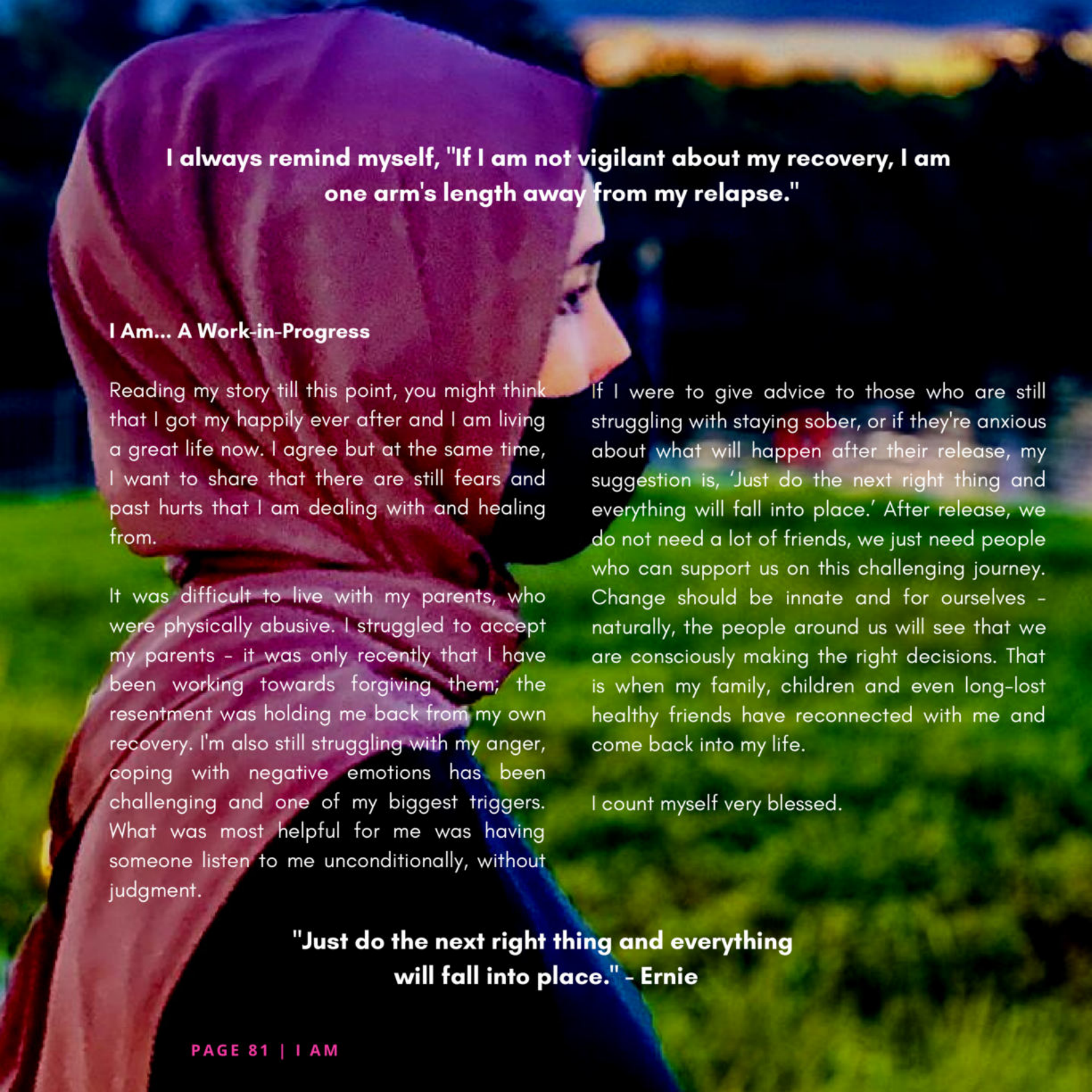
It took a surprising amount of dedication to be present every Wednesday after work up till 10pm. Usually, I will be so tired by then, I will just sleep and have no time to think about drugs. The scariest part was my release from the Work Release Scheme – I would no longer have any supervision and had to be accountable for myself. I wasn't sure if I was ready.



Admittedly, when I first went to the support group, I behaved like my old self; using my beauty to manipulate partners and people started gossiping about me. I decided to work on myself and have a partner that was serious about me, not just lusting for me. I did not consider my current husband at first as we always hung out as friends. I had no agenda and was determined not to use my beauty to make a man fall for me. Lucky for me, he was sincere and serious about our relationship and my children also accepted him.

**"I came to a sudden realisation that I was clean
(from drugs)
yet I was still behaving the same as when I was using
drugs.
I was not a changed person."**

Days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months, and I found myself feeling a sense of belonging at Narcotics Anonymous. The most attractive part of the programme was that I could be a volunteer in prison after 3 years of sobriety. I was returning to prison to share and carry the message of hope, but not as an inmate any longer. Being a productive member in the support group also gave me the opportunity to sponsor other female members in recovery. Although I want to help others stay clean from substances, I also learned not to get sucked into their lives and problems - carrying only the message, not the addiction.



I always remind myself, "If I am not vigilant about my recovery, I am one arm's length away from my relapse."

I Am... A Work-in-Progress

Reading my story till this point, you might think that I got my happily ever after and I am living a great life now. I agree but at the same time, I want to share that there are still fears and past hurts that I am dealing with and healing from.

It was difficult to live with my parents, who were physically abusive. I struggled to accept my parents - it was only recently that I have been working towards forgiving them; the resentment was holding me back from my own recovery. I'm also still struggling with my anger, coping with negative emotions has been challenging and one of my biggest triggers. What was most helpful for me was having someone listen to me unconditionally, without judgment.

If I were to give advice to those who are still struggling with staying sober, or if they're anxious about what will happen after their release, my suggestion is, 'Just do the next right thing and everything will fall into place.' After release, we do not need a lot of friends, we just need people who can support us on this challenging journey. Change should be innate and for ourselves - naturally, the people around us will see that we are consciously making the right decisions. That is when my family, children and even long-lost healthy friends have reconnected with me and come back into my life.

I count myself very blessed.

"Just do the next right thing and everything will fall into place." - Ernie

Beyond the Label

Sabrina



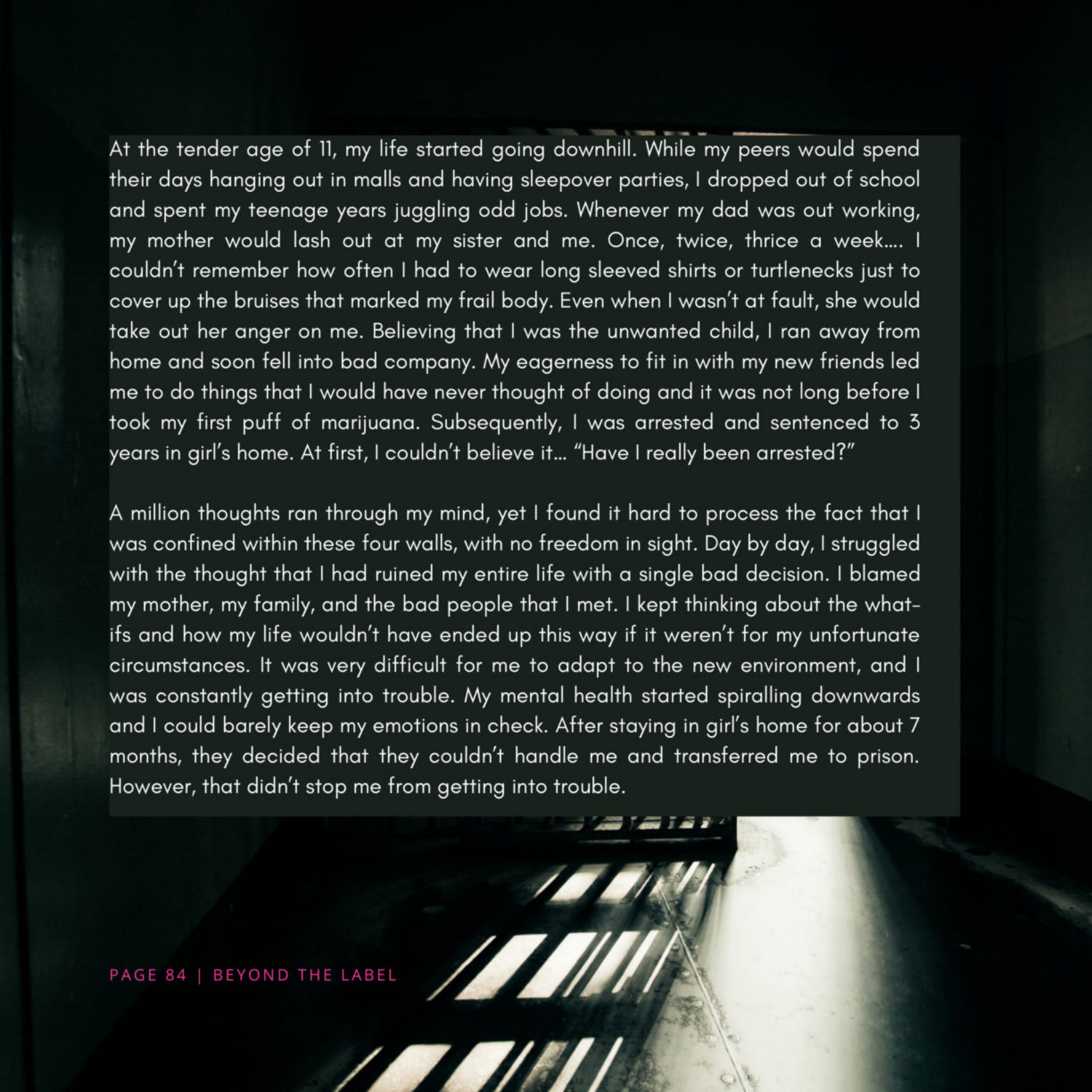
Beyond the Label

written by Sabrina

“Aren’t you afraid that people will find out that you’re an ex-convict?”

That is probably one of the most common things that we, as ex-convicts, will hear. I know that being an ex-convict is nothing to be proud of, but at the same time, why should we be ashamed of our past? As cliché as it sounds, everybody makes mistakes, yet what’s more important is that we learn from these mistakes and continue to move forward in life. Yes, initially I was very much afraid of judgement and stigmatisation. I didn’t want people to learn about how messed up my life was or how much hurt I had inflicted on those around me due to my bad decisions. However, I also realised that I did not want to be defined by my past. This realisation allowed me to use my voice to share my story to warn youths of the danger of drugs. As a mother myself, I can’t help but worry for my children. I am aware of the problems that youths face these days – peer pressure, social drinking, smoking, low self-esteem etc. After all, I was once like them. Nevertheless, I want to help and show them that drugs are not, and never will be, the solution.



A dark, atmospheric photograph of a prison cell. The scene is dominated by the vertical and horizontal bars of a window or door, creating a grid of light and shadow. A bright light source, possibly a window or a light fixture, is visible on the right side, casting a strong glow and creating a high-contrast scene. The overall mood is somber and confined.

At the tender age of 11, my life started going downhill. While my peers would spend their days hanging out in malls and having sleepover parties, I dropped out of school and spent my teenage years juggling odd jobs. Whenever my dad was out working, my mother would lash out at my sister and me. Once, twice, thrice a week.... I couldn't remember how often I had to wear long sleeved shirts or turtlenecks just to cover up the bruises that marked my frail body. Even when I wasn't at fault, she would take out her anger on me. Believing that I was the unwanted child, I ran away from home and soon fell into bad company. My eagerness to fit in with my new friends led me to do things that I would have never thought of doing and it was not long before I took my first puff of marijuana. Subsequently, I was arrested and sentenced to 3 years in girl's home. At first, I couldn't believe it... "Have I really been arrested?"

A million thoughts ran through my mind, yet I found it hard to process the fact that I was confined within these four walls, with no freedom in sight. Day by day, I struggled with the thought that I had ruined my entire life with a single bad decision. I blamed my mother, my family, and the bad people that I met. I kept thinking about the what-ifs and how my life wouldn't have ended up this way if it weren't for my unfortunate circumstances. It was very difficult for me to adapt to the new environment, and I was constantly getting into trouble. My mental health started spiralling downwards and I could barely keep my emotions in check. After staying in girl's home for about 7 months, they decided that they couldn't handle me and transferred me to prison. However, that didn't stop me from getting into trouble.

After I was released, I felt extremely lost and lonely. I did not know who to turn to nor how to cope with my problems. Hence, it was not long after I started picking up my old habits once again. I also developed unhealthy coping mechanisms - from indulging in alcohol and drugs to engaging in self-harm - I did anything I could to numb these feelings of loneliness. Despite my mother's disapproval, I started working at a nightclub. Of course, this made it very easy for me to slip back into the lifestyle of drugs. When I turned 19, reality struck me in the face. I was pregnant. 'Pregnant?' I scoffed to myself. So many couples around the world struggling to conceive but life decides to bestow the honour of being a mother on me? Oh the irony.

Without giving much thought to my situation, I gave birth to my first daughter. By then, I was knee-deep into drugs and frankly, the thought of quitting did not even cross my mind. When my daughter was barely 3 years old, I was once again caught and sentenced to a year in the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC). I will never forget the sound of my daughter's cries as I was escorted away. Until today, the sound of her cries still rings in my ear. I never realised how much my daughter meant to me until I was forcefully separated from her for an extended period.

"While I was incarcerated, I realised that I was no longer responsible for my life alone. I had a child - a child who needed me. Hence, I was determined to start anew and be a good role model for my daughter."

Starting anew was much easier said than done. The next few years were spent popping out more babies and struggling to keep myself out of prison. Every time I had to go back to prison, I couldn't bear to see the look on my children's faces. It was not easy for them to constantly be separated from their mother for extended periods. When I was in and out of prison, my husband would be taking care of the children. He had a good job hence we were never worried about money. But he also had his own children from his previous marriage, which I felt he prioritised over ours.

The house that we lived in was also under his name and not mine, which meant that my children could be homeless if he decided that he did not want me or them anymore. That got me worrying about our future. However, what could I do? I was in prison anyway, and I had no money, nor did I have the stability to provide for them. In 2011, I was caught again and pregnant and gave birth to my baby in prison. This time, Child Protection Service (CPS) decided to take my baby away. I was hysterical, to say the least. I thought that I would never see my baby again. Time passed even more slowly after my baby was taken away, the only thing that kept me going was the chance to see my other children after my release.



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During my last release, I was presented with both good news and bad news. CPS informed me that they will return my baby to me if I have proven to be a suitable mother. However, they also warned me that this would be my last chance – if I were to falter and offend again, they would take all my children away. Hearing that broke me. Nevertheless, it also sparked a newfound conviction within me.

**I told myself that I had to become better once and for all,
for myself and my children.**

I picked up baking and signed up as a food delivery rider to earn money. Occasionally, I would think about going back to my old ways because I was overwhelmed with family and job responsibilities. However, I was reminded of my children and how my husband continued to stick by me all these years. Apart from my motivation to keep my family together, I took counselling sessions more seriously. Through parental and religious counselling, I was able to share my problems and frustrations. As someone who finds relief in voicing out my thoughts and feelings, I was able to better process my emotions and control my temper. Furthermore, my family and in-laws were very patient and accepting of me, which really helped me in the process of re-integration. My family truly were my strongest pillar of support and motivation!





Having spent over 20 years of my life in and out of prison, I had once thought that my life was completely ruined and that I would be nothing more than an ex-convict. Nonetheless, while the journey hasn't been easy, I am proud to exclaim that I have desisted for over 8 years now! I know that I cannot claim back my youth, nor can I eradicate all the pain I have inflicted on those dearest to me. However, I also know that life is a learning journey and I have - and will continue to - cherish my second chance at life. Looking back, it honestly feels good to have stayed clean all these years. To all struggling mothers in prison, I would like to reassure them that they will be able to get their children back from CPS as long as they are willing to change. Just like how I found my motivation in my family, I hope that sharing my story will help others find their motivation to move forward in life and serve as a warning for those who wish to indulge in drugs.

CELEBRATING SECOND CHANCES

Cost of Hour
Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Social Services, Ministry of Health
Salimah 12th Nov 2019



Battle Scars

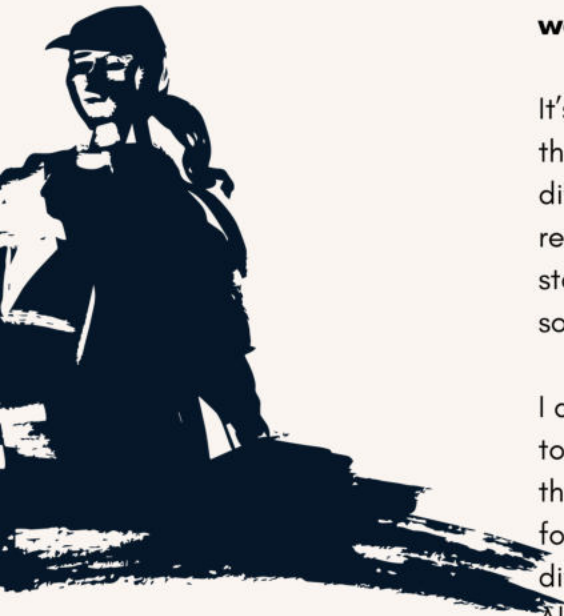
written by Salimah

If somebody approached a younger version of myself and told her that she would be consuming drugs and going in and out of prison, my younger self would say that it sounds completely ridiculous. A young civil servant in a government job, with no family history of drugs or criminal behaviour. It seemed like there was no reason why things would turn out the way it did.

It's the same thing with soldiers who have fought wars - not knowing that their lives would be changed forever. They return home and become different people. They thought their wounds had healed, but the battle scars remain visible on their bodies. These mental triggers are part of their life story. War feels like a distant memory for those around them; but for these soldiers, the memory will always be raw and real.

I do my best to be strong and show my children that I am alright. I want them to be able to enjoy the peace that has been fought for, but the reality is that it has been extremely challenging. Having consumed drugs habitually for so many years, my brain and body remembers the high. When life gets difficult and stressful, my mind wanders to a dark place where I can escape. Although I have been out in the community for more than 6 years and even though I have been awarded for being a successful desistor, it is never as simple as "I will never touch drugs ever again". It also does not help that I am still living in a neighbourhood where I can see drugs and having my 'past friends' living around the same area. I am always on my toes and always mindful that a relapse can happen anytime. I refuse to take my desistance for granted and I will stay vigilant for my family to be happy.

"However, we cannot appreciate peace and harmony, without going through war and pain."



I believe it all began from my very first marriage. I inherently knew he was not a good man – the red flags were glaring at me. My family noticed them too. My parents were against the marriage, but I insisted on choosing ‘love’ and became estranged from my family. My parents were convinced that he had put a ‘spell’ on me. Looking back, I wonder if that was the case.

He was previously working in a uniformed job but stopped working after 1 month into our 5 years of marriage. He was not motivated to work, giving excuses such as not having enough money for transport. He also cut me off from socialising with anyone. When he found out that I had contacted my mother, he would hit me. There were times where he would physically abuse me for something as trivial as coming home from work late. He hit me till I bled and threatened to push me off our 14th floor flat. It was a cycle of abuse and forgiveness until I finally filed for divorce. During our marriage, I did not know that he was on drugs. Either I was naïve or I did not even know what drugs looked like. All I knew was he was always asking me for money and spending money on ‘things’ that occupied his day. I confronted him, and he told me, “You won’t understand until you try it.”

I tried it. Three days later, I understood, and I was hooked.

I was consuming drugs nearly every day at some point during the marriage – this made divorce even harder for me because he was also my supplier. I lost all my strength and willpower; I was completely hooked to drugs. It didn’t help that after my divorce, I also had signs of depression as I felt that I was making all the poor decisions in life. My life was a mess. Drugs were the one thing that helped me ‘overcome’ my depressive, suicidal moods. I was caught and sentenced for the very first time in 1992.

Even after my release, I didn’t learn. Life was still bleak and painful. My family was still unsupportive and rejected me. I still needed money to fuel my habit – so I began trafficking drugs to earn some money. I was caught and sentenced for trafficking in 1995.

In between, I met my current husband. He was an old friend who was struggling just as much as I was, and we couldn’t get married because we both ‘took turns’ going in and out of prison. He waited for my release in 2000. We got married and had our first child together. Unfortunately, we were both quietly fighting our own battles, and never addressed the elephant in the room. In the same year, we both relapsed shortly after I gave birth.

Upon my release 5 years later, I vowed to stay clean and dedicate my time fully to my family. I stayed sober, though it was not easy. The family appeared to be happy and so was I. I thought this was finally my light at the end of the tunnel. However, it was only a short break until the nightmares returned once more. My husband was wheelchair-bound for a period of time due to his knee operation. We lost our main breadwinner and struggled to pay for the operation and medical bills, on top of supporting four young children. I sold our flat to settle outstanding loans, thinking that we could get through the struggle together. Little did I know, my husband was taking drugs behind my back due to the stress. I lost my mind. I was angry and furious. I felt hurt. I felt betrayed. My mind went back to that memory of pain and agony. I was suffering all over again.

“If you want to keep taking drugs, I’ll just ruin my life with you.”
“I want you to see me take these drugs. I want you to know that pain.”
“If you can take drugs, so can I.”

I tried to prove a point, in a bid to help him change. We both ended up getting caught in 2010. During this sentence, I found myself reflecting more as I repeatedly asked myself what caused me to land back in prison. The answer was my husband, so I told him that we need to stop being a bad influence to each other. I also found myself accepting the advice of the prison officers and took up the challenge of working in the call centre. My thoughts started changing, I started telling myself, ‘I can do it, even if I am older than others.’ My change journey definitely started when I was still serving my sentence.

During this time, I also saw how difficult it was for my children to be raised by parents who were struggling with drugs. At an event organized by Salvation Army, my children came to visit me for a Mother's Day event - what I thought would be a happy moment ended up being etched in my memory forever.

My children visited me in clothes that were old and tattered. They smelled grimy with a head full of lice. They also mentioned that there were days where they did not have enough food to eat. At that moment, I knew that no one would be able to give them the care that I was supposed to give them, they needed me.

But I had let them down. Thoughts started flashing through my mind in a never-ending loop.

My children were older then and could see everything that unfolded before them. I could no longer pretend or shield their eyes from the truth. There and then, I understood that these wounds that I thought were mine to deal with have infected my children too.

My son was firm with me upon my release. He told me strictly, "If you all (parents) go in again, you are going to lose us (children)." He talked about how he and his siblings did not receive love outside of his parents. Friends and relatives pin the problems of the adults on them - asking them why his parents are so dysfunctional and refusing to change. He told me that he was sick and tired of having to listen to naysayers, and he would rather be known as an orphan. If needed, he would step up to take care of his siblings if we ever went in again.

My children had all grown up and matured and I had missed it. I agreed wholeheartedly with my son and resolved never ever to put my children through that again. Instead, I wanted to become a role model for them. I wanted to teach them that if they were to ever make mistakes in their life, they can right their wrongs. Today, my son can say he is proud of his parents, that we both made a comeback.

In the past, I thought I was a lone soldier, fighting the war all by herself. I neglected to remember that war brings turmoil to innocent people as well. They were developing battle scars of their own, just by association with me. I do not want that anymore, for any of my loved ones.



It has been 6 years since my release in 2015. I have had the privilege to share my story on several platforms such as SCORE (now Yellow Ribbon SG) and had the honour of receiving a Yellow Ribbon Award in 2019. People see desistance as a dream and an ultimate goal, but forget the amount of work it takes to maintain a desisted life.

I cannot deny that I still struggle with triggers. My body remembers what it was like to be on drugs. I know where to buy drugs. It's not something that I will magically forget. However, I always remind myself that I do not need to challenge myself. If I feel moody on a particular day, it is that day which I will be even more vigilant not to fall prey to easy solutions. I will find ways to boost my mood, such as watch funny videos or enjoy a good meal. Many organisations such as New Life Stories, Family Service Centre and Social Service Office have played a part in helping me, but I know that at the end of the day, I also have to help myself. I tortured myself enough already, I have to 'sayang' (love) myself now.



One of the ways I care for myself is by being part of different community organisations such as New Life Stories, ISCOS and Yayasan Mendaki. I volunteer for their programmes and participate in flag days with my children. I now have the capacity to occupy my time with meaningful activities that allow me to pay it forward for a gracious society. I get a chance to motivate people like me who are also on this journey of recovery and direct them to proper channels, such as non-profit organisations, to support them. This has also helped me raise my self-esteem which has been important in sustaining my change.

It's not easy living with the memory of addiction - The more I hide these scars, the more they spring forth. But these same scars remind me that I am stronger than my history. There are so much more 'high' moments in my life that I have achieved after bidding goodbye to drugs, a better 'high' than what drugs can bring. In order for me and my loved ones to survive, I must keep on fighting this battle until the end of my life. As you know, it is not easy dealing with the triggers. With each day that I fight, is a day more successful than before.

A golden trophy cup is positioned at the bottom of the frame. From the top of the cup, a thick stream of small, five-pointed gold stars falls downwards, filling the upper two-thirds of the image. The stars are densely packed near the cup and become more sparse as they rise. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

A Taste of Winning

Jid (not her real name)

A Taste of Winning

written by Jid


How does it feel to win? It feels like you are on top of the world. A great sense of pride and achievement hugging you and you do not have a care in the world. All you think about is relishing the moment...

Hi. My name is Jid.

I will be 41 in November 2021. If God permits me with the life that I long for. In total, I have been incarcerated 5 times. Currently I am serving a 9-year and 4-month sentence. But I am left with 1 year and 9 months at the time of writing this story, before I will be back in the loving arms of my loved ones.

I hope that my experiences will somehow motivate you to turn your life around, for the better. Look out for my flaws too. This is my story.





I started using drugs when I was only 13 to show my rebellious side to my father. I wanted to grab his attention by doing things that were beyond words such as housebreaking, getting involved in fights and taking drugs. Every now and then, my father had to bail me out from my days in the lock-up. I kept on doing all that until I was seriously addicted to drugs. Heroin, to be exact.

My first incarceration was in 1997. My second, in 1999. And my third was in 2001 when I was only 21. The last one was a painful and hard experience.

I was caught on the 25 of September 2001 for abusing and possessing drugs. I was sentenced to 7 years imprisonment. I was one of the first batch of prisoners that was affected by the LT (long term) sentence. It seemed like it would be a truly long time before I would see the sunlight outside again.

I was a bit over the top because I was not a first-timer. Six months of being remanded and I did not even behave myself. When I was sentenced, my behavior worsened. Every now and then I was segregated due to misconduct such as fighting, fighting and more fighting. Everybody said, at that point of time, that I was a gone case. You know what I mean? I even took some PSY (psychiatric) medicine. They told me that I have anger issues. I kept on going to PC (punishment cell) every now and then. Majority of the officers gave up on me but there were still a handful of them that really helped me. I will name two officers who made an impact in my life. They are still very much involved in my life. Madam Ada and my beloved Madam Josephine.

I was released from my third admission on 11 April 2016. Beautiful Day. The sun was shining so bright and right after I was literally out from prison, the first person I saw was Madam Ada.

I had a short lecture from her and after that, I went straight home, after drinking a can of Pokka's carrot juice. I arrived at my auntie's place. The next person I saw was my ex drug friend. She was sending her son to school.

**She stopped me to have a conversation, but I shrugged her off.
It was an achievement for me.**

My heart broke when I stepped in and saw my grandmother sitting on her favourite chair. Her countenance took my breath away. I was thinking how could I have even hurt her before? That was the exact thing that was playing in my mind, even till this day. I hugged her for a few seconds and then hugged my auntie and my brothers. I felt at home, my home, even though that it is not my home actually. I felt accepted and loved and the warmth... , I just could not explain. In short, when I was released at that time, everyone seemed to understand and accept me. I felt like I was on top of the world.



**It was like a taste of winning,
if winning had a taste.**

I went for my first urine supervision the next day. I chose to be part of the first batch, because it would not be crowded during that time and I did not want to meet old friends whom I knew may trigger me.

Everywhere I went, I was bound to meet with certain friends. Singapore is small and there are media connections. It has to be you and it is only yourself who has control. Every time I went for my urine supervision, I reported for the earliest session.

I completed my supervision after eleven months. I can't explain to you how it felt like. Even ecstatic is an understatement. It was like a taste of winning, if winning had a taste. Sweet. Beautifully sweet. It was a great sense of achievement. And when it came from me to finish my urine supervision, it was a big thing. I was proud of myself. I called my family and shared the joy with them.

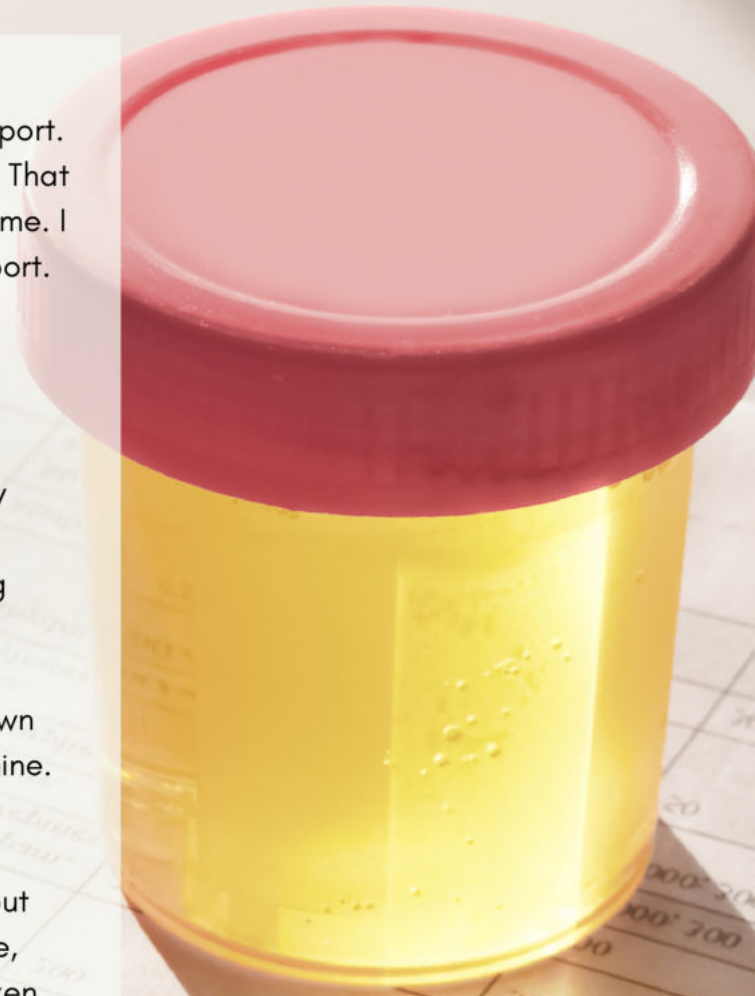
The very next day, I went to ICA to make a passport. After four working days, I received my passport. That was my second achievement. It meant a lot for me. I went to Johor Bahru the very day I got my passport. It was a whole new experience for me.

All was going well for me until I hit a plateau.

I was seeing someone - my partner. She was my anchor and I was dependent on her. She was promoted to a sales supervisor, which was a big deal back then.

Her circle of friends grew wider. She looked down on me because her pay was a lot higher than mine. But still, I paid the bills.

She changed, emotionally and physically. She put me aside. I wasn't good enough for her anymore, and she cheated on me. I was totally heartbroken.



One day, I went for a walk and stopped at a grocery store. I saw one of my close friends from prison. That friend of mine asked me for a favour. She was having really bad drug withdrawal symptoms. At least she needed me and so I decided to help.

After the first time that I helped her, she insisted on other means of "help". Sourcing for drugs, finding her veins to jab, finding places to feed her drug needs. It all started because I sympathised with her. Then it became my needs.

Find drugs for myself. The cliché. My temper kicked in. I closed my doors to everyone and everything. At that point, I did not even remember my stay in prison. Or maybe I was already resigned to fate.

I smoked like there was no tomorrow, without caring who I hurt or who I would leave behind. And the best part was, I felt relieved, surprisingly relieved when I was caught. How selfish I was, causing grief to my family. All the things that I achieved back then, went down the drain. Nevertheless, I did enjoy each of all the beautiful moments that I had experienced. It was priceless. The invoke paper (a paper to say I had completed urine supervision), the trip to Johor Bahru, the feel of my passport in my hands, the feeling of not being a refugee in my own country. Hahaha!!! I know that there will still be a time that I could taste winning. Please, there is more to life than life itself.

Although I'm back in prison again, I have looked at my life and focused on the beauty, scars and all. My message is, "When you put your heart into certain things, that you think you want to make a difference, it can happen and when you believe in it, it will happen. My life is changing inside and I will continue to change."

**I am really looking forward to being a winner again,
and this time I will hold on to the trophy once I get it.**

With the purest of heart,
Jid
27 July 2021

Taken For Granted

Faye (not her real name)



Taken for Granted

written by Faye

I'm running out of time.

I am turning 38 this year as I write my story, in prison. You will be surprised because I used to be a hairstylist and a make-up artist. I have a complete family that consists of my husband and 2 beautiful children. Everything was going so well and life was almost perfect yet what went wrong? It was me. I took everything I had for granted. I thought I could get away with everything quietly without my family noticing but I was dead wrong. Before I let you in on the events that led to my current incarceration, let me share with you a little bit of my history.

In 1998, I took heroin for the first time and I landed up in Toa Payoh Girls' Home (now known as Singapore Girls' Home). It was during my 2 years there that I decided to pick up hairdressing. I also studied extremely hard to graduate from school.

Somehow, in 2002, I entered prison. I had made a bigger mistake. This time, with heroin and pregnancy. Even while carrying my child then, I still did not learn from my mistake. My beloved baby was going to be a year old. It was an extremely horrible experience to look at your child through a glass panel. I wanted to hold my baby. I remember a visit where she hit the glass panel and fell down crying as she tried to reach out to me. My parents cried and walked off saying, "We are not going to do this to your daughter! It's your mistake." They did not want to bring her there anymore because it was my mistake. It wasn't fair for her to experience this at such a young age. This was the visit that made me realise that I needed to change my life.

A few days after, I was selected as the Dorm IC to look after my cell mates. This is where we learn how to take care of each other. After one month, I was selected to be the night cookie (attendant) and was told that I was able to go home (released earlier) on work tagging (supervision). I reconnected with my family and managed to get my job back at the salon. Times were still tough and there were days I really wanted to give up but each time I saw my baby, I pushed through. I recalled how she had fallen trying to reach me and how I could not pick her up.

"I did it!! I was free from drugs and problems."

In the following years, life was no fairytale with the happy ending that I was yearning. I was out for a good 17 years with family support and a good relationship with my daughter.

In a moment of folly, I thought that I could get away with taking one more puff. It's as if in that moment, my accomplishments didn't matter. My job as a make-up artist, working for a famous Malay wedding gallery and even starting on my acting career.

The only challenge I had was when I experienced severe back pain because of a slipped disc. Suddenly, everything in my life slowed down, my mood was always bad and I coped by indulging myself in all kinds of food to make myself feel better. That led to my extreme weight gain and my self-esteem was affected. I decided to start freelance work again and I began to socialise again with different people from all walks of life.

I was constantly amazed by their work ethic, stamina and ability to impress others but behind the success of it all was drugs. That was how they gained the confidence to do their work well. I looked at myself, after all my weight gain and my low self-esteem, maybe this is the right way to go. I started to get hooked to it as it gave me lots of energy. I had energy to take long projects and look beautiful at the same time. However, just like everything, my beauty had a price to pay.

One day, CNB decided to conduct a routine check and I got caught that very day.

For 17 years I was free, now I am back in. I am serving 3 years for my foolish actions and I hope this is the last time I will be coming back in. This story is not about me being high and happy on drugs. It is about me taking the life that was given to me for granted.

I am writing this to you to tell you to think twice. Choose the right path. I should not have allowed any event or person or my self-doubt to take over the decisions in my life. It is my responsibility and I have myself to blame. I no longer blame the people around me. Yes, I am not perfect but I know that I am willing to take the right path this time round. For me, it is knowing that beauty is not defined by my physical appearance.

I am more than how I look. It is defined by my character and who I choose to be. And who I choose to be is the person that I am working on today - a capable woman who works hard to support her family.



Dear prison,

Thank you for the magnificent journey in here the past 2 years. It was a destination that I chose to be in even though it was last on my list. That being said, I would like to thank all the officers for their effort and passion to guide me through this. It takes hard work, learning about emotions, changing of attitude and making 'I-statements' to be somebody new. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for this learning journey experience where I can learn and expect the unexpected so that I am ready to continue this journey in my life.

Rise & Fall

Pearlisha Ebrahim
(not her real name)



Rise & Fall

written by Pearlisha Ebrahim



I was the youngest of 5 siblings, my father was the only breadwinner. We constantly faced financial issues such as insufficient expenses for school and household utilities. When the days got too challenging, conflict and violence occurred frequently between my father and mother. The abuse would spread to me and my siblings. It was terrifying.

For me, I had always dreamt that one's childhood should be carefree where we played under the sun, had happy gatherings and shared meals together. However, my life was not like that. All I experienced was darkness.

I was constantly in a nightmare.

When I became a teenager, it was my chance to rebel. I was immune to the beatings and scoldings from my parents. I blamed them for who I had become and I just wanted to be with my friends. Nothing mattered to me as long as I was out of my home. At 15, I started to work as a sales assistant in the sports department at Metro Plaza. I mixed around with the store boys who were involved with alcohol and drugs. I started smoking cigarettes and then it became drugs. I started heroin when I was 17. At home, my siblings had already started taking drugs.

It was in 1994 when my sister and I were caught for drug use. We were both incarcerated for 6 months. It was such a scary and lonely experience for me as it was my first admission. My mother and other siblings never failed to turn up for visits, never complaining. They would come early in the morning from Jurong West to Changi. I always let them know that I miss them and love them. During these visits, I would cry out loud and beg my mother to take me home.

In 1996, during my second admission, my father passed away.

There was a sinking feeling in my heart knowing that I was unable to seek forgiveness for the very last time.

What was running through my mind was no longer the strict rules to obey or the fierce images of him hitting me. It was the good memories. However, it still did not stop me from my unhealthy social life where I still thought of getting high. After I was released from prison, I struggled to find a decent job due to my history of incarceration - I felt that I had no choice but to work as a hostess and that 'added on' to my havoc life. I would get high from drinking alcohol until 3am with my clients.



Eventually, I got married and it was during this time that my mother passed away due to a brain tumour. At the start, marriage life was perfect as I shared a house with my husband and two daughters. I was fully occupied with housework and I took care of my family. There was no time to even think of doing anything illegal. However, as time passed, my marriage did not last as there was violence involved. We could not resolve matters and hence decided to end it.

There was so much hurt in me that I tried to self-harm but still the pain did not go away. In addition, I experienced flashbacks due to the abuse that occurred within my marriage.

I decided to seek professional help from NUH and was diagnosed with depression, but the pain persisted. I found myself in prison again as I used illegal drugs to cope with my pain. Drugs was my solace.

As I am writing this, I am reflecting on what had helped me stay out of prison for the 5 years before I returned again. Above all, it was my family, my children and my own determination that played the biggest part in helping me achieve that good life. Along the way, I made huge mistakes but my motivation and experiences gave me a different outlook in life. I have a vast appreciation for things that others may take for granted because of what I have been through. Instead of dwelling on the past, I know that my family was always with me, giving me quiet encouragement and strength despite all that I had been through.

I always kept in my mind that everybody needs a second chance to unlock the doors that will allow us to upgrade ourselves. Thus, I will seek help and approach the proper channels in managing ways on how to stay out from addiction. I was fortunate enough to bounce back up because I was asking for help at the right place. My gratitude of appreciation goes to my Family Service Centre officer from Lower Delta centre, Ms Eswari and my doctors at NUH for understanding my emotions, my depression and traumatic events of my life. I will apply my strengths to switch my mindset to do something useful and meaningful for myself and my family. I want to remember that the tears I shed are not tears of failure but tears of success in my recovery journey.

My encouragement to myself and others who are still struggling inside or outside prison will be that age eventually teaches us how to transform ourselves to who we are. We will not stay young forever and by the time we realise it, it will be too late and growing old in prison is a painful and meaningless process.

"Continue to seek help from the right channels and know that you are never alone in this journey. We will make it through together."

Don't Give Up Hope

S (not her real name)



Don't Give Up Hope

written by S

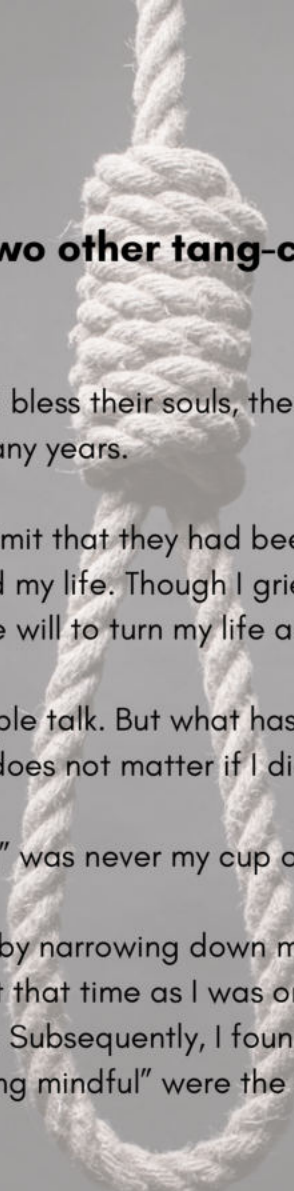
"Hope is the only thing that keeps one alive." That's what I have always believed in, though at times I felt hope itself had become slippery and unreliable. Brutal challenges have been a loyal companion, in my tumultuous and undesirable life journey. However, no one told me that life was going to be smooth sailing anyway. Therefore, here I am, as always, trying hard not to lose hope.

Before I pen down bits of my journey, let me briefly introduce myself. I am Sal (not my real name), aged 42. A single mother who is blessed with a son. I am the 4th child amongst 5 siblings, and was raised single-handedly by my loving, drug-addict father (an ex-addict now for more than 15 years). I was always the apple of his eye, completely pampered and spoilt.

Most of my family members have been involved with drug abuse. My dad, my 3 brothers, we all used drugs. Only my youngest sister and my mum were spared from this disaster. It will be unjustified to blame the past or my background for the choices I have made thus far. Nor can I justify the present by invoking the sins of the past.

My incarcerations started from the tender age of 17. Since then, my visits to prison have been consistent. In total, I have been in prison 7 times. My current conviction is a 12-year imprisonment sentence for illegal possession of controlled drugs and trafficking. My liberation will only be in December 2023.

On 30th June 2004, I walked out of Changi Women's Prison gates with resolutions and remorse. My dues were paid for, through a 14-month sentence for failing to comply with the urine supervisions protocols and illegal possession of controlled drugs.



My two other tang-case (co-accused) were not so lucky as they were sent to the gallows.

May God bless their souls, the souls of my 2 friends. I was alive but back to square one after many, many years.

I must admit that they had been good friends through and through. Losing them had deeply impacted my life. Though I grieved their loss, through these grievances, I also sought solace and found the will to turn my life around.


Yes, people talk. But what has happened cannot be silenced nor can it be explained away, right? It does not matter if I did not do what they said I had done.

“Betrayal” was never my cup of tea. I did not betray anyone but I cannot control the talk!

I started by narrowing down my number of friends, keeping only the positive ones. Guidance was crucial at that time as I was only an amateur. They are, to be exact, my mentors and my go-to boosters. Subsequently, I found the courage to blend into the community and make new friends. And “being mindful” were the keywords here when it came to choosing the types of friends inside prison.

Still, fear and inferiority never failed to envelope and grip my conscience. I feared that my dark past would push all the valuable friends away.

As days passed, these people got to know me for who I was and where I came from. It gets easier to reveal a little of yourself each day, once you get closer and closer to one another. It feels as though a huge burden has been lifted off you.




Their acceptance, motivation, and support for me took me by surprise. You know, it is as though their forgiveness mattered. The kindness of a stranger or even acquaintance that could be transformative.

The immensely consoling kind words of my new friends are threads for me to hold on to, leading me back on track. It is in fact a glorious thing to be given hope, especially when all had seemed lost. It is like you are able to live once again.

The uncomprehending but immensely consoling kind words of theirs are threads for me to hold on to...

Things had been good for a few solid years. I had even managed to repair my relationship with my family and equipped myself with a good job. In short, life was in my favour, and for that, I couldn't thank God enough. I was blessed with the kind of healthy lifestyle normal people experienced.

Yes, I yearned to live a life of normalcy and it was finally happening. With these positive experiences, came the urge to give back and reach out to those in need. While reaching out to them, there came "Jim"(not his real name) from my past. He came with the desire to change.



Jim and I were entangled in an intimate bond that got us officially married in March 2008. At first, it seemed so beautiful and I swear I never knew that life being a wife could be so perfect.

Holding on to his promises and his desperate need to turn his life around, I ended up being trapped in the prison of my own making. A marriage that was supposed to be a sacred thing, instead, became an abusive ugly one. It stripped me of my freedom, happiness and above all, the sanity of staying alive. The mental and physical abuse had left me tormented and killed all hope that I had planted all along. Yet again, the substances had proven their usefulness to me. It helped numb my pain and ensured comfort. Then in January 2009, I was caught for breaking the law again and taken to task.

I ended up being trapped in the prison of my own making.

It felt like I was running a marathon. Bursting towards the finishing line and suddenly being yanked roughly back to the start, lacing up my shoes, wondering if the race had even begun. The new sentence, shattered my hope into a million pieces.

Birds of a feather, flock together.

Serving my sentence, this time round, I vowed to make it quality time spent. I signed myself up for school in prison. Though I am not one of the high flyers, I became an A Level graduate. I know education is the start of my journey and it gave me a sense of purpose, something which I didn't have before. Maybe that was why my attempts at change failed. I was sure it would work this time. And since I still had 2 whole calendars before I embrace my freedom, I could start planning what I wanted to do out there based on my reflections.

Yes, I know we have been tormented enough to know that life is not ideal. There is always something left to be desired. Yet I am sure that we are capable enough to acquire wisdom and learn to let go of things wholeheartedly. I have learnt that forgiving our past makes it easier to move on. When hope seems distant, our faith in hope should burn brighter than anything else. We must take this stance to fight for and win these challenges instead of transgressing.



So, my dear peers, before I end, I hope all of us will fight our own devils with our honorable weapons, willpower and determination, and never give up. Let's try and play our humble part in the struggles of life and bring these murky and ugly phases of our life's journey into the light. And in case you are wondering, it is never too late.

Our faith in hope should burn brighter than anything else.

Last but not least, I wish all of you the best as you embark on your future endeavours with God's blessings.

Remember, don't give up and keep that hope burning.

Resilience

Zin (not her real name)



Resilience

written by Zin

"I thought it was easy with second chances, something like what we see in a movie."

I wanted to change and find meaning to my life. However, when I went out to the community, I started off on a wrong footing. I was dishonest and had to lie to be accepted because I wanted to be employed. In my mind, it felt like society did not give me a chance to be honest. I struggled to re-integrate into the society because of the stigma of having past criminal records. I faced countless rejections and discouraging comments whenever I wanted to go for courses to upgrade myself. I started to have self-doubt and I was scared that I would be left alone. Finally, I gave up and continued to mix around with my peers from the past. Peers that accepted my past self. Eventually, I ignored the soft voice at the back of my head, constantly prodding me to wake up and reconsider my choices.

A positive turn?

Life finally took a positive turn when I met my ex-partner. My partner's love changed me. She was the main reason why I started to process my feelings again. I realised I had a lot of unresolved feelings in me - anger, for the way people treated me when I sincerely wanted to change. Feelings of sadness and even feeling lost about my life. My partner reminded me that it was okay to feel the way I was feeling and to feel a whole host of things that other people may not understand. At the end of the day, everyone has their own journey to take.

I was blessed to meet my partner because she was crime-free and led a normal life. She was a positive support for me. She also motivated me to get a proper and stable job so that I could keep myself busy with work. I saw myself becoming a more responsible person and I spent my energy focused on providing for my family and spending quality time with them.

"Bad choices, we all make them."

Telling a story from the dark side is not easy. I can never accurately put into words the sufferings I went through in prison. Despite knowing that, I chose the very same path repeatedly. "Bad choices, we all make them." Our emotions take over and we lose sight of what really matters. When I was young, I had my own dreams and ambitions too. I wanted my family and country to be proud of me. However, "once a person sets off to sin, there is no way to control what happens next", at least that was what I thought in the past.

The first turning point in my life was at 17 years old. As a teenager, I was arrested for my first offence. If you were to ask me for the reason, I would say, "I do not wish to wear an innocent hat and blame it on the lack of attention and love from my family and friends."

This is because I have come to realise that we are responsible for every behaviour of ours.

I experienced the 'free fall life' which moved me away from the 'goodness of life' at a speed that was rapidly beyond my control. I was often in and out of prison for nearly 20 years of my life with various crime records. What seemed like an innocent and exciting activity ended in a disaster every time I was arrested and I was sent to prison countless times.

With my ex-partner's support and accepting me for who I am, I stayed in the community for almost 6 years. I had found a reason to change. I met someone who occupied the void in me, someone who was not embarrassed about my past and at the same time, challenged me to grow.

Another turning point

What came next is not a surprise. We know in reality, it is never a 'happily ever after'. The danger of having someone as your anchor is when that person leaves you, you will find yourself lost without a direction in life again. I was broken and battered when I lost my partner. I felt I had lost my self-worth once again, which led me into depression.

"The danger of having someone as your anchor is when that person leaves you, you will find yourself lost without a direction in life again."

Without her support, I did not get the constant positive motivation I needed, which resulted in me not being able to manage my depression well. This resulted in me getting involved in an unhealthy lifestyle again. Initially, I comforted myself saying that it was okay because I am just healing from my heartbreak, but eventually, I found more and more excuses to stay in that life again. I trafficked drugs without hesitation and thought I was lucky enough to not get arrested. However, at the end of the day, I had to take responsibility for my actions and faced the consequences. This led to me having to serve the longest sentence of my life, nine years and nine months of imprisonment.

Life is full of surprises

It was also because of this situation that helped me realise that you should never give another person control over your destiny, no matter how sincere that person may be. However, what I did not know was that life could continue to 'surprise' me. During my incarceration, I learnt that my grandmother passed away. I was given compassionate leave to see my grandmother for one last time but it was daunting for me because I did not know how to react, how to face my grandmother.

My grandmother was closest to me because she was the one who raised me and showed me love. In a way, she was actually my 'mother' because I spent the most time with her, more than with my own parents during my childhood years. Thoughts of what am I going to say to her started flooding my mind. But most importantly, I was worried about how she would feel to see me in this state. Regrets flooded my heart when I stepped into the house and saw her face for the last time. This time, I visited her with the identity of a prisoner.

After experiencing two major losses in my life, it took a lot more effort and willpower to change. I learnt that in order to heal my wounds, I must have the courage to face them. I know I had to forgive myself and correct my mistake. I knew deep down that doing something once can be considered 'truly a mistake' but the rest of the 'mistakes' were actually my choices.

It is never too late.

The turning point in the process of growing up is when you discover the core strength within yourself that has survived all hurt. I started believing in my strength and made the right choices. I was embarking on my journey of change in baby steps. When I started this new journey, I felt as if I had been living in this cloud of smoke in the past, not seeing what was in front of me. Now I could clearly see how far I had fallen. I know the pain of sacrificing my youth, my chances, my loved ones and my dreams, will never fully go away. Yet, I have been preparing myself to live life again despite the pain.

I think we should always remember: there is no failure for the man (or woman) who gets up every time he (she) falls.



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STORIES OF HOPE & EMPOWERMENT

An anthology of personal, short stories from
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Bringing together the voices of 16 ex drug users from all
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of these women's lives and how empowerment has
played a part in shaping who they are today.

