

BRIDGING THE GAP: A WRITING WORKSHOP

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COMMUNITY RESOURCE
GUIDE



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Community Resource Guide



View BRIDGING THE GAP on the Reentry Web site at: www.reentrymediaoutreach.org.

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

ABOUT THE PROJECT AND THE PRODUCTION

In 2006, The Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign began working with Vicki Lopez Lukis, former Chairperson of the Florida Governor's Ex-Offender Task Force, to develop a documentary on the BRIDGING THE GAP writing workshop. BRIDGING THE GAP is a collaborative effort among the [Florida Department of Corrections](#) and [Department of Juvenile Justice](#); community volunteer Vicki Lopez Lukis; the [Girls Advocacy Project \(GAP\)](#); and [ArtSpring, Inc.](#)

Envision finding yourself in prison and wondering how to make sense of this new and unexpected journey. This is exactly where former Lee County (Florida) Commissioner, Vicki Lopez Lukis found herself in 1999 when she self-surrendered to FCC Coleman, a female minimum-security federal prison. She began serving a 27-month sentence for honest services mail fraud for lying to a newspaper reporter about an affair that she was having with her then boyfriend, a lawyer lobbyist, and now husband.

Few individuals who were voted most likely to succeed by their high school class and one of the youngest persons to graduate from the University of Notre Dame would ever believe that their charmed and privileged life could take a sudden and bizarre twist. Yet this harrowing experience provided a unique opportunity for Ms. Lukis to go "inside" to see firsthand the fastest growing industry in America and experience the impact of incarceration.

On November 21, 2000, President Bill Clinton commuted Ms. Lukis' sentence. Upon returning home to Miami-Dade County, she has worked tirelessly on behalf of women in prison, girls in detention and ex-offenders who are released and return home to Florida's communities. She has emerged as a well-respected authority on these issues.

Responding to a growing crisis in our country and particularly in Florida that has resulted in more and more women and girls being arrested, detained and incarcerated, often for very long periods of time, Vicki Lopez Lukis is determined to break this vicious cycle.

Her work with girls in detention highlighted the urgent need to intervene in the lives of these at-risk girls to teach them that every action has a consequence. Each time she told her own story about her prison experience, she saw the power of someone who had "walked the walk and talked the talk". She invited other formerly incarcerated women to talk with the girls, bringing into detention the stories of those who had "been there, done that" and who desperately wanted to save the girls from following in their own footsteps.

In the absence of being able to bring together the women in prison and girls in detention for a series of meaningful dialogues around the negative impacts of incarceration, she developed a writing workshop to "bridge" this gap. Thus was born BRIDGING THE GAP: A Writing Workshop.

The objective of this project is to develop a published anthology of the writings of the women inmates that can be shared with the GAP girls. ArtSpring engaged its advanced *Inside Out* program participants who had been in the program at least five years at both Homestead Correctional Institution, located in Florida City, and Broward Correctional Institution, located in Pembroke Pines, in a specifically designed creative writing program that addressed, through

personal narrative essays, answers to questions that were posed by the girls in GAP, including the realities of being incarcerated.

BRIDGING THE GAP is expected to educate female juvenile offenders on the issues related to the criminal mistakes made by female adult inmates who are serving long, and in most cases, life sentences for their crimes. The life experiences shared by the women inmates will benefit the girls in detention by giving life to real stories that have ended in real tragedy. The women will be able to highlight their regrets and the losses they have experienced, such as the loss of families and freedom since their incarceration. The objective is to share experiences of the women inmates to help the girls reject unhealthy relationships, substance abuse and the temptation to become involved in future criminal activity.

BRIDGING THE GAP directly addresses the opportunity for positive growth and development in the lives of the project's participants. Through this innovative intervention program, the girls will be given the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the women, which will give the girls insight to make different choices about their own lives when released from detention and/or confinement. They will have a heightened awareness that will allow them to return to their lives in the community with a more positive self-image, an expanded perspective to strengthen their family relationships, and thus be able to work toward establishing healthy lifestyles that will lead to their search for the resources they need to live productive and successful lives.

The inmates have participated in a twelve-week writing workshop with the expressed objective of providing insight on certain themes appropriate to girls involved in, or at risk of becoming involved in, the juvenile justice system. This anthology will be distributed free to girls in the Miami-Dade, Southwest Florida, Orange and Palm Beach Regional Juvenile Detention Centers and will be used to develop an intervention/ prevention curriculum for girls in or at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

An additional component of BRIDGING THE GAP has involved women from the community who have volunteered to educate themselves about the shared paths of delinquency of the women and girls. Some have volunteered with GAP providing programming and mentoring services to the girls in the GAP program. The community volunteers at Broward's workshop were Jill Ecklund, Kendall Pryles and Brenda Valencia Aldana. During the Homestead workshop two freelance journalists, Leslie Sternlieb and Bonnie Schindler, joined Jill Ecklund. These extraordinary volunteers spent untold hours with the adult female inmates learning about their journeys into the criminal justice system and how incarceration has impacted their lives and that of their families.

The BGAP program at Broward culminated with a formal presentation in May 2006 for invited guests from the community, representatives from organizations and agencies funding the project, members of ArtSpring's Board of Directors, as well as Department of Corrections staff, including Deputy Secretary Laura Bedard. The BGAP program at Homestead hosted a similar community presentation on April 28, 2007.

In May 2006, The Florida Department of Corrections authorized the Reentry National Media Outreach Campaign to film inside the prison facility. Producer Dean Radcliffe-Lynes interviewed some of the inmates to share their written work and their reasons for being involved in the workshop and the impact they hope to have on young women who will be exposed to their writings. Dean also captured the formal presentation at the Broward facility, and the reactions of juvenile girls at the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center.

BRIDGING THE GAP PARTNERS



Florida Department of Corrections

The mission of the Department of Corrections is to protect the public through the incarceration and supervision of offenders and to rehabilitate offenders through the application of work, programs and services.

Meeting the unique service and program needs of female offenders housed in Florida's correctional system is a priority for the Florida Department of Corrections. The Operational Plan for Female Offenders establishes a blueprint of the actions that should be taken to ensure that the specific needs of female offenders are met throughout the correctional system.

Emphasis is placed on programs that foster personal growth, accountability, self-reliance, education, life skills, work place skills and the maintenance of family and community relationships that lead to successful reintegration into society and reduce recidivism.

To ensure accountability, reliability, and continuous improvement, a Female Offender Program Unit will be established in the Office of Programs Services. The mission of the unit is to design and facilitate equitable and gender-specific services and programs for female offenders in correctional institutions and community corrections.



Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

The juvenile justice system must provide strong prevention and early intervention services for at-risk youth and minor offenders. A balanced approach also must supply opportunities for rehabilitation for the more serious juvenile offender.

Florida provides evidence-based, responsive and gender specific programs and services for

girls throughout the juvenile justice continuum. The philosophy of the Department and its Providers is dynamic and embodies practices that evolved based on the needs of girls and empirical evidence of effective service delivery models. As a result, girls who participate in juvenile justice programs and services acquire the skills essential to successful crime-free living and become active members of society.

Girls Advocacy Project (GAP)

Since 1999, and under the leadership of the Honorable Judge Cindy S. Lederman, GAP has provided services to female youths detained at the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center (MDRDC). This innovative first-step intervention program administered by the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) offers a gender-specific, research-based curriculum. GAP's services generally include daily group talks, individual support, and advocacy. Additionally, the program collaborates with community volunteer agencies that supplement its services.

The gender-specific group talks are integral to the services offered by GAP and are provided Monday through Friday in an interactive setting between the GAP participants and the GAP Facilitators. The group talks provide GAP participants with education relevant to teen issues and delinquency and information related to available community resources. Educational topics include, but are not limited to sexuality, conflict resolution, health and hygiene, gang affiliation, alcohol and substance abuse, support systems, independent living, violence, victimization, artistic interest, and self-esteem. In this group context, the GAP participants are given the opportunity to relate their experiences with each other and to the topic, as well as learn from the presentation. The GAP participants are also encouraged to express themselves in conjunction with the group talks by journal writing. GAP also collaborates with community volunteer agencies that supplement its services already offered.

Another vital service offered by GAP is individual support. This type of support is accomplished by individual sessions between the GAP participants and the GAP Facilitators where issues can be addressed more personally. For instance, issues like family circumstances and health may be addressed, which in some cases, may reveal a need to report abuse. In other instances of individual support, GAP Facilitators empower the GAP participants by promoting proactive engagement in their delinquency cases, related decision-making, and communication with associated personnel like the Juvenile Probation Officer (JPO) or Public Defender (PD).

In addition to the group talks and individual support, GAP also advocates for its participants. Often times, this is accomplished by collaboration with the Department of Juvenile Justice – Juvenile Probation Officers (JPO) or with the Public Defenders Officers.

Finally, GAP collects information on its GAP participants for statistical analysis. The GAP Facilitators conduct daily individual assessments for each of the GAP participants on an initial or reentry basis, which is then reflected in a client profile. The profile includes information about the GAP participants like family, ethnic background, educational background, health, substance abuse history, delinquency history, mental health history, and sexual abuse history. This data is then captured in a database for statistical analysis.

GAP has expanded services to include a project which provides for involvement and follow-up beyond release from the detention center - Post Detention Services. A Teen Dating Violence curriculum has also been added to the on-going educational groups. A program specific to mothers who are minors continued to be implemented since its inception in 2004. The library project has also continued to provide reading material to detainees. A brief review of these programs follows.

Post Detention Specialist (PDS)

In August of 2005, GAP added a component to its program that provides continuity of care to its GAP participants through a Post Detention Specialist (PDS). The PDS acts as an additional resource and support to the GAP participants once released to the community. By augmenting the GAP participants' support network, the PDS strives to reduce recidivism. In November and December of 2005, GAP participants returning to detention accounted for—on an average—approximately 60% of the detainees. By reducing this rate, GAP not only serves its GAP participants, but its GAP participants' families and their communities.

By late October of 2005, GAP implemented its PDS component by piloting a small but growing caseload with established procedures. Since then, the procedures have been fine-tuned and are, optimistically, in the final planning stages.

Teen Dating Violence Curriculum

- Curriculum is based on a research-based model program/materials;
- Curriculum is provided, since September 2006, to detainees once monthly in four sessions spanning one week;
- Curriculum topics include:
 - Types of abuse
 - Warning signs of abusers and victims
 - Self-esteem issues
 - Protection against sexual assault
 - Community resources addressing domestic violence and sexual assault/abuse
- Curriculum materials include:
 - Educational handouts
 - Games and role playing
 - Videos
- Detainees identified as potential victims may be referred to appropriate community providers.

Minor Mothers of Minors (MMOM) Project

Teen pregnancy is a challenging issue among today's youth that exacerbates when mixed with delinquency issues. In response to this challenge, GAP developed the MMOM project in December of 2004. The project assists pregnant teens—who may also already be mothers—detained at the MDRJDC.

The project aims to encourage GAP participants to accept responsibility, identify a support system and community resources, and utilize that support. By promoting such goals, MMOM hopes to promote the health and happiness of its GAP participants and their children. Since its

inception, MMOM has assisted more than 30 GAP participants by providing education and referrals to community service providers.

The provision of educational services includes discussion of topics relevant to teen pregnancy like health, nutrition, medical insurance, and support networks. Discussions also focus on any substance abuse history of the pregnant teen and/or the father and the potential consequences to the newborn. GAP participants also receive reading materials like What to Expect When You're Expecting which provides a month-by-month description of the course of pregnancy.

The MMOM project also refers its eligible GAP participants to programs that specialize in assisting pregnant teens. Healthy Start is one example of this type of program. In the circumstance where a client has been referred here, she may receive parenting and childbirth education, counseling, support, and access to community resources.

The Library Project

The Library Project's inception was as a result of a generous donation from the Junior League of Miami and GAP's ongoing drive to improve its GAP participants' lives while detained at the JDC. The project provides GAP participants access to reading materials Monday through Friday. Its goal is to provide a healthy diversion from the doldrums of detention.

The Library Project achieves its goal by assisting the GAP participants in choice of literature, encouraging use of imagination, and promoting healthy habits like reading. The library itself is a rolling-cart packed with books, which is brought to the GAP participants' detention modules daily. The cart contains classic literature, history, poetry, inspirational themes and series titles like Chicken Soup for the Soul.

The GAP participants check these books out akin to the customary checkout in any public library. However, return times for the books, unlike a public library, are unrestricted because each client reads at a different pace/level and the project encourages them to engage accordingly. All that is asked in return for this service is respect for the GAP property so that others may also enjoy this classic form of enrichment

Expansion Efforts

In 2007 GAP expanded its program and began serving girls in the Southwest Florida, Orange and Palm Beach Regional Juvenile Detention Centers.



Promoting self-growth and effective life skills through art-making

ArtSpring, Inc. is a nonprofit 501(c)(3), arts-based public charity whose mission is to support self-growth and effective life skills through art-making for underserved and institutionalized women and girls. The focus of the organization is devoted to arts-intervention programming and the value of arts education in underserved communities. Since 1994 ArtSpring has served a diverse ethnic, age and racial demographic, offering specially designed arts-based workshops

through two principal ongoing programs: *Inside Out–Expressive Arts Workshops for Incarcerated Women* and *Breaking Free–Arts for Adolescent Girls*. These interdisciplinary arts programs incorporate movement, theater games, writing, drawing, music, storytelling, meditation, guided imagery and performance as transformational tools for self-reflection and personal change.

ArtSpring’s programs promote creative thinking, personal growth, effective life-skill development and confident self-expression. ArtSpring believes in the power of art to transform individuals and communities. ArtSpring’s creative workshops encourage personal reflection, self-awareness, acceptance, commitment, tolerance and individual choice-making that provide participants with better tools for survival while incarcerated and upon their release.

BRIDGING THE GAP IN THE COMMUNITY

The documentary enjoyed a premiere screening at the Bill Cosford Cinema at the University of Miami on Monday, April 23, 2007. Over 200 guests, including juvenile judges and others associated with the juvenile and adult justice systems, attended the event. Immediately after the screening, a panel discussion was moderated by Vicki Lopez Lukis, creator of BRIDGING THE GAP, with panelists the Honorable Cindy Lederman, Administrative Judge of the Juvenile Division of the Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court and Founder of the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP) and Leslie Neal, Founder and Artistic Director of ArtSpring, Inc., both partners of this unique collaboration.

During the discussion, Judge Lederman, who is known as a national children's advocate, applauded the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its vision and leadership in funding this work. The South Florida Sun-Sentinel, which covered this event, wrote an article about the screening on April 24, 2007. Mrs. Lukis promoted the screening in a live interview with anchorwoman, Diane Magnum, on Sunday, April 23, 2007 of the ABC affiliate (WPLG Channel 10) in Miami, FL. Clips of the documentary were shown throughout the interview.

On April 27, 2007, Ms. Lukis screened the BRIDGING THE GAP documentary to the National Association of Women Judges Regional Conference in Miami, FL. The Association graciously offered to profile BRIDGING THE GAP in the next issue of their newsletter, Counterbalance, which is distributed to over 1200 members around the country.



Vicki Lopez Lukis and Brenda Valencia Aldana

On May 15, 2007, Mrs. Lukis presented the BRIDGING THE GAP project to a standing room only audience at Books & Books in Coral Gables. The presentation was a unique production, staged and directed by Leslie Neal and La Vonne Canfield, an ArtSpring Facilitator. Mrs. Lukis, Ms. Neal, Ms. Canfield and other community volunteers read several pieces of literary work from behind the walls.

On May 17, 2007, Mrs. Lukis made a presentation and screened BRIDGING

THE GAP at the Faces of Courage National Conference in connection with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, The Juvenile Justice State Advisory Group, The Florida Network of Youth & Family Services and The Girls Advisory Council. Presenters included national and state policy experts, advocates and leading practitioners who discussed research, best practices, and strategies with a broad range of stakeholders including government leaders, providers, educators, law enforcement and corrections workers, court system personnel, child welfare leaders, parents, youth and other concerned citizens. BRIDGING THE GAP was presented as a groundbreaking model program developed in Florida.

SELECTED WRITINGS FROM INMATE PARTICIPANTS OF THE BRIDGING THE GAP WRITING WORKSHOP



Did you have a hard time fitting into prison when you first arrived?

My First Day in Prison

Catherine La Fleur

On my first day in prison, I learned that you are just a number here. The staff can and do talk to you however they please. Your body belongs to the state. I came to prison in a metal box. It was in the back of a narrow van with no windows. There is only a long bench down the side. There's barely enough room to sit with your knees pressed against the other side wall. If you are tall, too bad - you'll end up with bruises up and down your legs and knees. Also you are shackled hand and foot so what little movement is available to you is painful because the metal shackles are tight. There is no air, only people packed closely together.

When the van finally arrives at the prison after an hour and forty-five minutes, all I could do was throw up. They aren't too careful about driving. The officers immediately started screaming at me for being sick all over the pavement. I was pretty dizzy and thought I was going to faint. I asked if I could sit down. Wrong question. First I had to clean up my mess. They unshackled my hands but not my feet. So taking baby steps I went back and forth from the water faucet to the mess armed only with a coffee can to carry the water. It took about 40 trips to rinse everything into the grass. In the meantime everyone was forced to stand in the hot sun, shackled, with no water waiting for me to finish. I was not Miss Popularity at that point.

The first thing we had to do was shower and be deloused. It doesn't matter if you are a clean person, everyone gets deloused. Then we were given our first prison clothes – a navy blue house dress, the kind they sell at the dollar store. Five buttons down the front, pocket on the right side, short sleeves. The dress fits like a shapeless sack. Next we had to go through a body cavity probe to check for contraband both gynecological and anal. What joy. They are not gentle.

Intake takes about two hours. You have to be photographed, fingerprinted, and yelled at some more for the officers' good morale. Finally you are released to the orientation dormitory. There are no rooms in orientation, only a big open room with 150 beds. You'll never be alone --

constant movement and no peace. It's never quiet. Everything you do or say is in front of hundreds of eyes -- every moment, every day for the rest of your life. Welcome to prison.



What was your essence prior to going to prison? Has it changed and if so, how?

Masks
Sarah Allen

Masks.....so many masks. I keep finding ones that fit. When you look at me, you see a mask of what I want you to see. You want me happy? I have a mask that smiles, but when you want to see my pain, I have a mask that hides it. I have masks for different times, different people, different places. I've been collecting them since I was a child.

If asked to set my masks aside and show the real me, I'd say it was impossible; the real me died the minute I picked up my first mask.

My masks are a part of me now. They hide my vulnerability, anger, help me adapt to my surroundings and help me cope. You may think I'm being phony, but I tell you my masks are real to me, as are the emotions they hold. My masks have become me. To know my many faces is to know me – a chameleon.

My masks make me and break me. I take one off and one is there to take its place.

To know my masks is to know me, for they protect what is too fragile to be seen. What you see is what you get. It's what you don't see that makes you wonder....



Do you have any regrets? If so, did these regrets surface over time and because of a different perspective you had once sitting in jail and/or prison?

Letter to Robbie
Jessica Carter

In the few moments I allow myself to smile, the guilt consumes me and pushes that smile away....because you'll never smile again. In the six years since that night when I last felt happiness, the guilt rages through me, because I took your happiness away from you. My only comfort is pain and sadness and worst of all – loneliness.

How strange that I can actually envy you. You're dead. But you're loved. I know there are always fresh flowers on your grave. I know that a new cross is placed at the site where our lives collided. I find myself wondering if my parents have flowers on their graves and would anyone visit if mine was beside theirs?

So how do I forgive myself?

I've sat down to write you so many times but the words never seem to express how tormented I am. I don't understand how I could cause the same pain to someone else's family that tore mine apart. What happened to my mother was probably unavoidable. What happened to you was [avoidable]. One wrong choice by me destroyed your life and your family's and there's nothing I can do to bring you back. I can only hope that one day you and your family will forgive me. There's not a single day that passes that I don't wonder what you would be doing had our paths not crossed. I knew a little about you and I know you would have had a good life. I think if we'd met, we might have even been friends. I also wonder if you're up there in heaven with my mother. I would trade places with you if I could.

If it gives you any comfort, I will spend 35 years in prison, but I will have a life sentence no matter where I am. Nothing will ever be truly well with me because I took you away from everyone who loved you and I will live with it for the rest of my life.



If your crime was violent, was there an event that precipitated the crime and how did you feel about harming or killing your victim?

Prey to Predator

Jessica Hill

From that night on, after what he did, I wanted revenge. Wanted to taste it on my tongue, wrap my fingers around it, and squeeze it until it's gone. Over and over it replayed itself like a movie on constant rewind, except this was real, not

Hollywood first produced in my mind. Years went by before it went on air, but time stood still in my head. I continued to smell my young blood – the pain. How I wish I was dead.

My fingers closed tight around the gun but the moment was lost and given to the past. Nine years of horror scenes before me his face was one of the last.

I was 17. I think my body jerked when three bullets spat from the gun. But I didn't feel satisfied or even like I'd won. Instead I felt at that moment I'd lost a great part of me. And revenge was more bitter than it could ever be sweet. I walked away as a murderer in three seconds; I was a victim no more. He and I switched roles.....

Prey.....turned Predator.



What was going through your mind as you were arrested?

Life and Laundry

Marilyn Roberts

The man sitting behind the desk seems to be engrossed in his papers. Slowly he scans their contents. Sitting in the hard metal chair I focus on the walls, which were once a sunny yellow but now are grim with stains and scars. I could play the game I enjoyed as a child, lying on my back on the grass determining objects from the shapes of clouds, but my anxiety and fear betray me.

I want to ignore him, but eventually I'll be forced to acknowledge him. But not right now! Now I want to simply hold myself together. I need to focus on my real life. MY real life. None of this is part of my real life. If I don't concentrate on my real life, the nightmare will suck me in. This nightmare has the grinding metal teeth of relentless destruction.

"Would you care for coffee?" the deceptively courteous man asks. Like a drowning man reaching for a life preserver, I jump at this act of normalcy. But normalcy is gone when I reach for the cup. My left wrist is tethered to a steel ring embedded in the wall by a handcuff. He notices the immediate change that occurs in me as the nightmare continues to unfold.

I've been arrested. That reality cannot be altered or ignored. Though the cop wants to talk about the murder, I want to call home. I explain I need to call home. Ron's shirts are in the dryer and there's a package of chicken thawing in the sink that must be put in the refrigerator.

The cop begins to yell at me. He tells me I'm in serious trouble - that acting crazy, worrying about laundry and supper is not going to save me from a guilty verdict and the electric chair.

The detective walks away angry and I am left in the gloomy, scarred room frozen in a cold emotional void.

Helplessly, all I can do is stare. I understand the facts, but I've no experience to draw upon to cope with this reality. I can manage my world. In my world I do all the usual things a woman does - I have a home, children, a good job. That is the reality I know and can understand.

Then I hear it coming - the nightmare of grinding...metal...teeth.



If you could return to the day you committed your crime, what would you do differently?

My Brother

Kortni Robinson

I am here because I loved my brother more than I loved myself. He was my best friend, confidante, and, literally, my partner in crime.

One night I turned down the wrong road or bent the wrong corner. When my brother shouted for help, instead of running off, I ran to him.

And now I am in prison. I never knew that by just being there, I'd become a principal to murder.

Because I was there, I was guilty. I was locked up like the animal they claimed me to be. I was innocent. But in my naïve mind, I just knew they couldn't convict me for murder...When the police questioned me, I opted to be my brother's keeper, and held on to silence.

Well, I no longer have to keep my brother; I no longer have to be quiet. I did all of this—for what? Nothing. Funny how I couldn't live without my brother, and now I breathe, and he cannot. For all the love I poured on him, pain has swallowed me. He's in heaven, and I am left in hell—this prison. Because of my unconquerable thoughts, I am in prison. Because I thought I could save Kevin, I lost myself.

I forgot to ask who would save me?



What was going through your mind as you were sentenced?

Question 13

Sandra Sysyn

I sit in the holding cell praying hard. I can't imagine being alone in all this. God had to be here. "Please stay with me, God. Sit next to me in the courtroom, ok?" The waiting is awful. The holding cell is always freezing and stinks of urine but I hardly notice this time. I have to stay in my head.

It's time to go. Handcuffs again, we go down the halls. They seem so long and barren. The strange glow of the lights. The elevator. A couple of young guys in cuffs with another deputy. They must see the fear, the horror in my eyes. They say "Don't worry, it'll be alright." I think its funny how they see through me as no one else does.

I am led back to the courtroom and uncuffed. My lawyer to the left, that empty wooden chair to the right. "God, I know you're sitting there; you just have to be." I try to sense His presence for my own comfort. I sneak a look at Mom and Dad so they'll know I'm ok. Before I left the courtroom the last time I told them, "It'll be ok, no matter what happens." I lied. So now I have to be ok for them.

"All rise." The jury is about to give the verdict. "Okay, God, let's stand. Here we go."

"The jury finds the defendant guilty of first degree murder." The judge says, "Poll the jury."

"Guilty...guilty...guilty....guilty." A couple of them are crying as they say it.

I'm thinking, "Are you sure? Where are you, God?" I struggle to keep my composure.

The judge says, "I have no other option but to sentence you to Florida state prison for the rest of your natural life."

I am hollow, frozen, numb, but I have to remain calm and strong. I need my parents to be alright. I don't matter any more. "God, please let them be alright. Stay with them." I am led back to the cell. I haven't cried at all, still holding my composure. We get down one set of stairs and at the turn, my knees buckle. I fight to stay upright and the deputy catches me. My legs are like rubber but I make it to the van that takes me back to the jail. When we get there, I finally let go and cry. I cry and I cry. I am so broken. I don't even exist.

The next day the newspaper report said "...she showed no emotion when sentenced to life without parole in prison."

What did they expect me to do? Throw myself down, cry, scream, beg? For what? To put my parents through more trauma? Haven't they endured enough? What does the media know about how it is to stand in my shoes? What the hell am I suppose to look like at in that moment to feed your hunger?

Whatever I would have done, it would have been scrutinized, but what I did was not for you, or for me, it was for those two hurting people crying behind me that love me more than you'll ever know. "God, please let them be alright. Stay with them."



Are you able to define a sense of purpose in your life even though you may spend the rest of it in prison?

Mi Paz

Yaneth Gomez

Siempre que me preguntaba como habia sido mi vida decia: tranquila y con paz. Pero en realidad nada de eso fue.

Fui inconforme, ambisiosa una revelede sin causa teniendo cantidad de malos habitos, orgullosa, consentida, desenfocada totalmente en los que es la vida y eso me trajo a prision.

En mi aislamiento donde no he visto mi familia, solo me he comunicado afortunadamente durante estos 10 anos, donde me he confrontado y he renunciado a mi misma.

Perdonandome, pidieudo perdon por tanto dolor que ocacione y perdonando, llorando y teniendo verdadero luto por mis perdidas.

Aceptando con humildad lo que puedo tener, reduciendome a las minimas necesidades.

Ha sido un fatigado proceso, enfocandome en mi vida espiritual teniendo permanente comunion con el Senor. Usando y adquiriendo mucha serenidad, "Entendi".

La vida es el regalo mas grande. La vida nos da la oportunidad de conocer lo bueno y esforsandome a no perder mi verdadera libertad.

Soy libre de espritu, poco y nada me ata. Amo todo lo que me rodea y cada minuto de mi vida.

La Paz es una forma de vida. Alguien dijo: “ la felicidad no es un destino sino un andar dia a dia.”

La libertad es la libertad de escoger el sitio de mi esclavitud. Pero YO digo , la libertad es la de aceptar el sitio de mi esclavitud.

(Translation)

My Peace

I have often asked myself, how would I describe my life? I have always responded that it was tranquil and peaceful. The truth is that it was everything but peaceful.

I was restless, ambitious, rebellious without cause, having developed bad habits, filled with pride, spoiled and totally unfocused. This is what brought me to prison.

In this isolation these past 10 years, where I have not seen my family but, fortunately, have been able to communicate with them, I have confronted myself and have renounced my very own being.

I have forgiven others and myself and have asked for forgiveness for all of the pain and suffering I have caused. I have shed a great number of tears and have experienced a true and profound grief for all of my losses.

I have humbly accepted those things that I can have and have reduced my needs to the bare minimum.

It has been a tiresome process. I have focused my life on the spiritual achieving permanent communion with God. It was in this place of serenity that I finally came to understand what is most important.

Life is the greatest gift. Life gives us the opportunity to know the good and forces us to retain a new found freedom.

I am spiritually free. Little or nothing affects me. I love everything around me and cherish every minute of my life.

Peace is a way of life. Someone once said: Happiness is not a destiny but rather an everyday occurrence.

Freedom has often been described as the freedom to CHOOSE the place of one's own enslavement. But I say that true freedom is the freedom to ACCEPT the place of one's enslavement.



Is there someone in prison that you completely trust?

To ArtSpring

Tyra Amos

I sit stunned, silent, lost without emotion. But that is just in my head, for there are tears sliding from my eyes. I notice my heart rate. It beats rapidly and strong. The sensation is overwhelming. I am immediately flooded with the emotions, that only moments ago, I did not feel.

I watch the facilitators for ArtSpring parade in and out, only to have the same realization. It's happened so often that I shouldn't forget it, but I do. They fall in love over and over again with us - the monsters. They dedicate 100% to understanding the preservation of a lost soul. We question our own lack of exploration of self, growth and healing.

Marching together, heads held high. The feeling of pride and self-accomplishment. Feel free to ask questions. "And what do you think? What stood out in your mind and heart?"

It is so beautiful to move people to the sound of your own drum, while joining a band that everyone has space in.

As we part from this rarity of love, acceptance and accomplishment, I can't help but wonder, is it better to be understood and admired or unknown and free?

The war starts to rage as the feelings begin to unwind. The pride, accomplishment and bonding are replaced with submission, dependence and isolated loneliness. I open my eyes and remember that the devotion, love and loyalty continue to come back each and every week. It eats with us, it sleeps with us and it never gives up.

So, why in the world should I?

ABOUT THE PROJECT'S FOUNDER



VICKI LOPEZ LUKIS

Vicki Lopez Lukis is currently the Statewide Expansion Director for the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP), Inc and a community volunteer focused on working with women in prison and ex-offenders.

In April 2005, Governor Jeb Bush appointed her to the Governor's Ex-Offender Task Force. The Task Force was a 17-member panel whose responsibilities included identifying barriers to successful reentry and providing recommendations that would eliminate these barriers. Mrs. Lopez Lukis initially served as its Vice Chairman until August 2006 when Governor Bush appointed her to the position of Chairman. She also served as the Chair of the Community Partnership Initiative Committee, whose responsibilities included the development of a model program for ex-offenders who are released in several counties in Florida. The objective was to produce successful reentry results based on the research and reforms recommended by the Task Force.

In 1990, Mrs. Lopez Lukis was elected to the Lee County, Florida Board of County Commissioners. During her tenure her responsibilities included Vice Chairman - Board of County Commissioners, Chairman - Lee County Port Authority, Chairman - Tourist Development Council, Chairman - Affordable Housing Committee, Board Liaison - Veterans Advisory Committee, Board Liaison - Housing and Community Development Committee, and Member - Transportation Metropolitan Planning Organization. While serving as a Lee County Commissioner, Governor Lawton Chiles appointed Mrs. Lopez Lukis to the Florida Tourism Commission, a statutory commission established by the Governor and Florida State Legislature to develop funding mechanisms and marketing plan for the Florida Division of Tourism.

Unfortunately, her tenure as a commissioner led to a highly publicized criminal case regarding her personal relationship with her husband, who was her boyfriend at the time, and a prominent Washington D.C. lobbyist with issues before her board. She went to trial and was convicted of one count of mail fraud for depriving her constituents of her "honest" services by lying to a newspaper reporter about that relationship. She was sentenced to 27 months in a federal prison and self-surrendered on August 9, 1999 to the federal women's camp in Coleman, Florida.

On November 21, 2000, President Clinton commuted her sentence. On December 9, 2004, Governor Jeb Bush and his Cabinet restored her civil rights in Florida.

Upon her return to South Florida, she continued her career in public service as Executive Director of Cool School, a therapeutic, after-school gang prevention program providing after school and therapeutic social services to at-risk children and their families in the South Beach, Overtown, Perrine, Northwest Dade, Little Haiti, East Little Havana and Liberty City communities located in Miami-Dade County.

She was also an active member of the Junior League of Miami (JLM) from 1998 – 2005 and is currently a sustaining member of the Junior League of Palm Beaches. She served as the Chair for the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP) Committee in 2003-2004. GAP is the only comprehensive project in the State, which serves girls while they are in detention awaiting trial and/or commitment programs. This program operates in partnership with the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice. Mrs. Lopez Lukis developed a challenging action plan and provided a program that helps to give these girls a strong sense of self, community and personal empowerment with the end result of rejecting unhealthy relationships, substance abuse and the temptation to become involved in future criminal activity.

In 2003 and in 2004, she was awarded the Junior League of Miami President's Leadership Award and the 2003-2004 Volunteer of the Year Award for her distinguished work as Chair of the GAP Committee. In 2004, she was the recipient of the prestigious Junior League of Florida's Berta Blecke Award for Outstanding Efforts in Legislative Advocacy for her tireless efforts on behalf of girls in the juvenile justice system.

In 2005, she developed a writing workshop project entitled *Bridging the Gap*, which involves a partnership between community volunteers, the Girls Advocacy Project (GAP); ArtSpring, Inc., a nonprofit arts-based organization serving women in prison and girls in detention; the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ); and the Florida Department of Corrections (FDC). The objective is to develop a published anthology of the writings of the women inmates participating in ArtSpring's *Inside Out* program that can be shared with the GAP girls and others who find themselves in or who are at-risk of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system. It is her hope that the women's stories will inspire the girls to change their lives while they still possess a second chance.

Mrs. Lopez Lukis also partnered with the ARISE Foundation to develop a training program for Department of Juvenile Justice staff which is geared specifically for girls who are in juvenile detention and commitment facilities throughout Florida and nationally. This work was funded by a grant from the US Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Mrs. Lopez Lukis is also a member of the Miami-Dade Regional Juvenile Detention Center's Community Advisory Board lending her expertise about girls in the juvenile justice system as it relates to detention.

In June 2006, she was invited to participate in a panel discussion at the Manhattan Institute (a New York based think tank whose mission is to develop and disseminate new ideas that foster greater economic choice and individual responsibility) regarding *From Recidivism to Redemption: Ending the Cycle of Incarceration*.

She is an alumnus of Leadership Florida, Leadership Lee County and Leadership Miami.

In September 2006, she was invited to join the Board of Directors of the Women's Fund of Miami-Dade, a non-profit organization engaged in social and economic justice with the goal of creating community where all women and girls can reach their full potential.

Mrs. Lopez Lukis has engaged female offenders because of her personal experience and her dedication to preventing girls from entering the adult system. She has emerged as a strong advocate for all women and girls in the justice system throughout our nation. She currently serves as the Girls Advocacy Project's Statewide Expansion Director having replicated the

program in Miami to Fort Myers, Orlando and Palm Beach communities.

Mrs. Lukis was born in Tampa, Florida on March 28, 1958. She was raised in Fort Myers, Florida and graduated from Cypress Lake High School in 1974. She graduated from the University of Notre Dame in 1978 with a BBA in Accounting. She began her professional career in public accounting working for Coopers & Lybrand and Arthur Young. She then moved to the private accounting sector working in internal auditing and assistant controller functions. In 1987, she obtained her Series 7 and Series 54 Securities Licenses and worked for AmeriSecurities Capital Corporation, a correspondent branch of Paine Webber.

She is married to Sylvester Lukis, a lawyer, and has three children, Donald F. Wolfe III, Alexander and Adrian Lukis.

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