

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/justice-in-katrinawake/how-pretrial-services-empowers-the-underprivileged>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The first time I was arrested was in 1994. I was five months pregnant with my youngest daughter when I was taken into custody and booked into Orleans Parish Prison (OPP). I spent three days in the booking center with only two cement blocks or the cement floor to sleep on. When I was transferred to the women's tier, they held me for 60 days on attempted theft, the maximum amount of days allowed by law. On the 61st day, the DA declined to prosecute and I was free. When I was released, I was seven months pregnant and a month later my daughter was born premature. During those two months inside, prenatal care consisted of a pint of milk and some graham crackers given at lunch; I never once saw an OB/GYN.

Many people think that jails are where people stay for only a night or two before they are released, but the reality is quite a different story. Sixty days was a long time to be away from my family, separated from my children, and worried about the tiny life growing inside of me.

I was unemployed and out of school at the time. Not only did I complete my studies this past July, earning my associate degree in applied sciences, I have five grown children and I am the full-time guardian to my five-year-old grandson. I also have a full-time job with [New Orleans Pretrial Services](#) (NOPTS).

When I first came to NOPTS as an administrative assistant, I was not completely aware of the work that they were doing. As I began to understand more, I became very intrigued with their commitment to bringing awareness to issues of public safety and jail population as it pertains to those less fortunate. Unfortunately, in New Orleans, those most affected are those who look like me—African Americans who are at a greater risk of being targeted, detained, and convicted by the system and who lack the resources to gain their freedom pretrial.

Too many times, the underprivileged have pled guilty for the sole purpose of getting out of jail and returning to their families. I see this every day. For many people caught up in the system, it seems like less of a hassle than trying to fight the charge without money. Pretrial services looks at risk, not monetary resources; because of that, all people are considered based on an objective evaluation and what they've been charged with, no matter their race, class, or anything else.

But still, most who are stuck in jail pretrial look like me.

In fact, that was me. I would have definitely been eligible for non-financial release (release on recognizance, or ROR) in 1994. I had never been arrested; I was facing a minor, non-violent charge; I had strong family connections; and I was pregnant. Also, I strongly believe pretrial services would have connected me to resources that would help me deal with a lot of the barriers I was facing during that time in my life. I've said this time and time again: There were no pretrial services, Veras, or [Micah Projects](#) in my hood then reaching out to me. My choices were very limited, so I made the best decision I could, given the choices available at the time.

I wholeheartedly believe that if I would have had an organization like NOPTS to help me on that journey to recovery, employment, and education, I would not have made a lot of the negative choices I made over the years. I didn't know that I had other options and I considered myself a smart young woman at the time. I mastered all the resources available to me in my hood, but no one ever told me I could graduate college, speak to others about anything, work for an organization that helps others, or be someone who others looked up to. That's what my life is about now, because God knew the plans He had for my life and being employed with NOPTS was in the plan. My surroundings changed, so my influences changed, and thus my thinking continues to expand and change every day.

I joke with my colleagues that I feel like I'm in the NOPTS supervision program myself, because each time a client comes through our doors, I see myself in them and want them to know there are options and supportive services available to them. The supervision specialist has been a mentor as well as a friend since I was hired. There were a lot of uncertainties in my life and she has helped me understand that life can be uncertain, but if I'm determined to do the right thing, help others, and know my worth, there's nothing I can't accomplish. I live each day determined to help others and do better than I did the day before.

Recently, I was [invited to a foot washing ceremony](#) organized by the Micah Project. Of course, I said to Mark Walters, one of their organizers, Sure, I will wash feet. My thought was that this would be a way to serve others. But then Mark said to me, No, Dolfinette; we would like to wash your feet. I was flooded with emotions. I didn't feel I was worthy of such a humbling gesture. But God's ways are not like man, nor are His thoughts. He put me on the heart of someone else and that in itself is very humbling. I was so overwhelmed once the ceremony started, because nothing about my past had ever prepared me to feel the presence of God so deeply. I literally saw God at work and, let me tell you, it is a feeling that is unexplainable. But again, God's ways and thoughts are not like those of men. He doesn't remember the past and He loves beyond faults.

Often people will hear me reference God for saving my life, because that's my own personal belief. I am very aware of all the different beliefs in our nation and beyond. However, for me, I hope not to offend anyone when someone has been through as much as I have, I can look back over my life and see instances where I should have been dead and I can't explain why I am not. In those moments I ask, "If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me, folks, where would I be?"

I am grateful to be right where I am, every single day.

Through the voices of those who fought for reform from elected officials to community organizers, advocates to public health experts the [Justice in Katrina's Wake](#) blog series reflects on local incarceration practices, the movement to foster fairness in the criminal justice system, and efforts to increase safety for all communities.

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