

Obden Mondesir 00:00

Okay, that is what's happening now. Ava you're the co host. And okay, cool. So Sharmaine, have a good one. And I'll see y'all soon.

Sharmaine Smith 00:19

Have an amazing weekend, be safe.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 00:24

Sharmaine we're so glad you could join us. I'm just going to say the date and the names. So it's Friday, July 21. And I'm Ava Sullivan-Thomas. And I'm here with Ana Sofia Harrison, Adam Johnson. And we're just gonna start with, could you tell me the year you were born and where?

Sharmaine Smith 00:53

I was born in 1969. In New York City at Roosevelt Hospital on 59th street and 10th Avenue.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 01:01

Thank you. Can you speak a little about your experience living and growing up in New York City and what made it unique for you?

Sharmaine Smith 01:12

Um, I grew up in it's had various different names. But for me, it's always Harlem. You know they call it Morningside Heights, some people call it the Valley I grew up on the corner of 125th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in a New York City project building.

Sharmaine Smith 01:29

And what made it unique was because it was its own melting pot. And it was like one giant meshed family. Even though as in all families, this one doesn't like this one. And that one doesn't like that one. But when it came time to protect one another, or especially with your children, you know, that's going to pull together that's what I remember the most. And I didn't know we were poor.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 02:06

I know in your pre interview you mentioned you don't know who your father is, but could you tell me about your mother?

Sharmaine Smith 02:14

So I am the product of a sixteen year old heroin addict, and an unknown DNA donor. My mom, from what I've been told, made it clear that she didn't want me.

Sharmaine Smith 02:34

You know, my mom left me in the hospital and my grandmother left me there too. But because of pressure, because one lady, I love her to death.

Sharmaine Smith 02:47

You know, she's a blessing and a curse. Because sometimes I wonder if my life would have been better had I stayed there and went into foster care, you know.

Sharmaine Smith 02:57

But the lady Ms. Sharadon. Because she came and she told my grandmother that my mom left.

Sharmaine Smith 03:03

And I was, I was there left to detox the heroin. But then the lady started pressing my grandma like, I don't see none of y'all up there.

Sharmaine Smith 03:12

I haven't seen none of you Smith's up there to see that baby. You know, and I believe my grandmother came to get me get just to show face—to save face.

Sharmaine Smith 03:21

You know, because, you know, nobody will go oh, not only the mother left them the grandmother left them too. You know, and that one action, there was the foundation of my childhood.

Sharmaine Smith 03:38

I was always told my mother didn't want me and she left me. Even sometimes now today, and I just turned 54, it's still resurfaces, that less than feeling and because of that, I suffer from, like, various differences.

Sharmaine Smith 04:08

You know, one of the biggest one is imposter syndrome. Because I feel like anything that I accomplished, I don't deserve it, somebody's gonna take it.

Sharmaine Smith 04:21

And, you know, for a lot of many years, probably like, what I'm not gonna let anybody take it. When really, nobody wasn't coming for it.

Sharmaine Smith 04:31

But that was so deeply planted in me that it was before I let anybody take it, I'm a mess of my own self. And I lost quite a bit of I lost, you know, I missed out on a lot of opportunities.

Sharmaine Smith 04:45

You know, because life would be just am I too good? Somebody's gonna come take it away. There's somebody else messing with me, I'm gonna mess with him.

Sharmaine Smith 05:03

And it doesn't go away.

Sharmaine Smith 05:17

Are you there? Hello.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 05:22

Yeah, we're here. Sorry. I was just going to—Ana Sophia, do you want to go on to the next set of questions?

Ana Sofia Harrison 05:30

Yeah, sure. Thank you for telling us a bit about that. Would you mind speaking now about also what led to your incarceration?

Sharmaine Smith 05:46

So, again, I suffered very specific childhood trauma, the greatest one being that I was never going to be [good and I didn't deserve] anything. So okay, first, I tried to do was [excel in] school this and that, and I didn't get the affection from my, what I call today, my relatives, you know, and, but I noticed that if I did things wrong, everybody knew about it, everybody had something to say.

Sharmaine Smith 06:24

And because of these different things, you know, one of them including molestation. I searched and sought acceptance anywhere I could.

Sharmaine Smith 06:34

And so, what am I seeking of affection was, I left New York and found [inaudible] Buffalo. And I became addicted to drugs.

Sharmaine Smith 06:52

And then after I couldn't take it anymore I told my grandmother, [she said] come home, I came back to New York, that monster was still there. So all of my incarcerations, not just one or two, all my incarcerations are the result of a very deadly and unfriendly substance use disorder, which was facilitated by me wanting to feel in in a crowd that I now know, say, I had no business in any way.

Sharmaine Smith 07:25

But, you know, not wanting to be alone. Not even not wanting to be alone, wanting to be accepted. Does anybody tell me that I'm okay, that I matter?

Ana Sofia Harrison 07:47

Thank you. What was your experience like seeking treatment for substance abuse while incarcerated? And did you face any barriers?

Sharmaine Smith 08:01

So it's ironic, because prior to incarceration [inaudible], so let me just back track a little. So in 2000, I went to Kings College. And, you know, it was the result of my grandmother saying like, you got to do something.

Sharmaine Smith 08:21

And before that, I had sought treatment. So and each one came with a stipulation, like, are you and this is pre anytime of incarceration, oh, do you have a case pending? Do you have children?

Sharmaine Smith 08:36

All these things were barriers because no, at the time, I didn't have a child. At that time, I had me get arrested [inaudible]. You know, and I'm stuck. I'm headstrong. So, at forty years old, I got arrested.

Sharmaine Smith 09:05

Five years prior, I had a child, by someone that I met [inaudible], who the the minute I said, I think I'm pregnant, they were gone.

Sharmaine Smith 09:14

But again, it was my choice. And I thought I'd never have children. And so I gave birth for fun. And I gave birth to a son that was, you know, that had drugs in his system.

Sharmaine Smith 09:29

But, you know, knowing that I had a problem, like maybe it was [inaudible] not even like, five days before I signed the practice, and then I had my baby. And the hospital didn't tell me right away, so I thought I gotta away unscathed.

Sharmaine Smith 09:46

So when they came, they told me to sum it up, because I can get called out. So at that point in time, minimal stipulation because prior to giving birth I had already exhibited the need or the desire to get help. So that first ATF case was closed, [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 10:12

And then you know, the reality of what was going on [inaudible], I'm 35 years old, with child that I have no clue, you know, and in my eighth month, I have relapsed. So, now again, my best friend is back in the picture.

Sharmaine Smith 10:40

And my child, Ryan's vying for the attention of my best friend, you know, and, like, I made sure my son, you know, when he comes to my house, like there'll be food, there will be, you know, what was necessary. But I use drugs.

Sharmaine Smith 11:03

And 2005 I said, Okay, I'll go to treatment. You know, and my aunt agreed to take my son for 20 days I was in treatment. And then we had a transit strike. And like, I sometimes [inaudible]. Because I actually, currently it is now two blocks away from where they moved my son.

Sharmaine Smith 11:27

And, you know, I was seen as being uncooperative or non compliant. Because I'm telling you, the treatment center has so many you had to be there at seven o'clock in the morning. You call me at one o'clock and tell me [to set a ride].

Sharmaine Smith 11:48

That's no, that's not going to work. Because, you know, I'm asking all the questions to protect me. So what happens if I get to 57th Street and Fifth Avenue and then I have [inaudible], how do I make it the house [inaudible]?

Sharmaine Smith 12:05

And I also, you know, really, well listen, you can take my son and take him to my aunt. And I will go to treatment. And then it dawned on me, if I'm in treatment, I wouldn't see my son for his second Christmas. And I [inaudible] and I'll never forget it.

Sharmaine Smith 12:28

That was December 23 2005. That the [inaudible] supervisor, [inaudible] person back to my door. And again, I had just moved there three four days earlier so who knows where I live.

Sharmaine Smith 12:44

You know, I'm grateful because both times we see [inaudible] the case worker or the screaming child, the police, and she felt that we had that much of a raport that, you know, I understand the brevity of my actions. But it wouldn't be a theme so she didn't bring [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 13:03

You know, that begs a theme, you know, like I didn't say I want to go but this lady wanted me to leave at one o'clock in the afternoon. What happens if I don't get in? That's what I wanted to know. You know, but then the other caseworker he went to court and he got an emergency removal order.

Sharmaine Smith 13:24

And like 10th and [inaudible] avenue, I walked my son down to the van and I ask where's my son gonna go?

Sharmaine Smith 13:32

And they were like oh he's going to your aunt's house. And then I'm like how do you know and they're like oh, we talked to her already. You know, which again opened up that door, I'm not good enough, you know, it [inaudible], you know.

Sharmaine Smith 13:56

Didn't tell the people that I asked my family for help three or four times and they're help is they're still taking my child for one day, then said [now come get your kid].

Sharmaine Smith 14:04

So again, December 23 2005 my son was removed and it will come back. [When you could've quit] tomorrow and get a urine test. Well, we all know my urine [would burn a hole in the cup]. So I did go to treatment.

Sharmaine Smith 14:28

But when I came back my best friend was gone, my son, and that was the beginning of the end. You know, because again, sometimes don't take the time

Sharmaine Smith 14:51

Again, [inaudible] to the point where I knew the police men [inaudible], where you going? Oh I'm going so and so, You want to check me? Do I need to? [inaudible]. And you know, them realizing or not realizing the [inaudible] thing [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 15:13

Because back then and [I don't know if it still exists] but the police stopped me and [inaudible]. So I would engage and you know, oh, we're gonna call [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 15:27

So go ahead call her. You know because I'm saying to myself, when I finish, I didn't know [inaudible] and they can't [inaudible] they can't do anything, you know, like just stop let me see.

Sharmaine Smith 15:42

They can't do it. You have to wait 90 minutes. I was [sad] and I began to develop, what I call a one crack mother. Because I had lost the job.

Sharmaine Smith 16:03

So I didn't have that. Matter fact, I didn't even move in with a job I was a [inaudible], and back then it was only [sixty three dollars]. And, you know, the mind is twisted.

Sharmaine Smith 16:17

The mind has, definitely, you know, the mind is definitely you know, put out some self sabotaging way. Where, you know, on [both sides] cause I would know that I had to go see my son on a certain day. And I couldn't say to 2:15 to 2:35.

Sharmaine Smith 16:40

And then get upset when my [inaudible] does happen. And [inaudible] Yeah [inaudible]. And it's like, it was just a feeling of like, again, still trying to fit in.

Sharmaine Smith 17:05

You know, still trying to feel or fake myself with the feeling that I'm normal, that nothing is wrong with me. And that phase, it's a physical, mental, psychological [inaudible]. You know that, that did it.

Ana Sofia Harrison 17:36

Thank you for sharing that. As someone who has experienced society's form of carceral punishment, and in response to substance abuse, what has your experience been helping people through community based services.

Sharmaine Smith 17:56

Anyone who knows me knows that my motto is no one gets left behind, [because I got left behind so many times.

Sharmaine Smith 18:07

When I was released from incarceration, it was like never asked where you going, never ask what you're going to do, never ask anything. [inaudible], potentially even angering them I went in because they had the nerve to [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 18:27

So I treat everybody equal until you show me there's a reason to treat you different. Because I say as long as somebody's in the book, I can you know, they don't have to be on the same page, [inaudible] live and die [inaudible] I've sent so many people to do that [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 19:03

Yeah. That's it.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 19:06

Thank you for sharing that. Can you talk about some of the hardships you faced upon reentry after incarceration and maybe how those hardships led you to the CWP [Coalition for Women Prisoners].

Sharmaine Smith 19:22

So Memorial Day, 2009, I got arrested. You know, and I went to jail. And the first time I went to jail, it was like 15 years.

Sharmaine Smith 19:44

I couldn't even fathom 15 [days]. So, the thing about it is is like I never have been, I think, been stupid or uneducated. And thinking about like, how much work is a public defender really going to do for you and they have like 1,000 people.

Sharmaine Smith 20:09

I took it upon myself, I wrote a letter to a judge and what I said was no I'm not going to say the police tricked me, no I'm not going to say that I didn't do it, but I am going to say that I'm a person that is in the throes of an addiction that they know nothing about and I did what I needed to do to survive.

Sharmaine Smith 20:35

You know, I'm always to [scared to steal] or whatever [inaudible]. You know, and when I returned back to the court and [them to give me] Judge Carol and he said [inaudible], and I was like you know this is my first real introduction into the criminal justice arena.

Sharmaine Smith 21:03

You know, this is a bit more than I'm going to the pen and I'm gonna get a ticket and get out no, and um, so he said did you write that I'm like yes, I did.

Sharmaine Smith 21:16

You know these are what I want to say, [inaudible], however, I was like [it would be good] to consider, um, that um, you know, basically I told him like I'm not a bad person, but as the result of this ugly addiction like I'm doing what I can to get what at this specific time I felt I believed I needed.

Sharmaine Smith 21:54

And when I finished talking like you know some people they [inaudible], everybody [inaudible] and he said to me, I'm gonna do you a favor, I was like oh shoot he's gonna let me go home.

Sharmaine Smith 22:12

He I'm going to adjourn your case for six months. I couldn't figure out how the luck was that, he said figure it out.

Sharmaine Smith 22:22

[So I] read this and that, started researching, and I realized that the Rockefeller Drug [law] was gonna go into place. The [drug law] repeal was going to go into place, and guess when instead of going to [inaudible] in the summer, I'm going to [inaudible] in the summer.

Sharmaine Smith 22:44

That's how it started you know, again, the looking for love, making acquaintances with some unsavory characters. And again, you know, the most important thing and I still [set a front], because I now still live in that neighborhood.

Sharmaine Smith 22:59

You have to be careful of trying to be, [shape built], whatever like me. You know, so. This is taking me you know, this is this is purging [for me].

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 23:29

That's really interesting how you wrote a letter to the to the judge. Thanks for including that. Cpuld you talk about how you got involved with the Coalition for Women Prisoners?

Sharmaine Smith 23:44

Um, so what happened was, as the result of the judge's favor, right. Um, [didn't know if I'd get out at] six months. I was able to go to ATI which is an alternative to incarceration.

Sharmaine Smith 24:04

And I went to Green Hope Services for women which at the time was located in the little convent of a church on 119th. [Inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 24:13

And I had no clue was CWP [Coalition for Women Prisoners] was [laughs], nothing you know, but because I was quiet whatever, and you know, I was one of the people that had a story about adoption and they were like you're gonna go to this agency and do you wanna go to Albany, but you have to dress nice and stuff like that.

Sharmaine Smith 24:30

So, [laughs] mind you I just got there, [you said] did I want to go to the moon with only one helmet, [I was like] yeah I wanted to get out of the building, and find out what I was walking out the building and getting into until I got into the car that I was a [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 24:46

There's people talking about yeah, motion this and that and this and that. You know, I don't [inaudible] we going, and I've not a clue what [inaudible] is gonna be required.

Sharmaine Smith 25:00

And [inaudible]. One lady, Serena Liguori, [love sweet] is now in the hierarchy of, you know, [inaudible], but she would always have something interesting and [inaudible] to say, you know, [good morning young lady], and it would be a joke.

Sharmaine Smith 25:21

And [she] made me not invisible, to me. You know.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 25:36

So you were a part of the campaign to pass the Adoption and Safe Families Act.

Sharmaine Smith 25:43

Yes. We got there, Serena and I forgot the other lady's name. As we're driving to Albany, that's when I find out what we're doing. Like this is not no ordinary, just field trip, this field trip has a purpose.

Sharmaine Smith 26:01

To me like I was, I was picked because of my situation. So we get up there and there's a flash light, you know flashing lights, movie characters and all that stuff.

Sharmaine Smith 26:16

I'll never forget first [inaudible] at my government gets up. Talks about the bill and why they want the bill to pass, and you know.

Sharmaine Smith 26:34

Then Senator Diane Savino, she gets up and you know, she talks about the importance of it, how the reason it was initiated was a good idea, but it fell through. Then, when they, you know, [inaudible] but you know, and then after they finish talking, the last, it was [Velmanette], Diane Savino, [inaudible], and then [Tamar Kraft Stolar] you know, and they were, you know, advocating for it.

Sharmaine Smith 27:15

And then we spoke. And the first person to speak was a young lady Brunilda and, yeah, [inaudible] and he spoke about how, you know, [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 27:35

And then it was me. And I spoke about wanting to be alive, but never being shown love.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 27:49

I'm sorry, can you just repeat that last part?

Sharmaine Smith 27:51

I didn't hear what you said, say it again.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 27:54

Can you just repeat the last thing you said?

Sharmaine Smith 27:56

Oh, so I don't even remember gosh, my mind is a blur. So okay, so these people spoke and they took about, you know, why they wanted it to pass and then the first person that went her name's Brunilda, and then, accompanying with her on the trip was her son, Brandon.

Sharmaine Smith 28:15

And they both talked about it from their [inaudible], and then I went up, you know. And, you know, I talked about how I'm some 35 years old I didn't know what I was doing.

Sharmaine Smith 28:26

You know, and just because certain things occurred, didn't mean I didn't want to be a parent to my son. And then another lady went, [inaudible] she talks about her daughter, you know.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 28:48

And around what year was this?

Sharmaine Smith 28:53

2010. We went to, okay, so I got arrested in May of 2009, we went to Albany, maybe May of 2010. And I'll never forget June 11th, 2010. David Paterson signed into law, [inaudible].

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 29:14

And how did you feel when the bill finally passed?

Sharmaine Smith 29:20

I felt grateful that I had played a part, and I felt very, extremely hopeful that no one, [inaudible]. You know. It was too late for me.

Sharmaine Smith 29:43

Too late for me, you know. But maybe someone else, you know, I was glad this was gonna be able to help someone else.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 29:59

Making kind of a big pivot here um, but what made you want to major in forensic psychology at John Jay?

Sharmaine Smith 30:11

Um, so again, like I said, I grew up in public housing, right? And I grew up in what's called Harlem Valley. So like my building was 125th and Amsterdam, the big giant building that has two entrances.

Sharmaine Smith 30:26

And when you look at one hill, you see City College of the City of New York. And then when you look at the other hill, you see Columbia University, but then you hear everybody talking about this John Jay College, like it was Harvard, like you had to be someone special, to go to John Jay.

Sharmaine Smith 30:45

And like, that didn't hit me that, you know what I mean, I was too busy I wanted to be a [Reverend] I wanted to go St. John. And you know, certain things happened, I wound up not going.

Sharmaine Smith 30:59

And when I learned, when I um followed the man to Buffalo, got addicted to drugs or whatever, but I still reminded myself of certain things. No this time you still have to work.

Sharmaine Smith 31:11

We want you to work [inaudible] I mean, you know, we [inaudible]. But while I was in Buffalo, I had engaged in schooling at this place called Bryant and Stratton and I had taken [up] criminal justice, then I went to [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 31:33

So anyhow, these are things that like right now [I'm] taking the department education because I need to know, I mean, Bryant and Stratton yes I did well, I excelled. Once I learned [that student loans could fuel] my education, I took them out.

Sharmaine Smith 31:53

But now Hindsight is 2020, how I was able to keep taking them out? I couldn't remain, I couldn't maintain a 2.0. How was that?

Sharmaine Smith 32:10

I asked that question because now after all these years because I never let go of the dream that one day I would walk again, you know when you're in elementary school and high school, you [don't walk for you, you walk] because that's your parent's [mandate].

Sharmaine Smith 32:28

The next two, [you know]. And at the same time, the majority of my life has been searching and seek out I've been searching and seeking some kind of affection, just to belong.

Sharmaine Smith 32:53

Just to belong because again, the God who I knew before God, my Nana had filled me with so much [inaudible]. I'm not worthy, I'll never have anything.

Sharmaine Smith 33:11

You know, I'm gonna be just like my mother. Which is one of my biggest motivations behind excelling in [inaudible] education.

Sharmaine Smith 33:20

Because we all know what happens when you're puffed up with pride and somebody's [inaudible] something that you don't think they deserve. I'll show them.

Sharmaine Smith 33:29

Okay, so what they saw and they still [inaudible], oh well, I'm gonna kill myself, you know. And then I would hit myself, you know, [inaudible] walk up the steps you know, like, you're not doing all that.

Sharmaine Smith 33:44

[To jump off] nothing and then what happens is you jump off something and you don't die, now you gotta live with the fact that you're a failure all over again, you couldn't kill yourself. But I also realized that [inaudible], intrinsically, I was killing myself every day.

Ana Sofia Harrison 34:21

Alright, so the next question is, I'm taking another little jump. But we did some research prior to the meeting about your answering questions when asked about winning the Malcolm King award at John Jay. And you quoted or quoting you, you said that your plan was to be a proprietor of a transitional housing program for formerly incarcerated individuals, and that the program would offer job readiness and various resources and social services to the system? What work have you done recently to work toward this plan?

Sharmaine Smith 35:12

First of all I'm getting my education so that I can have a foundation to know what I'm doing. You know? While I was a resident of a three-quarters house I was also the house manager, you know.

Sharmaine Smith 35:33

That one idea has taken on many different facets. I actually have a name for it. And it's called strong for strong.

Sharmaine Smith 35:43

Just think about it. I don't know about you, but I'm always a strong person that people go to, when I need to shoulder, I'd be better off leaning on a wall because nobody's just putting their shoulder out there. You know?

Sharmaine Smith 35:59

Oh, shoot. Okay. So, I don't know repeat that question again, because I just went somewhere with that. And I just envisioned, like a whole big house and people with kids that were happy.

Sharmaine Smith 36:24

And you know, that, to a degree were able to march to their own drum. And they were able to find out, you know, who they were. And really, really, soul search right, what caused the maladaptive behaviors.

Ana Sofia Harrison 36:51

Yeah, I think that's a very needed thing. So the idea is to get the formerly incarcerated individuals together, and to have a support system.

Sharmaine Smith 37:07

[Inaudible], like I said it's taken on many facets, I don't know, like, have you guys ever seen Cheers?

Ana Sofia Harrison 37:16

Seen what?

Sharmaine Smith 37:18

Cheers, the TV show Cheers?

Ana Sofia Harrison 37:21

No, I haven't. I've heard of it.

Sharmaine Smith 37:24

[Inaudible]. You know, so Cheers is like, whatever the name of it was, it's like the neighborhood bar.

Sharmaine Smith 37:33

And, you know, most of the times, it shows the bar part, you know, and very but everybody was individuals but collected, you know. And whenever anyone came through the door, some people you knew they name, other people, it was a hey, how you doing?

Sharmaine Smith 37:55

So, just, somebody's acknowledging that I'm here, you know, and that, you know, the the housing thing, yeah, but, you know, the thing about it is like sometimes we wear so many hats, where do we go to take over hats? And just be. Whatever it looks like to you. Just be.

Sharmaine Smith 38:23

And be in the presence of people that do the same thing that you do. So that you come in and you don't speak they understand. [Inaudible] think they are.

Sharmaine Smith 38:34

And you know, they have various different compartments, you know, [like here this] is a bar and a restaurant, and then you walk back and let's make this a Black history room or meditation room, and then there may actually be a [inaudible] room and because you know, a lot of times when you go to aftercare [once you've seen your] aftercare [contact] you have no more help.

Sharmaine Smith 39:00

[Or whenever] they just have that off day, [inaudible] keep down and whoosah. You can't do it at home [because] of your husband, wife, [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 39:11

Can't do it at home because you know, whatever relationship you're in. Even if it's, you know, ironically, like I love, I have a four month old puppy.

Sharmaine Smith 39:19

I love my puppy, but sometimes that's not the first thing I want to do, when I walk in the door is play with you. And deal with your over affectionate-ness. You know.

Ana Sofia Harrison 39:37

Thank you. Have you taken recent steps kind of toward this plan?

Sharmaine Smith 39:48

Well, we [inaudible] at \$2 over lunch money. However, when I see certain philanthropy groups and they you know they'll have a contest for people that want to start businesses and you know promote your ideas so that's [the way I've been] going in now.

Sharmaine Smith 40:14

And then you know the other thing is is like [inaudible] my shit is it took me seven years to get into John Jay, like to get into college period because of the different environment that I came out of substance abuse treatment [was supposed to]. I was in a three quarter house, I was sleeping in a bunk bed in a room with seven other women.

Sharmaine Smith 40:46

If myself or my neighbor sat up, we would have to bump so we had to [inaudible]. And um, like any dysfunctional family, sometimes we got loved sometimes we didn't you know.

Sharmaine Smith 41:07

And then I saw you know, don't get me wrong, [inaudible]. There were three family houses 40 of us in there, between two floors.

Sharmaine Smith 41:22

And um, no support and then it starts out [inaudible] you know, then you will [inaudible] have their money, but the people that do know are gonna have their rent money, they all need somewhere to go when it's all done.

Sharmaine Smith 41:38

And at that time I just graduated from [Samaritan Village], um I was living with my quote unquote aunt in Yonkers, I was going to my welfare work job in Yonkers, and then turn around and go [inaudible], and while that might seem insignificant, that's a consistency that's something that I could bank on and that was gonna happen.

Sharmaine Smith 42:11

So anyhow, long story short trips are shorter as part of my condition of my graduation from Samaritan Village, I had to go to 12 [step]. So it was maybe like 15, 16 of us and we were all recently graduated from the program, right?

Sharmaine Smith 42:34

So what happened after 16 months, oh, I get a cup of water and I give you a cup you get your own water now we [eating out the water fountain], now we [eating out of] this and that, you know.

Sharmaine Smith 42:46

Life has taken some very, some twists and turns, I've forced myself, I you know I've brought it on myself you know. I learned that, had to learn that nothing is [inaudible] you have to step back and see if I caused that [sun to go out].

Sharmaine Smith 43:19

Or you know, I don't know. It's just, one thing I know for sure right, good better and different. And trauma, incarceration, not too sure about the removal of my child.

Sharmaine Smith 43:43

But those things I wouldn't trade if I had if I could rewrite my story. Because those are the things that allow me to realize [inaudible].

Ana Sofia Harrison 44:08

Thank you, and how has your involvement with the CWP [Coalition for Women Prisoners] impacted your goals for the future?

Sharmaine Smith 44:18

It allows me access to a group of women, a group of dynamic women. Tamar and Jaya I love them. You know, and during my journey in CWP it wasn't always straight you know.

Sharmaine Smith 44:41

I relapsed. Got arrested again a couple of times. Anytime I called either one of them, you know whether it was Bronx Defenders or Manhattan Defenders, where their [inaudible] their affiliation. That was my first experiment of people wouldn't give up on me.

Ana Sofia Harrison 45:19

Thank you, um, and I guess if you, we're sort of wrapping up, but if there's anything you'd like to add, we still I mean, since we started a little late we still have you know, we can give a little more time. But really, it's up to you as well.

Sharmaine Smith 45:38

This journey, like it's not over, you know what I mean. Recently, I came to realize that everybody who said they wanted to get my life together really didn't.

Sharmaine Smith 46:04

And it was hard because I realized it was my family. September 11 2023, I'm 11 years clean.

Sharmaine Smith 46:19

Subsequently as a result of my addiction and incarceration, my maternal aunt adopted my son and that, you know, you participate in my [inaudible]. Because my grandmother raised me and they have a paperwork [inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 46:39

My other aunt raised my other cousin, and eventually turned into [inaudible] mother. [Inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 46:49

What was it about me that I had [inaudible] like that it had to be me who, that my partner, this young man's life, my sons now 18, was obliterated. Because when you adopt a child, the natural parents names are taken off the adoptive parents.

Sharmaine Smith 47:18

What was it about me that I wasn't even worthy enough for it to be written down somewhere that I gave birth.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 47:40

Well, thank you for sharing that with us. And congratulations on being 11 years clean. That's amazing. And I'm so glad that you could take the time to talk with us. And I'm sure you'll be hearing from Obden soon. And yeah, I hope you have a lovely weekend and stay safe.

Sharmaine Smith 48:06

You too, you know, and like thank you guys. Because I can say, you know, my aunt that adopted my son she recently passed away.

Sharmaine Smith 48:15

[Inaudible]. So my son's 18 now. He's been so conditioned right, and the thing about it is I can't even be mad.

Sharmaine Smith 48:33

Because I [inaudible], you know. Where negative things are said about my mom, like, not to my face. But I'm in the same house and you talking about my mother. I'm gonna soak that in. Know what I mean?

Sharmaine Smith 48:52

And, you know, the thing that puts me at odds with my family is they're so facetious. Know what I mean? [Inaudible].

Sharmaine Smith 49:03

And I can't, I can be mad but I can't be mad. Because I have to respect, I don't have to, I don't have to accept you, like I respect that's who you are.

Sharmaine Smith 49:13

And it's like, their worth is built on external stuff. And I'm not gonna [adhere to] that drum like I'm not gonna, I'm not gonna pitch into that party when that's my way in.

Sharmaine Smith 49:31

Because [not for nothing] I already tell this to people, if you put cream cheese frosting and rainbow sprinkles and pretty candles on a pile of shit at the end of the day, what is it? It's still shit.

Sharmaine Smith 49:44

And unless it's dealt with, and washed away, so we don't [stink]. You know.

Sharmaine Smith 49:51

And the explosion has always been in the implosion. Because that's when you know something's wrong.

Sharmaine Smith 50:01

And once I decided that I was going to explode and I was gonna throw up like all the stuff that was [fed into me] you know, [inaudible] I forgave my mom, whether it was true or not but at 16 years old you don't even know yourself and then you're addicted to a drug now you're pregnant, you don't even want yourself how can you want another human being?

Sharmaine Smith 50:26

You know. I said my grandmother treated me the way she treated me because she knew at this stage in my life that I was pretty much going to be on my own, like I had to learn how to do my own two.

Sharmaine Smith 50:43

And even with the molestation by my uncle I had to ask myself, people aren't born thinking stuff like that is okay, so what could happen to him that made him think doing it to me was okay and lastly I'm walking around [inaudible] dead they don't know it. [Woosah, woosah].

Sharmaine Smith 51:16

Me because [inaudible], my aunt got my kid, she won't let anybody take my kid you know, and I hide behind intelligence you know, and I walked around and dressed up bum, because in all reality inside I was a whole mess.

Sharmaine Smith 51:39

And I can't expect to throw that ball up in the air, [inaudible] just immediately you know, the yellow go yellow, the green go with the green red go with the red because it didn't happen. So I have to [inaudible]. But that's about it.

Ava Sullivan-Thomas 52:06

I think that's a good note to end on. I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording.