Noor Moughni:

[inaudible 00:00:00:00].

Mary Heinen:

All right.

Noor Moughni:

All right.

Mary Heinen:

Welcome!

Nora Krinitsky:

Okay.

Noor Moughni:

Okay. I'm just going to start with this official statement. I'm Noor [Moughni 00:00:15], I'm here with Nora [Krinitsky 00:00:19] and Mary Heinen. We work with the University of Michigan. Today is May 15, 2020, and the interview is taking place for Mary in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Noor Moughni:

Okay. So we're going to start off with this question. Mary, what is your earliest memory?

Mary Heinen:

My earliest memory is playing in the driveway of the house that we moved into in Flint at 2514, [Maryland 00:00:00:50], Michigan. And we must have just moved there. I was probably four years old and I remember literally sitting in a grassy area in the upper part of the driveway, just enjoying the flowers and the sun. I was a little nature kid. And I remember being really happy just sitting in the grass.

Noor Moughni:

That's beautiful. So you mentioned to us before that your parents raised you. What are some things that they taught you and also how was discipline handled by them?

Mary Heinen:

My mother used to say to me, "Mary, use your head. That's what God gave it to you for. She encouraged a couple of things that really stuck with me. One is, she always had a list going. She'd make a list early in the day and she'd put down everything that needed to be accomplished. And then she would prioritize and assign because we had a house full of kids. And the way she treated that list when I was older was, you could not go anywhere that you wanted to, outside to play, on your bike, to an event, to the basketball game, unless you did what you had to accomplish on your list, whatever she gave you. And she would check and make sure you did it or watch you do it. So I think I learned early the importance of prioritizing tasks. And when I came home, my sisters and everybody in the family all operate on a list. So she taught us well.

Mary Heinen:

As far as discipline, my father was mean. He was cruel. And he was very stern, very Catholic. He was a pain in the ass. He used to be on me about absolutely everything and I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all. And I kind of grew up with this... It's not really resentment, but it's just, I don't like to be told what to do. Like, "You don't tell me what to do." That's what they say inside of prison. It made me be really independent because I didn't want to do what he told me. I wanted to follow my own course in life. So because he was so strict, and because I was a smart kid, I think I figured out early how to be gone and how to get away from him. I just didn't figure out how not to get trapped by a man.

Noor Moughni:

So you mentioned that you had siblings that also partaked in the list that your mom made you guys do. Who else was in your house and what were they like?

Mary Heinen:

My sister Anne was 18 months younger than I was. Anne used to get on my nerves. She still gets on my nerves. After I went to jail, she became the oldest, so she had my role, and she was a kid that was always trying to run to catch up with me. I made cheerleading really easy, I was athletic, I had my blonde hair, I was cute. And she was kind of funny looking with these cat eye glasses and dark hair. She was the only brunette when we were little, in the family. Everybody else was blond like my dad, German. She had a lot of problems with me. And I read once that it's not good to have babies a year and a half apart or less because that can set up a jealousy dynamic with baby two. That may have been what happened. There was definitely a real early problem with Anne.

Mary Heinen:

Matt came next. Brother, I got along fine with him. Although he's a Republican, pro-Trump kind of a jerk now. I don't go over there a lot because I don't want to hear about Trump.

Mary Heinen:

Then my brother Pete. Pete is a builder. He's a construction dude. Works for a large construction company in Grand Rapids, married with kids. I get along fine with him. He's an alcoholic. And when he got arrested, when I first came home, my family was kind of surprised when he disappeared for a few days. And then when he came back, he came and found me immediately and took me outside and just started spilling his guts about being in jail and how much he thought about me. He had a lot of questions about what he was going through.

Mary Heinen:

So in a weird way, we connected because both of us had been in jail, but I don't hear from him. He doesn't call. That's kind of the way it is.

Mary Heinen:

And then Jean is in the Midwest. I get along good with Jean.

Mary Heinen:

Karen, she's quite well off. She lives on Lake Michigan in this absolutely beautiful home. They own [Coop 00:06:05] insurance company. We were little poor kids and they're kind of [soo-didy 00:06:10] now. They're a little bougie for me, but she's nice to me, but she's a little standoffish.

Mary Heinen:

And then there's the baby, Christine. Christine is mentally ill. She's probably bipolar. I think my dad was bipolar. I think Pete's probably bipolar. I certainly have had some mental illness challenges with a life sentence and being abused. So there's like a common thread that through a very alcoholic family, which ours is, of very hardworking, smart individuals with mental health issues and a lot of personal problems.

Noor Moughni:

So you mentioned that one of your brothers had been incarcerated. Could you tell us a little bit more about that and maybe how that impacted you and your incarceration?

Mary Heinen:

Well, he got arrested when they pulled into a drug store parking lot and they found him drunk in his truck with full beer cans. My mother told me when I came home and I realized he was alcoholic. I knew it but knowing it and seeing it is two different things. He's the kind of guy that works like a dog, is very responsible. He has whole crews that work with him. All of those guys are really heavy drinkers that get out of work and just drink all night and wake up in the morning and start over and go to work and then drink. So I think he had that pattern for a long time.

Mary Heinen:

And my mother told me that he started drinking, they found him passed out in the garage in Flint when he was very, very young. And my mother said he blamed it on me being arrested. But my mom wanted me to know, that's bullshit, "He was drinking long before he even knew the whole story and don't take that on as something you're responsible for because you're not. He'd be drinking no matter what."

Mary Heinen:

He's real kindhearted. He's a lovely person. Never ever goes to the doctor. So they were always worried, if anything was wrong with him, he'd go fast. But he has a son that looks just like him. And he's just a sweetheart, but he's really seriously alcoholic.

Noor Moughni:

So you mentioned a lot of issues with alcohol in your family and with the life that you had growing up. If you don't mind answering, what is your relationship with alcohol right now?

Mary Heinen:

I like to drink, I like a beer, I like some wine, I like a cocktail. I'm not alcoholic. I can't drink more than one or two. I'll have a beer and bring it upstairs and watch a movie and in the morning, they'll still be some of it left. I think I might have drunk more if I hadn't been arrested as young as I was. So I was forced to grow up and I was forced to, basically, break down all my defense mechanisms and deal with the real nitty-gritty, so I didn't have any crutches.

Mary Heinen:

If you understand what I'm saying? Because I went to jail so young, I think I was forced to deal with shit. So now, I don't like being out of control. I don't like being high and worried I'm going to fall down the stairs. I don't like being drunk. I don't like being drunk at all. And I don't think it has anything to do with anybody else. I think that it's all me. I just don't like being out of control and I don't like how it makes me feel. And I'm diabetic, so a whole lot of sugar really can screw me up. It makes my eyes blur. My feet feel like they're pin cushions. It's not good for me to drink a lot. A little is fine.

Mary Heinen:

And I'm not an extrovert by any stretch of the imagination. I'm actually quite an introvert. Most people don't know that because I can be kind of loud, but more than anything, I think it's just loud to be heard. Not out of being an extrovert.

Noor Moughni:

Yeah. So going back to your childhood, what places did you live before your incarceration and what were they like?

Mary Heinen:

I lived in Flint in my family home until 1972. It was just a lower-middle class neighborhood with a lot of people that worked in the shop and had factory jobs. It was the Vietnam War era so a lot of those kids went to the war.

Mary Heinen:

I went to a Catholic school, so in my entire class... Most of my life under 12th grade to 12th was about 20 to 23 students in the same room all the time. They switched teachers. So I had a very good education. I learned Latin for some years and I did the whole college prep thing and I was smart. But you can see in my grades, I was looking at them the other day, I found my grades from St. Mary's when I was a kid, and you can tell when I was being abused. Because I was sailing along, I had good grades, I was doing really good until bam! About ninth or 10th grade, I started getting Cs and I actually had one D in algebra. And I think that's when I was running into a bunch of crap with my dad.

Mary Heinen:

I think that the abuse got worse when I was older, because I was seen by him as uncontrollable, which is crazy. I wasn't uncontrollable. I just didn't like... I was mouthy. I didn't like what he said to me so I let him know it, but I wasn't a bad kid. I don't think I was that out of control. But I could easily see now in hindsight, how I got into trouble. Because I wanted to get the hell out of that house. And I had a lot of fun hanging out where I was with the boys down the street, on [Hoff 00:12:39] Street. I was a little tomboyish anyway, so I kind of fit in.

Mary Heinen:

After that, I lived in Florida. I ran away to Florida. I lived in Florida for a while in a little cute... Like now they'd probably call it Airbnb, a little streamlined trailer. I worked, I was a ward clerk at a big hospital in South Miami Heights. It was a good job. I should have stayed there. One of my life regrets is I came home.

Mary Heinen:

When I came back, I had an apartment in [Fenton 00:00:13:15]. I was living there when I got arrested. And then I was gone for 27, 28 years and I didn't come back until I was almost 50. And then when I came home, I lived with my mom and dad in a condo in Grand Rapids. So I stayed in the apartment downstairs, they stayed upstairs. And then I took care of them during the day, then I went to work. I went to Meyer's, I worked second shift and some third shifts at Meyer's for four years. And then I applied for the [inaudible 00:13:45] job and came in this way and rented a house here. And then I bought this house, the house where I live now.

Mary Heinen:

So I've had quite an interesting life. I'm now 65. I'll probably retire from this home. I'm very concerned about the virus. My main hope right now is just that I and my wife survive.

Noor Moughni:

Yeah. So you talked a little about your education. Could you talk a little more about your relationship with teachers or other staff members?

Mary Heinen:

Sure. My dad was a teacher. He taught high school, the football and basketball coach. He taught Civics and American History and Econ. He was an Econ major at Western, with a master's degree, after the war. I always liked school, but I wanted to be gone. I'd go to school when I was a little older, but I'd still either have my boyfriend's car or my bike, and couldn't wait to get out of there and go. And I'd go over to the Planetarium and wander around. I'd go to the Flint Art Institute and look at all the art. I used to get lost in there for hours. I just did my own field trips without the class.

Mary Heinen:

I'm very intellectually curious. I read absolutely everything. I'm good at detail and following the dots and coming to my own conclusions on things. I've experienced life from a side that most people haven't seen, inside a prison. So I've seen how the machine works from the, I call it the belly of the beast, from the bottom of the pit. And I think that to me, it's really important that the teachers of the world be the folks that have really suffered and have really lived in alternative universes, off the edge, out of the fringe. Because I think it's the only way that we can really understand what's happening in society. Otherwise, you're just sticking your head in a pit of dirt, like an ostrich.

Mary Heinen:

I loved my teachers. I've had great teachers at Michigan. I had wonderful teachers at Western when Western came into the prison program. I'm somebody that went to school all of my life. I just kept going to school and going to school and going to school. Only up until after I finished my MSW at Michigan when I was having trouble remembering, that's when I decided, yeah, I think I've gone as far as I can go now. Because it became harder, I'd have to read the same thing two or three times to really grasp it when I was studying.

Mary Heinen:

So now, because I had management positions and I had positions where that required leadership and a lot of vision, I'm really good at that. Because I did it for so long out of my head with no pen, where people would be playing cards and hanging out, I'd be sitting there trying to figure out what affidavits I

needed for the next piece of evidence. I just kept working. And I think that saved me. And I think because I had such good attorneys and such good friends that helped me along the way and respected me and relied on me. I think that really helped me mature as an individual and it helped me along the way, help other people.

Noor Moughni:

So you talked a lot about all the fun things you did as a child. It seems like you had a really fun childhood. What are some other things that you did and how did you spend most of your time during your youth?

Mary Heinen:

I spent a lot of time reading. Once I figured out I could get on a bike and escape, I would ride everywhere. I rode all over. You would not believe everywhere I rode. But I found [Potter 00:18:08] School, which was on the other side of [Dort 00:18:10] Highway and they had a library.

Mary Heinen:

I learned how to play tennis and badminton when I was a kid, I was never a runner, but I was always on my bike and I liked to swim. So I did a lot of swimming at [Kearsley 00:18:24] Field House and at [Ballenger 00:00:18:27], where my dad was athletic director in the summertime. So I was very physically active and I'd go to Potter School and I'd come home with about 10 or 12 books and I just devoured books. Book after book after book. And I did that all the way up until I came home after parole. I was just a voracious reader and it really helped shape my intellect and it helped me escape and it helped me... It built character. Reading builds character, I think. And it gave me a frame of reference where I could have a conversation with anybody. Some of the best conversations I've ever had in my life, I've had with my wife who grew up in many ways, the same way I did. Extremely smart, always read everything. She's way smarter than I am. But she's intellectually curious and I think that that's one of my main characteristics.

Noor Moughni:

That's amazing. Where do you think that this intellectual curiosity or love for reading came? Were there any people who maybe influenced you or introduced you to the world of reading?

Mary Heinen:

I think it was my dad. My dad, back in the day, the newspaper would hit the front porch every night, or every morning, depending on the day. And I'd race to get the paper and he'd be mad as hell if I got that paper before him and started reading everything and messing it up.

Mary Heinen:

Then we had the paper, we had the radio and we had a little black and white TV. And so even as an adult in prison, I still had a paper, a black and white TV and a little radio. So it kind of followed me. It wasn't my choice, but I've always been really thirsty for information. And I've always tried to find the best of information. If I'm working on a problem, I'm a researcher to my heart. I'll research something down to the last period because I had to. My life depended on being able to file an appeal or write a grievance or save somebody that was in serious trouble or help somebody that was dying that needed care and

couldn't get it, or help this mama take care of her babies long distance with guardianship papers and powers of attorney.

Mary Heinen:

So I tried, just naturally. I mean, it just happened totally naturally that I became a navigator person who was based in the law library for many years. And I was the resource, like the resource director. And I gathered a lot of resources. I would write to NIH, the CDC, I'd write everywhere and amass a collection of medical journals and resource material. And I handled the medical.

Mary Heinen:

There was a period of time when we all, the lifers that worked together, kind of, I don't know, I wouldn't call it "divided." We just chose for ourselves what our interest was and what we were really good at. And so then we became experts in our own fields. And so we'd meet for a cup of coffee in the morning and they'd just look on deck and think, "Oh, it's a bunch of lifer shit." We'd be sitting there and figuring out what we were going to do for the day, who we were going to sue next.

Mary Heinen:

But I think organizing comes real natural to me. I think speaking comes really natural to me. I'm kind of a born storyteller. I think that... I don't know where I'm going with this. Ask me something else. I'm sorry.

Noor Moughni:

It's okay. Aside from your dad, who are some other people who influenced you the most growing up and how did the lessons or the influence that they had on you kind of follow you for the rest of your life?

Mary Heinen:

I was heavily influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. And I remember being just totally into what was happening with the freedom riders and when Viola Liuzzo, who was from Detroit and was a mother, went down South to work with the freedom riders and was assassinated on the side of the road, I don't think I ever got over that. I always remembered the people that went before me that really sacrificed and try to help other people. And I think that to me, that's the highest admiration that I can have for somebody, is somebody that laid down their life for somebody else.

Mary Heinen:

I, yeah-

Noor Moughni:

[crosstalk 00:23:24].

Mary Heinen:

I'm sorry.

Noor Moughni:

No, I'm sorry. Continue.

Mary Heinen:

I see that a lot now with the nurses and doctors and the people on the front line. Because I watched my mother come home from work and be tired, broke down. I'd call and she never talk about work, ever, with one exception. And that's a story. I won't tell you that one. But the dedication of the healthcare workers on the front line, it's incredible. I mean, it's just phenomenal. And those are the people I really admire. I don't admire politicians and assholes that get themselves elected with their money at all. Ever. I admire the ones that work their way there and are doing it out of a genuine altruistic love for what they do and for the people that they serve.

Noor Moughni:

It seems that you have very strong opinions about the government and politics.

Mary Heinen:

Oh yeah.

Noor Moughni:

What were your ideas or perceptions about the government as a young person?

Mary Heinen:

I hated the Vietnam War, Tricky Dicky and Nixon. We always follow politics in my house because my father was a politician. My father was at one point, he served on the Flint City Commission with Don Cronin who got indicted later on. I remember the day a guy came to our house, standing on the front porch, trying to bribe my father over a public housing project development.

Mary Heinen:

So we always talked about politics in the house. We always had a TV or radio or something happening where there was political discussion. My father was actually, on hindsight, I realize he was more liberal than I thought at the time. I didn't think he was liberal at all. We didn't even understand what liberal was back then, you were Democrat or Republican.

Mary Heinen:

But I think that the interest came early and never left me. And it's been fun because it's the same thing happened with my wife. So both of us have very strong political opinions and cuss out the TV. We're doing it today. We've called Trump every name in the book and it's fun. It's political parody and art, entertainment and theater. We amuse ourselves cussing out politicians and making fun of the Republicans.

Noor Moughni:

That's so great. What about your perceptions about the local government and police courts, the criminal justice system? [crosstalk 00:26:20].

Mary Heinen:

Oh boy. That's a can of worms. I'll start by saying, I really like where I live now because it's in the Ypsi area and Ypsi has just passed an ordinance supporting returning people from corrections. Basically, by

ordinance outlawing discrimination against former prisoners, which allows us to rent and live here in peace. That's a beautiful thing.

Mary Heinen:

And most people don't know this, I think, but the mayor of Ypsilanti is Beth Bashert and Beth Bashert took Diane Engelmann, who's a good friend of mine, when she came home from prison after five or six years, into her home. And Diane lived with Beth and her wife Lisa for a long time It was a number of years before she went down to Florida to take care of her mom.

Mary Heinen:

So this is an area where people put their money where their mouth is. It's a lot different than Ann Harbor in many respects, that discriminate regularly against formerly incarcerated people, in education and housing in particular. It's hard to get anything to rent in Ann Harbor. It's too expensive and they don't want to let you in after they do a background check and a credit check. I got lucky.

Mary Heinen:

I think our government is about as fucked up as it can be right now. The criminal justice system is changing only because there's really genuine effort at the grassroots root level to change. That is moving mountains. And because there's more of an understanding of what the criminal justice system has become, which is a money machine driven by policy and a vindictiveness more than a real genuine concern for fair sentencing. And I hate the word "rehabilitation" because it's such bullshit. But being able to actually help someone with treatment for mental illness or addiction.

Mary Heinen:

I think the government is just fucked up. I don't even know where to start. I think it's going to be even worse if we lose the election in November, which I do not anticipate. I'm holding on to Trump will be out the door soon if he doesn't get us-

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:29:04]

Mary:

I'm holding on to Trump will be out the door soon if he doesn't get us all killed in the meantime.

Interviewer:

Okay. Well, let's maybe go back to your first contact with the carceral system. Could you explain what that experience was like?

Mary:

My first contact with the carceral system, I was 15 or 16 and I was a very young 15 or 16. When I look at my mugshot now it's like, oh my God, I look like I'm about four. And I ran away. And leave it to me, I had it planned. And so I had rented this little, tiny, tiny, tiny apartment downtown in Flint to run away too. So I ran away and I had the key and I went to my apartment and I holed up in the apartment and I stayed there and I was there about, I don't know, four or five days. And I had food and everything.

Mary:

And somebody knocked down the door and it was social services, it was like the CPS people looking for me. I had slipped up and I left a number to the land lord person that owned the house somewhere where my mother found it. So my mother called it and talk to them and realize that I kept myself a little spot to go to. So she sent social services over there to go get me. So they didn't get me on the first round, but they got me about a week later, they picked me up walking down the street and they took me to what they used to call the Pasadena Playhouse. And it was a juvenile detention center on Pasadena road.

Mary:

So now I'm in juvie, I'm wearing this little jumpsuit, and they take me to this little court thing there. The only thing I remember about that day is they told me I had to wear a bra and I had to obey my mother. And if I did that, they would let me go home. So I went home and nobody was talking to me. And I remember I started packing immediately. They weren't going to spoil my summer vacation. I was leaving. And so I did, I ended up leaving again. I hid behind the garage with my sewing machine. How funny is that? Took off, and I ended up staying with a friend for a while.

Mary:

And it was quite a thing then to just even get picked up. So years later, when I was 21, then I was arrested in another County adjacent to Flint. And that time I ended up in the County jail, that was the real thing. It looked the South in the fifties, it was horrible. And I did almost a year there and then I went to prison and I ended up serving another 26 and a half on top of that. And then I came home and did four years of parole.

Mary:

So I spent a big chunk of my life in the carceral state system in four women's prisons, DECHOCO, Heron Valley Women's Facility from the day it opened August 5th of 1977 until November... No, then I went to Florence Crane. I landed at Florence Crane in January of '89 and I was there until November 1st of 2000 when we shut it down and moved to the Robert Scott Facility on five mile and Beck. It doesn't exist anymore, it got tore down to the ground, but all the hot shots that wanted that property so bad, after we were out of there and they did all the surveying and the digging and the planning for how they were going to make all that money on that sacred ground, they discovered that shit is so polluted and so toxic they can't build anything on it. So it's a waste site in the middle of this like multimillion dollar mansion neighborhood.

Mary:

But I came home and I came home to my family and stayed with my family until my parents died and then moved on in life. The problem with all this is when you go to jail when you're that young and spend that much time in jail, when you come home, you have not had the normal trajectory of life, of folks in this culture at this time. So I don't have children. I don't have savings accounts. I don't have really deep connections with my family anymore because I was gone so long and I was the oldest. I think birth order matters. I've had to start from scratch from everything, from sheets to a wife. I had to live as much life as I could get into 18 years, which is where I am now. This summer I'm out free 18 years. Sometimes I find myself just hoping that I'm out and free and not dead as long as I was inside.

Interviewer:

So throughout the incarcerations that you've experienced, what was incarceration like for you? What does it feel like to live in a prison or in the South?

Mary:

We joke you had to be there. It depends on what year, what decade, where I was housed, what was going on. I mean, I've lived the majority of my adult life in a prison. So one kind of way or another. So there were years, I used to joke when it was good it was very, very good. When it was bad, it was horrid. And that's exactly what it's like. It's like a meatloaf song. Well this, oh, I love this line. Will this go on forever or be over tonight? You don't know. You don't know how long you're going to be locked up. You don't know how long you're going to be in that bunk. You don't know how long that bitch is going to be warden. You don't know who's walking in the gate, coming in with the keys to entertain you all night or lock you up.

Mary:

You just don't know from one minute to the other about what's going to happen next. And in a weird twist of fate or irony or kismet, that's half the reason why the world is twisting around now. They don't know what's going to happen next. And this is a society that was built on regulation, regimentation, order, planning, figuring it out years in advance. And with corrections and with criminal justice, you don't know what's going to happen next. And with all the planning in the world, you don't know who's going to have a seizure and go out in the ambulance in the next 10 minutes. You don't know when the lights are going to get flipped on and the dogs come and you're getting shut down and you're standing out in the field with snow up to your knees.

Mary:

You don't know if you're trying to sneak off with your girlfriend, if you're going to get busted. I mean, you don't know if you're going to the hole, you don't know what dinner's going to look like. I mean, everything is you don't know and you're completely out of control. So no matter how much fun it is because you're living with this fine woman, or you don't know how crazy it is because you have a family member that's in the hospital and you can't get a phone. There's so much that's out of your control that what you can control and what you make for yourself is what becomes your life.

Mary:

So I always had a personal life inside. I always had a business life because I made it, I created it. I was bound and determined, you son of a bitches are not taking me out for real. And so I would just, and I would tell them that. I would talk to them. If things were getting crazy, I'd tell them, and I knew there was a hit on me, I'd look right at them and tell them, look. You cannot do anything to me that my father didn't do. So, you're not going to make me cry. You might as well knock it off because this is not a thrill. Sometimes you just have to speak truth to power. Sometimes you just have to tell it like it is. And sometimes you just have to make it your own no matter what and no matter how bad your situation is, you just have to have a really good time.

Interviewer:

That's powerful.

Mary:

Yeah. We had some nice parties in the yard. We had parties you wouldn't even believe. They were so much fun, but it was a group of lifers predominantly. And we all lived together for so long that we just figured out how to make it work.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you mentioned having different experiences at different facilities. Could you talk a little about the living conditions and how they were like at each of the correctional facilities you were incarcerated?

Mary:

Yeah. Detroit House of Corrections was a dump. It was a old farm, turn of the century state school, raggedy and run down, no screens. That was fun. Part of it was a canning factory, tomatoes. It was little cottages with long corridors and old radiators. It was in the city, but it felt like it was in the country. But I actually kind of enjoyed being there strange as that sounds, because it was pretty laid back compared to what was coming later. Everything was a learning experience for me then, because I was so young so I had to learn how to live with folks from a completely different culture and race. I had to learn what it was to be a lifer. I had to learn, okay, from the old school, from people like Mary Butler, that was my mother's age, doing life.

Mary:

And now what the fuck am I going to do? I had to learn. I had to learn what it was to be a lifer. And how am I going to get out of this one? So I had different stages. So when we moved to Heron Valley, it was brand new, it was in good shape, but it slowly, slowly, slowly became more institutionalized and more strict from the time that we first pulled up. So by the time I spent almost 12 years there, by the time I finally rode out of there, it was a real penitentiary. They weren't messing around by then. And it only got stricter and worse and more overcrowded as time went on. Overcrowding has a lot to do with movement and programming and whether or not you lose your mind by midnight. So as time went on and it became more and more and more overcrowded and diverse and crazy.

Mary:

And then the class of guards changed. So in the beginning there were no men. About halfway through here comes the men, then the shit started. Then there were rapes and all the sexual stuff got really crazy. And then I transferred from there to Florence Crane. Florence Crane was a decrepit rat hole that was the worst of the worst. It had asbestos. It had toxic water from nitrates from bird droppings from the fertilizer that was laid out in the fields that went into the wells. Oh, it was ugly. But it had a great yard. That yard was the bomb. That yard was a field during the civil war. And it's said that there's civil war veterans buried, their bones are underneath that soil.

Mary:

It was a nice place to have a girlfriend. It was a nice place to be able to enjoy nature. We would name the deer and everything had a name. The Amish would drop by in their little buggies. That's a place that when it was good, it was very, very good. And when it was bad, it was horrid. It also was a place full of hepatitis and disease from no bleach and nothing to clean with. We snuck samples out from Q-tip swabs from the shower one time to University of Michigan to have it tested to see what it was because we had staph infections, just terrible. I had a terrible staph infection on my leg. And they said there were microbes and bacteria in that thing that were so advanced and sophisticated, they couldn't even identify it. They didn't even know what that shit was. That's how complicated the germs were.

Mary:

It was a cesspool, it was a miracle I survived that bitch. It had tiny red mites in the cement on the patios. So even if you could blow out and sit somewhere, you'd end up covered with these little mites. Mite bites are the worst. They had scabies, they had TB, they had everything. It was horrible. And then Robert Scott, which was a newer facility, was tight as a bitch. That thing was locked down, locked down, locked down. And if you did make it to the yard, you were jumping around, dancing all night, trying to get around the bird poop from the geese. I'll never forget that yard. It was horrible. I hated that yard. That yard, you could really catch anything in.

Mary:

So life in prison is summer and winter. There's really nothing else. In summer, you're outside, winter, you're inside. So it's summer, winter, summer, winter. And that's how you experienced the yard and being out, because in the summertime you have more yard privileges. So you can go outside after dinner and you can go out. There's more time during the day, although, as they get more overcrowded, that's when the squeeze came because they would only let you out according to your security level. So if I'm in unit three and I'm a medium custody person, they're not going to put me in the yard with the ones. And they're not going to put me in the yard with the fours. And certainly, everybody above that is locked up anyway.

Mary:

So you ended up moving only with your rank and your rank and file really. I used to joke about 3 and out. It was like the shop. You moved with the ones that you were classified with. And so that was your perspective and that was how you experienced the physicality of the facilities.

Interviewer:

How is the food like at these facilities?

Mary:

It sucked. food was horrible, food is used for punishment, reward, torture, you name it. I have all kinds of food issues just from being locked up so long and hungry. I was kind of mortified when I saw my monologue this week, because in the monologue about halfway through she starts eating and I'm thinking, oh God, they asked what I'm like and they told them I eat. They call it being convicted, I was convicted. I think that we were able to, for many, many years have our own money and do our own shopping and cooking, but you could only shop and cook what was sold out of the commissary. So a lot of it is starchy, sugary, noodles and stuff that's fattening.

Mary:

And I always had friends that were really good cooks. They could make something out of anything. So a lot of living in prison is around food. And a lot of torture in prison is around food. So it's a really complicated issue because I think the Catholic church does the same thing. A lot of churches do it. The food is used as a reward and as a celebration and as a center piece and I mean, center of the mass is bread and wine. I think the whole culture of food and food preparation is really tainted in the criminal justice system and difficult and painful. And a lot of people don't talk about it.

Mary:

But I noticed over time with the lifers, with the women, almost universally, there was a big group of us that were diabetic and there was another group of us that were hypoglycemic. And so depending on your own genetic makeup and constitution and eating patterns and whatever, you ended up in one or the other with a really serious complication of some kind of metabolic disturbance from sugar and diet. And you're not real healthy. You're just not healthy from poor diet and poor medical treatment.

Interviewer:

So you mentioned a lot of health issues. What was the healthcare like at these facilities?

Mary:

Terrible. Absolutely terrible. And I feel horrible for the folks inside now with COVID because they're not getting anything. You're going to die where you are and their version was always bus therapy. If you needed something they'd just put down a bus and send you here, send you there and bye. I can just see them, how they're handling people that are positive and people that they don't like that they want to move in with the positives. And I mean, here's classic DOC. We were at Florence Crane. We are complaining about the asbestos and all the health issues with the asbestos. We'd convinced the warden that she's got to get somebody in to take a look at the asbestos.

Mary:

So we wake up one morning and there's these guys in these suits and they're getting ready to remove the asbestos from the ceiling in the area next to the kitchen and right by the kitchen. So they march us to an area where we remained for the day. And when we're told, okay, the coast is clear, come on, they have us turn the corner and walk back to where we were from. And they weren't done cleaning up. And so everything that they had sucked up into this machine, they ended up spraying on us as we walked through to go to our unit. And then that same day, the electrical box in the kitchen caught on fire.

Mary:

It was a bad day, but that's classic DOC. It's like classic Trump. They say one thing, but they do the exact opposite. Or they say one thing or they're lying through their teeth or they tell you something and you can't rely on it because you know it's probably propaganda and bullshit. It's real difficult to be a prisoner and have lived there and know what's going on. And then be told something that's completely opposite. So healthcare is terrible. I've had prisoners die all around me. I've watched prisoners die. I've tried to help prisoners as they were dying, get to the clinic or get help.

Mary:

I lost a partner from stroke. Ambulance got stuck in the middle of the night in the snow. And everybody ran out to get the ambulance out of the snow to get her to the hospital on Saturday night and she was dead on Monday. We had a funeral inside. So we've had funeral after funeral after funeral. The age of COVID is just a nightmare. And I feel so bad because they're like the last ones that are going to get vaccinated eventually.

Interviewer:

Yeah. So you mentioned a few relationships that you had with people in the facilities. Who did you live with? What are some relationships you formed? What did community look like in these spaces?

Mary:

Community in these spaces was usually pretty tight. I mean, I usually had a friend and I had a woman that was my friend. And then I had a girlfriend or somebody that I worked with that I wasn't coupled up with. I always had a girlfriend here or there, girlfriend there. And it was usually somebody I was hanging out with in the library and we were working together or whatever. And then I had a woman and I had a woman really early. I had a woman through the whole thing. Longstanding relationships kept me alive. That's about all I can tell. It kept me alive. And it kept me sane. And it gave me somebody to talk to and providing companionship in a shark tank.

Interviewer:

Can you talk a little about the work that you did during your incarceration?

Mary:

Sure. I was a jailhouse lawyer in a time when it wasn't really understood that's what women did, because the women, when I first started, it was the Vietnam war. Men were jailhouse lawyers, men had programming, women didn't have anything. So I went in trying to figure out how to file a grievance, how to file an appeal. I was a process person, I was always trying to figure out how to do something. How do I do this? How do I do that? And I would ask for the advice of my elders, of the lifers before me that had some experience in that, many of which, the ones that were still alive, would have been exactly the generation before me, my mother.

Mary:

And so I started working early and I just kept working and I worked my whole life. I worked when I was a kid, I was at a job and a second job. I'm not lazy. So as long as I can walk or think I'm going to figure out something to do. I'm always trying to find intellectual stimulation. I'm always trying to figure out what I want to do educationally and personally next. I'm he kind of person when my boss says to me, you're only supposed to be working 40 hours, do not work after hours. I'll sit there and think, I've been working after hours since I was a kid, are you nuts? I just do it naturally. I just multitask.

Mary:

Well, I'd say, Maestro said to me, that was a prisoner, that sometimes in meetings she wished that she could just pull my tongue out and read it like a ticker tape. She wanted to read it like a ticker tape so she could see what I was thinking. I put a lot of thought and care into what I do. Yeah, I'm really dedicated to serving prisoners and prisoners' families and former prisoners and my community that has the most severe disabilities and disadvantages that aren't even understood [inaudible 00:00:54:00].

Mary:

Somebody that's been inside and knows what it's like. Not to have anything and not to have anything coming your way ever and not to have visits and not to have money and not to have half of your mind. And trying to just survive. Those are the folks that my heart bleeds for. I'm a classic bleeding heart. I can't say liberal, but I'm about as progressive as they come. And it's because I've got a real understanding of life and of what it is to be human and what it is to suffer. And I think that there's so much human suffering that happens because of ruthless people that want to make a buck.

Mary:

We started today making a list of what I'm calling Mel's musings. And they're usually like zingers that she'll throw like, what the fuck or capitalism. So a lot of what is happening now, we'll name it. So she'll holler capitalism and we totally get it because it's a capitalistic society, it's all about money and fuck the little guy and we're the little guys.

Interviewer:

So you talked about experiencing a lot of suffering. Where did you find joy in prison?

Mary:

I found a lot of joy in prison. I think that would be a surprise that people knew how much fun you could have in prison. You don't want to say that to anybody, but it's true. I can remember one day at Florence Crane, I just had a flash of it, sitting underneath the crying tree, that was a tree where we had the funeral and sitting at a picnic table and we were laughing about the dentist. And there was a prisoner that was a little squirrelly as my friend would say. And she was looking underneath the file cabinets. And she shook the whole library down looking under the file cabinets for the dentist. And we said, what are you looking for? She said, I'm looking for the dentist.

Mary:

And yeah, it was sad, it was touching, but it was hysterical because it just struck our funny bone. And I can remember sitting at that picnic table and I was laughing so hard about looking for the dentist, dentist, that I fell forwards and I rolled down the hill like a ball, like a little kid and lay there, just laughing hysterically. Sometimes you just have to clown around and have a good time when it's really getting to you. But sometimes you just have to hit that yard man and hang out in the sun and play dominoes and talk to your friends and drink pop, eat a sandwich, wish you had some sunscreen and chill out. So for me, I tried really hard not to take it too seriously, many days and just enjoy being with of my friends or my girlfriend or working and trying to accomplish something besides take a shower.

Interviewer:

Yeah. It's so amazing how you found joy even under such awful conditions. Did you ever find survival to be difficult?

Mary:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

And how did you manage?

Mary:

Oh yeah. Well, I've had some near death experiences. I have asthma, so I've had a couple of times when I couldn't breathe. I got hit in the head with a freight elevator door when I was testifying in federal court in Detroit, it smashed my skull. I fell backwards and I ended up in the hospital in Detroit for a month with a swollen brain and a nasty, nasty rash from the steroids.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:58:04]

Mary:

And a nasty, nasty rash from the steroids, from my IV bottle. When I came back, they threw me in the hall and I had to do yoga until I could stand up and walk without passing out. I've had some pretty dramatic shit happen to me. They tried to kill me. They've poisoned me one time. There's been hits on me. Guards were going to slice ... Well no, it's deeper than that. The head of security was offering lifers the opportunity to go to the parole board if they would slice my face up and run me out of the prison. One of my friends, Federico, came to me and said, "There's a plot to fuck you up. They're going to slice up your face and they're going to make a big deal out of it so that you have to be moved out of here to the other prison."

Mary:

So I ended up in court telling that story to the judge. And eventually I did transfer, but I always had luck or blessings or whatever where I was tipped off, or I knew about something, or I figured my way out of something, or somebody called an attorney if they threw me in solitary. I got around.

Speaker 1:

Wow. Could you talk a little more about the motivations behind these attacks on you?

Mary:

Well, they wanted to stop me from pursuing legal action against them. Once I pulled my file because I needed something out of it from the records office, and I found a stack, and I mean a stack of like 50 or 60 writs of habeas Corpus, where they were ordering me out to go to court to testify. And what tended to happen was when I went out to testify on one of the cases of our class actions, you would be accompanied by officers from the state that handed you over to the feds when they got you to the federal building, because you became a federal prisoner the minute you were on federal soil, but your officers from the facility that drove you down there would still be with you hanging out with them.

Mary:

So they would hear your testimony. And they would see who was doing what in court. And there was always tremendous interest in what was going on in federal court downtown and what we were saying and who we were telling on and what we were doing. So the ones that took us that drove us would come back and they would go straight to control center, close the door, and everybody came from everywhere to hear what they had to say right in our face. And that was the group that would retaliate and hit us immediately. We wouldn't even be out from being shook down and they'd be on us. "Dinner has been served. You can't have dinner. You're five minutes late, I'm writing you up." I mean, they'd start it right away. I always had a lot of BS that I had to contend with.

Mary:

And I always had ridiculous tickets that they gave me, like for not having a pass to a tree. That was a good one, or eating ice creams, C-R-A-M, ice cram where I wasn't authorized, or, I mean, it was just nonsense and bullshit. They were trying to reign me in or make a point or be a big man on campus or something. I don't know what, but retaliation is real. I've had property destroyed. I've had my friends messed with, I've had, oh man, you wouldn't even believe all the crap they did to me. But I just kind of took it like a real one. And that's what happens when you buck them and buck them, to put it bluntly.

Speaker 1:

Yeah. Wow. And somehow you still managed to make it out there alive. So can you talk a little about how you left prison, when you left, and where you returned to?

Mary:

Ah, that was a fun day. So finally, finally, finally my parole comes through and it's the day to leave and I had saved money for my little red suit and I had my little heels I was getting ready to put on. I grew my hair out so I could get a real haircut. So I had it twisted up in a French twist. I was dressed up and lifers were coming from everywhere to say goodbye. People were coming from all over the place. And I was hugging. You know, you usually can't be hugging and kissing on people. They just kind of turned their back. So I was hugging and kissing on everybody. And the ones that were giving me a hard time were waving at me and laughing, and I was hollering goodbye to them. I had to say goodbye to Ruthie. I was just talking about Ruthie yesterday.

Mary:

She died here in Ipsy not long after that of ovarian cancer. I had to say goodbye to my woman. And I had to say goodbye to my friends. And it's really hard. And they tell you don't look back because if you look back, you'll come back. There's a lot of superstitions around leaving. Like you can never give away your shoes. If you give away your shoes, you'll come back and you'll have to wear them again. So I was very mindful of the superstitions and I was very mindful of the women that I knew and loved that were watching this with their heart and their hands, because they knew they weren't going to get out. They knew I had the advantages because of who and what I was.

Mary:

I was a white girl that had a family member that was able to negotiate me out and they didn't, and they knew I knew. It was just really painful to say goodbye to people that I knew I would probably never see again. And some of them have been released. They're long gone. And some just came home. There's a couple of women lifers that just came back. I saw them when they had just come in. And there's plenty that have died. There's lifer after lifer after lifer, and LIG long and indeterminants that are now dead.

Mary:

So, I was able to come home to my mom and dad. I walked in the kitchen and my mother was sitting at the kitchen table crying. And she said, "Mary, this is your home. You can live here as long as you want to." So we had a nice little tea party with shrimp and grapes and tea Mary poured. I had the little kids in my family jumping around. It was just a wonderful thing to be home, but it was really sad because when I left, my mother was 42 and my dad was 50. When I came home, she was dying and he had Alzheimer's and was not in good shape. And they were old. My brothers and sisters had all grown up and had children and married or not. They had lives of their own all those years.

Mary:

And I was just somebody that my mom and dad sent money to in a box. They'd come and see me a couple of times a year. So it was hard. And then I'd go downstairs to my little beautiful little spot that I absolutely loved. I was so happy, but it was so quiet. You don't realize how much noise are around all the time. I mean, even when it's quiet, it's noisy. So I ended up just being really lonely because it was just me and I'm taking care of my mom and dad. My family would come and go, but my mother was

dying so everybody was upset and drinking and was wild. But I ended up making a little condo a home for everybody and my home. And then when it was time to go, my dad's Alzheimer's was really bad.

Mary:

He was throwing shit at me. He was pulling me by my ponytail out the car window because I wouldn't let him drive drunk. I mean, all kinds of shit was jumping off with my dad. So I knew I had to get out of there. I was at high risk because there was a couple of times he grabbed the steering wheel when I was driving over the bypass, the viaduct in on the West side? No, it was on the East side of Grand Rapids. I realized, man, this, this is not cool. I'm a returning lifer and I'm dealing with him. He could do anything and they're going to blame me. They're going to lock me up. So I started looking for another job and boom, I landed into PCAP. And so from that on, I went my own way and just started over with everything.

Mary:

So I started over. By then I was 52. Just starting over in a way where somebody that was younger, 23, 24 would be. So I lost all that time. Never had kids, never had a family of my own until I was well out and able to make up a little bit of life by being here. And I came here to Ann Arbor in part because queer folk and folk that were different and people that were not 9:00 to 5:00, straight white hetero lived. So this is queer friendly and my friends are here. So I came here because it was a welcoming community. Because it was a PCAP community that understood and didn't judge me. And that was one of the best decisions I ever made.

Speaker 1:

That's great. So it's so amazing that you found community. How did you make space for yourself within these communities?

Mary:

I think I made space by making my own personal space. So being able to create my own little house on the prairie, I called it, with my kitty cat and my friends at 1411 South Boulevard, which is over by where Vanessa lives by Burns Park. I rented Joe's house for five years and then I started running reentry out of my upstairs. I rented out the upstairs to returning people and helped them find jobs, transportation, you name it. I think just having my own place and having my own freedom and having my own career.

Mary:

I'm somebody that was always told what to do. Somebody always was trying to tell me, "Mary, you need to do this. Mary, do this," from the church, from my parents, from prison, from guards, from employers. And I'm kind of like, "Yeah, okay, I got it." But I like to do what I like to do. I like to take my own career where it needs to go. And so I was really happy when I was able to do the MSW program and then be a Soros justice fellow because you can write your own ticket as a justice fellow. And I was able to really explore. I've traveled everywhere. I've been to Puerto Rico, California, New York, Arizona, New Orleans, Detroit, Pennsylvania. I've been all over the damn place and Chicago.

Mary:

And I love to travel, but I just realized when we were talking the other day about the situation we're in now, where we will never travel like we used to. It's impossible. I came to realize that I really had

accomplished a lot of what I set out to do, that I had really lived. And I used to hear people inside express that they were scared to die in prison. And I always felt like I wasn't scared to die. What I was scared of was that I would never live.

Speaker 2:

[inaudible 01:11:01].

Mary:

That's my wife in the background saying I lived.

Speaker 1:

So looking back on your experiences, what does incarceration mean to you now?

Mary:

Incarceration is a classist, sexist, a horrible imperialist system of slavery where human beings are held and other human beings make money off their bodies and off their labor and off their existence. It's evil. People were not meant to be in cages. It's insane. It's hard to make sense of insanity. Sometimes you can't even try. It's cruelty. Nothing is more telling about incarceration to me personally, right now, than seeing what's happening with folks that are determined to have immigration issues and watching little tiny babies and kids be forced to lay on the floor without their parents in their own nasty diapers for days at a time and then take them to court and have them defend themselves.

Mary:

I mean, it just demonstrates to me how evil it is and how corrupt the government is that they would do absolutely anything in the thugocracy that's the White House to further their own interests and to remain in power. It's about power. It's about greed. It's about malice. And so for those of us that are humanists and believe in human rights and prisoner's rights and the inherent dignity of the human being, of the human person of the babies and the mamas in the dads and them men and women and queers and families and everybody, everybody, everybody, it becomes a cause. It becomes a way of life to use everything you have to fight that and to try and liberate and to try and educate and to make your existence matter.

Speaker 1:

So you talked about this a little before, but how did your perspective on the world change after your incarceration?

Mary:

I had a really aha moment yesterday. I was doing research with Nora on a project that we're working on. And for many years, 4503 was the policy directive. It's a different number now, but it was the policy directive on the right to humane treatment and living conditions. I must have used that grievance 5,000 times. It was the go-to grievance for conditions of confinement when I was filing a grievance or working on a petition or working on a affidavit, I would almost always under conditions of confinement cases cite to that policy. And I pulled it yesterday and I started reading it and I realized oh my gosh, it only applied to what I was experiencing with the frame of reference inside. And I can't use it anymore because I'm free.

Mary:

It sounds kind of trivial, but for me it was mind boggling that I could no longer use the right to humane treatment and living conditions. And that was my go-to because it didn't apply to me now. I went to my fallback and my fallback was always Eleanor Roosevelt's the rights of prisoners [inaudible 01:15:43] codified with the UN in 1945 during the war. And when I was looking Eleanor up, I found Nelson Mandela's humane rights for treatment for prisoners. And that has been updated in a kind of a Nelson Mandela version of what Eleanor wrote and it's been toned and put into this beautiful document that's a testament to his goodness and his wisdom and his understanding of the rights of prisoners under all conditions.

Mary:

So I started looking at that and I found a brochure that they've created that you can print. I mean, it's the actual digital version so that you can share it. I was sent the WHO, World Health Organization's policy, white paper, on COVID-19 and prisoners and with the arguments for human rights and breaking it down to eliminating overcrowding and releasing prisoners and providing good health care and comparable with that, that's offered in the community, which is the standard Estelle vs Gamble.

Mary:

So I realized I can pick up where I left off. For a while, I didn't do any litigation. I completed litigation I had already started like the sexual assault case. I needed to just distance myself from that for a while and recover because I had a lot of trauma around rape and abuse inside. So I'm now in a place where I'm excited about the project I'm working on now because I'm actually working on correspondence courses for prisoners, from PCAPs end of it in the world, using policies and procedures that are up-to-date and a very similar in principle, but are like they would say on Laugh In, it's the church of what's happening now.

Mary:

So this is what current best practices are. I can do it from this side and I can do it as a free individual with full knowledge of how to implement it inside. So I'm not suing on the receiving end inside of correspondence any courses anymore, which I was for many years. I did a whole master's program out of Cal State in the humanities from their external Huck's humanities courses on master of fine arts program. Finished the whole thing. Took me seven years. I can now do it from this end and help prisoners at a time when it's critical. This is needed more right now than anything I can think of absent healthcare, food.

Speaker 3:

Mary, could you talk a little bit more about the present litigation cases you were a part of when you were inside?

Mary:

Okay. Very early on I was only in prison like three weeks and I saw Indy HoCo flyer, which would they tape all over the place. There was always a flyer. This choir was coming or that group was coming or they were having this group come in and they had really cool guests like the four tops. It was Detroit. So I found a flyer about these volunteer law classes and they were going to hold them in the employee dining room. It was a one night a week in the evening and it was you could sign up and they were going

to study civil and criminal procedure. Well, I needed to appeal. I had just landed. I didn't know what the hell was going on. I didn't know what I was going to do with myself, but I decided I needed to go to that group. Nothing was going to stop me.

Mary:

So the following week there were about four of us lifers. They got called to Dorothy Coston's office. She was the treatment director that I would later name in my first lawsuit, unbeknownst to me at the time. I was invited to sit in her office and she was a wonderful person, kind, generous, very, very tall, older. She would have been like my grandmother's age. She interviewed all of us together and she asked us what we wanted to do and did we want to go to school. She was doing this little focus group thing, as I realize now.

Mary:

So we had this really interesting conversation and it was the first time I had sat in a room with lifers or even understood what that meant. I let her know that I wanted to go to school and I needed to learn how to appeal. I knew I had gotten screwed over in my case, but I needed to know how did this happen to me. I ended up in the group with Judith Magine, who was a graduate of Mercy School of Law in Detroit. She had just graduated. She had a graduation picture taken on a hill naked, holding the flag. I loved her to death. She held a spaghetti dinner for us and raised the money to buy us books. She came in by herself. She was this little tiny just wonderful woman.

Mary:

She started holding law classes once a week. So all of our classes, it was about seven lifers total in the old employee dining room. We'd go once a week and sit and have our law class, but the plaster was falling on us from the ceiling and cats were coming in and out of the windows with litters of kittens going into the kitchen. There was bugs and flies and rats and mice. It was a jungle. And I had never imagined in my wildest dreams that life could be like that. We had screens, we had fans, we had water. But we got the chance to really learn from her. And so we brought every week all of our problems and our issues and what was happening story after story after story to the table.

Mary:

And by May, she had whipped all of our little sagas into landmark petition to the federal court on a complaint called Glover vs Johnson and Glover vs Johnson had named ... there was five named plaintiffs and a laundry list of defendants. And we sued the Department of Corrections in federal court for a violation of our constitutional rights, predominantly fifth, eighth, and 14th, rights to due process, rights to equal protection under the law. And we argued that we were being denied the right to access to the courts and that we were being denied the right to vocational and educational and training programs in parity with the men similarly situated.

Mary:

And we had this nice little list of all the places that men had college programming on campus and off where they had industry where they could earn bonuses and cash to send home to their families and take care of themselves, where they had camps, where they could earn good time, where they had ... I mean, I could go on and on.

Mary:

They had a classification system where they got paid about five times more than we did and they had a job. We didn't have any jobs. We went about collecting, which is one of the things I was doing at the time. I was getting all kinds of information from my former co-defendant about what they had and what they were doing. I'm standing there with a toilet brush. So we sued, we went to trial in 1979, after we transferred to the brand new Huron Valley women's facility. It was a 10-day trial. We all testified in front of Judge Feikens, the honorable John Feikens, who then was the most senior judge in federal court, Eastern district of Michigan and Detroit. Oh is that a story, oh my gosh. We presented our case and then we called to the stand Perry Johnson.

Mary:

Perry Johnson was this big gregarious, red headed guy that was the head of all of corrections, laughed all the time. He was a really nice guy. He took the stand and the judge got frustrated with the AG. They had an AG that was unbelievably incompetent. So the judge took over the questioning and he looked at Perry and he said, "You've heard the women testify about what's happening with them. Are they telling the truth?" And Perry said, "Yes, they are, your honor." The judge said, "Then why haven't you done anything about it? Why don't they have programming? Why don't they have a law library?" And Perry said, "There's no money for it, sir. There is not $1 on a line item in the state budget for a woman prisoner. Women are not even considered."

Mary:

And there it was. We won the case with that one thing right there and then, because we were telling the truth, and because there was no money for women, and because nobody ever intended us to have money for women because they never litigated it. They never promulgated it. They never worked it out through the legislature in the budget ever. If we hadn't fought back, they probably would still be doing-

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:27:04]

Mary Heinen:

... ever, and if we hadn't fought back, they probably would still be doing that nonsense. So, we won, and the case came back in the fall and it was landmark, we won everything. The state never appealed the original decision, so even now, I'm working on my correspondence case, I will go back into the Glover rulings. There's a link on Glover on my podcast, on our website under policy. I'll go back and look at that and use language out of Glover because that's still good law.

Mary Heinen:

And in a cool twist of fate, over time, that law in Glover is still used every single day in the United States, and it's used in contempt law because, believe it or not, we were in court so many times after that on contempt because the state didn't do this or didn't do that or didn't create programming or whatever, that we created a body of law that determines what is contempt of court, when is somebody in contempt, what do you have to do to be in contempt? How do you get out of contempt? How long can a case go on? The Glover case went on for 22 years.

Mary Heinen:

When we started, women, over half of the population, they were illiterate. They could not function at an eighth grade reading level, which is what the average newspaper is supposed to be. By the time we got done, we had three quarters of the population going to school, we had college graduates, we had

vocational and educational training programs. Right now, they're building a vocational village and finessing it at Women's Huron Valley, among programs that the Glover case has litigated and won and established for all these years, like the garden, that horticulture came out of the Glover case. I could go on about that one. But the vocational and educational program at the Valley came out of the Glover case.

Mary Heinen:

And so, it's been an amazing journey of seeing how the power of law, seeing the power of truth, seeing how women that fought to be heard were honored and respected as expert witnesses, even somebody like Jane that took the stand and told them all about her carpentry program. Oh, that was a funny day. And how she got to saw a piece of wood and nail a nail, and of course that was one of the contempt things that, yeah, we have the program now, but they're not doing anything. So, it was just a miracle that all those women that started out, that could barely read and write, they were just hanging on by a thread, now are here, they're grandmothers, they're working or have retired from work.

Mary Heinen:

Jane has multiple degrees, she's one of the best drug counselors and mental health counselors I've ever met in my life. She's run shelters. She's phenomenal. And I can tell you story after story after story of the women that came up through that group, including Hazelette. Hazelette, oh, was my buddy back in the day that kept coming in and out of prison. But sometimes it takes folks longer to grow up. Sometimes you just have to have the opportunities that people with money and people with the haves and the have nots... I'm getting signaled. What? Yeah, that's the end of that question. Let me see. Time out.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Mary Heinen:

Okay. Thank you. ... Okay. I'm back.

Interviewer:

Okay. Could you talk about your education inside? And I especially would love to hear about how you earned your degree from Michigan while you were incarcerated.

Mary Heinen:

Okay. So, we won Glover, and then the next thing that happened was I got the message, I think it was from Christina Jose Camphner, who was with Project Grow, and that was the group where we were employed as agents of the court to determine what programming the women wanted inside. So, we collected data and we did surveys and we held workshops. The first lifer workshops came out of Project Grow. And so, I was asked, "Do you want to attend the University of Michigan?" Well, hell yes. Yeah, I want to attend the University of Michigan." So, they had me fill out all the paperwork, and I got admitted just like I was anybody else.

Mary Heinen:

And the paperwork went to Dean Nissen, N-I-S-S-E-N, who would have been like one of the top guys in [inaudible 00:05:23]. He allowed students to sit in classes for me, or liaisons, as if they were me and

then take the notes and record it. Because then, we had the little cassette recorders, the old fashioned long ones with the little buttons on them, and they would record lectures, they'd get the test, get the materials, and then they would visit me at the prison and give me all the stuff and give me the low down while they were handing me the lectures. So, I had all the material a couple of days after the actual class, and then I would do the assignments and listen to everything and study. And then they would pick it up on the next round. So, I had Liz Boner and I had Hillary Farber who now is, and for many years, has been a attorney that teaches at Harvard, married with kids, that's one of the worldwide experts on drones. She started out in undergrad with me, and it was wonderful.

Mary Heinen:

And then, I had Geraldine Downey, and Geraldine Downey was working on her PhD at Michigan and came in to tutor me and to be my liaison. And now, she's running the Center for Criminal Justice at Columbia and she's a psychologist, and oh, she's amazing. I love Geraldine. So, a lot of the work that came out from Geraldine and Hillary and Liz all had early roots in being my tutor. So, we tutored until I transferred by force to the Florence Crane Women's Facility in January of 1989. So, I was enrolled... I came in '87. September of '87 I was admitted to Michigan, and then January of '89, I got bounced over to Florence Crane. And then, I was at Florence Crane until... Well, I was at Florence Crane, also, almost 12 years, but I finished my degree program in '91. But I couldn't graduate because I couldn't finish the foreign language requirement. They sent me all this stuff on Spanish, and the girls that spoke Spanish couldn't even understand it. It was classical European Spanish.

Mary Heinen:

So, the Dean came back to me in '92 and said, "Look, you've got everything it takes to graduate." By then, I had a declared religion major, which was really history, and then I had a minor in English. And I had won a Hopwood Award for a piece I wrote called How Janie Helps Us See Ourselves from Zora Neale Hurston's work, and that was quite a to do. I made it there on campus for that one. I made it on campus for graduation, too. So, I agreed to take Bachelor of General Studies because he could graduate me with a Bachelor with everything I had done. So, he graduated me, and I went to graduation in the spring with Joyce, Joyce Dixon.

Mary Heinen:

And then, because I hadn't finished the language requirement. I used that later to tell the warden, "Look, I haven't really graduated because I couldn't do this language requirement, so I need to go to Western," and she agreed. So, I ended up also being allowed to go to Western when they came in, which I absolutely loved, because I wanted a bachelor of science, so I got a Bachelor of Science from Western. So, I finished a second degree, second Bachelor's at Western, and this was after I had gone also to Washtenaw Community College at the Valley and finished and graduated on campus. And I had completed prison legal services certification program. Well, they started calling it writ writers early on, but we were legal assistants and paralegals in the early days. And so, I went through that program for a year, but I had been in the law library the whole time.

Mary Heinen:

And then, I came home and did... Well, no, and then I enrolled in 2000 in Cal State in the HUX program for fine arts, so I studied music and philosophy. They had a wonderful art section. So, I studied fine arts with Cal State by correspondence. My mother paid for everything. She paid for my teeth, too. And I'm just now starting to lose my cap, so my teeth held up pretty good. And then, I did the MSW program and

the Soros Justice Fellowship, and then ran out of memory. I started having a real serious memory issues, so I hit the brakes and here I am.

Interviewer:

Wow. That was all so amazing. And there's such important work that you've done.

Mary Heinen:

Thank you.

Interviewer:

So, earlier you mentioned that you refer to yourself as an artivist. What does this word mean to you, and why do you prefer to be referred to it as?

Mary Heinen:

I was called an activist this week, and I thought, "I'm not really an activist." I'm a directly affected person. I'm somebody that used art as my own vehicle. I mean, I rode that puppy like a car, just to survive, just to be able to do something creative. I painted once I finally made it to the last of the gates, and I had my public hearing, I had like two months of waiting while they came back with the decision and my paperwork. So, I painted this... It started out as a paint by numbers kit, but I totally took that puppy over and made it into a painting of a Grecian vase in a window with flowers. I just kept painting and doing crossword puzzles and trying to keep myself together on the way home.

Mary Heinen:

So, I've enjoyed art. I've watched women survive with art, both from a financial perspective and from a mental health perspective. I've watched how art changes institutions. I mean, somebody might be completely disrespected inside because they had a case that involved children, but if they crocheted beautifully and if they made afghans that sold for 40 or 50 bucks, the guards would scoop them up. So, even they would have money. I watched how art is so central to the existence of being a prisoner, that when I walked into cell block seven in Jackson, which was an old cell block they have had converted to a kind of a museum where you paid to get in to look at it, the first thing you notice when you walk through the gate are the paintings on the walls that the prisoners had drawn, that looked like all Italian villas. That was a trip. I thought, "Holy shit, all these years this place has been here," from the 1800s on, and they were painting and drawing from the beginning of the time that they were here. So, it's what you do as a creative human being when you're in a cage and you need to express yourself.

Interviewer:

So, what do you want people to know about incarceration in the United States?

Mary Heinen:

I want them to know that it's a social experiment that's failed miserably, that caging human beings is not the answer to the social ills and the fact that you cannot take care of people that need help in things like substance abuse treatment and psychiatric services and health care and childcare and employment. You don't just lock somebody up because the sentencing guidelines say you can and the families of the victim is jumping up and down. You don't use incarceration to try and help somebody. There's this whole fallacy that you're really going to straighten somebody out, you're really going to help them if you

send them to prison. Because then there's people there that will take care of this. They will help you. They will help you with your addiction or whatever.

Mary Heinen:

That's total BS. No, they won't. No, they can't. No, it's so overcrowded. You're doing good if you got a bed and you're not sleeping on the floor. No, no, no. It doesn't work. There has to be a better way. There has to be a way like some parts of Europe where... Well, even with a murder case, people don't do five years. It's not intended to destroy your life and your family's life, it's used like a timeout two where you still have the keys and you still have agency and license in your own life to be able to help yourself. So, I think that it's become a whip. It's become a whip to beat down black and brown people and people of color and the other, people that don't look like you, sound like you, act like you, people that you want revenge against because you don't like what they did, people that you really want torture or want to get revenge on.

Mary Heinen:

And sometimes when I'm around former prisoners or if I'm with prisoners inside and I'm hearing conversation about who did what or what to who, you realize how much people feel that they have the right to comment on what you did or what you didn't do or what she did or didn't do or he did or didn't do, when the truth is, the situation with somebody's legal business, it's their business. It's the business of the family and the people that are involved, and you shouldn't have to pay for something you did for the rest of your life. And if somebody is really criminally insane, that's a different thing. They should be given services and whatever it needs to make sure they're safe and people are safe. I'm not saying open the door and let them go. I'm saying, make sure that they're getting treatment and not solitary confinement because you don't understand [inaudible 01:44:02] there's nothing you can do. There's a whole lot of there's nothing we can do when it comes to prison. There is something you can do. You can abolish the bitches.

Interviewer:

So, I know you talked about how passionate you are about the impacts incarceration has on women and children. What do you want people to know about those issues?

Mary Heinen:

I want people to know how devastating it is to the children and families when you lock up that mother, and that's the kind of trauma that can go on for generations, just from locking up the mother. Because when I worked at... Where was I? [Boydsville 01:44:48] with Gary, Gary told me over half of the kids they had in his custody couldn't read and write. And I couldn't see a library. There was no library anywhere. I didn't see any books. I didn't see any magazines. I said, "How come they're not reading?" He said, "We don't have a library." I said, "Who are these kids?" He said most of them had a parent or had an immediate family member in prison or they were in foster care and they got in trouble. So, there's a whole generation or two or three or more of kids whose parents or whose immediate family members went to prison, and the throwaway kids, then, end up in the system themselves. So, it just perpetuates.

Mary Heinen:

And the day came at Robert Scott... No, was that Florence Crane? When I was out in the yard and I saw a picnic table of relatives, and I realized, "Oh, that's the mother. Wait a minute, that's grandma. Oh no, that's auntie. That's a cousin." The whole family was at the picnic table, and so prisoners started telling

me the story of the family. And it's just unbelievable that it's so out of control, and they obviously had very little money because a lot of their, what I was told, their issues were dealt with theft, survival crimes, crimes of poverty. And so, they eventually split the whole family up, they moved around, they separated them. But what a day when you're sitting at the picnic table and all your relatives are there and you're in the penitentiary. That's a sad day. That's a sad commentary on where we are, and it's inexcusable.

Interviewer:

So, thank you. Those are all the questions that I have. Or I don't know if you have any other questions.

Mary Heinen:

I just want to add, back to my picnic table scene, the grandmas that are not at the picking table, the grandmas that are home with all the kids, the grandmas that have taken care of the mom and the dad and their children and their children's children that are black and brown, from places like Detroit, that's a terrible thing; that the burden of incarceration would end up on the back of the grandmas, the black and brown grandmas of cities like Detroit and Chicago and Flint. And when you've locked up those family members, they don't have any support and they don't have any help, so the grandma's bearing all the financial burden. She's bearing the weight of the family living in her house, taking care of her kids, paying all their bills, making sure they're fed. The families that suffer are suffering, where the grandma's the only thing holding them together because the social net and everywhere it's just broken down.

Mary Heinen:

This is Dr. Melanie McPherson's study. This is her research on black and brown mothers and grandmothers who are taking care of kids and their own kids. And it's her heart, that's what she loves to do, so she's really good at it. And so, there needs to be more understanding of what's happening with these grandmas and helping support for the families that's left holding the weight of the world because the family's locked up.

Interviewer:

Thank you, Mary. We've talked about so many really difficult heartbreaking things today, but I'm just wondering what gives you hope when you think about the future?

Mary Heinen:

I think what gives me hope is seeing formerly incarcerated people at the table and seeing who I would consider the real experts, the mamas and the grandmas and the family members who have been dealing with this sometimes all of their life, from places like Detroit that's over 80% people of color, when they can tell their story of what's happening and when they can affect change and when they are given support, even if it's peer and they're with each other, that gives me hope. It gives me hope to know that academics with groups like Carceral State, like PCAP, Nation Outside, are working to educate people about what's happening and to record it for history. I mean, what's happening now, there's some really heavy duty historical stuff happening here that needs to be recorded in the same way that the Civil War was recorded, that wars are recorded. I mean, there's no doubt that this is a war, and we're in it.

Interviewer:

Is there anything that we haven't covered that you want to address or anything you want to return to?

Mary Heinen:

I just want to say how difficult it is financially to come home when you've been locked up all your life and you don't have any real property, you don't have any money, you've been living on nickels and dimes for years, and then try to navigate your way through life and [maintain 01:51:09] when you've lost a lot of the support that you normally would have had through a normal course of life and you haven't been living like a refugee in a camp. It's really hard. And it's hard when you get older. There's this idea that the first six months, they say, when you get out determines whether or not you are going to make it. Are you going to recidivate? Are you going to commit another crime? What are you going to do? How are you going to act? OD? You going to die? You have the high risk of dying six months out. I think that's true. Yeah. There's definitely a lot of risk in that first six months. But I think as time goes on and more and more family members die and you get older and your body is suffering the effects of being locked up all those years with bad food, poor healthcare, and no sleep... The sleep thing is really bad for all of us because you're up all the time. I think that it's actually worse the longer you live and the older you get, because if you're incarcerated by the age of 21, studies have shown your longevity is only expected to be to 49. That's mind boggling. But for somebody like me that somehow made it to 65, probably because I had good healthcare and dental care as a child and was very physically active and tried to keep myself together, it's just extremely difficult as you get older and you have that kind of history. It's a miracle if you're still alive.

Interviewer:

Well, thank you so much. I have just learned so much this afternoon. And Nora, is there anything else you want to add before we wrap up?

Nora:

Thank you so much, Mary. This is really great.

Mary Heinen:

You're welcome.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I'm going to end the recording now.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:53:18]