

Ana Sofia Harrison 00:03

I'm just going to say the date for the recording. It's Thursday, July 20. I'm interviewing Tina Reynolds for the Barnard Archives Oral History Project. Alright, the first question that we have is—we just want to hear a little bit about the year you were born and what it was like when you were living in Long Branch, New Jersey, to start off.

Tina Reynolds 00:29

So, I was born in 1958. I never lived in Long Branch, New Jersey, I was born there. And came home to my parents—with my parents. We lived in Red Bank, New Jersey. I was raised there until my mother and my father separated and went to live with my grandmother. I was about maybe five or six. And my mother—my grandmother and grandfather lived in Middletown, New Jersey, on Magnolia Lane.

Ana Sofia Harrison 01:04

And did you stay in Red Bank New Jersey for a very long time? Or did you move around at all?

Tina Reynolds 01:10

My parents, they're in our house up until the age of five. And then when they separated, went to live with my grandmother in Middletown—my grandmother and my grandfather in Middletown, New Jersey.

Ana Sofia Harrison 01:24

Nice. Okay, cool. And then later on is when you moved out of Jersey, right? Later in life you did?

Tina Reynolds 01:32

Much later. I was married. I completed high school there, I went to a Catholic high school. I started out in a public high school, but then was transferred to a Catholic high school because of busing. They needed more people of color—children of color—Black people, specifically—to be among the ranks in some of the schools. So my sister went to Red Bank Catholic High School and I went to Modern Day Catholic High School. My brother—I'm not sure where my brother went. I can't recall where he went to school. But my sister and I both separated.

Ana Sofia Harrison 02:24

Did you want to separate for high school? Or was that sort of just because of the banking? The busing, sorry.

Tina Reynolds 02:30

Yeah. We didn't want to. Everything that we did, I believe at that time was racially promoted, or, you know, there was some reason behind it. And it was—yeah, I think children who had already experienced trauma at the time, we probably wanted to stay together. We weren't with our mother and our father anymore. We were with our grandmother. And, you know, the environment was a lot different than living with our parents. So we, you know, wanted to stay as close together as possible.

Ana Sofia Harrison 03:19

All right. And what would you say was a highlight of growing up in Red Bank, New Jersey? And then something that you—maybe that you didn't like about where you grew up?

Tina Reynolds 03:37

Well, I remember, as a young girl, that my mother had me taking ballet classes. And she set up a bar in our dining room, so that I could practice my pliés and all of the other activities. Or, you know, just come from practice, or go to ballet class and come home and practice. So I thought that was pretty cool. Another thing I remember: we rode our tricycles, my brother and I rode our tricycles in the living room around the table. And it was pretty fun.

Tina Reynolds 04:23

As a kid, maybe we couldn't go outside, maybe it was raining. My mother created this idea to make it like a runway around the dining room table or through the living room. And those were some of my vivid memories as a child there. Unfortunately, my mother experienced domestic violence, so it was pretty traumatic. Because I love both my parents. And I didn't really understand what was going on.

Tina Reynolds 05:02

And I'd say as a child, and I think the confusion around violence, as it stood in my mind, where there was so much love in my heart for both of them, like I just couldn't understand what was happening. So, Middletown, where I went to live with my grandparents was a mystical place for me. I was—I'm more prone, even to this day, to be outdoors. And so my grandmother had five acres of land. My grandparents had five acres of land, so my grandparents weren't too keen on buying toys.

Tina Reynolds 05:55

She believed that whatever was outside was, could make for great fun. And it did, we had other kids on the block that we played games with. We had enough room to have a baseball team and play volleyball and dodge ball and kick the can. It was a dead end street. And our house was the last house on the lane. It was the largest house on lane. And all of the land around the lane was was different. It was manicured lawns when you rode up, like I said, it was five acres.

Tina Reynolds 06:37

And then there was a field of straw. And then there was an area that was manicured under the trees. And then was—on the left side as you went up, it was all wild. And as a kid, you could see deer, possum, fox, quail. We had a natural stream that ran through our land. So you could drink the water—we drank well water. My grandfather was a gardener. I don't think he was a gardener, but I guess he learned some of these skills from where he was before he migrated to the north.

Tina Reynolds 07:25

And he had different plants and trees that always bloom. So we—the olfactory, the smells of different things. And plus, he was a barbecue master. So we had these huge barbecues for everyone that was family that came up, and they parked their cars on the lane and in the parking lot outside of the lane, and sometimes on the streets and we would have people that would camp out for days.

Tina Reynolds 08:01

Just to come up and barbecue and eat the barbecue. So we had a pig farm. And so my grandfather would choose—we had this huge barbecue pit and my grandfather would choose the hog for the barbecues and he would be outside cooking this hog for days. A whole hog.

Ana Sofia Harrison 08:27

I never liked watching pigs get roasted but it I mean it's the process. It's just a little gorey to, like, watch.

Tina Reynolds 08:39

We watched—we had a favorite pig. Her name was Susie. This is so funny. But anyway, so we learned how to call her and she would come and meet us in the morning. She was a huge pig, a sow. And you know, she had her little piglets. She had her babies and I remember the pigs that my grandfather would choose. And they sold pigs, too, so they would hang the hogs upside down because they'd have to bleed out first. And with pigs, it's different than raising any other animal.

Tina Reynolds 09:21

There's a certain way that you had to kill them, there's a certain way that you had to bleed them out so that there was no blood in the animal. So, we—whenever that happened, where my grandfather would kill a pig, we had everything from the nose to the tail in the house to eat. And it was one of those things where the pig was split down the middle. So when the pig hung upside down, one of my uncles would split it down the middle, clean it out. And then the whole hog would be put on the stick.

Tina Reynolds 10:05

Not turned but laid out with a board over it. So it's different than rotisserie. That's why it took so long for him to have the pig get done. It was barbecued for days on this barbecue pit where he had to sit by it and watch it. You don't see much of that happening now—not unless you go down South. You wouldn't even know how to do it. Yeah. So I understood, that most of the animals that we had, were for food. I understood that.

Tina Reynolds 10:53

So I was taught at a very early age because of the possibility of that happening, never to name any animal. Because you name it, you become close to it. So, sometimes by spite, we would name an animal just because we loved it. And you know, we would get home in time after school before my grandmother got a chance to kill it, or have it served for dinner. But then other times, we weren't so lucky, or the animal wasn't so lucky. I remember having chickens and roosters and I named them and would come home and they would be dinner.

Tina Reynolds 11:44

And so I was determined at that point that there would be certain pieces of the chicken that I wouldn't eat anymore. Like I wouldn't eat legs, I wouldn't eat the thighs or you know, or—and eventually I became a vegetarian. So I stopped eating all meat because everything that was alive that I named and that I was close to became food. So I said, well, I won't eat it.

Ana Sofia Harrison 12:11

I think I would become a vegetarian, too, probably, if I lived on a farm and was close to that food chain cycle in that way, too.

Tina Reynolds 12:23

Well, that wasn't until after a while. But I'm sure because of who I know myself to be. I probably didn't eat much meat anyway, when I was a kid.

Adam Johnson 12:35

Yeah, thank you for that background info. And just to pivot a little, could you talk about what led to your incarceration?

Tina Reynolds 12:43

Sure, sure. I wasn't incarcerated until—in my early 20s. I didn't start going to jail until my early 20s. And I remember the first time I went to jail, I was a sex worker. And I was working around the Waldorf, Astoria. And I was working with a trans woman, then. And we would look out for each other. At the time, I didn't know that she was trans. However, it didn't really matter, we had become friends.

Tina Reynolds 13:33

Now I had been a sex worker and worked and chosen who I'd give my money to. And that's just the way it was. And so I chose a pimp. And so I traveled. Where, today, at my age—you know, I was much younger—I understand that's a little different. It's called something different now, today, right? Where you're trafficked from state to state. And so I was arrested. My first arrest was as a sex worker. And it was in New York. And it was at that time, that when I was arrested with my trans friend, she—the police called her by her given name.

Tina Reynolds 14:31

Because at the point—at that point names weren't recognized. Choice of a name as a trans person was not recognized. Pronouns were not recognized. So when I was in the back of the van, I asked her who they were talking about, and they explained to me that—she explained to me that she was trans. I was just like, wow, you were looking out for me regardless, you know. And at that point, when I was in New York, I had thrown away all ideas of giving my money away to men, I had had so many bad experiences at that point where either I was abused physically, emotionally, mentally, I wasn't respected.

Tina Reynolds 15:24

There were too many other women. You know, you name it, I got it. I said, I can do this on my own. And so that was the beginning of my arrest. And I had been arrested from that point up until '94. So from '80 to '94, if I'm not mistaken. I have my record here, somewhere. My first arrest was in January 10th, 1980, all the way until 1994. Excuse me. Yeah, '93.

Adam Johnson 15:53

And where were you incarcerated at?

Tina Reynolds 16:28

All over New York State. I went to Rikers. I went to—the only prison I didn't go to—I went to Bedford, I went to Taconic, I went to Albion. The only prison I didn't go to, I believe, was Bayview. But all of the other prisons, I'd gone to. Three prisons and the one jail.

Adam Johnson 17:06

And when did you have children?

Tina Reynolds 17:09

I had children throughout my whole time. So when I became a sex worker, I left my children, two of my children behind. With my grandmother. I had experienced a lot of trauma when I was a child. I couldn't tell you why I left but I know I needed to. And I loved my children. It wasn't that I didn't love them.

Tina Reynolds 17:36

I didn't know how to take care of them, didn't know how to be a mother at the time. And I left them with my grandmother. And I didn't come back. I didn't come back at all until something shifted. But I had had seven children from the time that I left till the end—till my last arrest. And I was pregnant during my last incarceration.

Adam Johnson 18:21

And were your conditions while you were incarcerated different when you were pregnant?

Tina Reynolds 18:27

Not really, you know, I remember physical space limitations for myself. I always walked in a way in which I could protect my stomach. The prison itself did not have conditions. I mean, the conditions of confinement, were: if you were in general population, you were in general population. If you were accepted into the nursery, however, there were different conditions of confinement for you.

Tina Reynolds 19:05

Now, the condition of confinement for pregnant women, as far as policy and procedure, was for—maybe an extra container of milk or an extra piece of fruit. There were no special reminders on doctor's visits or, you know, going to make sure that you had a checkup within an interval based on your trimester. There were very few conditions that were appropriate to meet the needs of pregnant, parenting people, especially pregnant parenting people who use drugs.

Adam Johnson 19:55

And once you were released, could you talk a little bit about the—was the reunification process with your children simple because your grandmother would take care of them, or were there complications?

Tina Reynolds 20:06

By the time all of it was over and I was done with going to prison, that's from 1980 to 1993, I had seven children. My older two were almost adults. I came out of prison with a baby. One of my children had been adopted by—not adopted, cared for by a family friend. And then another one of my children was adopted by my cousin. And my first son was with an uncle of mine, my mother's brother, after my grandmother had passed away.

Tina Reynolds 20:49

So my sister assisted with helping raise my older daughters to the best of her ability. She did the best that she could. There were instances where, during the time that I was using and going to prison, and trying to figure things out, because all of it in my mind was my fault. I didn't understand the system's impact on the war on drugs and war on people who use drugs. And specifically the war on Black people, and Black communities.

Tina Reynolds 21:27

Separation of family and policies that were very impactful, dehumanizing, and oppressive. I did not understand that until after I came home. So reunification was very different, because my children were not in one place. I was a new mother, basically, even though I had children. I attempted to be a mother. Upon this arrest, this last arrest and reentry process with my son.

Tina Reynolds 22:05

I also attempted to have my second youngest son reunited, returned back to me who was in foster care. And I went about doing that while I went about reuniting with my other children. Two of them, I didn't see until after maybe a year or two years that I was home. I was very overwhelmed by everything. I had spent that span of time if not imprisoned, on the street.

Tina Reynolds 22:38

And therefore I never had a permanent home. It was a transient life. And many abuses and many trauma experiences. And to the extent of where even though I had been arrested over 61 times, I was never offered an alternative to incarceration. I was never offered an opportunity to recover. If that were my choice, so to speak, I don't think recovery would have been my choice, I think being reunited with my children would have been my choice.

Tina Reynolds 23:19

Recovering probably would have been a part of the mandate. Whenever I came home, that was always a part of the mandate. You know, it wasn't about addressing anything other than my drug use, not the fact of the trauma or the harm or houselessness or abuse, physical abuse or mental illness or nothing. The priority was you're a drug addict, or the other definitions that were dehumanizing because of the choice of drugs.

Tina Reynolds 24:03

I think of when I reunited with my children or attempted to, I had some great success. I became a great mother, I believe, to the extent of where I could see myself having an impact on my children positively. Even the ones that I didn't raise. I knew one of the things that I needed to do. And I did this while I was in prison, the last time I was there in 1993, when I had my son. It was to begin therapy. And that was the first experience I had when I was accepted in the nursery in Bedford Hills. And I stayed there for a short time. I had an opportunity to receive therapy.

Tina Reynolds 24:52

And I began to talk about some of the things that I had experienced, never sharing any of the experiences of trauma before with anyone, certainly, and even in this instance, did not share the experience of trauma with a person who looked like me. However, I did have a counselor who looked like me. And she initiated the whole process of my being able to become accepted into the nursery. And this was at Bedford Hills. I was at first at Taconic , and that's a medium facility, and that's right across the street from Bedford Hills.

Tina Reynolds 25:33

And the counselor came across and talked to me, and asked me whether I wanted to be in the nursery. Now they had two nurseries, but I was accepted into the one in Bedford Hills. Bedford Hills was different, because it was only for women who had committed violent crimes. Or, as you know, Bedford Hills is that prison that is specifically for women who've committed higher class—higher classified crimes. Taconic was a medium facility, a middle classified crime level, crime facility.

Tina Reynolds 26:16

And so, that opportunity. And it was through the women that I had been in prison with that, because I'd gone to prison so much and showed up in in prison so many times because of the war on drugs, because there were so many arrests, that they began to share with me how it is that I could get into the nursery. At that point, when I was pregnant with my last son, in 1993, I was done. I wasn't done using, I was done with the ways in which I was treated as a human being to the systems, the intersections. Even the system's intersections were horrible.

Tina Reynolds 26:58

You know, you came out, you had mandates for parole, you couldn't be with anybody that you were in prison with, but yet and still, you could go to meetings where people who were formerly incarcerated. Just didn't make sense to me. In order to get my child back, I had to have a job. But in order to have a job, I had to have housing. To get my child back, I had to have housing, I had to have a job, I had to go to a treatment facility, I had to make weekly, and sometimes bi-weekly visits to my son who was in foster care. I don't know how anyone else could have done all the things that I'd done, just to have some semblance of what folks said was a normal life. The pressure to be—to do all of those things certainly weighed against me and my success.

Tina Reynolds 28:00

If I didn't have so many people in my corner, and were there to support me, and I don't think I would have been able to do it by myself. So I know, and I knew then at that time, because of the system's oppressive nature, on all systems involved, that any woman that was trying to do this alone would not fare well. Now, when I say I had support, I didn't necessarily have support of my family, because they were impacted by a person who had been in prison and the ways in which prison is defined to so many people, especially in the Black community, it's, you know, it's shameful, you carry guilt.

Tina Reynolds 28:44

The culture is one of where, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, get yourself together, believe in God, God will handle it, you know, and all that is well—all well, fine and good however, it just carries a different impact as a person who uses drugs, as a person who's identified as a parent who uses. And

so my family was not very loving or understanding, didn't bother to become educated on the impact of incarceration and the war on drugs.

Tina Reynolds 29:24

My mother, however, who had left me and my brother and my sister, when we were young, with my grandmother, she didn't make consistent visits. There were times when I would allow her in my life and there were times where she wanted to be supportive, and she was, where she became a little bit more understanding because not only was I experiencing incarceration, but my brother, also. Reunification was the most important thing.

Tina Reynolds 30:00

Again, in the scope of the way in which things were with my family and their lack of knowledge and understanding and their own shame and guilt that they dealt with understanding or, you know, misunderstanding, they did the best they could. They don't know how harmful they were. They still probably to this day don't know how harmful they were. I appreciate everything that they've done. I think they did the best they could.

Tina Reynolds 30:33

They really did the best they could. They kept all of my children safe. And all of my children are phenomenal human beings. I don't know how, but they are. I do know how, I do. Because they were brought into this world through love, regardless. And they are beautiful, responsible human beings. Every last one. I'm truly blessed to know them.

Ana Sofia Harrison 31:12

Thank you. Shifting a little bit now into some of your advocacy work, I would love to hear about your connection to the church organization Justice Works and how you got involved in that.

Tina Reynolds 31:38

So when I was released from prison, through the Sisters of St. Joseph, Hour Children, Sister Tesa—mainly sister Tesa—Sister Elaine was instrumental in my getting into the nursery, Sister Tesa carried the baton from there. Like I said, there were so many people that supported me, through my own process. And this journey in particular, that I was afforded an opportunity to stay at Hour—not Hour Children, but the Sisters of St. Joseph, Providence House. So Providence House is a halfway house. It was located in Queens, and that's where I chose to stay.

Tina Reynolds 32:20

I had never lived in Queens before. I was very happy that I wasn't going to be staying somewhere in the city, there would have been too many triggers for me. Like I said, I never stopped wanting to use, but I knew I had to because of all the mandates. I kind of figured I could use and figure out how to mitigate and monitor my own drug use. And I also knew that trauma and the abuse that I'd experienced stood in the way of me having any semblance of normalcy, if I were to use again.

Tina Reynolds 32:50

Because you used to run away in most cases, at least, what I did, to kind of numb the pain and the trauma and the experience and the memories. So, I was offered an opportunity to stay at Providence House, my youngest son, and I moved in. And we were there right as soon as we came home, it was a very quick maneuver. I was bused—a van pick me up from the prison, and I arrived in Queens, New York, at Providence House with my baby son. I was given the restrictions, and the rules, and the guidelines of living in this house and had to go to a treatment facility, and had to make visits to my son who was in foster care. There were certain responsibilities that we had in the house.

Tina Reynolds 33:48

Fortunately, I could cook. So there were times where, you know, each resident had to make a meal. And this was to bring community and all the women that stayed there all had their children as well. Some of them were houseless, and were staying there until they found housing or were given vouchers for housing. And some of us came from prison. So the idea behind it was to build family and community. And I thought that was probably my first experience of being with other women who had children who had different experiences than myself, we would all share. Some some of us got along and some of us didn't, and that's just the nature of things.

Tina Reynolds 34:33

But there was a house manager there. And she was very, I don't know, I think she saw something in me. Maybe she saw, I think I had a little OCD. I was very attentive to my son and keeping him clean and maybe too clean, I don't know. But she saw something in me and one of the sisters there had introduced me to the Church of Gethsemane. The Church of Gethsemane is located in Brooklyn. And at the time, they had an advocacy organization called Justice Works.

Tina Reynolds 35:19

And Justice Works was run by another sister, a former sister. She and the board of the organization, were actually, at that point, talking about the conditions of confinement for women and pregnant, parenting people in prison and jails. So, Justice Works was the beginning of our—I mean myself and other women—sharing our stories of our experiences of being in prison. The conditions of confinement, being a pregnant parenting person who used drugs, the mandates that parole had on on us as women, as mothers.

Tina Reynolds 36:10

The specific policies, and guidelines—rules, actually, not guidelines—that the Administration of Children's Services had in regard to our children. So we're dealing with three systems at the time, and we're home, we're dealing with ACS, we're dealing with parole, and we're dealing with issues of houselessness, and restrictions within the place that we live, because we come home with nothing. I came home with my youngest son, when I had him.

Tina Reynolds 36:47

And throughout all of that process of being incarcerated, and the people that I had met to support me, and advocate on my behalf, I defined my son as my miracle, because he was going to change my life. And I lived for him. Because in the beginning, I did not know how to live for myself. So my introduction to Justice Works was through my being able to share my story. At the time, because I was so new to it,

I really didn't know how to share my story. I shared my story from a perspective of saying that I was grateful that I had gotten arrested.

Tina Reynolds 37:36

I knew I'd gotten arrested over 60 times, why would I be grateful for that? Why? Because none of the alternatives to incarceration were ever offered to me. Because there were only three alternatives that ever allowed or accepted women who are pregnant, or parenting. In New York, there were only three. I just didn't understand the system's impact. I did not have a systems analysis. I didn't understand. I thought that the way that I shared was from my perspective of my experience.

Tina Reynolds 38:22

Now I understand that, during the time that we were talking, and we were sharing these experiences, we were also re-traumatized. So the women who led this conversation, were women that didn't look like us, right? They identified through having hardships of their own being comparable to the hardship and the trauma that I had. There's no comparison as a Black woman when you're working with white women. Regardless, it's no comparison. However, I understood that as from a human aspect of harm and hurt that I could understand in some way.

Tina Reynolds 38:59

However, I didn't think that it was a true comparison. I just need to note that. And so we shared our stories. However, the women that sat at the table with us, that were advocates, shared the system's impact. They understood how the system's intersected, shared all of the intersections in regard to the collateral consequences of incarceration. I wanted to share that. I felt like it was my story. I need to understand all of the other information.

Tina Reynolds 39:38

I needed to understand the system's impact. I needed to understand how they intersected. I need to develop my own systems analysis, and I went about doing that. It took some time, however I went about doing that. Because I really didn't feel like my story was being shared from a perspective of power. I felt a little exploited and tokenized. Again, I didn't know.

Tina Reynolds 40:05

That was what it was, giving it a word. But early on, remember that people weren't talking about women who are incarcerated. Right? I don't think, until there was this video that came out that was made by one of the Kennedys, did you ever look at women having a connection to their children, or women going to prison pregnant? I don't think a lot of people even understood that women went to prison pregnant. And so Justice Works was the entryway.

Tina Reynolds 40:36

And again, by way through them, I gained and grew so much. Yes, I did want to share my own story with all of the complications within regard to the collateral consequences of incarceration. The conditions of confinement. I didn't know all of those things in the beginning, I shared my story as part of catharsis, as a way to heal. And, along the way, realize that there needed to be something to deal with

the trauma. I think that, for me, it was the continuation of sharing, and hearing other women's stories that were different from mine, however I had the same experience.

Tina Reynolds 41:26

It wasn't until I realized that when I had my last son, when I was in prison, that I was shackled and handcuffed when I gave birth to him. And it wasn't until I had that experience that I realized that if this happened to me, then how many women was it going to continue to happen to? And how many women did it happen to you before I got there, right? And I said, 'Oh, my gosh.' I said, 'I couldn't believe this.'

Tina Reynolds 41:54

And I wasn't allowed to call anyone, even if I didn't have any family, didn't have a choice to call anyone to come and pick up my child to stand outside of the room where I was giving birth. I didn't have a family member in the birthing room with me. I had a correctional officer looking at everything that should have been privy to anyone of my choosing other than them.

Tina Reynolds 42:17

And the doctor—who knew me from no one, because I didn't have a consistent doctor to help me through my whole process, through my pregnancy—was the only one that advocated to take the shackles off me when I was giving birth. And then I had to go back to the prison and fight for my child.

Tina Reynolds 42:40

Because if I wasn't able to keep him with me, then he would have had to go somewhere and the chances of losing him, having two children in foster care, greater, now, to lose both of them. Because unfortunately, the system sees you as a person who's consistently doing these things, a consistent person identified as a felon, or abandoning your child.

Tina Reynolds 43:12

So, these definitions that I had to live with, defining me, myself, according to the way in which the systems have played out everything. I was just becoming more angry, and more angry, and more motivated, and more activated. It was little by little, and I love the way that I didn't know, and I loved even more finding out, because it inspired me. It incited something inside of me. So, Justice Works was the beginning of that.

Adam Johnson 44:05

What years were you in Justice Works?

Tina Reynolds 44:07

So, I would say I came home in 1993, '94, I started going to school, I'd say '96, '97. Through them, I started going to the Correctional Association meetings. Living at Providence House, wherever I went, I had to bring my son. See the mandates, right? So I had to take my son with me wherever I went. So wherever I went there with my son.

Tina Reynolds 44:55

Like I said, I don't know how a person could have done this without the support. I think I was just so angry, then. I was finding out more things about racialized institutions and structures that I was just like, oh my gosh, I'll do whatever it is that I need to do. I didn't even think of it that way. I got up. And that was it every day, until I could really get to a place of where my voice could be authentic and authentically mine. The connection between Justice Works was a stepping point to that.

Tina Reynolds 45:39

There was so much within their involvement in that part of my journey, even with the church, the support that I received. The love that I receive, continuous love that I received. That assisted me toward the Correctional Association and meeting other women. Somewhere during that time, working with the Correctional Association, I met a woman who ran the Osborne Association.

Tina Reynolds 46:10

I started traveling and talking about the issues around women and what it is that women experienced in prison. She spoke about her children's father, who was incarcerated. And so we were sharing two different stories, and we befriended each other. And we began talking about what it is that I wanted to do, I had no idea of, or thought of starting an organization.

Tina Reynolds 46:38

But through the Correctional Association, I was just like, what if we got a bunch of women together who've done time? What if we were specifically going to change public perception and policy, about women and how they've been impacted by incarceration, and the collateral consequences of incarceration? So she listened to me and I kept talking about it, and I kept thinking about it.

Tina Reynolds 47:01

I just wanted to do something, I knew there were more women. So we began meeting. Seventeen women started WORTH, [Women On the Rise Telling Herstory]. Women On the Rise Telling Herstory, or WORTH, would be the second organization run by a formerly incarcerated woman. The first one was CCF, College and Community Fellowship run by Vivian Nixon. And the second one was WORTH, Women On the Rise Telling Her story, run by myself. It was co-founded by Liz Gaines.

Adam Johnson 47:38

Was she your friend that you were talking about?

Tina Reynolds 47:40

The executive director of the Osborne Association, she and I co-founded WORTH. And then she turned it over to me. I was able to get the 501c3 of the organization that was started in Bedford Hills. So, it was the first 501c3 that was ever started. And the women's facility was in Bedford Hills. And they did various things to support the women inside, because most of the women were long terms. They had the first 501c3 organization ever started in a prison.

Tina Reynolds 47:47

They handed that over to me and the women of WORTH. And we worked under that under a fiscal sponsorship with the Osborne Association for many years. And if it weren't for that beginning, and the

17 women which grew to over 200 members at one point. And we had a membership. And we all went about specifically raising money, or making sure that we would show up at these conferences. Women's Health Organization. We wanted them to write a charter, about the shackling legislation.

Tina Reynolds 49:13

And they wrote one. We were never invited to these conferences, we showed up at conferences where we weren't invited to make sure that our voices were heard, that we were visible. We would stand in the back and sometimes, at the last row of chairs, raise our hands and say, 'What about formerly incarcerated women? What about our children? What about, what about, what about.' In many instances, we incited conversations that weren't supposed to be had. We incited anger in many instances. We incited disagreement.

Tina Reynolds 49:52

We never backed down. We never backed down. It's powerful, powerful work that we did. And working with the coalition of women prisoners, though, we were able to change laws as a collective. Whatever it was, the vision behind work was never one where it was me, myself and I. It was all of us, always all of us. And it was all of us that did it. All of us, every last member. Every last member played a part, no matter how small or large, in offering themselves, their experience, their story, their authenticity, their sweat, their laws, their experience of incarceration to change laws.

Tina Reynolds 50:43

And through our involvement in the CA [Correctional Association], we were able to change three laws. The condition of confinement, the Adoption and Safe Families Act, and the anti-shackling legislation. And these were all led by formerly incarcerated women, and many of them who were members of WORTH. Many of them who grew, went back to school, now have doctorates, now are teaching, are doing phenomenal things. Like I said, during that time, when I had returned home, I also went back to school. I hadn't been to school—I was 35 when I came home, and I went back to school and got my master's in social work.

Tina Reynolds 51:28

I wanted to be a lawyer. I was told that I wouldn't be able to pass the Bar exam because of my incarceration. I know that was a lie. However, I finished my degree in Queens at York College and went into Hunter College, School of Social Work on advanced standing. So I got my master's in a year.

Adam Johnson 51:54

And what year was that?

Tina Reynolds 51:56

That was in 2003. I graduated from York CUNY in 2002. And was one of five people selected for advanced standing from York College. Actually, two of my friends went along with me. And so I acquired my master's degree in a year. And I encouraged every sister that came through the doors. Now, when we were talking about women, we had trans women. We had LGBTQ folks, self identified. We had people using drugs.

Tina Reynolds 52:38

We didn't turn our heads away. Because remember, the mandates were that you had to be in recovery. I was in recovery. But if a sister came to me and said, 'Tina, listen, I use.' I'm like, 'Okay, can you do this? Can you can you do what we need to do? It doesn't matter that you're using.' Didn't matter who you were, and many arguments that we had internally about trans folk.

Tina Reynolds 53:03

And I'm like, 'Listen, what are you talking about?' And from that first experience of my being a sex worker, I was reminded of the humanity. I was reminded of the necessity. And we had many arguments. Because back in the 80s and 90s, people didn't see people. All people as people. You know, I just felt like, how is it that I could oppress anyone after being oppressed so badly? Dehumanized, experienced white supremacy? There's no way that I just couldn't open a door and say no, somebody else couldn't join.

Adam Johnson 53:54

And just to backtrack a little what year was WORTH founded? And what year did you start collaborating with the CWP [Coalition for Women Prisoners]?

Tina Reynolds 54:01

So we started in 2006. And we were housed in the Open Society Institute. We held our meetings there. And most of the meetings were with long-termers. We were founded—and what I mean by that is that Liz Gaines agreed to assist us. She was with us throughout our whole process from 2006 to 2008. We became an organization. We had our own office, fiscally sponsored by the Osborne Association, and we began raising money.

Tina Reynolds 54:33

And all of the members began learning how to run an organization. Our involvement in the CWP was through that process way before we got our office. Way before we became an organization. We were involved in CWP or the Correctional Association, as individuals, many of us. And then we came together as a part of WORTH, and branched off into some of the leadership roles within the CWP, the Coalition for Women Prisoners, and we became leaders of certain coalition meetings or co-leaders.

Tina Reynolds 55:21

It was always thought about within the CWP, which was really phenomenal, was how to really share expertise and skills. This experiment was one where women came with power, it wasn't a matter of empowering people. We had many discussions with the people who were running CWP, Tamara and Jaya, and many people before them. We became very close. And we talked about some of the most difficult things. We had the most difficult conversations around race and around how we identify and really see some of our own biases and how it is that we work through it?

Tina Reynolds 56:04

And there wasn't a conversation that we couldn't have or where we wouldn't come back. We would always come back. And it was one where it took time. We always showed up and shared ourselves and even through our success and our growth. We were committed. It was just hard to see CWP and move

on or not be existent anymore, not be a part of what we were doing. Because so much had come up out of it. There were so many leaders that have become very strong and just gone on and moved on. If we didn't have that outlet, I don't think we would be where we are. We would be phenomenal women, who we are regardless, but that piece was so necessary, and for many of us.

Ana Sofia Harrison 57:21

Thank you. Is there anything that you would like to add about your organizing that you haven't?

Tina Reynolds 57:38

I don't know whether you need to speak to me again. But I do have another commitment that I have to go to right now.

Ana Sofia Harrison 57:49

Yes. No, that's good.

Tina Reynolds 57:54

I'd love to keep talking with you.

Ana Sofia Harrison 57:57

Yes, thank you. Thank you for your time. We really appreciate it. It was great to get to know you and talk to you.

Tina Reynolds 58:05

Good question. I could keep going on and on. I'm writing my book. Trying to be careful with everything. You all may be able to help. You never know.

Ana Sofia Harrison 58:18

That'd be really cool. Well, looking forward to hearing more about that as well, the book. Have a good rest of your day. Thank you.

Tina Reynolds 58:28

Thank you so much. Thank you, Ava, thank you Adam, and good meeting.