Texas After Violence Project, Visions After Violence

Interview with Michelle Parson

Interviewer:	Alexa Garza
Narrator:	Michelle Parson
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Summary: Michelle Parson and Alexa Garza discuss their time in Mountain View Women's Prison in Gatesville, Texas and experiences of reentry. Both Parson and Garza were first sentenced as teenagers and were incarcerated for twenty plus years. Garza interviews Parson about her time inside, her experience of parole, and her transition out of prison. They discuss brutality of women's prisons, how prison underprepared them for reentry, challenges they've faced since prison including GPS parole, employment with a felony, navigating taxes and reentry fees, and successes they have found outside of prison.

ALEXA GARZA: You look phenomenal. So no worries, but I want to thank you again for meeting me on this cold morning here in Dallas over here. So thank you so much Michelle.

MICHELLE PARSON: You're welcome.

GARZA: Introduce yourself, please. And we'll just start talking. [laughs]

PARSON: Hi, my name is Michelle Parson. That's it?

GARZA: Yeah, that's cool.

PARSON: Okay [laughs]

GARZA: Michelle and I were both at Mountain View together. And while we were not really close there, I still consider her my sister. Because we were there. We both experienced that experience of Mountain View TDC.

So I just want to, just to touch base with you and just talk about your experience. I know that you entered at a really young age. I mean, what's your thought process like, looking back on it? Because when I look back on it Michelle, I don't even realize–I don't even think of how we did it. Like, it seems like a different person.

PARSON: I don't either. I actually had lunch with Mandy yesterday and I was telling her about that. Like sometimes I just have moments. Like I was following her to the restaurant we were going to eat at and I was like God who woulda like--Just seeing her in the rec yard line, like following somebody to rec. And now here I am in my car following to a restaurant. Like it's just—and As far as being locked up young, I feel like–

I'm trying to put it in the right way–I don't think that people that are that young should have that much time because–I'm not trying to take away from my crime or what happened in it because you know, obviously I did have a victim and you know, that person can't never come back. But at the same time… they didn't teach me anything. Prison really didn't teach me. It taught me when I first got in there. Because it was a lot worse the first ten years I was there versus the last nine years because they started coming up with all kinds of <u>new</u> policies and stuff like that. But the beginning, like the first ten years in my sentence–and I know Jennifer can probably--I don't know how long you were locked up Alex, I have no idea.

GARZA: Nineteen.

PARSON: Okay. Yeah, so we were locked up about the same time. And it just, it seems like it got harder, time got harder but it got better at the same time because of policies and stuff like that. But, being seventeen years old and going into that--it's just--nothing can prepare you for it. But they don't teach you how to budget, how to--you may have like one ninety day class, Changes, and it teaches you in one little section, Okay, here's a budget sheet. This is what you have to do. It doesn't--versus real life when you get paid and they take your taxes out, you have to pay for insurance and 401k and all this adult stuff that they're not teaching you about. You don't know anything about that, you know, you don't realize that you're going to have to have all this when you come home and that you, you have to have insurance. You have to have car insurance. You have to have all this stuff and they don't teach you anything. Like it just doesn't prepare you for it. If it wasn't for my family, I'd have been really, really screwed when I came home. Like, I was blessed enough that I got a job the first three weeks I was out doing shipping and receiving at like a, it was like a family based business, like a family owned business, not my family, but the lady that lived down the street. And from there, I did their shipping and receiving and I was their shipping and receiving clerk. And UPS would come in and deliver their packages. And I asked one of the UPS guys one time if UPS hired felons and–mind you I was on an ankle monitor when I got out. [laughs]

GARZA: Wow.

PARSON: So they were like, yeah, you know, so I applied. One of the drivers helped me get--their union rep actually helped me get my job loading trucks. And to me I was like, I've done host squad, I've done maintenance, I've worked in the kitchen. I've been in SSI (support service inmate), I'm not scared of loading the truck. And so I loaded the truck for about a month and a half and then after that, because I did go to college while I was incarce--like my parents--once again, thank God for my family because they actually paid for my college. I did go to college. And so once they found out that I had some type of education and I was good with computers because of classes I had taken in there, they offered me a promotion and I've just been kind of going up from there. But I've had battles even out here. Like just recently, I took a promotion. Well, they offered me a promotion to be an on-road supervisor, which is training the drivers, which is really good. I mean considering, it's very, very good. But my background came back ineligible when they ran my background check. And so I had to basically fight UPS HR because I was like you can't--you hired me with this background. My felony's twenty-two years old. That's another thing they don't tell you. They tell you in there, when you're going through changes and all that or cognitive, oh if your felony's five years old, seven years old. No, that's bullshit. Pardon my language. Because they'll go back–a company--that third party is going to go all the way back. And my charge is twenty-two years old, but they still--you know, thank God that I was able to–I was smart enough to read the HR policies regarding backgrounds and I was able to fight it to where they had to promote me, but not everybody's going to be able to do that. Like it just–

GARZA: You bring up a great point Michelle. You were like, I need the rules. You hired me with this background and therefore, you know, the policies are state--you can't discriminate against me because you already knew. You were forthcoming the whole time that you had a record. Right?

PARSON: Yeah, I was from the very beginning when they hired me at UPS, like the lady that was in HR at the time was Tamika and she told me, she was like, it's going to come back eligible, ineligible or decisional. And I had the option to explain my felony, how old it was, the circumstances regarding my felony and even then when they hired me my background came back completely eligible. It didn't go past the five years they were supposed to. But when you go into management or anything like that, it's a more intensive background, extensive background. But it's still the same thing. Nothing else popped up on there. I mean, it's the same thing. So if you're going to hire somebody at a company you need to tell them hey, yeah. It'd be like them saying, Oh, you're a woman, you can work here, but you can only go this far, you know, because you're a female. It's just–but I feel like I'm getting off track. I'm sorry.

GARZA: No, no, not at all. It's interesting to me because I know that you have a good job and I was like, dang. How did she get that one? Because for me I couldn't get an apartment on my own. Like they wouldn't rent to me because of my criminal background. And so I was having problems there. So they're right. They don't tell us that. My convictions twenty-three years old also. So, you know, at what point is it going to be–at what point are we going to be done with it? Apparently, never, because it's always going to come up--

PARSON: It never never goes--I had the same issue with an apartment. I ended up having to settle for–I mean I make good money, you know, I had to live in a ghetto ass apartment because that's the only people that would take me. It didn't matter that I had a good job or I had this or I had that. And so finally, I ended up having to have somebody cosign for me that they--and what stopped me from moving into this place was because I didn't have any credit. So I had to have somebody cosign. They were like, we don't care about your background it's twenty years old. You know, we're not–it's because I was trying to move into a really nice neighborhood and they said, but you don't have any credit. I mean, you're thirty-eight years old, why do you have no credit? And I'm like, because I was locked up for the majority of my life, like I--and so even that, they don't tell you that. You have to come out here, establish credit because you can't do anything without credit. Even if you go buy a car. If you don't have credit, you better have two or three thousand dollars to put down, you know, so it's just, it's insane. Like, it's--they don't prepare you for any of this.

GARZA: You bring up great points. Again, the same thing. Like we don't have any credit. Like, where were you? And then, you are exactly right. Do you think that if they would have--my opinion is if they would have started out–you know, 95% of the people incarcerated are eventually going to get released, whether it's two years, five years or twenty years or how much ever time you did. If they would prepare us and like from the beginning, this is what you're going to face, this is what you need to prepare for. I

think we would be better equipped in dealing with the situations. Like we would have all the tools necessary to kind of--

PARSON: Well definitely because people come out here and they give up because it is frustrating, it is hard Alex. Like you can't--I guess that if it wasn't for my family, it just--I cannot fathom people that come out here and don't, they don't have anything to come home to. Either because they burned bridges because of past mistakes they've made or people have passed away in their family, especially nowadays. People are in there and they're losing people to COVID and they're coming home to nothing. They don't have anything. And it's like, they can't

It's hard, it's really hard. It's not easy.

Something that I struggle with like even to this day, I have to--and I was telling Mandy about this yesterday--this is a more male dominated, obviously, more male dominated thing, which I don't have problems with that. But like people have asked me--cause people invite me places to go do things but I don't–I think TDC ruined me. As far as like being around crowds or being around people. I just want to go sit home with my two dogs and be by myself and I'm okay with that, but that's bad too. Because it puts you in a mindset to where you're constantly alone or you're by yourself and you start to get sad, or you start to get depressed, but then you don't--people don't realize that you if you've been locked up as long as we have, you need that quiet. You need that peace. We were around people twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for nineteen years, like never were we alone. Even in SEG (segregation). If you go to SEG, you're not alone. You're not by yourself. You're in a cell by yourself but that's it. Other than that--so it's like having to learn who you are basically. Because in there you're--you don't really get to–even though you have all this time–you don't realize who you are because you're in a circumstance where your mindset is kind of--you're having to adjust to your surroundings. You know, you become--not become a product of your environment per se, but in order to survive mentally in there, like you just have to adjust your way of thinking. And then you have to come out here and try to adjust your way of thinking again. The best advice--I went to Lockhart before I got out and there was a guy that came there and he did–I think he did like twenty-six years. He came in with a ministry. And this is when I very first found out I was going home. I got a RMS and I just figured I was going to do all my time, you know.

GARZA: So did I.

PARSON: I only have a year left? Oh, well, like, what's the worst you going to do?

GARZA: [laughs]

PARON: I only have a year, at least I'm in Lockhart like whatever. But I asked him, if you could give me one piece of advice about getting out, because I've been locked up so long, what would it be? He

said--and it made perfect sense--as long as it took you to adjust to being–to getting locked up, that's as long as it's going to take you to adjust to be in the world. And he's absolutely right. Every day--like in there, when you first get in there, you're having to learn how to do things differently. You're having to adjust your mindset. You're having to be more aware of your--like you just have to change your entire way of thinking. Anything that was instilled in you, trained in you, you just have to like kind of push it to the back and then later on when you're around good people, or you find a good friend group in there or whatever, then you can take back those values and morals that your family instilled in you. But other than that, you just gotta keep it pushed to the back. Because you see all kinds of crazy stuff. And in order to survive it you just kind of have to mentally block it out. And then versus if you get out here and then you have to deal with people every day and people out here are crazy.

[laughs] You have to learn how to drive. You have to learn how to pay bills. You have to learn technology. Like they didn't--this right here--they didn't--when I got locked up they had a Nokia phone. The only game you can play on it was snake. Now you can--that's where I was emailing you from earlier. You know what I'm saying? You can do everything from there. It's insane, but they don't prepare you for any of that. Nothing. Like this in itself can make you have a nervous breakdown.

GARZA: You know, they have tablets now.

PARSON: Yeah, I just said, no. My parents bought me a laptop and I just kept that, other than that I just do it on my phone.

GARZA: No, but I'm talking about the girls inside have tablets now.

PARSON: Do they?

GARZA: Yeah, they just got them.

PARSON: I didn't know. I knew there were talking about it before I left but I never--

GARZA: Yeah.

PARSON: You want to know something? Let me tell you something crazy. I've been out two years today.

GARZA: Oh, you know what? It's meant to be. It's meant to be. You are amazing. You're bringing up so many good points Michelle. It's like, we don't talk about this stuff, you know, like our thought process and what we become and what we have to do to get through it, you know, it's just--I just applaud you for just, like I said, just telling it how it is. And you do it so eloquently and just from your heart, like, this is

how it is for us. We have to basically change who we are as people to survive in where we were. And then we come out and like, find out who we are again, you know? So I mean--

PARSON: I tell people all the time–because as I've gotten into like--of course, I have to explain my background sometimes to people, because I'll ask a question–I remember the first time I filed taxes. I didn't know how to pay taxes. And I was trying to do it at work because I was asking somebody to show me and they were like--I said, I don't have any life skills. I said I'm very intelligent. I'm very smart. I have probably life skills in an aspect that most people will never have, survival. [laughs] I said, but as far as like, everyday life skills, I don't have that. We don't have life experience. You know what I mean? We don't know what it's like to

… get a car repo'd or you know–if we were locked up from the time we were seventeen, so we're just trying to do it all right. I mean I made mistakes when I first came home, like trying to build my credit with stupid fast loans and stuff like that because I was trying to hurry up. And then I just had to sit back and realize it just all takes time. But if you don't have the support to be able to take the time, then you're kind of just screwed. You know. If you don't have anywhere to stay that's going to let you--oh I can stay here until I can save money so I have enough for my deposit, my first month's rent, my last month's rent, if you have a pet, your pet deposit, and then you got to go through all that stuff. You can't do it. It's just–it's impossible. If you don't have somewhere–if you don't have somebody to help you, it's damn near impossible. It's just–it's insane.

GARZA: Yeah.

PARSON: And I know they started the Strive Program at Mountain View and I donated there. I drove up there and gave Warden Nelson a bunch of stuff. And I think that's awesome. But they never had any of that. They just started that.

GARZA: And it's only for thirty people too. Thirty people, like, out of all the women population in TDC. You got thirty people. What about the other hundreds and hundreds of girls that are not going to be eligible for that program?

PARSON: I know and it's–it's a good thing. Like I'm glad they finally started something to try to like reintegrate people. But a lot of times it's more of a--I feel like they should have people that got home and went through it come back in and tell people, okay, this is what it really is. This is what you're gonna--this is the reality of it. It's awesome to have your freedom every day. It's amaze--like I had to sit there--I have to remind myself sometimes. I was sitting there, I was like, God, I really don't feel like going to the store. I hate going into Walmart. I hate it. And then I was thinking, somebody else--somebody is standing in line somewhere and they're fixing to probably run out of soap. So I need not to complain about running to Walmart to get toilet paper. [laughs]

GARZA: Wow. You know, you are absolutely right. I know that you brought up the point of you work in a male-dominated industry.

PARSON: Mm-hmm.

GARZA: For me, it was a problem speaking with males and looking them in the eye. Because I was, you know, I automatically kind of would look down, like, if an officer or whatever, because they were officers and we were inmates. And I never realized that was a trigger for me, being around men. We always wore the baggy clothes. The uniforms were like horrible huge on us. You could never see your shape, you know.

PARSON: And now it's like BAM. [laughs]

GARZA: Yeah you know and then I had a problem with wearing the clothes that fit you, that show off your figure and stuff. And I didn't realize it and I deal with it sometimes, I'm like, I am a woman. We do have curves. You know, your hair is--

PARSON: Have you worn high heels yet?

GARZA: Yeah and makeup and I used to wear glasses and stuff. You wouldn't recognize me. Like you wouldn't recognize me if you saw me. Like right now I'm in jeans and a t-shirt. But thinking about it, like your hair looks great. Like honestly, if I would have passed you on the street, it would have taken me a minute to recognize who you were. Because you're so–

PARSON: The same with you, it would have taken me a minute, yeah.

GARZA: Because we're so different [laughs]

PARSON: There was somebody--I know you don't--I don't think you know Crystal Garcia. Did you know Crystal Garcia?

GARZA: I don't think so.

PARSON: She was only in Mountain View for a second, she came from Hobby and she went right back. But her and I were pretty close. She got locked up when she was fourteen and she did her whole twenty. She got out when she was thirty-four and I went to Miami with her. And mind you, the majority of us who were incar--the only good thing prison gave us was it kind of froze us in time. So we look a lot younger than what we are.

GARZA: [laughs]

PARSON: Crystal, she's like, you're not going to get botox or anything? I was like, no. She was like, the state of Texas took my youth, I'm buying it back.

GARZA: [laughs]

PARSON: But you can do that I guess. Nobody looks the same out here. Nobody.

GARZA: No, not at all.

PARSON: Between fillers, hair dye. Like, nobody looks the same.

GARZA: Yeah because your hair is red right now, I was like, oh it looks good. [laughs]

PARSON: It is.

GARZA: But I was going to ask you, Michelle, do you think--what kind of help or--did you get any post-incarceration re-entry support from parole? I mean like anything?

PARSON: I will say this, and I know this is gonna sound really strange, but I actually had really, really good parole officers. Like I actually--because I was on a monitor and they were-

I had a love-hate relationship with my monitor because I understood it. Like, I got it. Because I had been locked up for so long. They were trying to slowly put you back like, okay, like here, and I got that. I needed that. And so I couldn't just go full speed. I needed somebody to tell me, take baby steps to try to accustom yourself to this. But I also had one--my parole officers were very …informative, like about getting my driver's license or the easiest way, or--but I will tell you this, there's a lot of people that when they got out, nobody told them that they could get their food stamps.

Morticia was out with Susan Fraser. She was locked up for twenty-six years I think. She was out for--I think she got out before me and I got out and had to do her food stamps for her to show her how to do it. She had been out for like two months. Because you get six months of food stamps but when COVID hit it extended for–I think mine was like a year. I think I got like a hundred sixty four dollars every month for a year. Which is enough for one person.

GARZA: Yeah

PARSON: It was enough for me. But they don't tell you about any of that stuff.

GARZA: You’re right, they don't.

PARSON: Nobody did. Not in there. Now my parole officers did help me. I had the same two for almost the entire--I think I was on for almost a year and a half and they did kind of help me. But as far as like …

like you go to the Texas Workforce Commission and they help you fill out a resume and all that but it really doesn't ….

if you're trying to make a career for yourself somewhere like yeah, I would have worked anywhere. I would have heard at Sonic, I would have worked at Mcdon--anywhere that had work. I figured I'd done enough shitty stuff for free, for the state of Texas. What is flipping burgers for a paycheck for twelve dollars an hour? I would have done anything. But some people, they have it in their mindset, oh I'm not going to go work there. I'm not going to do this. I'm too good for that. I'm too good for this. But the Texas Workforce Commission, instead of trying to lead you towards a career like to, okay, we're going to help you get this trade, you know, we're going to see what we can do to have funds. None of that was ever offered, none of it. So that kind of sucks. But other than that, I mean my parole officers were pretty good. I can't really say anything bad about them. The monitor sucked. And people think that you're only going to spend like a year on the monitor. Mm-mmm. No. They will keep you on there for as long as they feel necessary. Because it's like a whole new voting process, like you're going in front of parole again. Somebody higher–it goes up a chain of command that has to vote, and people don't understand that.

GARZA: So, for those of us that don't know, were you like on a curfew monitor, or I don't know what the other one's called.

PARSON: A GPS.

GARZA: GPS?

PARSON: GPS. I had to make a schedule every week of what I was going to do and I had to--it's a little phone looking thing and it has to be in the charger at that time or they violate you, they'll come and arrest you. If you're late, if you're sitting--I remember one time I had a eight hour--like I had finally got to where I had an eight hour–I could do something I wanted for eight hours. So I went to Dallas to see my aunt and when I hit Waco because I live in Temple, so when I hit Waco, I caught traffic. So I'm sitting in traffic in my monitor I was like, there's no way I'm gonna make it home, you know. So I had to call my parole officer on a weekend and hope they would answer and tell them, hey, I'm going to be late. One time I remember I was stuck behind a school bus and my monitor--I was three minutes from my house and my monitor started beeping. I had to call and be like I'm stuck behind--and I had to send a picture from my phone to show them I was behind a school bus.

Like it was insane. It was like being basically in jail at home. But I mean can't really complain about that. [laughs] At least I was at home.

GARZA: Right

PARSON: My parole officers were pretty good. They worked with me with stuff. They explained stuff to me. They weren't--they were just stern enough if that makes sense.

GARZA: Yeah.

PARSON: The GPS monitors, tt's not the same as curfew. It's a lot different.

GARZA: I was going to say, I've heard that GPS is a whole different anomaly, like the schedule and like if it rings pick it up or I mean, I don't know.

PARSON: Oh yeah, it doesn't--you better, if it rings, your phone, you got to answer every unknown number that calls your phone. Like, it's insane. And if you don't answer, whoever's number's on the back up--like mine was my sister. They would call my sister at 2:00 in the morning. Where's Michelle at? We need to--she's not answering, and it wasn't--well she's asleep, I mean– [laughs] But it was hard. It was. That part sucked. But like I said, it was a love-hate thing because I kind of understood it at the same time. Like, I got it. Because I mean I didn't have no idea what I was walking into and then I came home–well, both of us--I don't know how long you been home?

GARZA: Three years.

PARSON: Okay, so I came home right before COVID hit. And then they had the whole the black lives matter movement. And then we had the--it was just--it's been one thing right after another. So it's just pretty insane trying to adjust to that [laughs]

GARZA: I know. It has been crazy. What about like, your parole fees Michelle? If you didn't have family support–what were your thoughts on that? Because I was like, I have to pay how much a month? You have to pay those.

PARSON: Yeah. I had to pay off all my college. Anything, like my reimbursement, I had to pay off. I think I paid eighteen dollars a month. And I paid, one was a parole fee and one was for victim services. You pay towards victim services. Basically, if you have a victim, you're paying towards victim services because it's I guess nonprofit is what I'm guessing and so that's what keeps it going, victim services. And then I had to pay off my resti--I didn't have restitution but my--what's the word I'm looking for?

GARZA: Reimbursement?

PARSON: Reimbursement. I had to pay off that.

GARZA: Okay. So let's talk about that. For example, I don't know if you know this or not, but Pell is being re-implemented next year, which means the criteria for people taking college inside is like, clear. So it doesn't matter how much time you have. Doesn't matter what your crime is. You basically get free college.

PARSON: But this--is TDC going to--

GARZA: It's Federal. It has to.

PARSON: Oh, okay. Okay. Okay.

GARZA: So they're just, they're passing it, they're starting it like in January 2023, the federal government just passed it and it opened the door for a lot of--like before remember, it was like, you can't have this crime. You can't have this time. You had to fit a lot of criteria and Pell kind of eliminated that. So, I know for us, the classes were what? Six hundred dollars? Toward the end.

PARSON: Yeah, they kept getting higher every year. [laughs] Every year they would just get higher. Like ten dollars, twenty dollars, forty dollars, kept getting higher.

GARZA: Right so at the end, you have these parole fees that you have to mandate to pay or you will get violated but you also have this debt of college reimbursement that you kind of have to take care of also, right? Because if you don't …they can violate you?

PARSON: I don't think they can violate you from--because when I originally started paying I would--I paid my parole fees up six months. The very first paycheck I got that was one of the main things I did was pay my parole fees up. And then I asked about paying my reimbursement and my parole officer was like, you can pay ten dollars towards it, five dollars towards it, she was like we're not going to keep you--like I'm not going to lock you up because you didn't pay your reimbursement. As long as you're paying your parole fees, that's what--that's the important part. So she wasn't like--she gave me the impression like it's frowned upon if you don't do it, but they are not really going to lock you back up. But at the same time, I feel like if I didn't pay, it was going to ruin it for somebody for something in there that you know--it would ruin them having funding for people to go to school, you know. So I paid mine. I didn't want to have debt anyways.

GARZA: I don't blame you. It's just a really kind of slippery kind of confusing issue with a lot of people, like, do I have to pay it? What happens? And then with Pell being implemented, which is going to be

next year, I'm just trying to figure it out myself. You're like the one of the first people that I know who paid it. [laughs]

PARSON: Yeah. I paid it. Like I said, I paid it because I didn't want it to like hurt any type of grants or anything they had that was going to help other people be able to go to school because--that was from when I very first got locked up. I got locked up in 2001, I think I started going to school in like '03 or '04. And so that was very--and then after that, they stopped reimbursement because I had too much time or I was too far away from my minimum date and then I was too far after my minimum date, or my minimum, my maximum are the same. So, every year a new rule changed to where I just end up having–my parents had to pay for college.

GARZA: Yeah, shoot Michelle's, right. The rules would change. Policies would change. Policies would be implemented that we didn't know about and it was like, we were the ones that suffered for it, you know. So I mean, if it wasn't for your family, like we know a lot of people who didn't have that family support. We know a lot of people that families didn't put money on their books. And, you know, would have to go to the chow hall, eat that food where we could get commissary, you know? Or …have a t-shirt and shorts, where the other ones had to wear state clothes, you know, just different things that we were truly blessed to have.

PARSON: My biggest--when people ask me how bad, I say okay, this is--to another female this is a simple--this is how bad I can let you know. For you being on your cycle all month long, they give you--and it's so funny because the tampons they put in the bathroom at work are the same tampons they gave away for free.

GARZA: [laughs]

PARSON: The little yellow ones. So I'm like, you got six of these to last you a month and a pack of pads. Not good pads, like the cheapest pads you can find. And they're like, what? And they're like what is--I said you can buy more on commissary if for one, if you have money and for two if they have them. [laughs] You know? And they were like, that's crazy. And they were like, how does a woman survive? I said she gotta figure it out. Got to figure it out. I said I'll go to the store and buy them some for somebody because somebody can't go to the store so you're like, hey, I'm gonna get you some tampons because if you get caught giving them to them, then you're going to get a case for trafficking and trading. Or if somebody doesn't get sent money and they're washing clothes to try to make money in there just so they can buy their hygiene or have a soup to eat if there's something really bad in the chow hall, I said if they get caught doing that, it's a major case for extortion or solicitation or--I said, it's a win-lose situation. Like you can't--they don't teach you to help people in there. It doesn't matter if your neighbor doesn't have a soap or shampoo or conditioner or deodorant or toothpaste, that doesn't matter. If you get caught--some officers, if they catch it, if they catch me giving somebody a tube of toothpaste, traffic and trading case, they're confiscating it and it’s going to get thrown away.

GARZA: Yeah. Yeah. No you're right. It was very difficult for me like yum…seeing girls go hungry.

PARSON: Yeah.

GARZA: That was really hard for me, like even coming in from the chow hall they're like, oh, it was horrible. And, you know, and they're like--and they would, you know, sit there I'm hungry. We would have to like hide behind the wall to give him something. So the officer couldn't see.

PARSON: Yeah. Or slide a bowl to where–you slide it down the aisle. [laughter]

PARSON: On the cubicle floor will slide it.

GARZA: But there were a lot of things that, looking back on it I'm like, wow, I don't know how we did it, you know. Like lockdown. What was the sense of carrying our stuff on your back to the gym to get--I mean, you know, that was horrible in and of itself, I mean people had like six bags. Remember? [laughs]

PARSON: They're like, you'd do what? I said you had to pack up everything in your cubicle and carry it to a gym so they can go through it and not put it back together, but you got to put it all back together in a reasonable amount of time where you're being hollered and screamed at just to carry it all the way back to where you originally got it from. It's insane. For what?

GARZA: [laughs]

PARSON: For what? We know it was coming three weeks in advance. Like what's the point? At this time, like, what is it? I remember when I first--and you probably remember this--I was at Crain and we would have twenty-one day lockdowns.

GARZA: Yep.

PARSON: Oh my God, you want to talk about whew. That was a— … like when I first came home who were like, oh, we're going on lockdown. I was like, I don't know why everybody's tripping. Like

GARZA: [laughs]

PARSON: My sister was like, well, you can't go anywhere. I was like--I said, you have a TV, you can get anything in the world delivered to you now. You have a bed with pillows, you can go outside, like this is the best lockdown I've ever experienced. [laughs] You can order anything online now, it just gets delivered to you. Doordash, Ubereats, DIPS, Sabor. They don't hire felons though. FYI for everybody.

GARZA: Really?

PARSON: Ubereats does not hire felons.

GARZA: Oh.

PARSON: They don't. I tried to just to save extra money just to put--because I have a five-year plan. So just to try to save extra money I tried to–you know, just to do it on the weekends or whatever. Because you make your own schedule and they're like, oh no you have a felony. You can't deliver food. I'm sorry. [laughs] I was like okay, whatever.

GARZA: Yeah. But that's really crazy you said you have a five-year plan. I mean, who taught you that? because they didn't teach you that in TDC.

PARSON: UPS taught me my five-year plan. That's who taught me my five-year plan.

It really did. It's really crazy to work for a company that's so big. Like it's huge. UPS is huge. It's worldwide. But you run in–
… you see people here that have been here, twenty years, thirty years, almost forty years. Like they've worked for this company forever and they start out–like at the end of next year, at the end of this year if all goes--like the track I'm on, I'll be making eighty thousand dollars a year by the end of the year. And that's base pay, that's small stuff. These people that are sitting in some of these positions, they've never been to college, they've never done certain things, some of them have felonies, some of them had--you know, like they have histories and they're making a hundred fifty thousand dollars a year.

GARZA: Wow.

PARSON: But so it's taught me–like being here--because I've worked for UPS for almost … a little over year and a half. And so it's taught me to put my plan in perspective, okay, like what--I had to figure out a path, a career path. Like, did I want to go and--like right now I'm a safety supervisor. Did I want to stay in safety? You know, what was gonna put me on the fast track? Because unfortunately, money does rule the world. So you have to think, okay, if I want to build a house or if I want to buy a house, what can I forward? Like you have to sit there and mentally--and I had to have people help me with this. You know, like my retirement. UPS goes towards so much to your retirement, but some of it goes in stocks and you can choose to invest. I didn't know nothing about that. I don't know where to invest my--like why do I--invest it for what? And then people had to teach me that. They're like you need to have a plan, like you need to have–in two years, where do you want to be? In three years? But also they do evaluations on us every six months but we have to do a self-evaluation and part of that is they ask you, where do you plan to be in the next two years in this company? So it taught me to sit down and be like, okay. What do

I want to do? Like, in five years where do I want to be? I want to have house. Obviously, I'm not gonna have any kids, it's too late. I'll probably be single with just my two dogs because I think I'd scare people off. I don't know. Might be a little bit too harsh. And then where you were all nice and quiet in there I was the drama queen, I guess …. in relationships

GARZA: Not at all. Not at all. I admire your tenacity and your—

I just want you to just take a moment and just to know that like, wow, Michelle. Wow, like you are on fire. I mean like, literally you are doing amazing. You are successful. You have your head on straight. You're thinking clearly. You're thinking of a five-year plan, you're educating yourself, like look at us now. You know, those officers, how they spoke to us and looked down at us, you know, like take it in all grace. I mean, I am amazed at how phenomenal that you're doing.

PARSON: You know, I still have officers--and I don't know if it's because I grew up there, which I don't--I still have–I've had officers reach out to me and asked me, hey are you okay? What's going on with you in life? I was just thinking about you or something happened and you crossed my mind. And to me not every officer in there was bad. Some of them I grew--I'll give you an example. Lieutenant Tackett, I don't know if you remember her. I grew up, I literally grew up with her. She started working about the same time that I went in. Captain Shane or Major Shane . Same thing. She started with the--and Jennifer knows, it's the same--like we kind of went along the same path with these people and I used to laugh, like with Major Shane, so you mean to tell me I could have been a major by now if I could have just stayed out of prison. Like I could have been--this is what I could have been doing with my life. You know? It used to be an ongoing joke for me, but even now some of those officers will reach out and be like, hey, you know–or there's some former officers that I'm Facebook friends and they're like, hey I just want you know, I'm proud of you. You said that you were going to get out--because I used to tell people all the time, I'm going to make more money than you. At the end of the day that's my goal is to go home and make more money than you because this is--y'all talk down to me, you've belittled me, you've told me I'm nothing. You've basically tried to break me in every way you can, and so now my goal is to get out and to show you that, no, I'm not the person that you have placed in your mind. Like yeah I made a mistake when I was seventeen, but I had a company that when I first got out, they wanted to hire me, and they found out I had a felony and I told the hiring manager--he interviewed me and he was like, well you have a felony, I said, if you're going to hold something against me that happened when I was seventeen, I don't want to work for your company anyways. Like screw you. I was seventeen years old. I'm thirty-eight. I'm fixing to be thirty-nine. If you're going to continue to hold on to that, that's for anybody, whether it be your family or friend. I don't need you. You just got to look forward. You can't keep--My parents told me I need to write a book, but you can't--I don't forget anything that came from there. I don't–I know people have gotten out and they've completely disassociated. I can't, I just can't disassociate myself with it because it took such a big part of my life that I felt like it was unnecessary. Like I should have never--Alexis–I'm keep saying Alexis, there's a girl next door who's name is Alexis.

GARZA: It's okay.

PARSON: We should have never—
Being as young as we were, we should never have done the amount of time that we did.

GARZA: I agree with you.

PARSON: Never. Your brain is not even fully developed at seventeen. Like at that point in time you--yeah, you know right from wrong I tell people all the time,(??) yeah, you know right from wrong. But you don't understand the permanency of your actions.

GARZA: Or the consequences.

PARSON: You're still in the mindset of, that's not going to happen to me. That's never going to happen to me. Or, that's something you always see on the news. You don't realize …

how your actions affect everybody else. And then you go in there and you--to me those teen years are the most important where you're finding your confidence, you're finding out who--you're figuring out who you are. And so then you get thrown into a situation where you have a bunch of people telling you, you ain't shit. You're not nothing. You're just an inmate. You're not going to be nothing. You think you're better because you're going to college in prison. And then you're surrounded by a bunch of females. And what are females? Envious, jealous, vicious. So you just have to--it's hard. I think men's prisons are tougher in the aspect of like fighting and stuff like that. But mentally and emotionally, I think women's prisons are way harder. Like the things that you just--because we're just emotional creatures. Well, the majority of us are emotional creatures and we're nurturers and so you put us in a predicament where you can't hug nobody. Can't let anybody see you cry. You can't get punked out because at the end of the day, that just is what it is. People are going to test you and try to take advantage of you and try to take you for commissary. Women are manipulative. It's just a mind game when it comes to women's prison, it's surviving a mind game. Whereas man, I think it's more physical like it's a more of a, you know, like a blow for blow type thing. I just think it's hard. Women's prisons are harder emotionally and mentally. You have to--I still don't--I think that's a lot.

I was made fun of severely growing up. And so just when I started to find myself where I was growing out of that and was in high school, bam, I went to prison. And so, all that, any kind of progress I made, it came straight back. And so even out here, I don't have that--like you said--I'm not used to looking down. I'll talk shit to anybody, but in the back of my mind if somebody compliments me I'm like, what do you want? To me, I don't take it as a genuine compliment and that's not right. Because I maybe missing out on the person of my dreams because they're like, oh, hey, you're pretty or can I have your number or can I take you out. Why? What's your motive? And prison did that to me mentally. It just messed--my nails

broke, sorry. I have to go get it fixed today. But mentally, it just--that's what stuck with me. Like, I can't--that's something I can't shake. I always think somebody has a motive. So I'll probably always be by myself. [laughs]

GARZA: You can't think of it that way. We tend to view things from the perspective or the wall of cynicism because, what's in it for you? What are you going at? Why are you asking me this? The wall is always up. But Michelle, let me ask you right now today, what would you tell Michelle, seventeen years old entering the system?

PARSON: Girl, don't do it. [laughter]

GARZA: I love it. Just run. Run!

PARSON: As I'm entering the system?

GARZA: Yeah.

PARSON: Take care of yourself. People in there are not your friends. I learned the hard way that there's some really good people that are locked up that were like me made a mistake and they're good people. They're generally good people. But it took me a really long time to realize that prison is where all the bad people go too. You know, like there's some really fucked off people in there, you know, and you just have to stay guarded. You have to guard yourself and I wish I would have known that. Because I probably would not have done as much time as I did, but I wish I would have known that and concentrated more on myself as a teenager. Because going in there as a teenager, my mindset was horrible. I was in county for eighteen months and had all these expectations and I hit the system and went straight to medium custody for fighting. [laughs] Like, so I had …I wish I could tell myself that just it gets better, just stay to yourself, it'll get better, you know. But I didn't unfortunately.

GARZA: But I admire you and where you're standing now is what counts. You got here friend. And that's what freaking counts more than anything.

PARSON: I'm trying girl. Well, look at you. You did too. You're interviewing me. [laughter]

GARZA: I just want to thank you very much for taking the time this morning and stuff. I'm just going to turn the recording off so don't go anywhere.