

# TEXAS AFTER VIOLENCE PROJECT

## Interview with Lauren Johnson

Date: June 9, 2017

Place: Austin, Texas

Equipment: Sony FS7, Sennheiser 416

Recorded on: SanDisk ExtremePro SD Card

Interviewer: Gabriel Solis (with Erin Bajema)

Videographer: Matt Gossage

Transcriber: UT Transcription Services

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lauren Johnson is a prison rights advocate who was formerly incarcerated by the state of Texas. In her interview, Johnson discusses the poverty of her childhood, and how drugs and abuse impacted her adolescence. Johnson gave birth while incarcerated, and describes her experience of pregnancy and childbirth while in prison custody. Finally, Johnson reflects on her advocacy work and discusses her vision of a just society. This interview took place in the Texas After Violence Project office in Austin, Texas, on June 9, 2017.

[TAPE 1]

GABRIEL SOLIS: So today is Friday, June 9th, 2017. We are in the TAVP office interviewing Lauren Johnson. The voice you're hearing is Gabriel Solis. Behind the camera is Matt Gossage, and Erin Bajema is also in the room with us. She's our intern from St Edward's University. Thank you, Lauren, for agreeing to participate in our project.

LAUREN JOHNSON: Of course.

SOLIS: You've signed the consent form, and you consent to be interviewed broadly speaking about your life, about your experiences with incarceration and your advocacy. I - In preparing for this interview I was— impressed doesn't do it justice with all that you have done.

JOHNSON: Oh, are you researching me too?

SOLIS: Yes, yes absolutely.

JOHNSON: Okay.

SOLIS: And Erin helped with that.

JOHNSON: Tell me what you found.

SOLIS: I'm just really excited to talk with you. We've talked a little bit about, before we started the interview, that if you need to stop at any moment, we could do that no problem. Before we started here talking about how you've done some of these interviews before and you have been interviewed many times about your activism and your advocacy. I've noticed that in those interviews you talk a lot about how your life is now and how that's special when you take into account where you're from. This is something you've mentioned in several interviews.

JOHNSON: I need that list that you looked at.

SOLIS: Tell me about that. Tell me where you're from.

JOHNSON: Oh gosh, how far back do we wanna go?

SOLIS: As far back as you want. I'm really interested to know about your family background.

JOHNSON: Yeah so, I grew up- I would call it pretty close to dirt poor. I don't know that I remember fried bologna sandwiches as the standard but I definitely remember being hungry quite a bit. I remember the first of the month was when we had food in the fridge. I lived in a house, an old rickety house, next door to my great-grandmother; she owned the house. My parents were spending \$250 a month for that house. It was in between 45th and 51st Street,

over from Red River onto Pew. We had no central air and no central heat. We had gas heaters which I remember very well burning my leg on one year in the winter time drying off after a bath. I'm standing next to it trying to get warm, touching it and searing my skin off. I remember summers of going into the freezer because I was so hot that it would wake me up. I would get meat out of the freezer and put it on top of me to cool off.

I remember going door-to-door and telling the people in the neighborhood that I was looking for work. That if they would hire me, I wanted to raise money to take my mom and my little brother to the circus and pay for a cab there. Some people would just give me money to make me go away and some people would give me work to do. I wound up with I think 20 something dollars which was big money for me at that time. I had it in an envelope and I couldn't remember where I put it. That's when I freaked out and mentioned it to my parents. It was supposed to be a surprise. My mother has cerebral palsy and she's legally blind, so she can't drive and she walks with crutches. My father was working all of the time or he was drunk or he was passed out. When I lost that envelope, I was like, "Oh my gosh, I did this to earn this money "and now I lost it." Finally, when I layin' down to go to sleep one night, it hit me, I remembered where the last place that I had it was. I ran over to my grandmother's house and I found it in the toy box. I took it back and I was like, "I found it, I found it!" My dad took it away from me and bought a fan that he put in their room. So, I remember that.

One of the things that's come up recently for me is very emotional that I think I probably should spend a little more diving into 'cause I think it gives you a clearer picture of the path later on. I think it was first grade, new school somewhat. I remember my great-grandmother making clothes for me, so I always had nice clothes for the first week of school. Shortly thereafter, I went to school. Now mind you, I had a little baby brother that I became very responsible for in many ways. I also became responsible for a lot of things around the house like when the house needed to be cleaned, it became my job to do it. Dishes, laundry, a lot of the things around the house fell to my shoulders for some reason. I don't know how many people- I've got an eight-year-old and I know what an amazing job he does doing his chores. I think that I can look back and understand why they weren't done very well.

But I remember going to school and being made fun of because I smelled like urine. Because my hair was a mess, I looked tattered; knotted hair and the kids started making fun of me. I went back home, I was brushin' my teeth, I was combing my hair, I was makin' sure everything was clean. I did everything I could to take that label away; not understanding that that was something that was stuck to me now. From then forward, I didn't really have any friends in school because everybody had already made that judgment about me. If somebody became my friend, then they took the chance of also being cast aside. Interestingly enough I made pretty good grades, but I remember frequently getting comments on my report card that I was always talking, that I talked too much. I was kind of questioning that as an adult. I was like I wonder why they always said I was talking because I didn't have any friends. Then it dawned on me that that was the only time that I could talk to people because if the teacher was there, they would either respond or they weren't being mean to me because there was an adult present. I'm kind of giving myself a little bit of leeway as far as understanding what that little girl was going through and also understanding not having access to friends.

I know my first birthday party was when I was 28 years old. I'd never had a birthday party growing up. Growing up I remember always kind of adopting things that I heard my parents say about we've always got food on the table, we have Christmas every year. We're being taken care of. Looking back at that with adult eyes and thinking oh, but there was always a little can of marijuana up in a cabinet. I remember growing up and seeing syringes at one point up in the cabinet not really understanding what that meant and thinking we were taken care of. But if those things hadn't been happening, maybe I could've had the karate lessons or gymnastics lessons or maybe those things would've been options for me if that hadn't been also happening. So we stayed in that school until I was in fourth grade. I was part of a class that did - I don't know if y'all remember Head of the Class was a TV show in the 80s or 90s. It was a class of mixed really smart kids and somehow I wound up in this class. It was similar to that. It was the third, fourth and fifth grade. I think I was in third or fourth at the time. I did well and it also came - I never tried, I didn't know how to try. It just came naturally. It's just the teacher telling us to check our work, it didn't make any sense to me because if I go back and look at it again, I'm gonna see it the same way I saw it the first time. I don't get that, I just do my work and I get what I get. I think having those good grades come so easily to me early on really messed me up later. It's something that I see in my son is that things come pretty easily to him and it scares me because I want him to develop the understanding of how to work for the things that you're getting. I'm gonna pause and see if you got a question before I—

SOLIS: That's what I wanted to know. Were you the oldest or was it just you and your brother?

JOHNSON: It was me and my brother in the beginning and then when my parents divorced I think I was about 11 when they divorced, 10 or 11, my father remarried and they had a son who is 12 years younger than me. Then when they split up, he remarried again and had another son and he was - Gosh, I haven't done the math, but he was 12 years old when he died three years ago. He's just one year older than my son, my oldest.

SOLIS: Yeah, I wanna spend more time. There's a lot that you just mentioned in the house when you were younger; going to school, interacting with kids. I wonder if before we sort of move on into your young adult life, I wonder if we could just spend some time back when you were a kid. You could sort of talk about some of your early memories or even just what a day was like, a typical day for you around this time.

JOHNSON: I can tell you pretty easily what the summer days looked like. My dad was working swing and sometimes swingin' graveyard shift. My parents never really did a lot of stuff with us. They didn't take us to the park. We had a nice big backyard but we didn't ever go do anything. My dad's style of parenting at that time involved sending us to our room. There were the occasional Saturday morning cartoons, snuggling with my dad and he would say we would eat cartoons and watch donuts. So I have good memories too. It wasn't all bad but they just didn't take us to do a lot and I had a very adventurous spirit. About the time my brother learned how to walk, I would put clothes on him and then I would tell him to go stand outside the backdoor. We waitin' for my dad to go to work and I'd give it about 30 minutes. I knew he was there and I knew he couldn't come home. Then I'd send my brother into the backyard and I'd tell my mom, "Adam ran away, I have to go find him." I would go with him and

we would go to these apartments, Tanglewood North, they're still there. That was about two blocks from our home and we would swim at that pool all day long. I don't know how nobody ever kicked us out, I don't know how we never got- It was great for me at the time, but as an adult and as a parent looking back at that, it's horrifying.

We would go home and my mom would be crying, or she'd be yelling at us and telling us all the bad things that could happen with the boogeyman out there. My dad would come home that night, we'd already be in bed. The next day, before he'd go to work, he would give us a whipping, stick us in the corner, then as soon as he left we'd do it over again because I knew that sting was gonna go away. But I needed to have fun, I was an eight, nine-year-old kid. My brother, I taught him how to swim pretty shortly after he learned how to walk which also is a little scary as an adult parent looking back and being like, God, the amount of things that could have gone wrong. But I was a pretty strong swimmer thankfully and it all worked out thankfully. But as a parent I'm looking back and maybe there is something to this idea. I don't think CPS was then what it is now, but I imagine my mother being disabled probably made her fearful of bringing in somebody else to help. But as a parent I'm also like, if you really thought that the risk of something happening to us was real, shouldn't that have taken more of a priority?

So anyway, it was a great childhood in that aspect. We had a load of fun. Other than that, an average was walking to school and I remember on the walks to school I would sit there and do the math in my head about how old I would be when my brother got into school and how I was gonna protect him and nobody was gonna make fun of him. Just kind of imagining what kind of life was going to be there. Then going home and doing homework. My mom pretty much stayed glued to the TV. If my dad was home, he'd send us to our room or out into the yard to play. The idea of children was great, but the reality probably not so much and that was kind of life.

SOLIS: Were your parents both from Austin?

JOHNSON: Yeah, my dad was born in either Bossier or Monroe in Louisiana, but I think he grew up here. They went to high school together and my mom's always lived here.

SOLIS: I'm just curious, what was Austin like? Things have changed so much over the years, what do you remember about what Austin was like back then?

JOHNSON: Gosh, I don't know I was very aware of what Austin was like back then other than wandering over to the pool. There was one year where one of the neighbors across the street had gotten some sparklers for the fourth of July. I brought them home to my mom and my mom was so excited about the sparklers. I got it in my head and I was like, "Oh, I'm gonna go get some sparklers." Again, I don't know what my young mind was thinking but the lady told me she got them at the Capital. I'm like, "Oh okay, well I'm gonna go to the Capital." I got on my bike and I rode from our house to the Capital, 10 years old I guess. It was dark by the time I got to the Capital, everything was done by the time I got back home. I went up on that upper deck - It really is a miracle that I'm sitting here talking to you. I really don't know how it all happened. So made it back, my parents were freaking out. When I got home and peeped through the windows, it was probably midnight by the time I got home because that's a

pretty good trek. They were frantic and I think I tried lying and saying that I had fallen asleep under my desk 'cause I could clearly see I was in trouble for having left. I don't even know if I've ever told them that story.

SOLIS: Take me up a couple more years and as you're getting older, are you still living in Austin at this point?

JOHNSON: Yeah yeah, I've been here my whole life. My parents separated. My dad, him and my mom, I don't know how frequent it was, but he was abusive to her. He would hit her. I remember kind of shielding my younger brother from watching the fight go down where he hit her and knocked her chair over. Again, my mom was disabled so it's not like she could've really fought back. I don't remember what the fights were about. So anyway, apparently she just had it. He did it one too many times and she made the decision to leave him. So I remember waking up one morning and she was crying at our bedside and told us that my father was in jail and that we were packing up and leaving. So just like that everything I knew was disrupted. We stayed with a friend of hers for- Couldn't have been more than a few days and she wound up getting a place in South Austin. We stayed there and I went to school there. I don't remember making any friends there. I don't know if we were really there for long enough for that to happen. I had just started kinda making a friend in the little condos that we were staying in.

Then my mom, just kind of out of nowhere, had a news crew come to our house. I think it was like 7 On Your Side. It may not have even been that. But had a news crew come out to our house, she had called CPS and told them that she couldn't care for us. Had the news crew out- She shuts down when I try to ask her about this now, so I really don't know what was going on with her, why she thought this was the alternative. I remember being furious because she lied to them. She told them we had no living relatives in the State of Texas and that she feared for our safety. If ever there was time to fear for our safety, I don't think that was it. They set up a Karen Burgess Fund on the news. My brother and I went into a foster home. I didn't really have any critical thinking skills set up. It didn't dawn on me if there was a phone available to use. I remember calling a friend of mine, but it never dawned on me to try to call my dad or my grandparents. I just didn't know what was happening next.

So I think we were there, I think we got there on a Thursday and it was a three-day weekend. My grandparents found out that we were there and I had to wait until Monday or Tuesday; then Tuesday they came and picked us up and had custody of us for a while. Fifth grade with the grandparents; we stayed with them for a while. From then it was kind of we moved in with my father and my mom fought for custody, even knowing that that wasn't what- I remember telling her that I did not want to live with her. She basically told me to tell the judge and hung up on me. Anyway, she did win custody and I made it my mission in life to make her life Hell. I succeeded within a month. She did not wanna give me what I wanted though so she sent me to her parents. It was just really rocky and bouncing around. Around 12 is when I started coming into my adolescence, which is kinda scary and just how it was. 12 years old I started making friends in junior high. Of course they were all older than me, they were all part of the stoner group. So we were smokin' cigarettes and skipping school. I'm still friends with most of them today. We were just kind of the band of misfits, kinda found a sense of belonging with each other. That's kind of where things started going different.

SOLIS: Tell me about it.

JOHNSON: Like I said, started skipping school a lot. That was the year of the first kiss, the first boyfriend, the first time being sexually active, was smoking. From end of six to seventh grade was when some of this started happening and also looking back and seeing how resourceful I was. That was a year they had passed some law that you couldn't miss more than seven days of school. There were some caveats to it, but you wouldn't be able to pass unless X, Y, and Z were done. I was skipping but then I would go in and I would get my homework, take it home and do it. I'd be writing excuses, I remember withdrawing myself from school and transferring myself into another school. My mom had no idea. Just really resourceful but not in the best way. By the time I was 14, I had a boyfriend that I essentially moved in with, was still going to school. By then I had started using cocaine. We would use acid and mushrooms on the weekend. That was about a two-year relationship. I was living with him, he and I were selling acid. His mom was selling mushrooms, his mom's boyfriend was selling pot. So if it wasn't in our house, chances were it would be coming through at some point. It wasn't a daily thing at that point, it was still pretty recreational. But I think probably by the age of 15 or 16 I could see where it was becoming problematic. I would start setting rules for my use. "I'm gonna only use it on the weekend," just your typical pathway forward to addiction. Also at that time I was still going to school, I forged my birth certificate and I got an ID that said I was 18. My reasoning was that if I got caught, then I had an excuse of saying, "I'm just trying to go to work," although I really did wanna make it say I was 21. I was really being strategic about what if I get caught? So I started working at 14. My Social Security benefits go back to the age of 14, which makes up for the time I spent in prison but whatever. So yeah, lemme pause.

SOLIS: What kinda work were you doing?

JOHNSON: My first job was at McDonald's. Actually that job I had a lady go in with me and pretend to be my mom. They kept asking me for an ID, so I went to the flea market and got an ID. They were like, "You can just go to DPS and get an ID." I was like, "Shit, what am I gonna do now?" Hence the idea to forge my birth certificate. I don't know if that would work anymore with the technology that we've done but it worked for me at the time. So McDonald's first, then I had a friend whose mom had a nursing home in her house. So she was paying me minimum wage to go work there. Nursing was the field that I had wanted to push forward in. It was great experience for me. To be able to work at a job at 15 and 14 was not something that everybody else was able to do and that was important to me. We didn't have resources; my parents didn't have money and if I wanted any kind of freedom I had to find a way to get money.

SOLIS: I thought it was interesting just when you mentioned how, even at age 14 or 15, you were already starting to recognize possibly addictive behaviors with some of the recreational drugs are maybe becoming more like an addiction. That's interesting; that's pretty young to recognize that.

JOHNSON: It's not recognizing it in an aware kind of way. It's the path of addiction that everybody takes. I don't think you're aware of it until later; going through



treatment later on and understanding that these are some of the stages that you go through. Like one of the precursors where you start setting limits. I'm gonna only do it on this day, I'll only do it when I'm with so-and-so. You set rules and parameters around when you use as a means of controlling it and then eventually those get blurred, then you make an excuse to not follow the rule you've set up. So it's not something that I recognized for what it was at the time. It was I'm spending too much money on this. This is affecting my sleep habits; this is affecting the work performance. I need to slow down, I'm gonna do this.

SOLIS: So that relationship eventually ends with this guy you're with and what happens next in your life?

JOHNSON: Lemme see that was the beginning of the summer. Gosh, there's so many things that happened and putting a timeline together isn't the easiest thing in my head, but it seems like there was a summer of just hanging out with friends and going to the rock quarry in the lake and doin' stuff like that. I'm still working. I think that's about the time I started working at IHOP and waiting tables there. This is also around the time that I got my first car. I was 15 when I got my first car. There was nothing legal about that car. It was a '83 Camaro Berlinetta. I found an ad in the Statesman for it. I put \$200 down. It ran but it was kind of wonky on the running. But it had no insurance, no tags, no inspection. I had no license, there was no insurance. Absolutely nothing legal about this car and yet I was 15 and I had a freakin' Camaro. It was not gonna be sitting in the driveway somewhere.

Actually, that boyfriend had moved to Bryan and I had bought tickets for him and his stepdad to go to a Guns N' Roses concert here in Austin as kind of a Christmas gift or whatever. I had gone to Bryan to pick them up and a friend of mine had given me a book to give to this other guy. I went to Bryan, picked him up, got there, the stepdad didn't wanna go so it was just me and the ex-boyfriend and we came back into Austin. We get here and he decides that he doesn't wanna go and he sells his ticket to a friend of ours. I thought, Well, you don't wanna go to a concert that I drove to pick you up for and paid for your ticket for? Well, then, I don't wanna take you home. So, I made him suffer for a couple of days, made him lose his job and then decided to take him home.

There were actually two separate incidents which are really great stories so I'm gonna tell both of them but I don't remember in what order they happened. It must have been at one point- That must have been before that. So, at one point we were driving, me and this guy, we get pulled over. He's got a warrant for his arrest even though he's like 16 or 15. He's under 18 for sure. we're driving, get pulled over. They pick him up, they take him to juvie. I wind up coming home; I get to my mom's house and my mom says, "Lauren I just got a call from Eli, "and he said the strangest thing. "He said to tell his sister that he called." And I thought, "Got it." I called juvie, pretend to be his sister, but use my name and somehow wound up signing- It was the most nerve wracking thing but I had that fake ID that said I was 18. I went and signed him out of juvenile hall and pretended to be his sister. I swear it sounds like stories that you make up like you see on the movies, but this really happened. Then another time, the concert time, when I finally decided to take him back to Bryan, I took him back, dropped him off and I was on my way back into Austin. I had two choices, I could've taken 71 or I could've taken 290. I chose 290.

I get into Elgin in this car that's completely illegal and I get pulled over. Now mind you I'm the most brilliant person in the world; I'm using cocaine at the time. I thought I'm just gonna make this easy to do because I don't like things that impede my routines. So I had spent the time prior to going out and about to make sure it was all chopped up, finely ground. I cleaned all of my compact out from the makeup, put a little foil lining in there and put all of the cocaine in there. That way I could just flip it open and do a line on-the-go, no big deal, no fuss, no mess. So I'm just a brilliant drug user. Nobody's ever thought of anything like that before me. So this cop pulls me over and he's like, "Well I'm not letting you go in this car, so you can come have somebody meet you at the station. We're having the car towed. Somebody can come pick you up." Well before we leave he keeps asking a bunch of questions, I've given him my fake ID. Number one, he saw the book which was an anarchist cookbook which I've still never read, so I have no idea what is in that book. But as soon as this guy saw that book in my car, he kinda flipped out on me.

He started talking about setting booby traps for cops, just some weird- I didn't understand what was going on, why he was kind of so different. Also at the same time before I had left town, I had stopped at my grandmother's house. My grandmother had a birthday card for me for my aunt with like \$20 which was great 'cause I needed gas money. In the card it says, "Happy 15th birthday." The officer sees the card and he's like, "Well what's this?" I'm like, "Oh my aunt, she's out there. "She doesn't know what's going on," whatever. I showed him my birth certificate and reasserted that I was 18. Well when we get to the station, he kept going through my stuff and on the second pass, he had passed it up once before, the second time he found the cocaine in my compact. So he put me in a jail cell and I fully bought into the "You do the crime, you do the time." I had no idea, I didn't even think about long-term. Didn't have any clue what this meant, what was next, whatever. But I went into the jail cell, started falling asleep. I guess I thought I'd figure it out, figure things out the next day; but I wasn't gonna be calling anybody to come get me out. And, I don't know, midnight he comes back in there mad as hell because he did more digging and found out that I was not 18. He found my dad and he called my dad to come get me. But now he's got a minor in an adult facility and he's furious. I wound up getting some kind of temporary probation for that. I don't know if that even answered — I don't even remember the question now.

**SOLIS:** No, it does and I was actually going to ask you what your relationship was with your dad at this time when you said you'd live with your mom? Was he in jail for a while or was it a short—

**JOHNSON:** He was only there for a couple of days. They made him take some anger management classes. I've always been a daddy's girl which is interesting because- And I've had to kind of look back at that and wonder why that is. I think that in my mind even though my mom is disabled, even though she's got all of these barriers, I think that I feel more certain about her capability to navigate the world. She's also very resourceful, that didn't come by accident. There's always been a part of me that has just felt really sad for my dad. Even today my dad is living in my home right now and he's been an alcoholic my entire life. Just really sad to see, to remember what a big 10-foot-tall strong man he used to be and to see the little bit of nothing that he's withered away into. How he's just kind of existing in the world and knowing that there could be so much more for him that he chooses not to seek that out. I guess if

I had to make a determination, I think I'd look at it and I'd think that he's got more need than my mother does and so I think I'm trying to fill that need.

SOLIS: And is your mother still alive?

JOHNSON: Yes. She's remarried, she's bought a house in Jarrell and she's doing good. She actually went back to school while I was a teenager and she got her degree in social work at UT then went back and got her masters. So, my timeline, still again, is a little fuzzy, but there was a lot of moving around. I went from my mom's to my dad's, back to my mom's to the other grandparents'. So, there was a little bit of all of those things. I went into another two-year relationship with another guy that had just gotten out of prison. He wound up working at a bar downtown; it was a gay bar. It was the Blue Flamingo, "Where the lights are low, "the drinks are weak and the women are men." That was their tagline. I spent a lot of time hanging out at there, but we couldn't tell anybody that I was his girlfriend because that would impact his tips. I think that after the relationship that I was previously in, which also turned into us being violent with each other; very unhealthy, very jealous, very just not healthy. When we ended that relationship, I kind of had it in my mind that's not the way I want my relationships to be. I wanna be able to trust people, I don't wanna be too needy, too clingy, I don't want all of these components in my relationship. So, when I went into this next relationship, I did a really amazing job at having healthy boundaries with him and he was cheating on me the whole time. And so, ya live and ya learn. Lemme stop there 'cause I could go on some tangents all day long, so I don't know if you wanna reign me in a little more.

SOLIS: No I'm really enjoying it and really learning a lot. Did you graduate from high school, did you go to college?

JOHNSON: No, so when I was in ninth grade when I had that Camaro, prior to it being taken away from me by the Sergeant Potatoface in Elgin. I was goin' to school at, I just moved high schools. All my friends were at Reagan or maybe, yeah. All my friends were in Reagan, so they were always a year or two ahead of me. I had been skipping school a lot the year before. I don't even know how I never missed a grade. A friend of mine had essentially dropped out, like she wasn't going to school. She was my best friend and I really wanted to encourage her and I thought we can be- I wasn't thinking about the word accountable but we can help each other. So, I'm gonna motivate her to get her GED and I'm gonna go with her to the classes, whatever. But I was still in school, I didn't have intentions to drop out. I went with her to an assessment test that they had. We got there, we took the assessment. They told her, "Okay you need to come back. "Work on this, this and this." They looked at me and said, "You can go take your test." Of course, I was 15 so I knew everything. I was like I'm gonna get my GED now, I'll go enroll in college, I'll graduate college, by the time y'all are done in high school I'm rockin' and rollin' over here. But remember what I said about not having the development, like I hadn't even been through high school yet. I didn't know what was gonna be expected in a college setting.

Ninth grade was when things had started getting hard for me in school because now the content is taking it up a notch. So, I didn't have study habits. I didn't have all of those development areas that you should have. I took my GED and I passed it, I think that was in '91, '92, somewhere around there. Right before I had turned 16, which I also had to bend some rules for but I don't

remember the details of that. I think it was about a year before I started. Maybe I took a prerequisite writing class and some math. What I didn't know was that my math has always been my least favorite and what I didn't know when enrolled in ACC was that being in a math class was a requirement to be enrolled in any other classes. So, the second semester that I went, I had just gotten an apartment with my best friend, I was working full-time at IHOP. I enrolled in a full-time student schedule not understanding what that meant. I'm like three hours, three hours, three hours, that's 15 hours, no big deal. Interestingly one of the classes that I took was a contemporary dance class 'cause I wanted to have some fun in my life at the time and I thought it'd be great to learn how to dance. Working full-time and being a full-time student became a little overwhelming pretty early in. I was like, okay, something's gotta go, but I've gotta pay rent so it can't be work. All right, we're gonna drop that math class and when I dropped the math class, they un-enrolled me from everything else. I just was working full-time at the time, so just got distracted with life.

SOLIS: At what point do you find yourself? You mentioned to me that that was the place that you were first—

JOHNSON: Incarcerated?

SOLIS: Is that right?

JOHNSON: Yeah—

SOLIS: Was that around this time?

JOHNSON: Well, let's go on a different journey, but first let's take a break because I am outta tea and I talk too much. Okay. Yeah, we are. We're gonna have to go a different route to get to [inaudible]

SOLIS: Okay.

JOHNSON: So what had happened was, you know I had that first apartment with my best friend. The relationship with the guy that had spent some time working at the bars on Sixth Street that I thought was so healthy until I found out that he had been cheating on me the whole time. She and I were living together after my relationship with him ended and she wound up dating him. They were hiding it from me but I wound up finding out and he was living with us which was really odd. I was also trying to rise above that, because number one she was my best friend and I didn't want to let that come between us. I still cared about him so I was trying to be a more mature 17-year-old. Finally, when we split ways, gosh where did I go after that? Oh, I got my own apartment, started datin' a few, there were a few other guys in between. There was a guy that I started dating while I was working at the restaurant, we wound up moving in together.

Right around this time, my dad and his second wife, she just couldn't take his drinking anymore. She called me and she's like, "Listen, I don't want things to be bad; I want him to have a place to go but I'm leaving him." So, he moved in with me in my little one bedroom apartment and I

started dating this guy. We all moved into a place together in South Austin. I had gotten him a job at the IHOP over on Duvall right before we moved to South Austin. He was not going to move from that store because he had already gotten regulars. So, me and this guy dated for, I guess we were living together for about a year. But I had previously slept with his brother a year or two before I even met him. His brother had been in prison the whole time that we were dating, but his brother was about to be released and I think that something in his head just didn't cope with fact that I had been with his brother before. So, our relationship ended.

While I'd been with him I had gained quite a bit of weight, I wasn't really using drugs. It was more of a family style. We'd work, we'd come home, we'd cook, we'd do stuff with his family on the weekends and I gained quite a bit of weight which was very uncomfortable for me. I think I would attribute the majority of my drug use to wanting to be skinny. Yeah, there was some fun and joy involved in the beginning, but also there was the knowledge that if I'm using this kind of drug, I'm not eating. I'm losing weight and that was really important to me. I remember having some aha moments about that and realizing that when you compare yourself to Gwen Stefani, you're probably gonna come out of this with some body image issues, right? I was really uncomfortable about my weight while I was with him, he didn't seem to care.

But when we broke up it was kind of number one it was devastating to me because it kind of came out of nowhere, the break up. I wound up moving in with my grandparents and I started using again pretty much on a daily basis, but I was still snorting it and hiding it. But it was also problematic because I was spending a lot of my money on this. So, I started dating a guy that was the area supervisor for the IHOP. I had known him for a long time, never really looked at him that way and then something just shifted. I was like, "Oh, what's his name?" So, we started dating. Now this guy was 50 years old and I was 19 at the time or maybe 20. He had just divorced after a 17-year marriage and he was very clear with me in the beginning that this is I'm not ready to make a commitment to anybody. But it really didn't matter because he didn't have time to devote to anybody else. So, it wasn't like he felt like there was a commitment there and we were seeing each other for a good year and a half before he decided to move to Colorado to open up an IHOP there. In between all of this time, I had lost a majority of the weight that I had set out to lose and I was taking a CNA class; Certified Nurses' Aid for the folks at home.

Somewhere I got it in my head at this time that if something is unused in a hospital room, they can't reuse it. I don't know where I got that 'cause I don't know. But anyway, I was living out at my grandparents' house in Georgetown and my aunt and uncle next door. My aunt was pregnant and she had just was going into premature labor. So, I went out to the hospital to see her and they were transferring her from one room to the next. When they did that I was like, "Oh, free goodies!" Of course, I loaded up my purse with band-aids, cotton balls and whatever was on the table or in the drawer and took it with me. It's like towels at hotels or the soaps and shampoos. I had most of that stuff sitting in a little souvenir cup that I had gotten when I went to Vegas with this guy.

Now the guy that I dated, Perry, that spent some time working downtown, he used to shoot up and it never was really tempting for me to do that. I didn't judge him for that but it just wasn't something I was necessarily interested in doing. But I remember watching him and there were some syringes in the stuff that I'd taken from the hospital. I mean, again, that stuff sat there for

quite a while but just one day I thought I wonder if I could do that. I wonder if I'm even capable of knowing how to do that. So, I just gave it a try, just randomly out of nowhere just decided to shoot up drugs. Don't do this at home, kids. And I did, it was easy and I was like oh, that's easy and it was pretty awesome. Then from then it just really snowballed out of control. I remember I would go to buy syringes, I didn't know that you could buy them in anything less than a big box. So, I would go spend \$30 on a box of 100 syringes and then I would spend the night trying to shoot up. Because the first time it was easy, because the first time you had veins and the first time just all these other things. But as things progress, it gets harder.

I also didn't have a mentor to show me you're not getting all of the particulates out. It's clogging it up, like if there's not blood it doesn't matter if it looks like it's in your vein. It's not, don't inject it. I remember one time having my arm just swollen out to here because I didn't have somebody to show me. I was definitely stigmatized and ashamed of what I was doing, so I definitely didn't wanna—Even the people that I knew that did that I wasn't gonna go tell them that I was doing it. I was too ashamed to admit that. So, I remember going through the motions of I'd buy the big huge box of syringes I'd use overnight, then I'd be so disgusted with myself in the morning that I would find some big dumpster somewhere and toss them all out, only to do it all over again. When Mark discovered — one night we'd gone to play pool and I spent a really inordinate amount of time in the bathroom. When I came out, he was like, "What's going on with you?" Little did I know that he used to use heroin that way. He was like, Listen.

Looking back at all of this, I know he wanted to help me but I don't think he knew how. He kept asking how he could help me and I didn't know. I couldn't tell you how to help me. If I knew how to help me, I wouldn't need help. He thought I had gotten it under control, but he moved to Colorado and then he invited me to move up there with him. I started managing the restaurant up there. I moved up there with the intention of running away from myself and yet there I was. When we got there- Now he was the kind of guy he would do a line of cocaine or two, then we'd have sex and he'd go to sleep. It was great for him. I was not the kind of person that was gonna go to sleep after doing cocaine. Also, there was something about having those moments of intimacy after using that I needed or wanted at the time, so when we got to Colorado- He was a businessman, he wasn't gonna go out looking for drugs so that became my, and it wasn't something that he sent me out to do, just something that I decided to do. I'm not sure why.

There I was again with connections in Colorado now, except that a lot of those connections were for crack. I just followed myself to Colorado and things got really out of control. I remember sitting in Colorado, maybe I should back up. My aunt that was in the hospital that gave birth. Before I left to move to Colorado, I went to go say goodbye to her, I went into her house and she wasn't home. Up until that day I never compromised my integrity for drugs. I always paid for the drugs, I never slept with anybody for 'em, I never pawned anything. As far as I was concerned, my integrity was intact. But this one day I went into their house, I just started bein' snoopy and I found a debit card, except I didn't know it was a debit card, I thought it was a credit card. In my mind, the justification that I used was I'm gonna take this, I'll use it, I'll get something out of it. They won't have to pay for it because the credit card company will cover it and everybody's a winner.

When I got to Colorado and my life started spinning out of control, I remember calling my grandfather and they had figured out what had happened. I was crying and I'm like, "I don't know what to do." He gave me some sermon and he was like, "What have you done to your uncle?" Like, "What have you done?" So, I remember just being so- I'm such a rational and logical kind of person and I would sit there and think about I'm spending almost all of my money, I'm late on my rent, I cannot stop myself. All week I think about how I'm not going to do it, then when I get paid that's the first thing I go do. To sit there and hear the thought coming through my head of I can't stop myself just sounded so, didn't make sense. So much dissonance there. I'm like what the f— do you mean you can't stop yourself? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!

I remember a girl moved in with me, I was in my own apartment but I was still seeing that guy. This girl had moved in with me. I moved her in as kind of a safety net for me thinking that would help to keep me from using but also, she had just found out she was pregnant. She needed help. I just was in this really desperate place. So, I planned it out, I was in the living room and I heard her in the bedroom. I heard the crinkling of money. She left to go somewhere, so I went in there, I dug in the pillow case and there was like, I don't know, \$200. I was planning my suicide. I was like I'm gonna go, I'm gonna get a 16th of cocaine, I'm gonna do it all in one shot and I'm gonna be done. So, I did, I stole her money with the intention of killing myself because I didn't wanna deal with anymore. I didn't know how to stop this, it was out of control. So, I went and I purchased the 16th. I sat downstairs in my truck. I fixed it and I did it and I saw five of everything. I mean, that whole Double Vision song is clear to me now.

Then I'm like, Fuck, I'm still sitting here. Now I've stolen from my roommate, I still have not got my rent money and I'm still frickin' alive. So, I was sitting there, wah wah wahing and thinking now I've gotta go upstairs and tell her what I did. It took me a while to get up the courage but I went up and she was already gone. She had already figured it out and she had left my house. She was done with me. So, I sat there and I found some engine cleaner under my cabinet. I'm like okay it says, May be fatal if accidentally swallowed or ingested. I'm like well if it may be fatal if it's accidentally swallowed, then it should certainly be fatal if I inject it into my veins. So, I did and I did that a couple of times. It gave you this really weird smell and I'm just still sitting there. I'm like, Jesus. I just started thinkin', If you keep this up, what's gonna wind up happening is you're gonna be paralyzed in a hospital somewhere and still stuck here with all these problems only now you can't walk too. I'm like, you better pull it together, figure this out and do something.

I remember going to the first meeting while I was in Colorado. I was trying to find help. I remember calling a hotline, I'm like, I need treatment, I need something. Basically, they told me there was like a six week wait. I remember thinking to myself I might be dead in six weeks. I can't do this for six more weeks, I need help. I remember going to an AA meeting, the first one. I walked in and looking back at all of this, I realize that I didn't, because of the relationship with the guy and the fact that we couldn't really talk about it at work, here I am in a whole new state. I can make friends but I can't talk to them about the things that are actually happening in my life. It just put me in this really bad place where I really didn't have a support system. I remember going into that first meeting and I remember somebody in the other room say, "Well I'm here because I don't wanna use." I remember thinking, Go home asshole, you're a winner. Like why would you come here if you don't wanna use? Like, I want to use that's why I'm here.

But also, I didn't feel- It was one meeting, I didn't feel a sense of community even those people walked up and tried to introduce themselves to me. I was very uncomfortable. I just didn't see the use of it. I didn't understand what they were doing there. I didn't understand how that was gonna help me. I wound up actually getting evicted from the- Lemme back up. The man that I had spent the last three years devoting myself to, even though he was very honest with me about his level of commitment, went to Iran to visit his mother. He was gone for six weeks and he came back married. It devastated me and broke my heart. At the time, I remember thinking if only he would commit more to our relationship, then I could stop using and doing this stuff. But also looking back at that, I realize who can devote more to a relationship with somebody that's busy being a junkie at the time? Anyway, broke my heart, devastated me, I wound up- He had rescued me several times, but rescuing isn't solving the problem. This one time I was about to get evicted and he had drew the line and was like, "I'm done. I'm not doin' this anymore, figure it out. "You're gonna have to do this on your own."

So I came back to Texas, I moved in with an old friend and I started using meth to stop using coke. It was much more functional for me. I would sleep every night, I was working again, but I was still shooting it up. Prior to my moving to Colorado, I had been pulled over. I had a little baggie in my van, my car, and had gotten arrested for residue or whatever. Didn't know any better, I think I signed a statement. Anyway, the boyfriend bought me an attorney and I was driving back and forth while I was in Colorado to go to court for that. When I finally finished, they gave me probation and I had no idea, I thought I could still dictate to them what my life was gonna be like. I called him and I'm like, "Hey I just wanna let you know that I'm your probation client and I live in Colorado. Here's my address, I don't know what we have to do, how we have to set this up." Not really understanding that they're gonna tell you what to do. They never called me back, they never responded to any of my, I tried four or five times to get a hold of them but they never responded. They never called me back and I was like they must not care. I was so young. Anyway, so when I came back to Texas, there was probation warrant out for me. It didn't take, I think I was here for about three or four months before I got picked up and had more drugs on me. So that was my first time in going to state jail.

SOLIS: And what year?

JOHNSON: 2001.

SOLOS: Okay. Before we get to that, I have some questions about that experience but only if you feel comfortable going back to this. You talked about your suicide attempts right after you talked about this sort of cognitive dissonance you were having between being somebody that was rational and was in control, but also simultaneously recognizing that you weren't stopping with the drug use. So, I'm wondering if those two were related because that's the way that you retell it.

JOHNSON: I think they were.

SOLIS: Okay.



JOHNSON: Yeah, I think they were. I think it's a combination. I think that me giving away my integrity for drugs. I think that was the first real big crack in the glass. I had never stolen anything. I took great pride in my integrity. It's something that you spend your lifetime building and knowing that you are doing the right thing. Even if I'm using drugs, I'm still not hurting anybody. I'm not doing all of the bad things that people do to get drugs, I'm still doing well. The kinda story you tell yourself. But I also took great pride in that, like I'm a hard worker. I do my job, I do it well and I earn what I get. So, to have compromised my integrity, I think was the big first crack in the glass. Then seeing that it was so out of control that I couldn't do anything and I am feeling so helpless. Like I'm not the kind of person that does helpless well. Again, back to the—

SOLIS: So describe Whitman Jail for me; is that in Texas?

JOHNSON: It is, it's in Gatesville. It's a state jail facility. They do have some folks there. All of the units are kind of a mix or the ones that have state jail people. Do you want me to explain the difference between state jail and prison?

SOLIS: Sure.

JOHNSON: Okay. So, in Texas if you have a low-level drug felony- They created the state jail system with the idea that the people that had these kind of crimes, these low-level crimes, could be better served by keeping them closer to home instead of sending them hundreds of miles away to a big prison. They created this system to keep people closer to their community so they would have more support, but also that this wasn't gonna be about- So state jail sentences have an end date. The only way that you're gonna stay longer than that end date is if you get another charge along the way. Doesn't matter what you do in prison unless it's a free-world charge, you're getting out on the date that you're set to get out. If you've got like a TDC charge, if you got the other kinds of felonies that there are, you have to go through the parole system to be released from that. That was my first sentence, it was a state jail sentence and I did 10 months at the state jail. I guess I did kind of know what to expect because girls in the county jail were there, they would explain to me the routine and give you all of the here's what you do, here's what you don't do, here's how to manage all of this. In that way I was somewhat prepared, but it's also really scary going to a prison and all of the things that you see on TV and hear. Then you get there and immediately you are indoctrinated into a life as a subhuman. As soon as you arrive, you're being barked at and demeaned.

SOLIS: What were your interactions like with guards, with the administrators, medical staff?

JOHNSON: You wanna hear the first day kind of story or do you wanna just hear in general?

SOLIS: Yeah, both.

JOHNSON: Okay, so the first day is like you ride in a van chained to a bunch of other women for two, 2 1/2 hours. You get there, there's no potty breaks, there's no

food on the way there. You get there, they bring you into a room, they unshackle you, they have you all undress at the same time, they check under your tongue and in your hair and they do the squat and cough thing. Make you take out any piercings or whatever and so they're very thorough with the flashlight or whatnot. Then you go and change into a gown. It's a big white cottonish gown and then they go have you sit in the dog pound. The dog pound is pretty much what it sounds like. It's a concrete floor and a chain link fence. There's some doors to different part of it and you sit there and you wait to be processed in. Eventually you'll go and do different components of getting checked in. They'll go through your property; they'll give you a set of clothes to wear. While you're sitting there, you get a lovely johnny-sack which is basically a stale sandwich, peanut butter and jelly for your burn taste to it, and some raisins or something along those lines. So not the best food. Oh, and the lovely bologna, yeah bologna. So anyway yeah, first day is long and grueling 'cause it's just sitting there doing nothing all day. The best thing that you can do to get through the day is to have conversations with the women that are there with you and kind of get to know each other. Just walk through that together, but also if you are being loud or cantankerous then the staff will tell you to shut up or whatever. So, they'll start screamin' at you and it's- I just don't see a reason to treat other human beings the way that people in prison are trained to treat the inmates.

SOLIS: So you were there for 10 months and did you have contact with your family during that time?

JOHNSON: My family, so my father is claustrophobic and has this really interesting- I remember growing up and hearing his perspective on jail being- You don't put a wild dog in a cage and expect it to be tame. He's never really understood the purpose or value of jails, but I also I think his claustrophobia makes him imagine it being way worse than it can be. So, I think that it's tough for him to think about what jail is like. I think he wrote me maybe one time. My parents didn't really have money and I didn't feel comfortable asking. It wasn't anybody's fault that I was there but mine and so I knew that they always were just struggling to make it, so I didn't feel right asking them to support me because I made bad decisions. My mom would send me letters more often, but still not as frequent. I don't think they understood how to support me through that. Yeah, so I don't know. They were there, but not- It wasn't an overwhelming amount of support, no.

SOLIS: Tell me a little about some of the women during this first experience, does anybody stick out to you in your memory when you were there?

JOHNSON: Oh I see her face right now, but I don't remember her name. Loud and interesting. Not from the very beginning part. I don't know, it was a couple of months in, so mind you I spent a few months in the county waiting to go there. Then when I got there, I guess I was there for about seven months. I must have been there for about a month before they decided to put me in their modified therapeutic community, which wasn't court ordered. Because I had a drug charge, they just put me in there. I remember going into my meeting with the counselor because everybody told me that I could opt-out and I was like I want out. I don't wanna be here, I don't have to be here, I don't wanna be here. She did some motivational interviewing with me which I was thinking about it later and I was like that was pretty impressive the way that lady just led me to those things. That's a skill right there. So later on I've

come to understand what she was using and I'm like really interested in learning how to do that. I'd love to learn that with my kids actually. So, she convinced me to give it 30 days. She's like, if 30 days you don't wanna be here, you can get out. I'm like, Okay, fine.

So, by then I was bought in and now if I had made enough friends in there and so I remember some of the faces and some of the stories. Some of the sentiments. It's interesting too because the way that their therapeutic community is run, they've got this structure and organizational structure. Like they'll vote people in, you have to interview for these positions and everybody started out on the same footing. Everybody's a dorm janitor then you get your eye on a prize and you apply for it. I've actually thought about that a lot in recent days about how that structure reminds me a lot of some of the boards, coalitions and things like that that I'm involved in. I'm like I wonder if they did that on purpose, I wonder if they knew they were preparing me for this or if it's just what they knew to do.

Even then, like just hearing the stories of these women who had entered trauma and abuse and just used the coping skills that they knew how to use. I don't know that I saw it in that kind of broad perspective back then, but I've always been drawn to people's stories. I believe who people show me that they are. Most of the time I refuse to buy into the world-at-large picture of who those people are. The monsters behind the fence. Actually, that was the time, my bunkie in there was convicted of murder. She was on the downhill stretch and they had sent her into this TC program. I think she had murdered her husband and it was as often as an abusive situation. I remember then having the understanding that this is what a murder looks like. This is just a human being. She was somebody I'd feel comfortable leaving my children with. Like that's not the story that people tell you about the people that'd have these labels slapped on them.

SOLIS: Well tell me a little bit about your life after you were released.

JOHNSON: Well, fun story about that.

SOLIS: Are you cold?

JOHNSON: Sorry.

SOLIS: I can adjust the temperature a little bit if you want.

JOHNSON: I'm good.

SOLIS: Okay.

JOHNSON: Are we good? Okay. So, shortly before I was due to be released from Woodman during that stay, I got pulled to Williamson County. Now if you remember I stole my aunt's credit card. I got to Williamson County and I called my grandmother. I was like, "Mimi, I'm here in Williamson County." She said, "Oh baby, I know," and I'm like, "I just got here and I didn't know I was coming, so how do you know that I'm here?" She's like, "Oh well, your aunt Michelle is workin' there for this Sheriff's office now." I'm like, "Great, that's

awesome." So, there I was mortified and ashamed behind what I had done but I also didn't want to go to her and say how sorry I was. I didn't wanna make it appear like I was trying to get off easy. I wanted to go ahead and be sentenced. Then once I was sentenced for that, I went back and apologized to her and gave her a note. When I went to court, it turns out somebody had gone into my grandparents' house and stolen some jewelry and some other things. They assumed it was me which completely understandable. But it was not me and I'm totally willing to own the things that I did, but that was not something that I had done.

But I remember going to the- Now mind you, I was almost done with my time form Travis County and now I'm sittin' here facing this other sentence. I went to court and they were like they wanna give you, I don't know how many months it was, they said, "Well they'll give you that time." I'm doin' the math and I'm like that gives me like five more months, six more months. I'm done. And they said, "Well," and I said, "Plus this charge, I didn't do this." They were like, "Well we've got "the pawn tickets and receipts," and I'm like, "Great, maybe you've got video too "and that'll show you that that was not me. "I didn't do that." So, they went back to talk to the DA and they said, "Okay, if you plead guilty to the thing that you didn't do, "we'll drop your sentence down on these other charges "and that'll have you released within the week." After you have one felony in my mind doesn't matter how many more you have like one, 15 whatever, it's all the same. The consequences are the same so I'm like whatever if it gets me home, I'll sign for it. So, I signed for it. I did get the chance to give my aunt that note and tell her how sorry I was.

Then I was released and I went straight back to friends that I had had and things that I had been doing. Straight back to using meth because I gained a whole bunch of weight while I was in jail. Now, the thing that I say a lot is I think that we determine success rates of programs based on does somebody get out and stay out and stop using all those things? I would say that I wouldn't say that my time in that program was a failure, I just think it was part of a process which is what life is. It's a process. You're not gonna get everything the first time, sometimes it takes a while and you have to build on it. It's just the journey. I was out not very long and then I got arrested again. I spent probably about six months in the county jail and got finally released on a drug court. Except that I was pretty intent on going back to what I was doing. I don't know that I started, I don't think that I left jail thinking that's how it was going to be, but it's pretty shortly after I got out that's where I went. I had the reasoning in my head that if I just go into those appointments high every time, they'll never know the other me and so they'll just think that's how I am. I managed to juggle that for a couple of months, so I was released.

Started using again, started selling. When I say selling, I'm not the big bombtastic drug dealer that you hear about. I'm like selling enough to pay for my habit which is often the case. I was only out for two months and I had missed- I was out for two months. A week before that two-month run ended, I found out I was pregnant. The guy that I had been seeing, he's using drugs also. We had been pretty much shackled up together with a friend of ours. He owed like 10 or more thousand dollars in child support for a daughter he wasn't paying because he had a warrant for his arrest. He was scared to go to jail for it and so he was just kind of living. He was existing. He was so worried about going to jail that he didn't wanna have a job because he was scared that he would hunt 'em down at the job and they would take him to jail. He was just so stuck in his fear. I should bring that up to him. He lives in fear a lot. Like his fear really runs his life. I am not that person. Unfortunately, it might have done me a world of good to have a little more fear

in my life. So, I got arrested, anytime that we had thought about or we started tryin' to have a conversation about, "I'm pregnant, what are we gonna do about this?" I would start crying and I think about it a lot because I didn't want to have an abortion. I had already had an abortion before. I didn't want to that again. I couldn't picture a way out of this life. People have dreams and visions and imaginations and even in my imagination, I could not imagine a life other than what we were living. I couldn't see a path forward to get there. So, next thing you know, I'm arrested and I'm in jail and there we are.

SOLIS: And where is this? What town is this?

JOHNSON: Travis County.

SOLIS: Okay. What's the sentence?

JOHNSON: Well, let's go into that story a little bit because maybe I shouldn't be eating chips while I'm talking. I'm pregnant, I'm in jail; I have no more choice about what's gonna happen. I'm havin' a baby now; now it's a matter of what's gonna happen to the baby. But once I start really wrapping my head around the idea that I'm gonna be a mom- I imagine every woman that's pregnant doing this but I started imagining what kind of mom I was gonna be, what kid of kids I was gonna raise, what I was gonna instill in them, what kind of values I wanted them to have. Just like the dream that I wanted the legacy to be. Once I started having all of that happen inside my head and my body, I remember going to court really excited. I'm like, "Just tell the judge I'm pregnant. "Everything is changed now, don't you understand that? "Everything is different; I'm different. "I'm gonna have a baby." The attorney looked at me and was like, "The judge doesn't care if you're pregnant "If you're committing a crime. "The state of Texas does not care if you're pregnant "if you're committing a crime." It just really kind of knocked the wind outta me. They were offering me four years. Lots of things were happening at this time and at the time there was a lady in the jail who had a bench warrant to go to Williamson County for and so I was giving her the 411, all of my wisdom passing it down. I'm like, "Listen, when you go over there, "these are the two guards you ask for. "They'll help you with this, they'll help you with that. My aunt was one of them. "But do not tell her that I'm back in jail. "Don't say nothin' about me." So, what do you think the first thing that she did when she got there was?

So, next thing you know, I'm getting a letter in the mail from my aunt. She was like "I heard you're pregnant; how can I help you?" I need to also tell you that she's not my aunt. She was married to my uncle; she's not my blood family. I really harmed her because when I stole that debit card, which I thought was a credit card, they thought it was safe in their home which they had every right to assume. They didn't know that anything had happened to their bank account until all kinds of overdraft fees had happened and a couple of weeks, time had passed. The bank wasn't giving them that money back because they expected them to know what was going on. This was before home computers and cell phones were getting update all the time, so I really put them in a bad situation at the time when they had just had a newborn child. So, here's this lady that I did real harm to reaching out to me and saying "How can I help? "Who's gonna take the baby for you?" So, she set up her phone for me to call her.

Every once in a while, she'd send me 20 or 30 dollars which was more than my family was sending me. She was coming to see me on Christmas day. She came up to the jail to see me with her daughter. She offered to take my son for me and she did and I let her pick his middle name. Once I started really, I'm like okay I know what's gonna happen to my baby. If they don't come down from this four years, then I can sign for the four years. But I knew you get to share all this information in there and there were so many women that told me the horror stories about women that had gone to Galveston, which is where the prison unit, the UTMB I think has a contract to deal with the prisoners with. So, the women that go there that give birth, if they're lucky they get 10 minutes with the baby. Some will get an hour here and there with the babies, but it's so hit or miss and sporadic that you can't count on any of those things and I also heard the stories about the women that had their babies here. They got to spend the two days in the hospital in the same room with the baby. So that was what I opted for. I just wanna tell you you know life is bad when you look forward to—this was 13, almost 14 years ago, 13 1/2. So, at the time, I think things have shifted a lot in nutrition in hospitals over the years, but at the time, I was really looking forward to hospital food and that was a big deal. Hospital food didn't use to be what it is today with the made-to-order stuff whatever, and so yeah.

SOLIS: So I wanna learn more about what it's like, broadly speaking for women who are pregnant while incarcerated, but particularly from your personal experience. You were in Travis County jail through the duration of your pregnancy, is that right?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SOLIS: So I'm just curious about in that Erin did some research on this too and submitted some really good questions around this too, so feel free to jump in, Erin. But I'm just curious, what is that like? What is the quality of care like if any? Are you treated differently? I don't know if you care to go into detail about that.

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.

SOLIS: It's just something that I'm particularly interested.

JOHNSON: Some of the guards might treat you worse because they look at you like oh, you're pregnant and you're still doin' that crap, right? Just the culture of us versus them mentality often in the jails is kinda messy. I think that women on the inside definitely kind of instinctively are protective and generous and caring with the pregnant ladies, so that's always something that's neat to experience and see happening. I had one lady that would help me with my dill pickle cravings 'cause I didn't really have money to help myself, but I remember- I remember being treated kinda shitty when, so they would give the pregnant women snacks at night. They'd give us a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Peanut butter and jelly, I was getting such bad heartburn. So sometimes they'll just call you out to grab your snack and take it back in, then some guards get all uppity about not wanting you to share your food. Whatever, so the diabetics would also get a snack and they'd get some graham crackers and some milk. I'd be like, "Dang, I got some peanut butter over here, "You wanna trade me?" I remember getting in trouble for trading my snack one time, which I'm like I have to live here, gimme a break. I have to live here.

Yeah, some interesting- I remember going to my doctor's visits. I think that the medical care was good, I didn't have anything to compare it to at the time. I don't really see that it was any better or worse than any of my other pregnancies. It was at Brackenridge. We went through, not really a back way, but I remember being shackled for my doctor's visits. What I remember is being out-to-here pregnant and number one being pregnant makes your balance kinda [inaudible] anyway. I'm like, I can't even see my feet right now and y'all have got my ankles shackled. This is crazy. If you can't catch me, you shouldn't work here. And the guards would sympathize with me and they were like, yeah, we think you're right. But also, not too long prior to that, a lady in Williamson County had been taken out for a doctor's visit when she was pregnant and she absconded. So that made the whole department look bad and it was all in the news. I wound up being her pen pal later on through a quirk, circumstance passing mail between people. I was like, "You, you're the reason!" That was something that bothered me. It was a really tumultuous time in my life up until then. So, having something bigger than me to think about was good for me. It wasn't ideal by any circumstance. It was rough imagining all of that. I'm always looking for the positive in things; not to say that I think it should've happened that way, but I think that I was grateful to be able to force myself to be still. Not having all of the distractions that you have out here and just kind of really—I had that book the What to Expect When You're Expecting and really got to experience that pregnancy in a way that I probably wouldn't have. I don't think that my other two children I got to experience in that same way. We're able to use the bad for good.

SOLIS: Did you give birth to your child as well?

JOHNSON: So they moved me to the downtown jail and I stayed there for for a couple of weeks prior to my delivery date so I'd be easier to transfer. There was a guard there who used to be a nurse. She was just so great and she was just a really sweet human being. Her name was Miss Holiday or Miss Halliday, Holiday I think. She had used to be a nurse for Travis County, worked there and then switched over to a guard. Then recently right before that, I think that she had been doing a bed check and had come upon somebody that had committed suicide, so she was kind of hyper-vigilant at this time. I remember being in my cell; you could do quiet time or you have to sit in your cell and everybody's gotta be quiet. It's kind of annoying to be an adult in a timeout, but it's also useful to have that quiet sometimes where you don't have to listen to all the loudmouths around you. I remember I was in my room, I'd done some letter writing and I had started fluffing my mattress. Anyway, to fluff your mattress, you stand and you do this number. You slam it down and it pushes all of the stuffing down to the end. I wanted to make it thicker so that it was more comfortable to sleep on, but I also, looking back, I knew I was nesting in a cell. Great stuff.

So, I felt like a little thing happened and I'm like I wonder if that's what they mean when your water breaks. It was like two o'clock, shift change happens at three, so I sat there and waited. When Miss Holiday came in, I'm like, "Hey, I've been waiting for you!" 'Cause the guard that had done the first check, I was like, "Is Miss Holiday comin' in today?" And they were like, "Yeah she'll be here in a little bit." I'm like, "Great." So, when she came by I'm like, "Hey I think my water broke." She's like, "What?" I was like, "Yeah I was waitin' for you to get here." So, they called the paramedics. They came and they shackled- I think it was, I don't really remember. I don't remember. I know I was shackled, I don't know if it was one leg or two. It didn't seem like

a huge deal. I wasn't having major contractions or anything, it was just goin' to the hospital. I got there and had done a- It had a hole in my amniotic sac, right word? Yeah, had a hole in it. So, they had to induce labor to keep me from getting an infection, but I wasn't full-on labor. I know they gave me pitocin the to induce the labor and it made me really nauseous.

There I am, it's a teaching hospital so I've got all the interns and all the new folks. Then I've got a guard coming in and a guard going out. Good thing I'm not shy. We got there at like 11 at night and all the processes happened. I started feeling nauseous so they gave me some phenergan, which made me really tired. So, I went to sleep and I remember them coming in in the morning and saying, "Okay we're gonna come back in about an hour "and have you start pushin'." I'm like, "Okay," and I'd fall back asleep. It didn't feel like an hour, maybe it was, but I remember being really frustrated when they come back to wake me up to make me push. I'm like I could be sleeping right now. Y'all are really messin' with me. I was already mad for them waking me up and then the lady was like, "Okay I'm gonna have you push." I was holding onto the rails like this. She's like, "Okay ma'am, grab the rails from underneath." I'm like, "I don't know what difference it makes "how I grab the rails!" She was like, "Honey." Like you can tell she does this all the time and deals with assholes like me. She's like, "Honey, it helps give you a little more-" I don't remember the word. What's the word, help me?

SOLIS: Leverage?

JOHNSON: Leverage, yeah. Something to push.

SOLIS: Yeah.

JOHNSON: And I'm like, "Oh." I've always felt bad for bein' such an asshole but I was tired and I wanted to sleep. Then I had a little baby. I got to spend the two days in the hospital with him and I didn't set him down. When I went back to jail, my t-shirt I had gotten to wear to the hospital still smelled like baby. I did not wash that t-shirt for the whole rest of the time that I was there. So yeah. And I should tell you this story because I'd just finished Leadership Austin. They just had their yearly party on the rooftop of Hall. That what it's called? Never been there before. I was looking up at the Frost Tower when I had just had Dylan. I was back in jail and I was sitting in my room, I had a contraband radio that the batteries were almost dead on. But you can't buy new batteries if you don't show on your property sheet that you bought a radio. I remember sitting in the window and I would wait until like nine o'clock at night. I would flip the radio on and I'd get about two songs worth before it would flip out. I'd just be sitting there looking at the Frost Tower. The Frost Tower at that time was the tallest building on the skyline. So now to be in graduating Leadership Austin and looking up and seeing that tower. Then I'll be on my way home from football practice with the kids and we'd take the toll road back to our house. When you're up on the top part of that curve over, you can see smack downtown and look at that town. It's like all these kind of full-circle moments.

SOLIS: Yeah, that's really interesting that it's become sort of a symbol for you. There's so many ways I wanna go now. Do you wanna break or anything?



JOHNSON: No, I'm just gonna eat this chip while you're talking. Carry on.

SOLIS: Thank you for sharing that story with us today. It's just interesting to me that there aren't more accommodations made for women.

JOHNSON: Or more options. Yeah, I think there have been talks. I don't know that it's happening as much in Texas about not sending pregnant women to prison like finding other community alternatives. There are a few times in my life where I think I would have been a good candidate for probation and I think that might have been with the right support. I think that would've been a really great time for me to have community supervision.

SOLIS: Before we move on, do you have any questions about this Erin?

ERIN BAJEMA: Just like broadly when you compare that experience with pregnancy and birth and your other experiences, how do you see them as different or, I don't know, how do you view them differently?

JOHNSON: I think that being stuck in jail added a layer of depth to that experience. Like really understanding, spending that whole pregnancy knowing that I'm gonna be separated from this baby. There's nothing I can do about it. I just have to keep my eye on the prize. Keep moving forward and still kind of enjoying the experience, noticing the kicks. I'd take my contraband radio before the batteries were dead, I'd stick a earbud in my belly button, lay there and listen to music. It definitely without all the distractions from the outside, I had nothing to worry about. If there was anything to be lost, it was already lost. Just being able to really focus on what was happening to me, what was happening to the baby. Being able to- Now I've even forgotten what your question was. Oh, how it compares to the other ones.

There was something a little more special in some ways, although I think- No this is gonna be. I was gonna say my second child was my favorite but no that's not- My second pregnancy was different because I was both terrified and I was like, well shit, if I could do it that time. No baby daddy, no house, like in jail and we survived and I'm like okay I can survive this again. We did that, we can do anything.

Having that time to really focus on the pregnancy and focus on all of the changes because I am a pretty rational, logical, kind of move forward kinda person. I spent all that time in the county jail and knowing what was gonna happen. Knowing that my aunt was gonna come pick this baby up. Knowing I was gonna go back to jail and this is just how it was, end of story. When she came that day, I was so hoping that they would give me a third day in the hospital. I was just like please, please let there be something wrong with me to make me stay here for another day. Probably a good 10 minutes before we left the room, I just started crying. Luckily, we got to take a picture with me and the baby. They let my aunt do that thankfully. I think that was kind of a courtesy because she was a sheriff's officer in Williamson County. I think we were gettin' a little more outta the deal. I could not stop crying. The whole hallway. I remember being in the wheelchair goin' down the hallway, getting in the police car. Should have been excited about the

contraband I was takin' back with me from the hospital. All the lotions and stuff, but I could not stop crying. Then when we got back to the jail, they were like no you're not getting narcotics. Ha, we don't care if you just had a baby, here's some aspirin, bye!

Then they put me in a holding cell. It's supposed to be for medical observation for 24 hours. It's supposed to be for your benefit. But the last thing I needed right then was to be alone. I really needed some kind of pro-social activity to kind of process what had just happened, what I'd just been through, what I was still going through. So, for that whole 24 hours in that cell I'm either asleep or I'm crying. I just really tried to sleep through it as much as I could. It was the single worst experience of my life. I would definitely say that. I hear women talk about giving natural birth and experiencing a deeper level of love and bonding with the baby because you had to go through so much to have that birth happen. Like you had to have so much pain to get this joy. That there's some kind of deeper connection there. I've always had an epidural. I'm not gonna suffer if I don't have to. I think on some level that was along the same lines except that then I didn't have that bonding time. I mean two days is great, it's more than I could've had. I didn't see him again until he was five months old. Do y'all need a break?

SOLIS: No, I'm okay. I'm good.

JOHNSON: I think this is actually counting as work for me today.

SOLIS: Oh good!

JOHNSON: After this today, I'm gonna go be super brave and do something that I've always thought about doing, but I've always been really terrified to do which is I'm gonna chop off all my hair. I'm gonna do like a boy, pixie, short. Which is crazy because this is how I always wear my hair. It's always up anyway. But there's something about that safety net of knowing that I can put it down if I want to, but I never want to. So anyway, I'm gonna take the plunge today and it's a little scary I gotta say.

SOLIS: It'll grow back.

JOHNSON: Yeah, it will. It will, but I've just never- I always think that I'm gonna do it and then I get there and I'm like, "Okay,"

SOLIS: Nice. Whenever you're all ready.

JOHNSON: Action.

SOLIS: Okay. When we were talking to set up this interview, we had a pretty good phone call a couple weeks ago. You told me that you were recently at the legislature and that you were really advocating for this bill but that there were victims' rights advocates there giving personal testimony against the bill. You told me that that got you thinking a lot about the need for community healing. Your words, in the aftermath, violence. You also said that it got you thinkin' about how we need to change our cultures of violence. So, I would be really interested—

JOHNSON: A culture of punishment.

SOLIS: Culture of punishment. I'd be really interested in hearing your thoughts on that experience and sort of why it led you to think about these much bigger questions.

JOHNSON: This year at the legislature was technically my third year. Even though as a big component in my life, it's only been two sessions. But the first session was just kind of me learning some of the how it works and just kind of testifying. That was kind of it. The last session and this session were a lot more in-depth. So, this isn't my first rodeo. Doing advocacy work, I recognize there's a need for system change. I recognize that we are not gonna get anywhere if we're just reforming the same system. If we just keep the same system in play, we're just gonna continue to have the same results that we currently have. It may get a little bit better, but we need to change on a large scale and not just the incremental stuff that we seem addicted to doing. The bill that we were working on this session didn't do anything to come close to that. It really didn't do anything in my eyes. I had a hard time getting excited about this bill because I know the reality. The bill would have given people with violent offenses, under the statute it's a 3G offense which includes capital murder, sexual assault, kidnapping, and a slew of other things. People that have 3G offenses have to do half of their time before they're eligible for parole. Often times those are the people that are getting really large sentences anyway.

Now what I know about people, whether they're violent people or not, is that nobody is the same person today that they were 10 years ago or 20 years ago. So, when we start stacking out these really long sentences, the capacity that people have to change, especially when you think about even violent crime. People age out of crime. People age out of the sets of thinking that kind of drive some of those actions. Knowing that and knowing the sentencing that we give people is really harsh sentencing. This bill; all it would've done was given them an incentive to get involved in programming that when you rewire your brain, you create new neural pathways. You become a different person. You do better. That's what we want. We want the people that we deem to be the worst of us to come out better. So, in that aspect I'm all for promoting programming even though it's almost non-existent. In my perspective TDCJ would tell you another story. I know that it exists but it's not accessible for the large portion of the people who are confined there. This bill would've just incentivized them to get into programming, it would've given them credit for being in programming and vocations and work towards parole eligibility.

Then what would've happened is parole would say, "Based on the nature of your crime, you are denied." Because that's what they do even when it's not a violent offense. They consistently cite the nature of the crime as a reason to deny the parole; even though your sentence was for the crime. Anyway, so we know that about the parole board that they're gonna air on the side of caution. In my mind, this really didn't do anything. It's not the system change. Because we love to pass legislation that does nothing and because it's not system change, I thought this has got a pretty good chance at going and we'll just buy into the incremental change that we're so addicted to and this will just be a step. Then maybe we can come back and expand upon it in future years. We did have a victims' rights group come out and tell their stories. It was really emotional and it was hard to hear. It was hard to experience that pain with these people and also know what

they're talking about is not what I'm talking about. How do you tell somebody that their pain doesn't pertain to what you are talking about? Like it's not important in this moment. You can't tell somebody that. You have to give people that space to feel what they're feeling.

At the same time, I think that's why we have a judicial system. We have a judicial system because the victim of a crime isn't gonna be like give 'em treatment, give 'em another chance. That's not how you feel after you've been victimized. You want to see somebody suffer the way you've suffered and that's just kind of a human response. That may not always be the response but it's a very natural and understandable response. I think that that's why we're supposed to have all of these safety nets in place to prevent us from just acting upon that desire for revenge. But we've given a lot of clout to the demands of what somebody who's been a victim of crime wants. I don't know that that's wrong or right, I just think that we need to balance it a little more. Anyway, I did leave that hearing thinking a lot about not only the victims that were in that room, but the victims that are living inside of prisons that didn't get the sense of justice that other people often get or sometimes get. Often, I don't know how well our justice system works at all. It just made me think that if we can't pass a bill that doesn't even come close to addressing system change, how do we get to the system change?

We can legislate things all day long, it doesn't mean it's gonna actually play out that way on the field. I was like what has to happen for us to get to the system change? What has to happen for us to pass legislation that does even this lower level of reform or transformation that we need? What I came out with is that well number one, we've gotta start with healing our communities. Because people that- We just need to heal our communities. People have been harmed and we need to find ways to offset that. We've gotta change the culture of punishment. What I saw that day was a lot of people coming up there with a conception that justice for them is somebody else paying. That sounds an awful lot like revenge. Just seeing kind of that cycle of hurt people hurt people and heal to people heal people. If you're hurt, you want somebody else to hurt and then they're gonna want somebody else to hurt. Then we're just creating this ripple and this perpetuating cycle that is never gonna go anywhere. I wanna think about how we change that culture. How do we create healing in our communities but also change the narrative where we care more about the community healing as a whole than we do about just getting revenge on the person that caused us harm?

**SOLIS:** Yeah and during that same conversation, you also said that it got you thinking about victimhood and about your own experiences as a victim. You've mentioned that you've lost someone that you love to violence. I don't know if you wanna talk about that too much, but if you're willing to, how that experience of you losing somebody factors into how you're now seeing violence in victimhood?

**JOHNSON:** I left that hearing and I started thinking who am I to tell other people how to experience their pain or to how to get through their pain? Who am I? Who do I think I am to tell somebody else what to do when they've gone through this really horrible experience? Then I remembered I've also been victimized by a whole realm of crime. The guy that the anarchist cookbook belonged to, remember that story back when I was 14, 15? He was somebody that I always imagined that he and I were gonna someday wind up riding off into the sunset together. Like he was this guy that I was very, I always called him the love of my life.

Now I question my perception of that situation but I still cared a lot about him. We had moments in time together where I could've envisioned a future for us. In between some jail sentences, I had introduced him to some people that I was hanging out with, then I went to jail. Then I got out and he was living with those people. I started seeing somebody else and he wound up getting murdered at their home by one of their roommates. I remember when I was pregnant with Dylan in the county jail, the day that I had gotten arrested was the day that that murder happened. While I was being booked into jail, all of that SWAT Team going out there, all of the things that happened that day, I was being booked into the jail. So, I didn't know anything about it. By the time I got out to, all of the media attention had gone away because it was over with. About six weeks into my incarceration, I got somebody to gimme a three-way phone call. I called a friend of mine and I'm like, "Hey I've been havin' a lot of dreams about BJ, "have you talked to him lately?" He's like, "Oh, you don't know." I'm like, "Know what?" So, he tells me the story about how the guy that they were living with had been on a variety of drugs, Dilaudid and some other things. Had been up too many days, just a psychosis had set in and he thought that everybody was out to get him. He pulled out a gun and shot and killed three people. So, I got to experience that. I didn't get to go to his funeral. I remember at the time, it was really important to me. I wanted to know did BJ suffer? Was he saved? Like what happened? What were those moments like? So, I wrote the guy while we were both in county jail and I said, "I know that you can't say anything that they could use against you in court, but if you could just, as an observer, tell me what his last moments were like. That's what I need." He didn't respond to me back then. He was sentenced to a couple of life sentences. It was a capital murder charge, couple of capital murder charges.

The truth of the matter is it could have just as easily been my friend that situation had happened to. It could've just as easily been him that got crazy on drugs and did something stupid and murdered somebody. That could have been the end of that story. It just happened that it wasn't. I think a lot about all of those dynamics. Like I can't look at this guy with hate knowing that it could have just easily been the other way around. I never really held animosity towards the guy. Honestly, I haven't really ever thought of him that much. I'll think of the guy that I lost, but I never really thought about this other guy and I'd never known him prior to that incident. This moment with the policy this session made me think I'm gonna have to practice what I'm preaching in a way that I can use as a tool. I didn't know how this was gonna turn out and it's still not done, I would say. But I wrote to him and I said, "Here's what I'm going through; I do this advocacy and this is what I just witnessed. I wanted to reach out to you." He responded to me and he said, "I don't know what you want from me. I'm sorry for what happened, but I can't change anything." That rings really true to me. I know exactly the feeling you have about that. We can't turn back the clock. We can't change the good or bad things that we've done. I wrote him back and I was like, "I don't need an apology from you. I want to be there for you in the ways that I can be there for you because somebody- There were people along the way that weren't."

We've written back and forth a few times since then and it's clear to me that he does have some mental health issues. He talked about having a hit out on him at that point in time, I'm not really clear if that was legitimate or if that was imagined. It could go either way. But currently while he's incarcerated, he thinks that people are poisoning his food and poisoning his commissary. There are a lot of things that happen in prison. I have never experienced that being one of them.

What I now know about him is that he was an eight-year-old little boy who lost his father in a drunk drive, I think it was a drunk driving accident. But he lost his father at eight years old. Then less than two years later, was in the other room while his mom's boyfriend beat her to death. Like I picture my little eight-year-old little boy and like what would happen to him if those circumstances happened to him and there was no support for him? So, this little eight year old little boy, 10-year-old little boy winds up going into foster care dealing with the systems. No wonder he's where he's at. No wonder he's got these issues. So, I'm thinking about that, I'm thinking about how do we care more about that little boy not becoming this adult? Also, how do we learn how to care about this adult so we don't have more little boys? Does that make—did I explain that—

**SOLIS:** Oh absolutely. Yeah, thank you. I took a note of that when we were talkin' on the phone. I thought it was interesting. Particularly that you reached out to him. Now that there seems to be some kinda ongoing correspondence at least. What do you want for him?

**JOHNSON:** You want me to get super lofty? Super lofty would be I'd like to see him get the mental healthcare that he needs. Even though he probably will never get out of prison. I would like to see him find a sense of purpose. If I wanted to get super lofty, we would deal with the mental health issues then we'd get him out and let him be part of our community. We've tossed too many people away as garbage and they're not. Sometimes I question myself. I'm like maybe I'm fightin' for the wrong folks. Maybe I should find some little fuzzy bunny to advocate for. Then I got to hear Anthony Graves speaking. Anthony Graves was somebody that was wrongly convicted and sent to death row for 18 years. Listening to his story about going onto death row where all of the worst people that we deem have to die because of their crimes. There he was with those guys and he said that they pulled him in and created a community around him. He learned that they were just people. They weren't the monsters that he had been told they were. That's my experience too. Like I have not- People can get on your nerves when you're livin' in the same room with them for a long enough time, but they're just people. I think that with the education and support and the right treatment for the mental health issues that exist, I think we could do better.

**SOLIS:** There's a Texas Observer article and you tell the story about how you first got involved with policy or [inaudible] around. I thought it was a really cool story. I wanna hear more about what do you believe is the role of formerly incarcerated people in advocacy or in activism particularly on criminal justice reform or whole transformations of the system as we currently know it?

**JOHNSON:** I think that unless—we've got to be more represented. I think that there has been such a stigma attached to the labels that we've created for the castaways for society. People often come home and just want to live their life. They wanna pretend like it didn't happen. They wanna stay under the radar. They don't wanna be associated with that part of their past and they wanna move forward. It becomes like this thing that you try to keep close to you and hide. I think that the more- The numbers are insane. One in three people have a criminal history. Why is it that we're almost a majority? That's crazy, one in three people. If we were to all stand up and say hey, maybe we're dealing with this wrong. Or if more of us could say that

because I think there are still gonna be people that have criminal histories that wanna “other” other people. So, I think just being able to see us represented more.

I can give you a great analogy. Recently I was watching TV within the last year and there was a scene on Primetime TV of two men kissing. I kinda freaked out a little bit. I don't care who you love, what you do, whatever. But it made me very uncomfortable and it also made me very uncomfortable to wonder if my children were in the room. I'm like how do I deal with that? What do I do if my kids are here? I started thinkin' what was that? What just happened? What is wrong with you? It's not like there's full-on sex going on, these are two men kissing. What is wrong with- After being curious about my own reaction and thinking about that's the first time I've seen men kissing on TV that it wasn't on a Primetime regular station. What if that had been something that had been represented and normalized throughout my life? Then maybe I wouldn't have that reaction and maybe I wouldn't have such crazy feelings about my kids seeing it. Knowing the people that I've known from back in the day in the gay bars and the things that they go through.

Understanding that when people feel like they've been represented and we start seeing it more than there's a growing acceptance, it's the fear of the unknown that really creates all of this tension in our communities. So, if we know that this is pretty much all of us; some of us have criminal histories and some of us are better criminals and they didn't get caught. So, what if we have a community where we cannot shame and stigmatize each other for that, but rise up and say, this was my experience, I can accept responsibility for my part? There are systems at play that also owe some responsibility. We have to come together to work on everybody's part.

SOLIS: I read an article recently that It was written by somebody who spent some time in prison was now out. She wrote this article about the notion of community, both within and outside. I thought it was really interesting the way that she explored what community meant. While incarcerated but also in the free world. Not as black and white as someone like me that doesn't have experience with that So I don't know if you wanna comment a little what community is. 'Cause you mentioned community just now. What that was inside, what that is outside and what being the importance of community if for people who are just coming back. Is it the free will?

JOHNSON: I would say that having a supportive community is by and large the key to success. No matter who you are or where you are. Whether you're using drugs, you have to have a supportive community to help you along the way with that. Or whether you're doin' the right thing and just tryin' to find your way in the world. Finding your people is what we all need. I always thought it was interesting. I went from the time that I was 12 or 13, I started sayin' this thing and I said it as a joke when I first started off. It was like men are dogs. That's right up-front, how it is. Men are just dogs. Everybody knows it, no qualms about it, men are dogs. But women, it's like a Hallmark commercial where you're running across the beach in slow motion to each other and ya get there and they pop ya. I'd say women are two-faced, vindictive, conniving, back-stab- And the list, every time I told the story it would get a little longer about all of these awful things that women were. But, of course, I didn't count myself in with that group 'cause I was one of the tomboys that hung out mostly with the guys. I wasn't like them. In the beginning, it was a joke. I think I kept getting such a rise out of people when I would say it. Then

I kept saying it more and more often and it just became kinda my philosophy of how I viewed the world.

Then I had somebody challenge me one day and they were like, number one, you know that you are a woman, right? You're one of them whether you like it or not. Did ya notice that you've got kind of a bad perspective on everybody? How do you have good relationships if that's how you see the world? And I'm like, huh, oh, maybe there's somethin' for that. Now I don't remember what—Oh, the community. So, going into jail, that's like a pretty common – not Specifically not my philosophy. But so many of the women that I was in jail with also had that same kind of notion of I don't normally talk to other women. I don't befriend them, you can't trust them. There's all this competition dynamics going on. Even knowing that, you come into jail and you see the women creating a- And I know men's jails are different. They've got their own ways of building community and their own rules. It's a whole different animal, but my experience was really interesting watching. It's like you set up a family wherever you go. That was one of the more beautiful things about being in there was just seeing the way that, even in this really bad place where you're separated from all the things that you love and you've got people talking to you like you're dirt. You see this kind of community just come together and hold each other together. I flashed you a scene, the one at Woodman. I think they were actually both at Woodman. Christmas time, the women would find- There are so many ingenious artists in prisons across America. Man, the ingenuity, the innovation and creativity. Using baby powder and matte pencils to create colored stuff. Some Vaseline and they would create wallpaper- Like people would go and have their windows done for Christmas with the paint. These women created that in prison with nothing! So, like that and people would make each other little paper stockings. Somebody turned a magazine into a Christmas tree on the table. Just seeing the human spirit rise up in the middle of the dark is the most amazing thing. If you're not looking for it, you can't see it but it's there. It's there.

SOLIS: You also were involved with a project for women who were incarcerated. Particularly the performing possibilities I thought that was a really cool project. I watched little bit of—

JOHNSON: Arts in Context?

SOLIS: Yeah, I thought that was really neat.

JOHNSON: Did you watch the Arts in Context?

SOLIS: I didn't see the Arts in Context. I just saw a slideshow with some voiceover and some photos from the—

JOHNSON: Are you sure that was from Performing Possibilities? That might have been from the Mothers and Daughters. Either way.

SOLIS: Oh, possibly. So, I just thought that was a really neat project. I wanna hear more about that. I think you said somewhere that sharing one story through



theater gives you the opportunity to change people's perceptions and to have dialogue and human connection. I wanna hear a little bit more about that.

JOHNSON: It's been a really powerful experience. I'm also on the Board for Conspire. Getting to participate has been great for me but also being able to watch the other women and their growth, their blossoming and the way that the stories can be used to kind of shed the coats as stigma. Not only to stand up in this really scary place and tell your story and your truth, but to have it accepted and revered; even the ugly parts. Watching that empowerment happen through that, being like it's not more than just that one moment. So that's been an amazing experience to watch not for me, for the other women and also for the audiences to see the kind of shifting. Of course, you can never get the people in the audience that really need to be there. We've had some great opportunities to perform for unlikely audiences as well. It's always been something that has been well-received and very powerful. I think arts; it just dawned on me. I'm like I'm so silly because just like a year or two ago. I'm like, wow, the arts have a really great, powerful way of connecting people to issues. People have known that for a long time. I think that's why they do some of these things. But it just dawned on me. I'm like oh that's a really powerful way. What can I say, I'm slick sometimes. I'm sorry I'm so wiggly, Matt. He just gets it right and then I move around. So yeah, it's been awesome. The first time that we—It's also been great as an exercise of bravery. Did you watch my comedy thing?

SOLIS: No, let's find it.

JOHNSON: Ha!

SOLIS: Oh no, okay I will find it. Like—stand up or—

JOHNSON: Conspired, we teamed up with VSA Texas and did a thing called Stand Up for Mental Health. The thing is I don't ever imagine myself as a performer. I've never thought of myself as an artist. Then I keep finding myself in these places where I get to play around with these things. I don't know still that I would qualify myself as an artist or performer, but I think it's neat that I get to explore it. All of that was to say it scares the shit outta me to do some of these things. Then you get through it and you're like wow, look what I did. Like I didn't die and I survived prison and standup.

SOLIS: [inaudible]

JOHNSON: What?! For real?

SOLIS: Yeah.

JOHNSON: No, you'll have to go watch it on YouTube, it's there.

SOLIS: As we're sort of wrapping up, you've been involved in so much these past few years. Then there's Ex-offenders Counsel, Travis County Re-entry Planning Counsel, this is the stuff I found. You worked with Grassroots Leadership, TIFA Texas Inmates Family Association. I guess a couple of questions. Why have you devoted your life, these past

several years, to these causes? I guess a way more broad question than that is what are you working toward and what does justice look like for you? These are all sort of related questions.

**JOHNSON:** Why have I devoted? Well somebody has to. If it's not me then who? When I first started working on the Food Stamp bill, I was still bein' a stay-at-home mom. I didn't really have another job. I couldn't say yes to everything but the things that I could get to I would go to. I remember thinking a lot I just can't do more than this. That first session kind of, the couple of times that I made it up to the Capital and not really understanding that what I was doing wasn't really gonna be enough. Then in the next session devoting a little bit more time and then thinking it's gonna take more than this. If I don't do it now, I've gotta come back in a couple years. I've got to make space right now for this because this is important. The fact that I've been able to get to a place where I'm not ashamed and I'm not stigmatized. Now I've got a little experience under my belt so like I can. Gosh, there's a billion things I could say right now. It's important to me to do it, but it's important to me to pave a way for other people to come behind me. There were people that paved this road before me too so it's not like this is a path that I trot alone. We've created a monster with our system. We've created a monster with the perceptions of the community at large. We've got to undo some of the harm that we've done in those arenas. We've gotta question ourselves. We've got to be curious about why we react the ways that we do and how we can do better. What does justice look like? Justice means that - Right now what's popping into my head is don't read the comments, don't read the comments. I just think about the way that people react. Maybe what justice looks like is being more curious about somebody else's pain than your own. Maybe that's what it looks like.

**SOLIS:** Before we end, I wanna ask Erin or Matt if you have any questions or anything the areas you want to expand on? We've covered a lot. Okay, Erin?

**BAJEMA:** I guess one question I had is you talked a lot earlier about body image and how that influenced you. Do you think there are certain experiences you had that made you place so much value on body image, or do you think there are things that could have changed how you viewed that and how you reacted to it?

**JOHNSON:** There are so many areas of growing up that I think I could've had a little more guidance with. I'm sure my children will grow up and say the same thing. I am not getting this perfect at all. It's the normal stuff. The images we see on TV, the way everything is so sexualized. The way that we wait - My father, bless his heart. He's forever making the mistake of saying, "Oh, looks like you've lost a few pounds." I think he says that to try to make people feel good. I'm like, "Hey dad, how 'bout we have a talk about something that's more than about what I look like?" I don't know if my dad even gets it. My husband is frustrated. Everybody says I don't have a sense of humor anymore. Once you know the things that I know, you can't un-know them. There are so many comedians that are not funny to me anymore. I'm just like life was so much more fun when I was clueless and ignorant. Now it's just not the same and I can't think that things are funny that aren't funny.

When I was able to recognize that for myself how much value I was placing on what I look like and realizing that when I look the way that I think that I'm happy to look, I am absolutely miserable as a human being. What good is being skinny if life sucks? What I did to kind of shift

the way that I, number one I stopped comparing myself to Gwen Stefani because we are never gonna be the same size. That's ridiculous. Number two- Like okay, if I'm going to compare myself to other people, then maybe I should compare myself to somebody that's more help. So I started looking and Oprah at the time, she had just lost a bunch of weight. She was at 150 and I'm like, "Oprah is two inches shorter than me. "If she can look good at 150, I can look good at 150." It's just been these little kind of bars that I have set for myself over time. If I'm healthy, Just slowly but surely kind of shifting some of those dynamics around to fit a different view. Also doing things differently like my step-daughter. Her mother places a lot of emphasis on her weight and I'm like here's the thing. And her daughter is now on meth. Coincidence? I think not. I try to spend time also sharing that wisdom with other people is that we can't be putting that kind of pressure on our children to put more value on the way that they look than who they are. Think that's not what we should be doing.

SOLIS: Is there anything I didn't ask or we didn't ask that you think is important for this project?

JOHNSON: You didn't talk at all about Pervert Park.

SOLIS: Well I did watch it though.

JOHNSON: Okay.

SOLIS: Tell me why you wanted me to watch that before this interview.

JOHNSON: As I've been going on my journey these last few years, there have been a couple of- I read a lot of articles and watch a lot of documentaries. That one was important to me. In the middle of the story, when I was 12 I was raped. When I was five, some guy pulled me and this girl aside. What's the word I'm looking for? Trying to think of a technical term. Anyway, there have been some instances in life where not-so-great things have happened. For me I don't feel like they were things that I haven't dealt with. I think that I dealt with them in a healthy and appropriate manner. I also have an uncle; the uncle who was married to the aunt that took my son, they got divorced when my son was- They were separated when she reached out to me but they got divorced shortly after she took my son. We later found out that he had molested her older daughter. He's currently in prison. I've really had to address what it is that I believe. It's one thing to go to church, be told something and say that's my ideology, but it's a whole 'nother thing to have to actually practice that. So, I was really confronted with what it is that I believe and do I really believe it? I really had to dive deep into some of those questions. So, with him, first of all it really made me question a lot of things about what it is that I think I know. Growing up I always thought I know who those people are and I just don't give them the opportunity. Understanding that no that's not how it always is and I know you hear it's never who you think it will be. But I thought I had the inside scoop on those things but I don't. What it did for me was it made me think about how even he is more than the worst thing that he's ever done. He used to be my favorite uncle. He used to be a deputy for the Travis County Sheriff's Office. He has done so many more things than that worst thing. I'm not excusing his behavior.

Absolutely there are consequences for it and he's more than that. So, I can't discount all of those other things. I get really frustrated when we watch 48 Hours or any other mystery, crime-solving show where you're like, "Oh, but they were hiding a dark secret. "They were living another life." No, it's just we all have lots of different facets to who we are. Some of us don't have the greatest facets, but I don't think we can discount all these other components to who somebody is. But it's still a struggle. It's still a struggle and I think what if it had been my kid? What if this and what if that? So, I watched Pervert Park and I had seen the trailers for it 'cause in my mind, women are not who perpetrate those crimes. So, it always baffles me when you hear a story about a woman that does that. I was like I don't know if I can watch that. I don't know if I can stomach that it was a woman. I almost expect that from a man, but I don't expect to see. So, I watched that anyway and again, back to the children that they were and understanding what- When you don't have the right environment to grow up the way that you should, what happens to you brain? What happens to you when you don't have the support of community? How are you supposed to overcome that without the support that you need to do that?

It just really helped me to kind of shift the way that I understand even in that area how are we going to get-I don't know of a time in history where incest and molestation and rapes and all of these things haven't been something that happened. How we've dealt with it may have shifted here and there, but ultimately, it's never gone away and we've never responded in a caring way. I'm not trying to say oh go hug whatever label you wanna slap there, but I'm just saying that we've- If somebody has a drug problem, we're just getting to a place in these last couple of decades where we're like okay, we need to care about what happens to these people. We need to not criminalize it; we need to not shame and stigmatize them. We need to offer them a hand; we need to help them. Even then it's still hard. What about this segment of our population that we have completely stigmatized and shunned and backed into a corner? The general public sees that, so if you've got that kind of thought happening in your head, how do you reach out? How do you get help for something like that when number one, there's nobody to help you and number two, you're just going to be further ostracized? I don't have it all figured out. I just think a lot about do we really want to end the harm that keeps being done or do we want to keep perpetuating it? I think that your answer depends on what direction we head. What we've been doing obviously isn't working.

SOLIS: I told you on the phone that that had been on my list for a while to watch and I'm really glad that you encouraged me to watch it. It was hard to watch for sure, but that's how you learn. That's how you're affected when things are hard to watch or when stories are hard to bear. But you're right, the woman who's featured in the film, her story I mean, it talks to the inter-generational nature of violence and trauma. As she was telling her story, you just got deeper and deeper and deeper. Like I said, there's a couple of times I watch it really late at night. I was tired, but I felt like I had to finish it just out of respect for the film, but also the stories, so I'm glad you encouraged me to watch that. Yeah, so.

JOHNSON: Yeah, pretty, yeah.

SOLIS: But that's what it's like; that's what it is. How so-called perpetrators or so-called offenders are very often victims themselves in many different ways and for some reason, our systems of justice can't quite make that connection.

JOHNSON: Yeah, Yeah. So, I actually wrote to a couple of the people in that and just yeah, I kind of feel scummy for doing. I looked them up on the registry to get their address and I'm like I wonder how many people did that for opposite reasons, but I just felt really compelled to say thank you for them being so vulnerable and sharing their story. I don't know if you've ever met Josh Gravens.

SOLIS: No, but go ahead.

JOHNSON: You've heard of him?

SOLIS: I've heard of him through a couple of people.

JOHNSON: So you know his story?

SOLIS: No, I know that he was in an accident recently.

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah, so he was homeschooled and by homeschooled, I mean not really homeschooled and very fundamental religious area. When he was 12, he touched his sister inappropriately. It wasn't like an ongoing abuse; it was just pretty much kinda normal childhood kinda thing. The sister told the parents, the parents told the pastor. The pastor called the cops. He was put in the juvenile justice system; spent a lot of time there, comes out on the registry. Winds up, for something when you're 12. All of these different components playing into this. Number one, you don't have the education and the access to information to a lot of other people have. So anyway, he's got a really great story that I feel like is an easy to tell story about being on the registry and what he goes through and how unfair it is that he's on there and how many more people are on there like him. I think well that's great and what happens if we start peeling away the people that we think don't belong on there and then we are only left with the people we think are the really bad ones? I'm like what happens to those people? Do they get healing? Do they get better? Do they get ostracized and threatened and all of those things. I don't know; I get stuck in my head a lot. It's not easy living in here.

SOLIS: Hard questions, but they're worth pursuing. I mean that's what this project that we're working on now but also with what TAVP was founded to do was to try to get at the really difficult questions and sort of nuance the people's experience with violence so that we can move beyond the "us vs. them" piece and it's a long-term project. Our goal is to document stories and create an archive and make these stories accessible so that other people can use them in really creative and compelling ways towards this sort of culture change, system change that you were talking about, but yeah, it's a—

JOHNSON: Long haul, yeah yeah.

SOLIS: Thank you so much, Lauren.

JOHNSON: You're welcome.

SOLIS: I really appreciate it and I really enjoyed—We met very briefly a couple of months ago, but it was very brief and so it's been good to reconnect with you.

JOHNSON: Thanks.

SOLIS: So thanks for doing it.

JOHNSON: And cut. I'm gonna squirm around everywhere now.

[TAPE ENDS]

[INTERVIEW ENDS]