A Determined Woman Shares Her Story:

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

On November 16th the LUCAP organization Students Against Hyper-Incarceration (SAHI) held a Zoom conversation with Rhonda Oliver, Executive Director of Women Determined, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping women transition from prison to the free world. Ms. Oliver founded Women Determined after serving almost 14 years in the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women for the theft of goods valued at less than $200. During the hour-long event Ms. Oliver provided viewers with compelling insights into the ways Louisiana’s criminal justice system is stacked against poor and marginalized defendants.

Rhonda Oliver’s lifelong journey in women’s detention is play-acted by Western Sabah Bashai, SAHI’s Project Leader, moderated the event. Ms. Oliver began by explaining to viewers how the Jefferson Parish DA’s office used Louisiana’s “habitual offender” law against her to obtain a 20-year sentence for a crime with a maximum sentence of two years. She then asked Ms. Oliver to discuss the repercussions of her sentence. Oliver exclaimed; “There were so many” first and foremost Rhonda Oliver was separated from her young children and was forced to take her home “with no stability” while her mother was incarcerated. Oliver lost all her possessions, including her car. The kids she had, including a student loan, continued to pile up. Upon release, with her parents deceased and her siblings imprisoned and themselves in unstable living situations, Oliver had no choice but to live in a homeless shelter.

When Sabah asked Ms. Oliver when she realized that the criminal justice system was against her, she responded, “immediately” if I was a poor, black female. My only way out was to study the law and then represent herself in court. Coming through her case and the cases of other women with whom she was incarcerated, Oliver soon realized that they were “caught up in a system that would do anything to obtain a conviction” and that defendants often ended up with sentences “to fit what prosecutors felt they deserved.”

Ms. Oliver’s conclusions resonate strongly with the research of a leading scholar on mass incarceration, Fordham University law professor John Pfaff. Professor Pfaff argues in his important book, Locked In: How Mass Incarceration flourished and policies that have contributed to mass incarceration in the U.S.

On December 7 JSRI staff met via zoom. Ms. Oliver wrote a play about her experience of homelessness after prison, “Released to Nowhere,” which was performed with other members of Women Determined at Loyola during the Spring 2019 semester. The play was sponsored by Dr. Rhonda Bolden’s powerful and courageous book provides critical insights into youth incarceration. Contact Sabah Bashi at sabash@my.loyno.edu to see how you can become involved in SAHI’s work. Learn how you can support the work of Women Determined at www.womendetermined.org.

To gain a better understanding of mass incarceration through the experiences of an adolescent, a must-read is Loyola Associate Professor Christian Bolden’s compelling autoethnography, Locked in: The Real My Life as a Gang Member, Prisoner, and Redemption. In this Advent season of light and hope, Dr. Bolden’s powerful and courageous book provides critical insights into youth gang and prison life and the social forces that pushed him there, as well as how the loving support of family and mentors helped him lead to healing and redemption.

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