



# National Lifers of America, Inc.

Chapter 1014 • Women’s Huron Valley Correctional Facility • 3201 Bemis Road •  
Ypsilanti, MI 48197-0911

WINTER 2025

## “Empowering Incarcerated Women Toward Reform & Release”

In this issue, a number of articles focus on prison jobs that the women have. They speak with pride about their work, however ordinary, and share how they are compensated. Other articles acknowledge the visitors who enrich the NLA community by their visits, while others still, provide glimpses into the lives of the women and the advocacy work that they are engaged in.

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### UNITY

*-by Felicia Hale*

Sister, my sister, I won’t let you fall  
I will grab your hand when I hear you call  
The love is genuine  
and the care is so real  
We’ve been through so much  
so I know how you feel  
Hopelessness and helplessness  
are things of the past  
United in encouragement and strength  
we are building our fight to last  
Hold on tight because there’s always  
a shoulder to lean on  
For when we are weak, He is strong

### ENJOYING MY JOB

*-Margaret Neal*

During my 46 years of incarceration by the Michigan Department of Corrections, I have had many jobs. My current job is working as a horticultural porter which entails many different duties. I work from 2:30 AM to about 9:00 AM. My duties include cleaning the bathroom and kitchen areas, making sure that the floors are swept and mopped and the trash is taken out. I also stock the areas with supplies that are needed. My job is considered to be unskilled and I only make \$1.14 a day.

The reason I like this job is because I do better working alone and not in a group setting. I really enjoy

my job because my peers in the horticultural section treat me well and explain the difficult things about their jobs, dealing with plants and gardening. My boss, Ms. Barren, is very friendly and comments on my work ethic, on how good the area looks, and how clean it is. I appreciate her telling me that I do a great job and take my duties very seriously.

### A NEW SMILE

*-Retta Huggins*

I work in the only dental laboratory in MI prisons for Michigan State Industries (MSI). We provide dental prosthetics for every MI prisoner who needs them. Unlike other MSI, we are not a factory, where you run machines that produce products. Dentures are individually designed for each patient; there’s an art that goes into creating each piece which moves through seven departments before it is complete. There are five line lead positions and one floor manager. Those who hold one or more of these positions have had years of on-the-job training and have shown excellent ability to hold a position and to teach others. It takes roughly a year to be efficient in one department, and at least five years to be proficient in training others. I have worked in the dental lab for a total of 15 years and hold two positions and earn \$1.25/hour.

The benefit of working for MSI is the opportunity to cross train in other departments, to learn every step and technique there is. The reason this is a unique

opportunity is that on the outside, you are tested and generally placed in a department that you are good at, which then becomes your job. The opportunity to expand your expertise in other areas can be limited.

Our floor manager and supervisor, who are both certified dental technicians, teach us both hard and soft skills. The hard skills focus on the technical aspects of the job. The soft skills include proper communication, work etiquette, leadership and team building. To help elevate each technician, those who are not in lead positions have the opportunity to learn all areas of the process under the tutelage of our floor manager and supervisor. The best part of my job is seeing the smile on the women who have received dentures. It's extremely satisfying and humbling when you are able to give a smile and confidence back to someone with your hard work and dedication.

### **MY JOURNEY TO MY JOB ON SUICIDE WATCH**

*-Melissa Belanger*

I was sentenced to three life sentences and 8 to 20 years. Coming to prison has taught me so many things. I wear a heavy pair of shoes and wonder every day when I will go home. For years, my life felt empty; at one point I tried to take my own life because of the grief from the pain that I caused my victim's family, my family as well as my community. At another point, I became too comfortable with my living situation, which had me travelling down the wrong path in prison. During this time, I caught over 60 major misconducts because I had no care in the world and felt that I was going to leave prison in a body bag. I went through all my appeals and was denied. I have a 6500-motion left. I had to help raise my children from behind these gates; my children were raised by my parents most of their lives. I'm honestly thankful for my time because I have been able to see that I was a broken person who needed to heal from all kinds of trauma that I went through as a child myself.

I have been healing these past eight years. I'm learning to understand things differently now. I have participated in over 30 groups that have helped me see life differently and be able to forgive and to be forgiven. I am a different woman today because of prison because I was able to get in touch with my inner self. I participated in a dialectical behavior therapy program in July 2017, which saved me from dying in prison. I had become a horrible addict in prison and was able to talk with a therapist on a one-on-one basis. I also participated in many groups focused on anger management and self-esteem. I also took Chance for Life because I needed to learn more communication and critical thinking skills to do better. These experiences have made me a better person and I am able to communicate with my parents, become a better mother, and feel genuine remorse for the life that was taken. I take full responsibility for my actions. I have also learned

to communicate better with staff and with my peers and have been ticket-free now for three years.

I have been in NLA for eight years as a Co-chair of the Lifers Legislative/Aiding and Abetting committee. I dedicate my time to the NLA to help me see things better. I have learned how to write a bill. I was able to get one of the best prison jobs, which requires clearance by higher people. I am a Prison Observation Aid and watch women who are on suicide watch. I make \$3.34/day for each of my two jobs. Some days this work is not easy for me because at one point I was on the other side. Doing life, you feel like everyone on the outside has abandoned you. I'm grateful that my family is still there and supportive because some families walk away after so many years. I stay in prayer because I know my higher power will keep me safe and not allow any weapon to form against me.

### **MY JOB AS A PLUMBER**

*-Renyatta Hamilton*

As a general maintenance worker at WHV, you can explore a variety of trades such as electrical, plumbing, HVAC, and "general". The latter covers basic repairs like windows and soap dispensers, cork board, furniture or mirror installation, and tile flooring. I am an experienced plumber and specialize in the Acorn system which is used in this facility. My duties cover all things that deal with sinks, toilets, drains, water leaks and water fountains. My job is to fix clogged sinks, toilets and drains and cause as little disruption as possible. Beyond the obvious stigma about plumbing, that is about "the smell and filth," I find reward in the successful outcome of each work order that is completed. I earn \$ 3.54/day for an average of 4-5 hours of work. My crew consists of four other women alongside me. We have developed a cohesiveness as we depend on one another on the job and off duty because plumbers are always on call.

Overall, I recommend general maintenance to everyone because the knowledge that you will obtain is a skill that you can utilize at home. Whether unclogging your sink or toilet, be confident in your ability to problem solve.

### **FEEDING ME: A FOOD SERVICE WORKER**

*-by Felicia Hale*

There are many job details that are available to the residents of Women's Huron Valley from porter to prisoner observation aide. Food service workers perform one job that I feel is underappreciated and underpaid; they have the most important job on the compound: feeding the population. Food is energy and energy is life. I feel that with the proper training and of course, a pay increase, the workers would realize how important their job really is and take pride in doing it.

When I spoke with a current food service worker, she stated that her favorite position is line lead. For those who don't know what that is, it is the person who keeps the line clean and running smoothly. She said that the joy that she gets from her job is "getting the opportunity to serve people and make sure that people eat." For her job, she earns \$2.3 cents/hour. She stated that one of the main problems with the job is that the supervisors don't know how to properly delegate duties. In other words, they overwork the hard workers and underutilize the lazy ones. I asked if she could give any advice to her peers, what would it be? She said, "Treat people the way that you want to be treated-don't serve people any type of way just because we are in prison."

This is a shout out to all paid service workers. We thank you, we appreciate you and we see your hard work. Keep up the good job!

### **PASSION PINK: ANNUAL WHV WALK-A-THON**

*-Angela Fisher*

On October 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of 2024, Women's Huron Valley held its 11<sup>th</sup> annual walk-a-thon for breast cancer awareness and research. Inside this gated community, we raised \$1475 this year, bringing our year-to-date donations to \$19,803.04. One hundred percent of the donations come directly from the accounts of incarcerated persons at this facility. All donations are sent to the Susan G Komen foundation for research, and ultimately for finding a cure for the disease that has claimed so many whom we love. I sponsor this walk-a-thon yearly in memory of my mother who lost her battle with this monster in 2010, and my friend Marie Catlett and other members of our community who have beaten the ugly beast. We walk, and we remember in solidarity every October.

### **REFLECTIONS ON OUR NLA VISITORS**

*-Linda Paling*

As I reflect on my time spent with the NLA, I think of the things that I've learned and of the feeling of unity. I also think of working together to help one another, sharing information, striving for knowledge and justice, setting goals, and working to change laws for a productive positive future. I reflect on all the wonderful volunteers and invited speakers who take time to share their knowledge with us and give us hope and encouragement in a dark place. Being away from our families and our loved ones, it was heartening to hear stories from Jose Burgos, Gregory Wines and Lorenzo Harrell who were once behind walls and are now free and continue to help others on the inside. Their words were heartfelt and needed.

I also appreciated the visit by Robyn Frankel and Jenna Astolfi of the Conviction Integrity Unit, who told us about their work. They listened to our stories and the

circumstances that brought us here; they listened to innocent women who were wrongfully convicted. It meant a lot to us to meet them, to shake their hands, to feel human. Robyn told us to always keep faith and hope in our hearts, that we are all worthwhile. They both thanked me for asking them to come out to WHV to speak to the women, and said that it was an amazing event. They appreciated all the time and energy that went into our presentations. My message to NLA members is to take one day at a time, keep hope and faith alive, and never give up—after every storm there is a rainbow.

### **BETH MORROW'S VISIT**

*-Shirikiana Draper*

On December 14 2024, we hosted Beth Morrow, the lead prosecutor at Oakland County's Convictions Integrity Unit (CIU). Ms. Morrow's visit was facilitated by NLA's Raise the Age/Youth Committee, which I currently co-chair. Morrow had previously worked for 30 years as a criminal defense attorney. For the last four years, Morrow has headed the Oakland County CIU. She stated "I'm doing what I love. This is my dream job." She also teaches law school students at Detroit Mercy about her work in the CIU. She believes people desire a judicial system that is fair and free.

NLA members presented Nikki O'Neil and Melissa Swiney's cases, highlighting the many injustices. The presentations were impactful demonstrations that even people in high positions make mistakes that negatively impact people's lives. After hearing these well-articulated case presentations, Ms. Morrow stated "Let me acknowledge your amazing group of women. You are so organized. You're doing it in here with your restraints and restrictions. I'm very moved and honored."

Ms. Morrow was very attentive while listening to our questions. She went into depths about her responsibilities in the CIU. In the prosecutor's office, Ms. Morrow is intentionally walled off from other prosecutors who aren't privy to her cases, which are kept under lock and key. Strict measures are taken to maintain the utmost integrity for cases that are being handled by the CIU, which can reinvestigate cases. The CIU has opportunities that the court does not have like interviewing witnesses and retesting evidence. Ms. Morrow does still have to work within the confines of the law, which oftentimes is a lengthy process. She is determined to give each case the attention to detail it deserved from the start. She currently has approximately 270 cases. She is very hands on with every case, employing only an administrative assistant and an investigator. She really is doing the legwork and is involved in the entire process.

During the Q&A portion, Ms. Morrow was asked what advice she could give us to not give up hope. She responded, "I don't feel qualified to give advice because

I haven't lived your life. I'm learning from you. You're doing everything you can. You have found your community, your voices." Her response was truly moving for at that moment, the audience felt acknowledged—someone heard our pleas, our stories and our struggles. That she took it all to heart is a true testament to Ms. Morrow's character.

Beth Morrow's visit was informative, moving and full of compassion. It was gracious of her to visit our chapter dedicating her time and attention. We extend our deepest appreciation and plan to follow up by a massive letter-writing campaign to the Board of Commissioners, asking them to increase the budget of Oakland County's CIU department. We would like Ms. Morrow to know that we not only listened to her words we also heard what she didn't say.

### I AM HERE

*-by Amber Martens*

Steel door slamming  
Keys on the guard's keychain jingling as he walks away  
Locked in a concrete room with a cold chill in the air  
Dirt on the walls and the smell of mildew all around  
Trapped behind the steel door alone  
Is this my new existence? My new norm?  
No longer mattering at all

No more family  
No more moon  
If they can't see me do I exist?  
Out of sight, out of mind..  
No calls or letters  
No visits or cards  
My new norm

Stale laundry—It's never quite clean  
Prison smell, despair in the air  
Tears falling on both ends  
Sniffles and sobs  
I'm sorry and I love you through the calls  
Mom—we are coming for a visit in the fall  
A visit, a phone call  
I matter after all

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE REFORM IS NEEDED

*-Susan Bardo*

I am generally soft-spoken and unless you were someone whom I helped with their GED, I would usually not be recognized. I was a victim of domestic violence and am active in the NLA.

Domestic violence and how the system treats victims who haven't yet become survivors really hurts my heart. Just a few short decades ago, rape/sexual assault victims were blamed for their attacks. Slut-

shaming was a common practice for defense attorneys. "What were you wearing?" "What were you drinking?" "Were you using drugs?" "Did you lead him on?" "Did you put up a fight?" These were commonly asked questions that were used to shift the blame from the attacker to the victim. This is why so many rapes went unreported.

Times and attitudes have changed since then. There has been a statistical increase in the number of reported sexual assaults and resulting convictions. More and more women have felt empowered and found the courage to report violence done against them.

Why then do police and prosecutors continue to condemn domestic violence victims and survivors? "Why didn't you just leave?" "Why didn't you ever report it or call the police?" "Did you ever try to get help?"

Why not ask the perpetrators instead: "why did you hit her?" "Why did you control all the money?" "Why did you prevent her from having contact with her family and friends?"

Statistically a woman is beaten every 7 to 9 seconds. It takes at least seven attempts for a woman to try to escape before she is successful. It is during the prior six times that she is at the most risk for extreme violence being done to her. Sadly, it is also true it is also that those six unsuccessful attempts put her life at risk. Personal protective orders often just enrage the person a woman is trying to escape. Papers do nothing to stop a bullet or slow down a slashing knife. Furthermore, police cannot possibly get to a woman's aid fast enough when the threat is already at her door.

Legislators need to stop blaming the victims for staying in a domestic violence situation in order to keep from being killed or having loved ones killed. It is often safer to face the monster and put up with the abuse than to risk the lives of loved ones—until it isn't. Too many women have received excessive sentences because the situation became one of "him or me." Cases need to be looked at in their entirety, and with psychological experts before sentences are handed down.

Why is it OK for a man who brutally beats a woman, or even kills her, to get only a manslaughter charge? But when a woman does the same thing just to protect herself or save her life, she is charged and sentenced so severely. I have met many women at WHV who are serving life or long indeterminate sentences. This is just not right and shows an obvious gender bias.

We need a change in attitude and laws regarding domestic violence, just as there has been regarding sexual assaults through the "Me Too" movement, which helps survivors of rape. It's time to change the "why-didn't-she-just-leave attitude." It is time for everyone to stand up against domestic violence and the extreme sentences that women are handed.





## PEELING AWAY LAYERS

*-by Felicia Hale*

When I was sentenced to prison, the reason was to be punished for the crime that I committed and also to be rehabilitated. My rehabilitation has been solely on me because regardless of how many classes or groups I volunteer for or am recommended to take, I will change only when I am ready. With that being said, growth and change have not been easy. Being vulnerable, responsible and accountable is not easy. But these are choices that I am making to become a better person when I leave than I was when I came in. I know that growth comes from facing the most uncomfortable situations and questions and from having difficult conversations.

Unfortunately some of the hardest questions that I have had to answer didn't come from the facilitators in my groups, or from books but from my sons, my kings. Recently I pushed open a door to be transparent with them, responding to any questions that they wanted to ask about my relationship with their father and the crime against him that brought me here. Regardless of how prepared I thought I was, I found that I was really not ready to answer the questions that they were asking me, but I did. In this process I had to expose my past characteristics and shortcomings, I had to tarnish the semi-infallible self-portrait that I had painted for them. It was not an image that I wanted my sons to have of me. I had to let them know that even though their father was the abuser, I wasn't always innocent.

I had to learn that I can't get defensive about things that they want to know because I owe them the truth, and regardless of how hard it was to say some of those things out loud, they had to be said. Stepping outside my comfortability to give my sons what they needed, has been one of my most emotionally challenging yet enlightening, cleansing, and humbling experiences. I thanked my sons because I know that this is just as hard for them as it is for me and it takes courage to do what they are doing with such open-mindedness and respect. Knowing that my answers are filling in gapped memories and some of the blanks in their lives that are needed to start the healing process, is worth any discomfort that I feel.



## MY BEAUTIFUL, UNBROKEN BOND

*-by Ashley Swartout*

Listening to my daughter growing up over the phone has been so hard. I am blessed to look back at all the years gone by. I thought that once I came to prison, I would never be able to parent my own child again. I was crushed, and my heart was heavy with sadness.

Though I'm not able to parent her physically, I have been able to be there for her emotionally. She has dealt with anger, sadness, abandonment, loss, embarrassment, and many other emotional setbacks while I have been gone. Through it all, I have calmed every battle that she has faced.

I never realized how much she actually listened to me. Over the years, she's brought up things that I said to her when I first came to prison. She was 10 years old then and diagnosed with autism, which makes it hard for her to connect socially. I started out only getting two words out of her, sometimes none. She would just sit there with the phone on speaker mode while she played video games on phone apps. The only way I knew she was still there was by the sound of her playing in the background and her small, shallow breaths.

I would ask her what game she was playing. Her smart reply was, "Mom, you would never understand. You're not a kid." I would just try to keep her talking by having her explain the games to me. Some days she would describe them; other days it was nothing but silence.

One day I told her that she was my best friend, and she said, "Mom, you're not my best friend. You're my mom, and that's better than a best friend." That response from her was such a warm greeting to my heart. It was the sweetest thing I had ever heard.

Sometimes, on really heavy emotional days, she and I vent to each other. She asked me why I had to go to prison and not Nate. She wanted him in prison and me at home. Those were the times I knew she wanted to cry but it would always come out as anger. I would cry the tears she herself couldn't get out. I would apologize over and over, telling her I had to go away. It was just what I had to do. I reassured her on every call that I loved her and missed her, and that I would be home one day, to never give up waiting for me.

As she got older, she was having trouble getting along with my family. She would tell them that they were not her mom, so she wasn't going to listen to them. Putting my pride aside, I had to tell her that since I couldn't be there physically right then, she had to listen to them. She would get mad and vent about how much she hated everyone. She felt ignored, lonely and unloved.

Many times I cried about things that I physically miss doing with her. One day we were talking about mermaids, and she brought up the Malco Mermaids series we used to watch together on Netflix. She told me that she wanted me to hurry up and get home so we could finish watching it. When I asked her why she hadn't yet finished it, she said, "Mom, we need to watch it together, and I don't want you to miss it." As sad as that was, I simply told her to finish watching it and she could tell me all about it. Days later, when I called again, she was so happy, ready to tell me all about the rest of the series.

She is a preteen now, and we talk almost the full 15 minutes I get per call. Most of the time, it's about

YouTube, animals and video games. Sometimes she forgets and tells me the same stories over again, and every time, I listen. Lately it's been about Pokémon. I bought myself the game to share the experience with her, and even became addicted to it on my tablet! It became our go-to conversation. She even googles silly cheat codes for me.

These shared moments have built our deep bond, so much so that we don't even remember that we are far apart from each other. From every silly animal sound, to every funny, nerdy game, to all the mythical dragons, mermaids and vampires—I feel right at home with her.

I could go on and on about all our sweet moments and this story would never have an ending. I thank God for giving us such a beautiful, unbreakable bond. I feel so blessed to be able to lift her spirits high, and to let her forget the long distance between us.

## WHAT DOES SECOND LOOK LEGISLATION LOOK LIKE?

-by *Renyatta Hamilton*

Second look legislation coming to fruition in my eyes looks like...Forgiveness  
Acknowledging the wrong (the act) that has been done by me  
Addressing those (the survivors) who have been affected by my actions  
Admitting my faults (the truth) for the trauma I have caused to others  
Accepting responsibility (the debt) for the wrong choices I have made  
Accessing what lies within myself (the conscience) good and bad  
Appearing unstable (the shame) in all my ways, wasting time  
Afflicted by my past actions (depression)  
Anxiety (the uneasiness) to make changes for the betterment of a bigger picture  
Atone (the reconciliation) to all I have affected with empathy and sincerity  
Assurance in the changes that within (the confidence) are seen on the outside by others  
Approval of the community (reentry) within and outside through acceptance of my return.

## ADDICTION

-by *Hykesha Marti*

My first suicide attempt was when I turned 13  
I wanted my trauma memories to fade away  
So weed became my escape from reality  
Until I was exposed to alcohol one day

2009 is when I opened a Pandora's box  
Falling hard and fast after one sip,  
Numbing all my feelings instantly

Never forgetting the taste on my lips

Suddenly consumed in this never-ending cycle  
Chasing that first high was my daily mission  
It took many years of living in denial  
Before I realized this cycle is called addiction

I am now a third generation addict  
Held captive in bondage that I hated  
Only following the same exact path that  
My mom and grandma unfortunately created

Drinking until I blacked out every night  
Was the only way I knew how to cope  
My body soon was dependent on toxic substances  
Accepting my fate, I started to lose hope

I am tired of numbing the painful feelings  
It's been a battle for sixteen years  
My goal is to live and enjoy my life sober  
Letting go of resentments, so that I can truly heal

I'm not strong enough to do this alone  
So I pray, begging God to help me  
With Him, all things are possible  
Finally, I am read to be set free

## DROPPING SEEDS

*Winter is not a season, it's a celebration.*

-*Anamika Misra*



*Winter is the time of sacred balance and rejuvenation of life in preparation for the coming spring. It represents abundance, teaching and gratitude.*

-*Noelle Vignola*

*In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.*

-*Albert Camus*

## FEEDBACK ON NLA NEWSLETTERS

The newsletter editor thanks all contributors in the WHV chapter of the NLA. Our goal is to encourage submissions, to give positive feedback, and to highlight all your voices. Much gratitude to all who have a hand in the printing and distribution of our newsletter. We look forward to hearing from you! Please contact **Editor B'dour Al-Yasari** at Women's Huron Valley Correction Facility, 3201 Bemis Road, Ypsilanti, MI 48197 or @JPay.