

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/womens-voices/great-mentors-create-great-mentors>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In 2017, I was working on prison conditions; visiting and interviewing incarcerated people to survey their conditions of confinement.

After serving 18.5 years in prison, I was triggered by going into facilities where I was once incarcerated, including the Central Detention Facility/DC Jail and the Secure Female Facility Hazelton. It was horrific to say the least. Going back into those facilities reminded me of the filth, stench, misery, oppression, and trauma I endured while serving my time. Then another advocate sent me a job posting for a restorative justice facilitator, and it spoke to my heart. At that point, I was involved in civic work with returning community members. In my spare time, I was working to advance reentry policies and create opportunities for formerly incarcerated people like me.

I didn't know exactly what restorative justice entailed, but I understood it was a means to address harm, establish accountability, and make reparations where they are due. I thought, This sounds like the story of my life. The job announcement stated something like, Those who live in directly impacted communities are encouraged to apply. No experience is required. I thought, That's me . . . They are talking about me. So I applied.

During the interview, I met the woman who would come to be my mentor, Seema Gajwani. Seema is the chief of the Restorative Justice Program at the Office of the Attorney General for the District of Columbia (DC OAG) and special counsel for juvenile justice reform there. She also spearheaded the restorative justice program in the juvenile prosecutors office in Washington, DC.

Seema is kind and humble. Her compassion for marginalized people and her commitment to reform is awe-inspiring. She has the capacity to imagine a world without punishment and works toward realizing it daily. This lady is fierce. Maybe that is why I felt compelled to share my story during my interview. I'd just released my book, [Through the WIRE: My Search for Redemption](#), and I knew that, sooner or later, Seema would find out about the violence in my past.

Still, for the life of me, I do not know why the first words out of my mouth were, I am formerly incarcerated. I listened to the words as they were coming out of my mouth. My lips kept moving. I said something like, My entire life has been about enduring cycles of harm, seeking to atone, and rebuilding relationships. That must have been what Seema was looking for, because I got hired.

The opportunity to work with young people who caused harm and to support people who were seeking accountability from those who harmed them was the experience of a lifetime. Working with Seema, I became a skilled circle keeper holding space for and facilitating discussions to explore the impacts of harm and ways to make reparations. I've used restorative justice to divert youth from prosecution, build community, repair relationships, and foster healing.

Under Seema's leadership, I also learned about [Cure Violence Global \(CVG\)](#) and its public health approach to preventing gun violence. CVG employs people with credible relationships and neighborhood ties to serve as violence interrupters and outreach workers. The methods they use involve detecting and mediating conflicts, educating people with risk factors for violence, and changing unhealthy community attitudes that accept and promote gun violence. I grew fond of the program's philosophy and threw my heart and soul into launching the pilot in DC. In 2018, DC OAG implemented CVG in two neighborhoods, and then it expanded to six.

I am privileged to now oversee the CVG program and support more than 60 staff members who serve their communities. Many of the violence interrupters and outreach workers have been personally harmed by gun violence and mass incarceration. They are me. I salute Seema Gajwani for her mentorship, passion, and commitment to criminal legal system reform. Because Seema believed in the leadership of directly impacted people, I have been inspired to believe in us, too.

Coming from a marginalized community that is consumed by concentrated poverty, it is rare to meet someone who encourages you to dare and do wondrous things. When I'm working with girls where I grew up, facilitating role-playing activities to help them practice walking away from a conflict or helping women violence interrupters develop public speaking skills, I always remember Seema: her kindness, her humility, her passion. I am inspired by her ability to push me to pursue my purpose and live up to my potential. It's been an uphill climb, but with women like Seema inspiring me, I cannot give up. And I'll continue to help other women the same way.

[Read more from our Womens Voices series.](#)

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Vera believes in using our platforms to elevate diverse voices and opinions, including those of people currently and formerly incarcerated. Other than Vera employees, contributors speak for themselves. Vera has not independently verified the statements made in this post.

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through personal storytelling and is designed for people who have experienced firsthand the impacts of incarceration and reentry and want to share their story.

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