

The Sentencing Project

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.sentencingproject.org/stories/dorothy-gaines/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Their lives turned upside down in August 1993, when Alabama state police raided her home for drugs. Police found no evidence of Gaines having possessed or sold drugs, and Gaines maintains that she did not know that her then-boyfriend was dealing drugs. Though the state dropped all charges, federal prosecutors charged Gaines with drug conspiracy eight months later charges that she disputes to this day. She refused to plead guilty or provide testimony against other defendants, but was convicted and was sentenced to serve 19 years and 7 months.

My son jumped in the judges lap at sentencing and asked not to take away his mother, said Gaines.

Leaving her children, Natasha, 19, Chara, 11, and Philip, 9, parentless, Gaines was accompanied by marshals to federal prison her first time on an airplane.

I was always a mother that never, ever went anywhere without my children. I missed taking my children to the park, going to their school, said Gaines. While I was in prison, they wrote me and told me those were the days that they missed, too. Phillip and Charas father died when they were two and three. Thats why my children were so distraught: because all that was taken away.

While Gaines served years in prison away from her children, attempts made by her family, friends and advocates to fight on her behalf resulted in national attention to the crack cocaine disparity and sentencing inequalities. Finally, in December 2000, Gaines received a commutation from President Bill Clinton.

After her release, Gaines did not forget about the many other women with whom she spent six years in prison. Since Ive been out, Ive been fighting every day of my life. There are other people, other Dorothy Gaineses that are on the inside.



Gainess advocacy work has included sharing her story at lobby day events, schools, and churches, and counseling the families of those who are waiting for their loved ones return. She has used her own resources to help youth see their incarcerated parents, and she has also created a curriculum for public schools called Holding the Bag, which teaches youth to be cautious about taking on others belongings.

My going to prison has not been in vain, said Gaines. I will fight until everything has been changed.

Increase in number of women incarcerated in the U.S. since 1980

Sentencing Policy

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