

The prison industrial complex has proven that prisons are here to stay, visible or invisible, and people will continue to go prison, and that those people will be disproportionately people of color, women, and the traumatized. “We Fight Fire with Fire! Give Trauma MORE TRAUMA!!” Since we have all consented to send so many people to prison, we are left with certain unfortunate outcomes: they will come back, and we have to find ways to receive them. Re-Entry feels much like the story of Christ’s birth, a whole lot of “no room at the inn.” People like the idea of prison reform or sentence reductions in theory, but they don’t want to hire me or live next door to me.

I was born an artist, but I grew up a junkie. Heroin was my first love and it became my life. Eight years into my addiction, I had a daughter and my world imploded. I sought treatment, but I was still using. Children’s services were involved, it was ugly, and I was sloppy. I just couldn’t continue living in my personal hell.

The night that changed my life forever, the one that sent me up, began with a fist fight because I would not make fajitas on a one-burner motel stove. The robbery seemed like aftershock, a decision made in a dream, rippling out over my life in waves. The dream became a nightmare as I began an eight-year sentence, and that nightmare persists because the question remains unanswered: “Why?” I have been “free” for almost 2 years, but I don’t feel free. I served five years... but who was served? Justice?

I will first give you a list of my accomplishments, and then perhaps we can come to a consensus about my worthiness?

During my Incarceration,

I built an Art Therapy program that is still running today.
I wrote and directed a short film, through the Pens to Pictures project.

I facilitated countless programs.
I lived a life of mentorship and service to others.
I taught myself how to paint.
I kept a clean record for the most part while inside, I “did my time the right way.”

Since my Release,

I serve on the steering team of the Ohio Prison Arts Connection
I created the Returning Artists Guild and have curated 3
exhibitions under our name.

I have networked relentlessly, and I’ve built relationships with a
variety of Institutions, Artists, Teachers, Activists, Etc.

I am in the final year of a bachelor’s degree.

I’ve kept the same job since my release.

I’ve paid all my legal debts and obligations.

Ironically, none of these things have opened the doors I thought they would and the only thing I really need now is time. You know, that thing I was forced to waste... and I’m calling it a waste. I was highly engaged and productive during my incarceration, but I still missed my daughter’s entire childhood and when I came home, she wouldn’t let me cuddle her. My own baby wouldn’t hold my hand or kiss me without being “told” to do so.

The time was more than wasted, it was vacuous, it swallowed my family.

Aimee Wissman