

MEN BEHIND BARS & THE WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM

BY CHERYL KATES BENMAN, ESQ.

THEIR QUEST FOR FREEDOM

In NYS, there are currently 52,344 inmates housed in NYS facilities (2). There are 10,540 inmates who are married (2). This represents 21% of the total inmate population (2). 60% of the inmates have children (married or not) (2). Maintaining family ties is closely associated with successful re-entry. The family unit is important when looking at how incarcerated people re-enter society. Most people at some point do return to our communities.

Marriage in the United States is already in trouble without adding a prison sentence, where 50 % of couples end up divorcing (3). This rate raises to 80% for people who were married when their spouse entered prison and after a year of their sentence (3). Each year thereafter of the prison sentence, divorce rates increase 32 % (3). Prison wives and families are the secondary victims of when a loved one enters the prison system (3). They suffer demoralization, stress, sense of outcast, guilt, shame, loneliness, financial hardship and increased expenses (3).

They also suffer increased stress and expense, when trying to maintain ties through prison visits, sending commissary and phone costs (3).

Two local cases are not only defying the odds, but the women endured being married for decades, while their men are serving out prison sentences. The families turned this devastating experience into something positive in their respective communities. Their husbands helped develop community programs which are doing

some good. These are their stories. Meet the men, the women behind them, learn about their programs to help the community and their quest for freedom.

WANDA LABRADOR/KEMET ALLAH

A woman of many roles, an educator, a mother and wife. Wanda never thought she would be a woman who would be married to an inmate. Her story otherwise, is like yours and mine.



She's a woman who is educated, gifted and an excellent mother. She is active in her community and is a law-abiding citizen. She is also the wife of Kemet Allah, a man sentenced to (32 ½-Life) who is currently incarcerated in Clinton CF. She often treks that 6-to 8-hour drive, goes through the metal detectors and finds herself in a whole different world: The world of the NYS prison system. This is her story.

Wanda began her career in education as a

paraprofessional at the Rochester City School District. At the time, she was a student at SUNY Brockport finishing her bachelor's degree. In 1997, Wanda began her career as a bilingual teacher. She stayed in this position for ten years. In 2007, she completed her master's degree in Educational Leadership from St. John Fisher College. She currently works as the Community School Site Coordinator at Martin Luther King Jr. school No. 9. She works closely with community partners fostering positive relationships with the school.

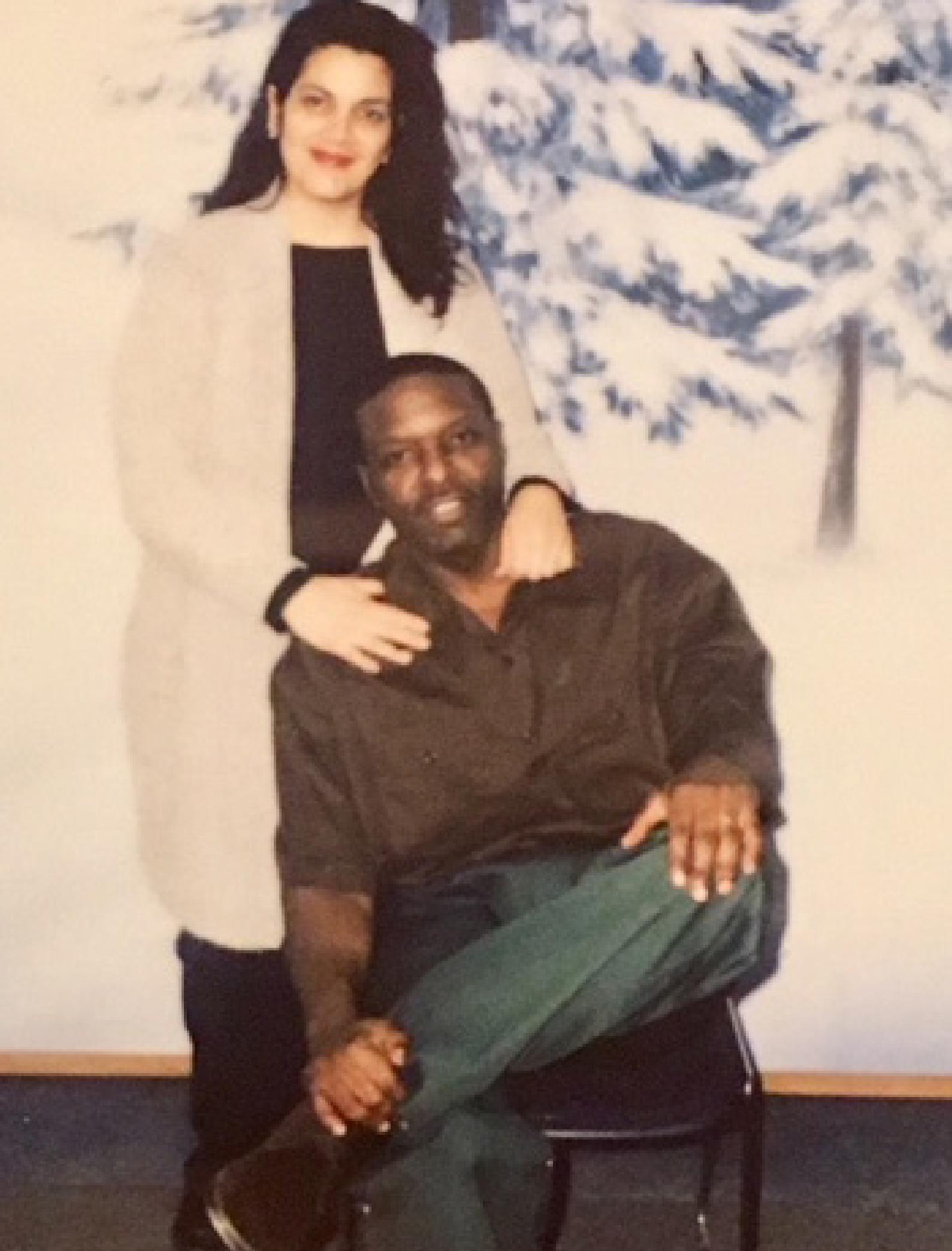
Wanda met Kemet when she was 13-years-old. He was 16. He quickly became her best friend. This blossomed into romance by the time Wanda was 18. Wanda indicates this remains true and Kemet, now her husband (since 1993) is still her best friend, offers her unconditional love, honesty and keeps her grounded. He is her greatest fan and motivator despite being in prison.

Wanda describes what it is like being married to someone incarcerated. "The best way I can describe it, is it is like being married to a ghost that only you can see. To the world, I am a single-mother, I have to carry on as such. But privately, I bear the burden and the pain of raising my children, running a household, being the sole breadwinner, all the while maintaining my own

and my husband's sanity and emotional well-being".

RWO asked Wanda, if she could change anything what would it be?

"Rockefeller Laws, they are archaic and ridiculous! Separating families, especially separating ours. My studies, looking back needed to include law. My life purpose includes fighting to help my husband and others in similar situations!"



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RWO asked Wanda, what is the most challenging thing in being a prison wife?

"Right now, the distance. He is five-and-a-half hours away. It makes it very difficult to visit. Travelling with young children, adds to the challenge, especially when one of them has Type I Diabetes".

We communicate. When we cannot talk or visit, we write. That is the only way to have a healthy relationship. We also talk about the future and make lots of plans. That gives us something to look forward to, something to fight for!"

COMMUNITY PROJECT

Together, along with the school social worker. Wanda and Kemet started a group to support students impacted by parental incarceration. It is called LINKS (Linking Ideas & Nurturing Kids Success). Wanda's husband Kemet came up with the name. The group provides a safe place for the kids to meet and keep a positive relationship with their family members. The group works on journaling and letter writing. Wanda hopes her program will be expanded to other schools in the future. She is currently being asked to meet with different officials from Albany to Syracuse, so the idea is picking up momentum quickly.

Wanda hopes in the next five years, she will work more on bridging the gap existing between our schools, community and student's homes/parents. She also loves having her husband by her side in this journey as she hopes her LINKS Program will decrease the stigma of incarceration and empower youth.

RWO asked, "How does Kemet play a role in the community activities you are involved in? "He is the inspiration behind a lot of the work I do. He actually does a lot of the footwork for work he is also doing while incarcerated. He wrote up some program proposals and was also approached by the prison administrations to run programs while at different facilities. I can't wait for him to be able to be more involved in the programs we are starting".

Kemet shares, "It gives me encouragement. My wife shares with me the success and attention

our collective idea is getting and how she has implemented it. I know, I'm on the right path and I'm looking to one day bringing my energy to the Links Project while reestablishing myself into society".

Wanda also began writing a blog about her experiences. It is called <http://www.37andahalftolife.blogspot.com>.

One of Wanda's entries shares the damage of prison life to children.

"Last night, I heard from my eldest daughter, she experienced trauma from growing up with an incarcerated father. That she doesn't like going to see him, because it is painful for her. I had never heard this before. Ever. It made me feel sad. And like a bad mother. Did I make a mistake in exposing my child to prison life? I began to think about the experiences we had, the two of us.

First, I thought about the fact that I was 20-years-old when this journey began. My daughter was 9-months-old. We were suddenly abandoned, left to navigate life on our own (without Daddy). As time passed and my daughter got older, prison became her playground. She had the biggest personality in the room, always.

When we would visit my husband, almost every inmate would say hello to her. She would manage to end up with candy, chips and other treats that were given to her as she visited and greeted people around the visiting room. Back then, the rules weren't as strict as they are today. My daughter was the honorary mayor and often appeared in family photos with friends of her dad and their loved ones. She loved the attention!

As soon as we would get in the car to drive home, our lives were back to normal. She took dance classes, has recitals, played with kids her age, did normal kid stuff. I made sure that my daughter went to a good school in the city while I began my own career as a teacher. My parents and siblings were very active in her life, so much so, that she struggled to see me and her as her own family (and that was ok). The bubbly kid did have one issue, she would get sad sometimes, but she wouldn't tell me why. About six years into my husband's incarceration, I began to have issues and insecurities of my own. I distanced myself from my marriage though maintaining the friendship that has always been the platform of our relationship. I moved away, plucking my daughter from her environment and engaging in a five-year whirlwind that took us to Florida, to Seattle, Washington and back to NY.

The events that took place and the instability during this time might be more cause for trauma than life as a prison kid. But this is just my opinion. At the end of the day, in my daughter's eyes, it's still my fault. And she's right. I was the adult, though not a mature or emotionally healthy one.

Trauma is what I have experienced too. But it will not defeat me. I will not focus on the negative and become disabled by the pain. Instead, I feed off it and turn it into passion so that I can make a difference in someone else's life. I didn't have this courage or attitude until recently, for this, I am grateful (Although, it may be too late for my daughter's benefit).

I told my daughter that I was sorry. That is all I can say. I am still growing as a parent and as a person, but I will never be perfect. I wish she would embrace the gifts that she has and use her experiences to help others. Somewhere, out there, there is a little girl who loves her Daddy to pieces but has no one to talk to about the pain of him not coming home".

Wanda shares her mother is the most influential person in her life.

She says, "She has loved me unconditionally.



She guided me and showed me what resilience looks like. She is also the most optimistic person I know. When I feel like I cannot take anymore, all I have to do is call her and everything is all right again".

KEMET ALLAH

Kemet remembers the day he went to prison, as a day where he felt an array of emotions; fear, anger, loneliness, as well as an uneasiness towards the anticipation of the unknown.

He recalls, "I was considered a "new jack" as it was my first time in prison. I was placed in handcuffs and leg restraints with a chain connecting both together; I was then transported in a bus full of young men who resembled myself. A twenty-four-year-old man. Our destination was Wende CF, to then be followed by Elmira CF. We were ushered into a room, lined up, shoulder-to-shoulder, and told to disrobe and bend over at the waist and to prepare for a cavity search. We were then given a disinfecting liquid to rub on our body and hair and told to get in the shower.

Afterwards, we were given a set of prison greens,

underclothes and boots with no insoles. Then the next phase was officers screaming into our faces "We don't care what you do to one another, but if you do something to one of our officers we will kill you". And that was the last thing on my mind, as I was then locked in a cell that resembled a mid-evil dungeon, with no windows, no lights, just my own thoughts. At that moment, the only thought I had was "Am I going to die in here?" So, my first day coming to prison, was an experience of humiliation that I've learned would become a daily occurrence for the next twenty-four years".

Thinking back on this day, twenty-four years later Kemet indicates, "I have a better understanding of myself, as well as this system. Prison is a dehumanizing, oppressive social system designed to suppress and alienate one's inner strengths, while causing inner conflict within the prisoner as well as his or her family structure. No one is exempt from being damaged to some degree from the prison experience. This goes for prisoners, CO's, Civilians, and family. I have learned to identify the negative effects of the environment on myself and my family. I try to counteract the effects, pain sometimes disrespect, they

may receive by making them aware and how to handle different situations that may arise".

Kemet identifies his marriage as what helped him achieve a place of peace within himself regardless of the environment he is placed in. His wife, Wanda is the sunshine that doesn't exist in prison. For the past twenty-four years, she rose to all occasions concerning staying connected to her and his children. She keeps him strong and hopeful in some of the most trying times in his life. His marriage encourages him to constantly strive to improve his character.

The Family Reunion Program offered in state prison is very essential in helping maintain family ties. Wanda and Kemet are realistic about their situation and other's individual struggles. Communication is key. They communicate on all issues concerning the family.

At this time, Kemet is incarcerated 24 years. He grew from a young man entering prison at age 24. He is now entering mid-life at 48. A clemency application is being filed on Kemet's behalf. He is sentenced under the Rockefeller Drug Laws and was ineligible for a re-sentence on a portion of his sentence. A portion of his

"The best way I can describe it, is it is like being married to a ghost that only you can see. To the world, I am a single-mother; I have to carry on as such. But privately, I bear the burden and the pain of raising my children, running a household, being the sole breadwinner, all the while maintaining my own and my husband's sanity and emotional well-being".

RWO asked Kemet, "Are you rehabilitated?"

He responded, "I guess I would say yes! In the sense that I do not desire to take any unhealthy risk which would jeopardize my life or others. I hope to further my education to assist me in helping counsel at-risk youth, by sharing my experiences and deterring them from making the decisions that led me to prison.

I think my request for clemency should be granted because my sentence was harsh and excessive. I was a first-time felony offender with no prior convictions, given a (37-1/2-to-Life) sentence for drugs and a drug deal which turned into a robbery. I was not being tried or accused of the actual acts. I was being held responsible for my co-defendants actions that they admitted to committing.

I was then sentenced to consecutive sentences. I was given (25-to-Life) for the drugs and (12 ½-25) for Robbery. In 2006, I was re-sentenced under the Rockefeller Reform Act. My sentence then became (20 years flat) for the drugs. I currently have 32 years. I also want to take this experience and do something positive by working with children in my community".

Should someone serve this type of sentence when there was no loss of life? Over thirty years in prison for selling drugs? The excessive nature of this sentence is what should qualify Kemet as a candidate for clemency. He is demonstrating daily by his actions he is rehabilitated. Even from prison, he is working with his wife in the community to make a difference to give back to the community he was ostracized from when being sent to prison. Can there be a hand of justice to pull him back?

LOVE SEES NO EVIL: DUTCHESS TAYLOR AND THE PUPPETMASTER

This is the story of Dutchess Taylor, a woman who suffered low self-esteem as a teen and was the child of a pastor. She married her first love and thought her first love would be her happily ever after. It wasn't. Her happily ever after came later, when she married Walter Taylor, a convicted murderer. A man who hated women,

but then grew to love her. It was a relationship which defied all odds. She was white. He was black. He was much younger than she was by 17 years. She was a Christian and he was in prison serving (30-Life). Dutchess said: "I knew nothing about his world, his life-style and nothing about prison". (Dutchess Taylor). Dutchess and Chris/Walter have defied the odds and are together for 34 years.

Walter Taylor lived by the lessons his father taught him, even having a hatred for a woman, love was a weakness, and feelings were not to be felt or shown. He watched his father abuse his mother physically and emotionally. His mother, a mother at age 17, was just a baby herself. Walter witnessed his father die after being shot between his eyes. He grew up using women. He learned and watched them. He talked to women to expose their inner secret desires, starting out as a Giglio, then becoming a pimp. A man who felt no love, pleasure or enjoyment in a relationship or women he dealt with. But he was able to one day know love.

Can a person be rehabilitated? Walter when first being convicted, didn't worry about going to prison. He knew he would easily adapt, in his mind he was the king of the streets. He had no doubt he would soon move to king of Attica. Walter learned the ropes fast and he was not deprived of women. Women working in the prisons were often available and engaged in relationships with the men in prison. Dutchess Taylor wrote about the entire experience in "Devil's Playground" a biography about her and Walter's life.

The most interesting part of the underlying case and what made it one of Rochester's notorious crimes, is the story behind why Walter/Chris is called "the Puppet Master". Walter Taylor was known in Rochester as a magician, a ventriloquist and then as a pimp (Orr, 2015). After witnessing his father's murder at the age of 5, Walter developed an alter ego through his dummy, Curtis "Fly" Johnson (Orr, 2015). He took the dummy everywhere and the two would speak back and forth. This was an issue to the point, as Walter spoke through the dummy when being questioned by the police

in 1979, about the murder he committed (Orr, 2015). He was the first NYS inmate admitted to prison with their dummy (Orr, 2015). The dummy was the dark force and Chris the good guy (Orr, 2015).

How does Dutchess meet Walter, if their worlds would not otherwise cross? Dutchess met him 34 years ago. Her son was struggling and having difficulties when he was serving our country. He attempted suicide. Dutchess read a newspaper column in the local paper written by her now husband. It was called "View from Inside A Prison". Dutchess thought prison is a place where people commit suicide sometimes after not being able to cope. She thought he may be able to help her get through what was happening.

She remembers in the early years, it was very difficult being a prison wife. The state can transfer your husband at any time and uproot the schedule of your life you became accustomed to. This involves travel. Sometimes an inmate can be placed in a prison which is 6 hours away from where they origin or where their families are located. Dutchess indicates so far "Chris" was placed at least 12 different prisons across the state of NY in the last 34 years.

Dutchess shares, "Prison was nothing like we see in movies and television. I had to learn how to deal with the process of going in, and with many other people who are visiting their inmate. People out here wouldn't believe what can go on inside a visiting room. I've seen fights but not only inmates fighting, visitors do too, also the sexual behavior that goes on in many visiting rooms. It's a crazy world...but for me, I see it but never get involved. I'm there to be with my husband and that is what matters most to me. Our relationship is strong. We love one another and confide in each other. He encourages me when I'm feeling down. He is there for me in sickness and in health, surgeries and other events throughout the years. Sometimes it's a lonely life, being out here, but I keep going, working to support myself. Many times, people can't understand. I've never hid it from anyone. I'm happy with Chris no matter what others think or feel.



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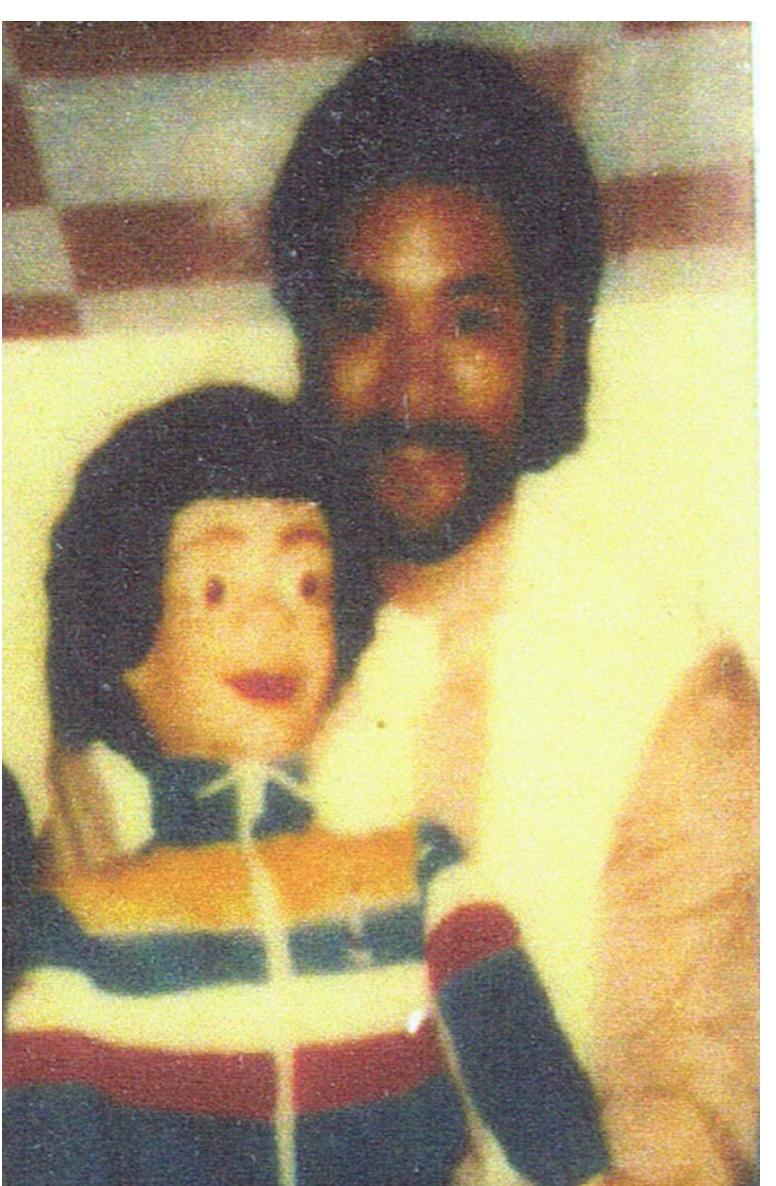
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RWO asked Dutchess first, "If she could change anything what would it be?"

She answered, "My answer would be for him to come home and start another journey together. I'm 17 years his senior and I know without a doubt Chris does love me. But sometimes, I wish I were more his age, so we could enjoy more time together when he comes home".

RWO asked: "What do you find the most challenging?"

Dutchess shared, "So many hours and miles, travelling from prison to prison for 34 years and all the disappointments from the parole board, six total, with two years added each time he was denied. As both of us are getting older



COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Dutchess informs RWO, the current project the couple is working on involves an anti-bullying initiative. Chris (Walter Taylor) is authoring a book called The F.A.B. Connection. F.A.B.

and dealing with sickness, surgeries, cancer and loss of loved ones, it isn't easy. But, we keep the strength to handle all these things".

meaning, "Fighters Against Bullying". This is Chris' 18th book.

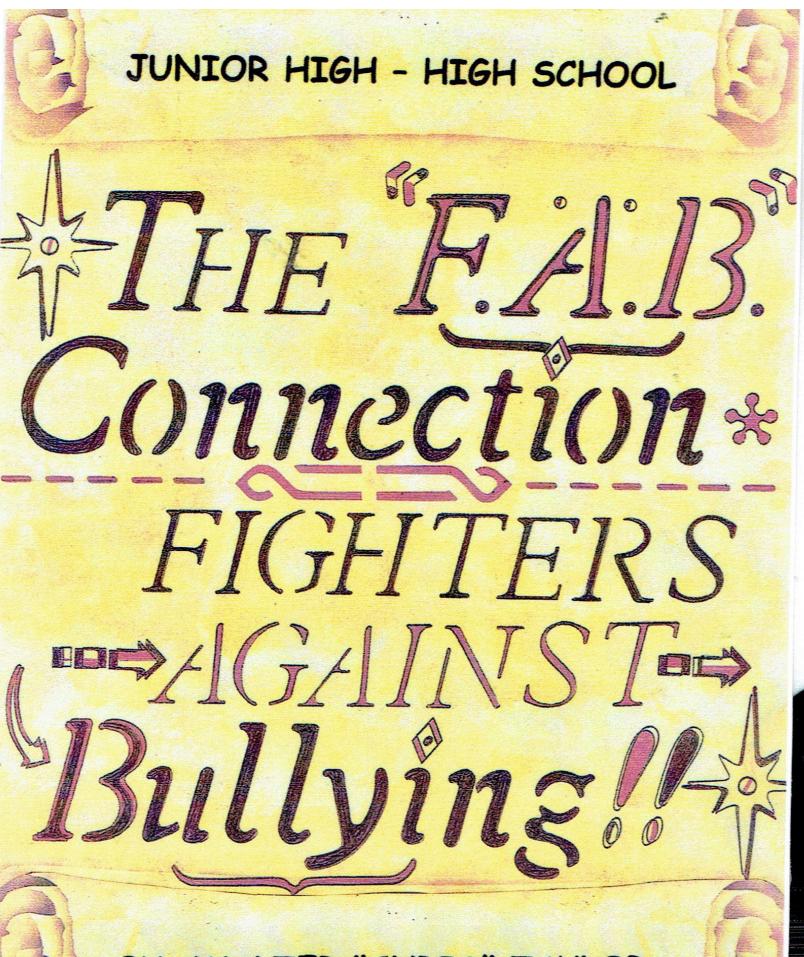
Dutchess shares, "We both remain faithful in our "faith" and in our love for one another. What better person to write such a book than a man who is on his 40th year in prison. He's been a teacher, counselor, and mentor to many bullies and abusers throughout the years. He learned from them and why they were that way. He's put it all in his book.

Once Chris is out and he and I will continue to help as many children as we can, so they don't end up in prison. I do the leg work out here such as computer and publishing. It's a back and forth project now".

RWO asked Chris "What does being involved in community service with your wife do for you?"

He responded, "For 34 years, my wife and I have built up a special kind of love, trust, commitment and values that will best serve our community. We bear witness to how family support, real commitment and love can build and bring a community together. We will share our life, adventures, even from a prison setting, so others will know that it's never too late to change and never give up on dreams of family, friends and community. Out of darkness, another light will shine as long as you believe and hold on no matter what. We live and survive three different kinds of lives that wouldn't have made it without family, friends, community and God to pull us through".

More information is available at <http://www.chrisdutchess.com>



WALTER CHRIS TAYLOR

Chris described the bus ride leaving Monroe County Jail on his way upstate to Attica Correctional Facility where he would live for the next 30 years or more as a ride of fear. The thought of all the heinous stories he heard about prison flooded his mind.

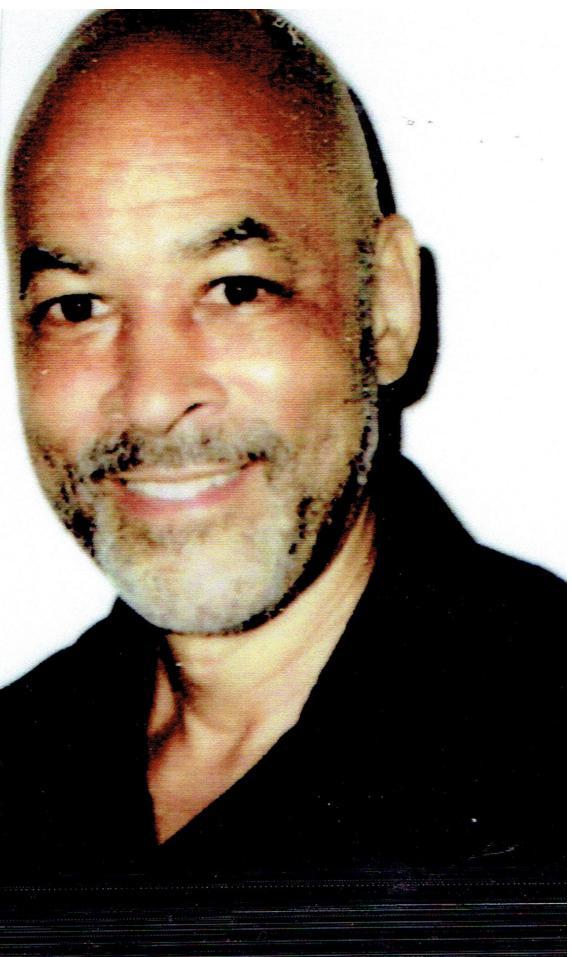
Chris stated, "That fear wasn't about to let me have any kind of peace. It got so bad I began praying for death as my only way out from a mad world, driving me insane before I even went behind those walls of broken dreams, with my own fearful heart, mind, and soul to live in the devil's playground where there was no escape".

Looking back on that day now Chris shares, "During that first day and 40 years thereafter, I overcame my fears, but also overcoming the fake past that I had. I was forced to look at myself. I had to face the evil I had within me. Prison didn't punish me, but it saved me from other crimes. Prison also rescued me from my dreary, insecure and cowardly ways. In forty years, I was forced to make a choice to continue to live like a monster or slay the beast within me. It wasn't easy by any means. I faced many trials and tribulations by waging war on myself causing me to lose what sanity I had left. But it was the goodness and true love of my wife and our faith

in God that changed me from a monster to a human being, husband, father, son and a true leader helping others to find their way from the darkness and back into the light for all to see. This is what I worked on for the last 40 years without any fear. For now, I know who and what I am, a man and no longer a monster".

Chris and Dutchess share a special bond. Chris thinks he could write a book about his marriage, but more importantly about how his wife saved him. Chris is happy prison was not able to destroy what the couple was able to build "behind prison walls of broken dreams". He believes the marriage, love and faith are stronger now.

Chris shares, "It's not about where two people fell in love and got married, but it is about their commitment, journey, communication, love and overcoming all obstacles which tried to destroy them no matter where they are. My wife and I have done that and are still doing it. Marriage and true love only lasts when both people involved really want it...end of story. We were able to take two different worlds, the one she lives in and the crazy world that I live in and bring them together to make our world. Marriage and love would rule over it. But when we're together we see, feel and understand and



love one another outside of these two different worlds. We're not foolish-hearted to all that's going on around us, but we do not let it destroy us because we have learned to control the love we have for one another. Therefore, our world is a comfort for us".

CLEMENCY

Walter unlike Kemet is not eligible for any type of resentencing structure. He appears at the parole board every two years and is continually denied parole. He is also applying for clemency based on the length of time he's been incarcerated and the actions of the parole board not complying with the law. He is serving a sentence for his role in the murder of a woman which occurred in the early seventies. His crime was indeed brutal but is there a time when someone is rehabilitated and deserves a second chance at life? After serving approximately four decades in prison is that enough when a life was lost? No matter what personal opinions are, the law in this state allows someone to be considered for parole after their minimum sentence is served. The nature of the crime is not a reason to continually deny parole when the record demonstrates rehabilitation.

RWO asked Walter Chris Taylor, "Are you rehabilitated?"

"Prison was nothing like we see in movies and television. I had to learn how to deal with the process of going in, and with many other people who are visiting their inmate. People out here wouldn't believe what can go on inside a visiting room."



He responded, "In all fairness, I have to answer to this question in two parts. First, no, if being rehabilitated means forgetting my past and moving forward with a new future, then I say no again. I can't and never will forget taking a life because the pain and hurt I caused and the lives of the family members I've destroyed cannot be erased. No amount of rehabilitation could or would be able to change what I've done. And yet, I have spent 40 years of my life "not" justifying, blaming, rationalizing or minimizing my attitude and behavior that I alone am responsible for. I've spent these long years not forgetting but getting my priorities as a human being through the many therapeutic programs I completed. I've changed myself from a monster into a decent human being, who refuses to forget about my past, so I will never repeat it. If the definition of rehabilitation is the equivalent to have I taken all my required programming? Then the answer is yes".

Chris explains why his clemency application should be granted:

"As for my clemency request the only way I can answer that question is by sharing with you what I've shared with the Governor. I've sent him copies and records of all my accomplishments and years of my achievements with letters of support from family friends and prison officials. Another words, I've let all of that I've achieved and the voices of those who have witnessed my change speak louder than my own words, now I pray the Governor will hear their voices loud and clear".

People do change. They can redeem themselves. Is it fair to let a single solitary act define someone for the rest of their life? Is there ever a time, they should be afforded a second chance? Kemet and Walter are examples of men who were able to change. They were able to see past

their circumstances and reach back through prison bars to try to save another person from becoming them. Is this not worthy of some consideration? The women who love them think they should be given a second chance and they helped them give back to the community they were accused of taking from. Only time will tell if the governor extends this option.

Resources

1. Orr, S. (2015). Quiz Answers Explained, Crime & Punishment, Rochester Style, Retrieved March 10, 2018 from www.democratndchronicle.com
2. NYS DOCCS (2016) Profile of Under Custody (Jan. 1, 2016), Retrieved April 26, 2018 from www.nysdoccs.gov

And Justice for All...

- Parole Plans
- Parole Administrative Appeal
- Parole Article 78s
- Appellate Division Appeals
- Parole Revocation Matters



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