

Obden Mondésir (00:01):

Okay, cool. So today's date is September 26th, 2022. My name is Obden Mondésir. I am collecting this oral history for the Coalition for Women Prisoners Collection that we have at Barnard College. And I am with Andrea Williams, and we are continuing the second part of this oral history interview in which we will be reviewing some of the images and documents that are a part of the collection and seeing if there are any backstories or metadata that we should also add to them. Yes. So the first photo I wanted to share was a 2005 group photo of the Women in Prison Project staff, which includes Andrea Williams, Stacey Thompson, and Tamar Kraft-Stolar. Would you like to talk more about this photo?

Andrea Williams (01:04):

And Jaya Vasandani, so the four of us.

Obden Mondésir (01:06):

Yes.

Andrea Williams (01:07):

So this was taken <laugh>—I love this photo—this was taken in 2005 at the Correctional Association's Gala, which was held down at, this location is at Chelsea Piers, in one of their event spaces. And we're one year into, I'm one year in at the Correctional Association of New York because I joined in 2004. So did Jaya, who was on the right. The Women in Prison project was Tamar, and then Tamar's first hire was Stacey. So Tamar's in the middle in the black, and Stacey is to the left of that in the picture as the coordinator for the coalition. And then Jaya and I were hired and we rounded out the Women in Prison Project staff. And one of our really dear coalition members and colleagues and friends, Lorraine Patterson, liked to call us 'the dream team.' So I remember she sees this picture, she says, "here's the dream team." And so that's what this picture is, we were there all together and it's just a nice reminder.

Andrea Williams (02:32):

Tamar used to like, to—Tamar really built the Women in Prison project. So as a project she was happy to finally have a team as opposed to just her. And then just her and Stacey really trying to kind of do all the work that she envisioned for the project. At this point in time in the project's work, we really were focused on the coalition advocacy and the leadership and building the Reconnect, the leadership training. We had not yet been put in charge of monitoring in the women's prisons, right. That would soon come, Tamar would soon have us doing that, but at this point, I don't think we were quite yet doing it. I think that we were developing the tools that we needed to do that, the surveys and things that we would need to go into the women's prisons. But we were definitely answering letters and taking calls and stuff from people, but we just hadn't done the monitoring to go in. I don't think we were doing that in 2005, but you can check with Tamar and Jaya on that.

Obden Mondésir (03:48):

Okay, cool.

Andrea Williams (03:49):

Yeah.

Obden Mondésir (03:49):

Yeah. And then we'll move on to this next one, which is—this is a 2005 photo of yourself leading a Reconnect session.

Andrea Williams (04:03):

Yeah. I don't think that the year of this photo was 2005 though, but I can check. So this, yeah, I think some of the photos may have been, I don't know—I have to check on this—this in the photo, and it's, I'm seeing two photos now. I'm seeing the previous one and this one. So if I could just see the, yeah, table... I recognize a number of the participants and I could go back to my list and double-check the year, but this was one of the earlier years too. And this was a reconnect session where one of the trainers did—we had two community co-trainers there, Tracy Gardner, who I'm still working with now, she is the head of policy advocacy at the Legal Action Center and would come in and do our training on how the government works, make sure that people understood that because so much of the coalition's work was state legislative advocacy.

Andrea Williams (05:13):

So if you look at the board, that paper pad and whiteboard, not whiteboard, but poster paper, she's the person that's right in front of the poster paper. And to her left, looking at it to the left, is Antonietta Atienne, who is a long-time advocate. She's retired now, but at the time she was at Iris House as an advocate and outreach worker. Folks in the community know her as Dreddy. And she was also in at this session and on that day it happened to be her birthday. So later on we brought in a cake <laugh> to celebrate Dreddy's birthday. But she was there too just talk about the advocacy. She is somebody, one of the reasons that we liked—that it was great to have Dreddy there is that Dreddy was at Bedford when the ACE program was developed.

Andrea Williams (06:21):

That was AIDS continuing-education program, a kind of vanguard program that helped educate people inside women inside about the importance of HIV and AIDS education. This was developed by women in Bedford. There's a book on it. A woman named Katrina Haslip was one of those leaders, another, Linda Gang, Kathy Boudine, who recently passed, a number of the long-termers at Bedford, a woman named Rusty Miller-Hill, who's deceased as well. And many, many more. The women developed that program and it's a program that continues today. There, it expanded to also be in the men's prisons, and it's used as a model for the kind of prevention education inside in the prison setting. And there was also a program developed called ACE Out, which would happen in the community. So elements of that same program to kind of continue the prevention education and peer advocacy on the outside.

Andrea Williams (07:39):

So it's likely in this picture that we were talking about, how the government works and how that AIDS advocacy is an example of that. Tamar's in the picture. And another person, Jacquie Velez who would go on—she is now, in her own right, a bonafide community organizer and activist in Massachusetts. So that's this picture. And this was at the old Correctional Association site. So the Correctional Association for many years—the Correctional Association was founded in 1844 and received a legislative mandate in 1846 to do prison monitoring. And we met, when I joined the Correctional Association. We were in its original building on 15th Street. And so that's this brownstone, that's the conference room in this brownstone. That's what we were meeting.

Obden Mondésir (08:40):

Okay. And then when do they eventually move?

Andrea Williams (08:47):

Well, we sold the—the board sold the building. I can't exactly remember what year that was, but it was well into—I had been at the Correctional Association for a while. And then they wanted to sell the building and create an endowment. So the building was sold, and that's how we ended up uptown in Harlem. And then I think we were up there for at least five or more years. So my memory on the exact year that the building was sold is escaping me, but it's something that can easily be checked.

Obden Mondésir (09:33):

I can check. Yeah.

Andrea Williams (09:34):

Yeah.

Obden Mondésir (09:34):

Well, I mean, your memory in regards to the photos is quite impressive, just because, like, I have looked at personal photos and I probably can only remember two to three things.

Andrea Williams (09:44):

Oh, yeah, yeah, No, I'm gonna remember.

Obden Mondésir (09:47):

<laugh>.

Andrea Williams (09:47):

<laugh>, yeah.

Obden Mondésir (09:49):

Okay. So, yeah, we'll move to the third image and then there's a document that I wanted to share.

Andrea Williams (09:54):

Okay.

Obden Mondésir (09:55):

Yeah. So there is this one. So this one should be from 2018, and it's a photo of you facilitating a CWP general meeting on strategy.

Andrea Williams (10:04):

Yeah. So at this point, um, we are at, in Lower Manhattan in 22 Cortland Street. And so we made this move from the Harlem office. This is the Correctional Association, made this move from the Harlem office to Cortland Street. This is gonna be a couple of years at the Harlem office. We were under the leadership of Sophia Elijah, who was its executive director. And so then she moved on and we had an interim executive director, a person named Carlton Mitchell. And the organization at that point was

going through some restructuring and some downsizing. And so we moved from the Harlem office to 22 Cortland. So this is in the conference room. We shared a space with Seed Co., um, another human services organization.

Andrea Williams ([11:08](#)):

And in this conference room, we were working at this time with a consultant at Groundswell, a woman named Lisa Castellanos, on some strategic planning questions for the coalition, trying to see if we could kind of assess where we were, see if we wanted to do kind of a reset. So if you look at the questions on the paper, like 'what's the strategic gap that the CWP is uniquely equipped to fill?' and those kinds of things, like, those are the questions that we were grappling with. The consultant, Lisa Castellanos was there, and there were other members of the coalition who were there. So that's what this photo is about, or that's what was happening here.

Obden Mondésir ([12:03](#)):

Hmm. Okay, Cool.

Andrea Williams ([12:06](#)):

Yeah, the information from this—this is one of the planning sessions. Eventually, the information that we gathered in this session and other strategic planning sessions will get pulled into and be used and culminate in the work and our decision to sunset the coalition, actually. So this is the early part of this impact assessment—what later became, like, impact assessment work. But we were just, we were starting to grapple with the questions like, do we need to pivot? How are we doing? What are we doing? What's this moment in 2018 mean for us? Where's the coalition going? That, all that kind of stuff. That's the start of this.

Obden Mondésir ([12:57](#)):

All right, cool. Thank you for that description. And with that, I'm going to move over to...

Andrea Williams ([13:12](#)):

The—this is the report.

Obden Mondésir ([13:14](#)):

Yeah, this is the report.

Andrea Williams ([13:19](#)):

Yeah. So this is the report. It's an internal report to the NoVo Foundation, that presented the views of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women on the repurposing of the Bayview Correctional Facility, which is in lower Manhattan. So what was happening at this time is that Bayview Correctional Facility had been, this was one of the medium-security—or minimum-security prisons for women located in lower Manhattan—I think it's around 11th Street and 12th Avenue or something like that. And it got flooded during Hurricane Sandy and the women who were housed there were moved to other of the prisons, principally, probably Taconic correctional facility 'cause that's a medium and closer by. So it was sitting empty. And the Novo Foundation was working with the state to try to have the building repurposed to be a global women's building that focused on women and kind of healing from trauma and interpersonal violence.

Andrea Williams ([15:03](#)):

And so this was, we were approached by NoVo to get the perspective of directly-impacted women, women who are incarcerated, women who were previously incarcerated, involved in advocacy. And so it's a project that I was involved in. Tamar asked me if I was interested in helping with the information gathering piece. And I was the point person on that. And so there were two pieces that we did in gathering information. One is I did a series, maybe three, focus groups with the women who were really involved in the coalition where they had a leadership role as a co-chair or chair of a committee, or they were active on one of the coalition's committees. So those groups I pulled together in focus groups. And then I did a series of key informant interviews also with some women leaders from the coalition as well, who also had leadership roles in the community in other ways.

Andrea Williams ([16:17](#)):

And then the third piece, so it was focus groups, key informant interviews, and then the third piece was a survey that we sent inside through our privileged mail status, so that people could volunteer inside to answer the survey and return the survey. And we got a good response rate. We got about 300 surveys back, I think. And so women would weigh in that way. And I took all that information and it culminated in this report. So this is the cover of the report and, "Valued Because We are Women," the title came from, you know, for me, when I work on projects, I always—the words of the women are always so powerful. So somewhere among one of the interviews or focus groups, somebody said this, 'cause that's where usually I look to kind of pull the title for things.

Andrea Williams ([17:16](#)):

And certainly in the inside cover of the report, you're gonna see a quote and definitely that's a quote from one of the women as well. So that's what this is. If you scroll down some, here it is, right? "A warm, loving, caring, helping experience where girls and women can go and feel safe and want it and try to do better themselves and feel great doing it and educate themselves for a better world," right. So this is what a woman in Albion who returned her survey said. So, all through it you're gonna see the thoughts and the perspectives and the vision of all of the women that I talked to in the different ways that I explained. So that's what this is. And this was a document for NoVo to use 'cause at that time what they were doing is they were gathering information.

Andrea Williams ([18:14](#)):

They wanted to make sure that they got the perspectives and the ideas and the vision of women who were incarcerated and home from incarceration in leadership roles. They used this in their process. They had a series of town hall meetings, many—at that time, they were very ambitious. They were trying to talk to like 400 women from various walks of life to get information on like, what should this women's building be about and look like? And I know moving forward, Anisah was on one of the advisory groups for this along with some other people who were also part of the coalition. And in one of their early kind of town hall discussion groups, they pulled excerpts from the report and used those to help as, I guess as a tool or a way to spark discussion in the town hall. So they were able to take information from this report and then they pulled it into the bigger community town hall discussions that they were having, which I thought was great, because the women's ideas and words, you know, they're behind the wall so they couldn't participate in person, but their ideas and their words were definitely part of our process that they were doing in the beginning.

Obden Mondésir ([19:50](#)):

And when you say Anisah, Anisa's full name is Anisah Sabur?

Andrea Williams (19:55):

Anisa Subur-Mumin.

Obden Mondésir (19:56):

Yes. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Okay, cool. And, let me stop the share. And, right, so the next document I wanted to share was the "Prison Within Prison: Voices of Women Held In Isolated Confinement in New York." And this is the document from 2020.

Andrea Williams (20:24):

Yes. So this report—the genesis of this report comes from a more global kind of request from the New York Campaign for Alternatives to Isolated Confinement: CAIC, c-a-i-c, which is a group that still exists. It was formed to fight to end the use of solitary confinement in the New York State prisons and jails. It finally had a win; it was a 10 year campaign for ending the use of solitary in the prisons. And so now it's in an implementation stage, but not in the jails yet. And so the campaign continues in, like, the New York City jail system, there's a bill, actually, last week that this New York City Council reintroduced to try to end the use of solitary confinements in the jail systems, for example, like at Rikers Island. But when—and so now we were at 22 Cortland, that's where the Correctional Association was at that time of this report we were working on.

Andrea Williams (21:50):

And an advocate for CAIC, an organizer for CAIC, Victor Pate, would always ask us in the Coalition for Women—those of us in the Coalition for Women Prisoners—could you help us find some women with experience with solitary confinement inside to be a part of the Speaker's Bureau that they would have. They had a Speaker's bureau where they would regularly have people who knew what it was like to be in solitary talk to the public about that experience. And then they also wanted to increase the number of women who were just involved in the CAIC campaign generally. And it was a bit of a challenge. We did have women—Anisah was definitely one that was involved. We had some women who would share their lived experiences at the Speaker's Bureau.

Andrea Williams (22:44):

But at one point I said, "Okay, listen, we, I think that we can do a report on lived experiences because I knew that women who were in Reconnect and part of the coalition as leaders, we could get those stories from them." And so—and I had, this is not—this is one of a number of kind of reports or either like booklet projects where I would have a process working with women to share their lived experience and put it out there in the form either of a book with resources or a report that could be used as an advocacy tool. So that was the purpose of this. We wanted to create an advocacy tool that specifically had women's experiences in solitary, whether it was in the prisons or at Rikers Island, so that CAIC could use it as part of the advocacy when they went to educate elected officials about why we needed to end the use of solitary.

Andrea Williams (23:57):

And the process that we—I used for this is I identified about 25—I asked for volunteers, and I got about 25 women who said, "I'll share my story." I knew from my work with the women and from our monitoring, kind of the different—not just the ways that solitary was used inside, people are also often

put in what's called the box. There's also a process called 'keep lock,' where you're not put in the box like a cell by yourself, but you're held in isolation in your dorm area and your privileges are restricted. I also knew that there were ways that being in solitary affected the ability of women to see their children, contact their family, or if they had mental health issues or if they had addiction issues, how that would affect their health and their wellbeing. So I did a series for those who volunteered to share.

Andrea Williams ([25:03](#)):

I did a series of interviews with them and pulled that information together into—that was the basis of the stories that were shared in this document. In addition, I worked with a—he calls himself a graphic activist. He's an artist and graphic artist, Troy Lambert. And we had done, again, work on a number of projects at the CA. We worked with him—he helped us to develop the logo using a process with Reconnect participants, My Sister's Keeper, the reentry booklet. We did a housing booklet. So Troy was somebody as an artist that we had already worked with. So I engaged him again, we asked for a small group of volunteers and we got a few people to work with us. And we did some collage work with Troy. We did a creative process where we talked about just how can we convey visually what it means for women when they're in solitary confinement, and how can we convey that image-wise?

Andrea Williams ([26:20](#)):

And so we shared that information. We created images, and what you see here, the images are the result of that. So if you can go to the beginning, one of the things that women who were involved in the image-making process talked about—stop on this image—is that how solitary is so isolating and it reduces you, right. And so that's what you see in this image here. It's like you're in prison within prison is what one of the people who were interviewed said, right. And then, so this image represents that, like, just the ways that it shrinks a person. The other thing that women talked about is that when women were in solitary, they would cry a lot. You would hear them crying, you would hear them moaning, just this very audible kind of experience of women in isolation.

Andrea Williams ([27:34](#)):

And so if you move to some of the other images, you'll see tears. So stop on this image. So these words were what a number of women would say is how solitary makes you feel, you know, humiliated and small and withdrawn and and a disorienting kind of feeling because when you were taken, even whether it was 10 days or longer, you come out, you were away from the community, right. You were away from people. People talked about not even remembering, like I lost track of the days. I lost track of my sensibility, the way that I can keep track of my things, my life in prison life. And then because you didn't know what was happening, you were afraid and you were isolated. You didn't know whether something was gonna happen to you while you were in solitary because you're locked away from people.

Andrea Williams ([28:39](#)):

So that's what some of these words represent, and the stories are there in the report. But you'll see a lot of the images have women crying in tears because that was one of the universal kind of overwhelming things that women talked about—is that they really just had a lot of emotions and solitary—and me crying, just trying to cope. We also wanted to make sure because in prison you have a range of ages, but we wanted to make sure that older women were represented because the women would talk about, just in general, kind of because of the way that mass criminalization works, that a lot of the women who were coming to prison were tending to get younger. I heard that in my early years in Reconnect. So

they're getting younger and younger, yet you do have a lot of women in prison who were older, who have been there for a while.

Andrea Williams ([29:41](#)):

In Reconnect, once women got home and they were interested in advocacy, the the age range would go from like 35 to maybe 55 or 60. I could have women in that age range. It was not unusual for me to have women in their fifties and sixties who were home and then wanting to know their rights and trying to, you know, get their lives back on the track that they want them. So we wanted to make sure that we had an image that also kind of represented older women. So that's what this image is about. And then if you move forward some more, one of the women in the group, in her collage, she made a fist with different colors and words, and we used her collage image to make sure that was represented in the report at the end around taking action. We used that to create this image.

Andrea Williams ([30:42](#)):

And you'll see in some of the other pictures—this report again, was used as an advocacy tool. So we had it, we can make it available to people and elected officials. It's on as part of the resources on the [CAIC](#) website. So it's there to be used. Anisah and other women would use some of the images as background on their Zoom. So, you know, during the pandemic when we couldn't—there's two things. One is we created big posters of these images so that when we were going to Albany and—[CAIC](#) had a replica cell that they would set up—that we would have the posters from this report. There were two—also with the cell so that we could also talk about the impact of women, right, being held in the cell.

Andrea Williams ([31:37](#)):

We also would give this—we had some elected officials who were interested in women's issues, who wanted to know specifically about women so that we had a report that we could put in their hands. So that is the way that the report was used in the fight to get the law passed to end the use of solitary confinement in the prisons. By the time the pandemic came around, and we were talking about—and we were online, Anisah would use some of the images as her Zoom background. So it was great to kind of have this, because it was just multi-purpose, she could use it. And that's exactly what we wanted. It's an advocacy tool, so you could take it. One other thing we did is that we would use it for presentations. So Anisah and two other advocates used the images as a backdrop.

Andrea Williams ([32:49](#)):

When they went to talk to a Unitarian church, one of the members of the [CAIC](#) campaign was a leader in the Unitarian church. And so they went out to, I think it's Long Island, where the church was located and used the images kind of in the way that you're scrolling through with me to tell their story to talk about the campaign and why it was important for them to support and contact their elected official about supporting the bill. And, you know, the images could be there as they're talking. So there's some pictures in the archives of that that you'll see, the use of the images and the big posters with the replica cell, and then also as the backdrop as women would do public speaking.

Obden Mondésir ([33:37](#)):

Yeah, I remember when we went to visit Anisah to pick up Anisah's collection that, like, that poster was one of the things that...

Andrea Williams ([33:45](#)):

Yeah.

Obden Mondésir (33:46):

we took along with us.

Andrea Williams (33:47):

Yeah.

Obden Mondésir (33:54):

Okay.

Andrea Williams (33:58):

So early on we had, it was a forest green T-shirt that had Reconnect on the back and it has the words "who I will be" on the back. And that came about when we were down at 15th Street, the Correctional Association had an artist in-residence, Kathy Engel, who also had another artist partner at the time, **Tiye Giraud**. And we, they were working with a group of women from Reconnect on a performance piece that ended up being performed at HBO. So you'll see in the Archives that there's a group picture, and in it is Susan Taylor and Bob and the **WIPP** staff and a bunch of women who were in a performance. And then **Tiye** and Kathy are there, and at maybe even Eve Ensler is in that group photo. So that's from the performance at the HBO space. And the women wrote that performance. So, I also gave you the script that ended up being developed.

Andrea Williams (35:08):

So, Kathy and Tiye worked with the women in a process to kind of gather the information and put it together in a script for the performance piece. And then they decided to combine that, see the stage, they're sitting on stools on stage, and they're each reading from the content. And Tiye is the music accompaniment, and it was a WIPP fundraiser that was performed at HBO. And so from that, Stacey was also having some of the women start to meet together in an alumni group, right. And we decided to have some t-shirts made for the group, and they decided to have a line from that performance piece, Who I Will Be, which I think is the title of the piece on the back of those t-shirts. So that's the story behind the first T-shirt.

Andrea Williams (36:21):

Okay. So then later on down the line, when we're at, in the Harlem office space, this was a more practical <laugh> kind of reason. By that time, you'll notice, like I gave you a big notebook with all the information that women would get from the community trainers and stuff like that. That was kind of the big bible or encyclopedia that women would end up having. And they didn't have anything to carry it in, right? So they started to say like, "we love having a notebook. It has all our information in it and stuff, but it's heavy and we need something to carry it in." I said, "Okay, so let me see about getting some tote bags." And I was swimming at one of the pools in the New York City Parks and Recreation, and the lifeguard was a guy that had a side business called Pigs and Blankets that did hats and t-shirts and stuff.

Andrea Williams (37:12):

So we were talking back and forth and I said, "Oh, do you think you can do some for me, for my, for my program that I have?" And he said yeah. So I gave him the logo and he put it on, We had purple tote

bags, and then we got, he had these peach colored t-shirts and he put the logo on that and we all thought they looked good. So all the T-shirts got handed out and we had tote bags to give to each class cycle for Reconnects that they could have something to carry the bags in. So that's that. And I'll share one other story. This goes back our logo and brochure and application, we worked on that at 15th Street with Troy. That was the first time that I engaged Troy and another friend of mine who's communication specialist called Vivian. Her name is Vivian Todini.

Andrea Williams ([38:12](#)):

We worked on the images and the content to create the logo and the brochure, redesign our application and all of that. So, um, we worked with about five women in a series of sessions where again, it was about sharing ideas, like, what do you think a logo should look like? What should be a tagline in a brochure? What should we say in a brochure to people, pulling all that together. And one thing that I love about the brochure is the back page of the brochure has all these affirmations that's straight from the women. That's straight from the women. There's no editing or anything like that. That's all their words. So, um, in the beginning we had a business card where people could write in their name, had a logo, it could write in their name. So when they're doing advocacy, they could hand out a business card. Um, we had the brochure, we had the application, and Stacey would go, when we'd do presentations and outreach, we had a nice brochure and application that we could give to people to hand in that had a very strong image. And so, you know, the, the program had a brand early on that they created.

Obden Mondésir ([39:36](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Yeah. And in regards to the HBO or the fundraiser that was held at HBO, that was a story that was discussed when we shared that image with Anisah.

Andrea Williams ([39:51](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Cause she was in it. Anisah's 2005 and that was that class. A number of the women who were in that were from the 2005 class.

Obden Mondésir ([40:03](#)):

Yeah, and I imagine there isn't a recording of that?

Andrea Williams ([40:09](#)):

No, I don't know because I mean, Kathy Engel would be one to see if there's a recording, and then Tamar or Jaya would know of the contact at HBO to see if there was a recording of it, and it would be nice if there was. But I just don't know. Eve Ensler spoke, another woman whose name I'm not gonna remember, but she was a comedian and she's also a minister, she spoke, and then the women did the performance. It was nice, you know, folks in the coalition came in support. So you'll see a lot of the, there's a number of pictures at the cocktail hour after that have pictures of folks in the coalition, kind of mingling, who had attended the event, but yeah. Yep. So fond memories of that for the folks who were in it.

Andrea Williams ([41:16](#)):

One person who's in it is not alive anymore. But other folks have gone on, Anisah, you know, Anisah is knee deep in advocacy. Another one of those folks is an executive director at another advocacy organization. And I'm about to do some work with another of those folks. We're gonna do some advocacy training in a hospital setting for people who take medication-assisted treatment. So, you

know, it's just great to be able to—a lot of the folks in Reconnect and in the coalition have gone on to do just amazing things.

Obden Mondésir ([42:04](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And that must be a nice feeling of like, starting with these people and then like they're at this point where they're,

Andrea Williams ([42:12](#)):

to just be able to continue to work together. Yeah, Yeah.

Obden Mondésir ([42:15](#)):

For sure. I hear that.

Andrea Williams ([42:17](#)):

Yep.

Obden Mondésir ([42:19](#)):

Cool.