

**TAVP Visions After Violence Interview
Interview with Stacy Bowen**

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Summary:

Stacy Bowen (Venable) shares her perspective on growing up with a parent who was incarcerated, her experience of witnessing her children being incarcerated, and the effects of generational incarceration.

MARCI MARIE SIMMONS: [00:00:03] My name is Marci Marie Simmons. I'm with the Texas After Violence Project. I'm speaking virtually on Zoom with Stacy Venable. Today is April 16th at 8:20 PM. Thanks so much Stacy for joining me. I appreciate you so much.

STACY BOWEN (VENABLE): No problem.

SIMMONS: So we're talking about incarceration and how, um, the criminal justice system has affected your family. And I'm just wondering what your earliest memory is in regards to prison. What – when did you know about prison?

VENABLE: I – when I was young, I was probably like five or six, and I'd go visit my dad and he was in prison. Um, I remember going in there and seeing my dad through this, the glass, and the little cage at the bottom, talking to him, through the cage, the little bars at the bottom. And I – I couldn't touch my dad, you know. Um, pretty much what I remember.

SIMMONS: Do you remember how that felt seeing your dad behind the glass? Were you old enough to process what was happening?

VENABLE: No, not re – I mean, my family kinda tried to lie about why my dad, where my dad was. They tried to tell me that he was at work. I knew better because I mean, you don't have cops at your work, you know, like, they were there. You didn't have to go through the metal detectors and all that other stuff either, you know, I mean? I, I knew that was off. So, I kinda knew, but I didn't know know why he was really there.

SIMMONS: Who would go – who would take you to your visits?

VENABLE: My grandpa, or my grandmother and my mom.

SIMMONS: Were your siblings there?

VENABLE: [00:02:04] My brother was, yes. He's younger than me.

SIMMONS: Stacy, how many siblings do you have?

VENABLE: I have one brother, and, um, a stepbrother.

SIMMONS: Have either of them ever, um, been incarcerated?

VENABLE: No, they're goody goodies. Well, my stepbrother's been in trouble one time, but he didn't – he was in there for like, two hours. So that don't count.

SIMMONS: How old were you when your dad got out of prison?

VENABLE: My dad has been in a prison in and out my whole life so – I don't – I mean, he's in there now, so.

SIMMONS: Your dad's incarcerated right now?

VENABLE: Yes. He gets out in June.

SIMMONS: So, have you ever been incarcerated?

VENABLE: Yes, I have.

SIMMONS: How old were you when you got incarcerated?

VENABLE: I was 28 years old when I first started getting in trouble. And I got incarcerated that same year that I got in trouble.

SIMMONS: How much time did you do?

VENABLE: I did - I believe it was eleven – nine or eleven months on two years.

SIMMONS: So, because we know each other personally, I know of a story that happened while you were incarcerated and there was a hurricane –

VENABLE: Yes ma'am.

SIMMONS: Can you tell me about that?

VENABLE: It was Katrina. And, um, it was like – Tonight it's supposed to hit, and the Warden came into the pod and told us to – we didn't know our higher power to find it, because she didn't know if we were gonna be there the next morning. If the prison was gonna be there the next morning. And if we didn't have one (higher power), we better find one. And that she was goin' home and best of luck, basically. [00:04:05] We wrote letters home to our families saying goodbye and everything. They never received them, that I know of. I know that my family called and they told 'em that I was evacuated. They only made two trips out of that whole prison. And I was not one of 'em. It was – it was crazy. We did a prayer circle and we went to bed that night and we didn't know what was gonna happen. That's what we did.

SIMMONS: Did you watch them evacuate some of the ladies?

VENABLE: Yes, we saw some of the ladies get to go.

SIMMONS: So how was that in your dorm? How was the reaction to knowing that some people were leaving and you guys were there?

VENABLE: They made it sound like they were just, you know, catchin' chain to go to another unit that it wasn't that bad. If that – if Katrina would not have turned when she turned, we would've been dead. Would've drowned or whatever in our pod cause there was no way out.

SIMMONS: So, for somebody that has never been in prison, can you describe the scene, like how the dorm is, and how many women are there?

VENABLE: It was like sixty-five people in the dorm. Um, you walked in it's like a big open area. You have your bunks, with concrete in between 'em. You got a TV. And then tables in the middle, and showers and stuff in the middle, shower and the toilets in the middle. A lot of people. We went for seven days no water or electric after Katrina hit. We had port-o-potties all around the prisons. Sometimes they let ya out to go to the pot, sometimes they didn't. You know, it was stinky. They brought other people in from another units. They were sleepin' on the floor. It was disgusting. They fed us the stuff comin' out of the kitchen that was half frozen, half not frozen. [00:06:06] That's all we had. We got one bottle of water a day. And it was hot.

SIMMONS: Where were the officers when the hurricane hit? Do you remember? Did they stay? I mean the Warden said she's leaving -

VENABLE: (interrupts) -It was a couple that stayed but we were - it wasn't very many at all. I mean, I think we had one person in the, uh, picket thing and it's like one, two, like four pods around picket, one guard.

SIMMONS: Do you remember you had, at that time you had children. How many children did you have when that hurricane hit and you were incarcerated?

VENABLE: Four.

SIMMONS: I'm sure as a mother that you were worried about them. I'm just wondering what you were thinking about that -

VENABLE: I was thinking, I might not ever see my children and I hadn't had no visits when I was up there because I was so far away. And it just fucked me up, man. It was a bad feeling.

SIMMONS: And I can't imagine -

VENABLE: (interrupts) [inaudible] and they never even got it.

SIMMONS: What kind of letter did you write ?

VENABLE: I wrote 'em a goodbye letter. I really thought I was, we were going to die.

SIMMONS: Wow. Did you have a job when you worked? I mean, excuse me, when you were incarcerated there? Did you - did you work?

VENABLE: Maintenance.

SIMMONS: Were y'all working after the hurricane?

VENABLE: No, just uh, certain people worked like the plumbers worked. But other than that, no. They didn't send us out to work.

SIMMONS: Wow. Um, how old were your kids at this time?

VENABLE: Um - I believe Brittany was twelve maybe? [00:08:07] It was in 2005, so, um, Brittany was like thirteen, CJ was like eleven or twelve, Haley was nine, ten, and Dustin was eight or nine. Very young.

SIMMONS: After that, after Katrina hit, when was your next contact with them? How long did it go without you talking to them ?

VENABLE: [inaudible] before I got to contact them. 'Cuz they finally transferred me to Bridgeport, which is pre pro unit and there I finally got to call my grandparents and I got to talk to my children that day. It was about two months after.

SIMMONS: How did that feel?

VENABLE: They did not have no idea that I was sitting in the middle of that.

SIMMONS: They assumed you had been evacuated like they had been told.

VENABLE: Yes, yes.

SIMMONS: After that pre-release unit, you got to go home?

VENABLE: Yes, I did.

SIMMONS: Tell me about that.

VENABLE: I came home to my grandmother being bed-bound and my grandpa being in custody of the Adult Protective Services, and then not even two-not even a month later, um, CPS came in and said I was- I had some accusations about somethin' that happened when I was locked up in prison. So that was false, but they did a drug test anyway and I did fail and they took my children. I lost my children right after that to CPS. And then my grandmother died and then my grandfather died.

SIMMONS: Were you there when CPS took custody of your kids?

VENABLE: Yes, I was. [00:10:07] I'd just got out of prison and I got out in February 28th, and they said the- the accusations were done in January. And I was locked up at that time, but, um, they took my children and I- I was there when they took my children. I mean, they took them away from me right there in my apartment.

SIMMONS: And I'm - I don't want to, um, I'm not trying to cause like re-traumatize or anything like that, but I'm just trying to paint the scene of what that looks like. Someone comes in your apartment and physically removes your children.

VENABLE: Yes.

SIMMONS: And the kids all went willingly? Or -

VENABLE: They did not want to go. They did not want to go.

SIMMONS: I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that that happened. Um, they didn't stay in CPS custody, so tell me about what was the process that you had to do to be able to get your kids back.

VENABLE: I did a year of drug test classes, hair follicles, um, my kids were able to go to my parents and my brother after being in foster care for two weeks. And from what my kids tell me, the foster care was awful. Um, so I was grateful that they did get to go family afterwards, you know, eventually, um, but like I said, I did a lot of classes, hair follicles drug tests all the time. I got my children back after a year. Um, and I had joint custody with my mother, just so CPS could never touch my children again, you know. Um 'cuz I am a drug addict, and ah, you know, things happen. And they would have to prove my mother unfit too, so they couldn't do that because my mom not unfit you know? [00:12:07] So that's why I gave her joint custody with me. So they couldn't touch my children again. But I got my children back and, I

mean, I was good, I was good 'till they were eighteen years old just like I promised 'em I would be till they couldn't touch them anymore. And then life happened and, you know?

SIMMONS: You were, um, you did everything that you could to protect your kids from that happening again and you definitely did your part and everything that the state required of you. And by the time your kids were eighteen, some of them had already had some contact with the legal system -

VENABLE: Yes ma'am

SIMMONS: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

VENABLE: My youngest, he got in trouble when he was eleven years old and has been in and out ever since. He's not in jail or prison, he's in mental homes. Um, my oldest daughter Rudy, she got in trouble. She was over eighteen when she got in trouble but CJ, my oldest boy, he got in some trouble also when he was younger, before he was eighteen. It's been Hell.

SIMMONS: Can we talk about about, um, can we talk about your baby and what you know about the youth prison system in Texas?

VENABLE: Youth prison system is a joke. It is cruel. It is unhumane. And it did more damage than do good. The judge even told me with Dustin that the system failed him. They kept him in there too long on his first time there, 'cuz they kept him three and a half months, his very first time going to jail. They kept him three and a half months, and by that time he wasn't scared no more. He adapted to it - you know what I mean? So, he wasn't scared and the scare tactic went out the window, and he's been Hell ever since. [00:14:07] I mean, he's not scared of nothin' I mean, he's - he's goin' back to prison today, you know mean? Like he's institutionalized or somethin'. I mean we had Gainesville State School. The officers there would buy him cheeseburgers from McDonald's, dollar cheeseburgers from McDonald's to go beat up kids because they got a kick out of that. It is a crooked system. I mean it's - it's awful.

SIMMONS: Were you able to visit him when he was incarcerated in the Youth System?

VENABLE: Yes, I was.

SIMMONS: What did those visits look like?

VENABLE: Well, when he wasn't handcuffed and shackled and all that, um, it was okay. I mean it was like one big room and you know, he sat across from me at the table and, you know I got to buy him food and stuff like that and we talked and stuff but, then there was times though when he was handcuffed and shackled and, you know, because he did something or, he made a threat or he was, whatever. And the guards there, some were okay and some of 'em were just petty. I mean they nitpicked and tormented these kids to make them act out and act the way they did, you know what I mean? They ask for that, that's way they were treatin' 'em. You know, you have your good guards and you have your bad guards, you know, anywhere you go I guess.

SIMMONS: Um, did substance abuse disorder play a factor in some of - in some of your youngest babies' decisions?

VENABLE: Yes, yes. Substance abuse has been a big factor in a lot of things that's happened in my life.

SIMMONS: [00:16:07] And then, your next son, can we talk about him just a little bit?

VENABLE: Chad?

SIMMONS: Yes.

VENABLE: My oldest one. Yeah um, Chad's Chad. Um, drugs have a lot to do with his problem too.

SIMMONS: And how has his experience been with the legal system in our country?

VENABLE: He's been in and out. Um, he gets G Ward every time he goes to, um, prison. And ah, he was at a unit last time he was locked up in a unit and um, the guards would hit him with, like, sticks in the head. [scoffs] And I remember, um, me and my daughter went and visited him one time and he showed me this knot he had on his head from the guard hittin' him in the head with the - like a nunchuck. And, no joke 'cuz during visitation they would walk back and forth behind him and they would have the sticks in the back of their, you know, uniform. And they were not afraid to tell him that they would use it against them. You know?

SIMMONS: Did you get to have contact visits with him?

VENABLE: No, I did not. It is behind glass. In-in a cage kinda thing. This time it's not like it's behind glass, but he's not like in a cage, you know, it's like an open thing in the back. But he is behind glass. Not allowed to touch him.

SIMMONS: How is that? How is that for a mom when you're seeing your baby? And not able to hold his hand or touch him or hug him.

VENABLE: It hurts. I felt bad.

SIMMONS: [00:18:07] How do you think he feels not getting that from you?

VENABLE: I think it-it hurts him. I think, you know, it effects him. But he don't let it be shown, you know, because he's-he's a boy, he's a man, you know, and that bothers him. But I do think it bothers him.

SIMMONS: And then your oldest daughter, Brittany.

VENABLE: Yeah.

SIMMONS: And she's had some legal trouble. Can we talk about that?

VENABLE: Yeah, she got into some trouble, um, the very first time she got in trouble it shocked me because Brittany never got in trouble like that, you know? And, um, it shocked me because then when I found out she was really doing drugs, I mean I had my suspicions, but I didn't know know until then. And that sucked really bad. And this last time that she went to prison, it really sucked because, I mean, she was G Ward, and the only visit that I had with her before she got G Ward I wasn't allowed to have contact because we were with her best friend even though her best friend was on there as "sister", we never had a problem with it before, we had a problem with it this time. So, I wasn't even able to touch her then so I went six years without even touching her. But she's out now and she's doing great, so. But it sucked. And I blame myself a lot for my kids bein' the way they are because, they see, you know, they learn what they see. And even though I try to hide a lot of things for my kids, they saw a lot too, you know, 'cuz I didn't want them, I wanted them to know the real world. You know, my way of thinking was I want them to be able to make it if they had to, you know, on the streets or whatever. And I regret that.

SIMMONS: [00:20:13] I'm gonna pause this real quick.

VENABLE: All right.

[END OF VIDEO ONE]

SIMMONS: [00:00:05] So, just because I do have personal knowledge of your family, I'm proud to be a part of your family, I know that you guys are really close. Can you talk about your kids' relationships with each other growing up and into adulthood?

VENABLE: Um, the girls were real close. Um, I mean they were all real close when they were together, but then, you know, when CPS came in and Brittany and Haley went with my brother and my mom had the boys. You know, they kinda bonded with each other then, but um, Haley and Brittany had a real good relationship and then this last time Brittany went to jail, um, Haley grew up and she started drugs and it-it broke Britney's heart. And uh, Haley and Dustin has a good relationship, but sometimes it's- I think it's kinda toxic for each other, for them to be around each other. Whatever it is.

SIMMONS: Why do you think it might not be healthy right now for them to be around each other?

VENABLE: Haley's trying to do the right thing. She's clean right now, I'm very proud of her, um, but it's-I just think that Haley wants to be his friend and stuff and not tell him he shouldn't do certain things, you know what I mean? She kinda like enables him some. I think not thinkin' about the big picture.

SIMMONS: All for your kids

VENABLE: [indecipherable]

SIMMONS: Say that again, Stacy?

VENABLE: Brittany just trusts me hard, you know, she trusted - she wants the best for all of 'em and sometimes her approach is not the right one to take. I don't think but - that's Brittany, you know? She has the best intentions.

SIMMONS: As the oldest child, do you think that Brittany has taken on a little bit of a parental role with her siblings?

VENABLE: I do, I do. I think, um, cuz sometimes I just- I don't know I don't want to say I'm not able to is just, sometimes I don't make the best decisions on some things, you know? I don't think the right way on some things. Brittany has more of a realistic knowledge of things going on. You know what I mean? Yeah.

SIMMONS: Can we talk about, um, let's talk about - you have a new grandbaby.

VENABLE: I do, I do.

SIMMONS: Tell me about him.

VENABLE: I love him so much. (laughs) I was thinking the other day, and I - I was thinkin' was God granted - gave Dustin my youngest one, a baby. Because God's gonna take Dustin away from me. That's what I think. I don't know if it's gonna be prison, the streets or, you know what. And he is gonna go back to prison, so that's a given.

SIMMONS: What makes you think that he could go back to prison so easily?

VENABLE: (sniffs) He's already violated probation. [00:04:07] He's gotten two new charges pending. He's gone. I know that. He knows that too. He regrets it but you know, he's already done it, so's no changin' it. (sniffs) But my grandbaby's-

SIMMONS: How are you coping with that? How are you coping with the- yeah, tell me about how you're coping with knowing that there's some legal things that very likely will put Dustin back in prison.

VENABLE: I try not to think about it. But I know the phone call's comin'. I know it's gonna happen. There's nothin' I can do to tell him. I just wanted to spend all the time you can with this - his baby. But he told me, he said, um, he wants to cuz he loves him but at the same time he don't want to because he don't want to be close to him and then get yanked away. So, I mean, I understand that but still.

SIMMONS: Your-your dad had problems with illegal substances, um, you and your kids have all been victims of mass incarceration, and, um, frankly overcriminalization in this country. And I'm just wondering if during any of those incarcerations between you all, did the state provide any kind of help for your substance abuse disorder?

VENABLE: Psh, no. They sent me to, uh, Cornell is, Cornell at the time, it's [inaudible] maybe I believe now South Dallas County Rehab. They sent me there for a fraud case that I had, not a possession charge - possession charge it is they sent me to prison for with no, nothing. And Cornell, I mean, it- it was Hell, um, I won't shoot dope no more (laughs) after that place. I mean I- it worked for a little while and then life got, you know, real, and I slipped up and I fell but, it worked for eight years, it worked. But, um, it really wasn't anything they did anyway, it more what I've done, you know what I mean, that got me clean that time. Prison systems don't offer you any help with drugs or, you know, issues with dealin' with, you know, life and aftermath of gettin' out and not having nothing in tryin' to start over, they don't help you with any of that. They send ya out- they're wantin' you to fail till you come back. It's a paycheck for them. All it is.

SIMMONS: You said that that rehab place was really rough. Can you tell me about that a little bit?

VENABLE: I mean, um, it was just, um, it was like daycare, you know? It was like, you're a child and, other people tellin' you what to do, and - I mean the place itself was not that bad. It really wasn't. Um, there was some good people there. But, um, I don't know, it just, It was like, you're in day care and other inmates were telling you what to do, somebody that was just as low as you are tellin' you what to do. And it was like they controlled when you

smoked, they controlled when you ate, they controlled when you went to the bathroom, you know what I mean? [00:08:09] And it's like, it was a joke to me, it really was. I mean, I did get a little bit out of it, but, I got more when I got out and was attending in AA and all that. I got more out of that than I did that program. And then right after I got out of that program, they got sued because they were videotaping sessions and that kind of made me think too. I mean, when I do my one-on-ones was I being videotaped, you know what I mean? That's some sheisty shit. But yeah. That's not, no. The prison system didn't help me at all. (sighs)

SIMMONS: Was that an in-prison program or it was out of -

VENABLE: It was at Dallas County, the county program. Yeah. Prison didn't offer me nothing.

SIMMONS: Um, and I know -

VENABLE: All it did was [inaudible] and that's it.

SIMMONS: And Stacy, I don't care about anybody's charges, we don't have to get into any kind of detail, but just for context, um, I know that your kids' biological father is not in their life, um, but can you just briefly talk about if he was incarcerated and did he have any substance abuse problems as well?

VENABLE: He does have substance abuse problems and he was incarcerated. He decided he's gonna touch my two children. My two youngest. I think that has a lot to do with their problems, too. But, um, yeah he's out of their life.

SIMMONS: So your kids grew up kind of knowing they, uh, they experienced your brief incarceration, um, and they watched you fight your addiction and-and overcome it for a time -

VENABLE: Yeah

SIMMONS: And they watched their biological [00:10:09] dad, um cause trauma to the family.

VENABLE: Yeah, he got ten years

SIMMONS: Okay. And then they grew up with him in prison.

VENABLE: Yeah, that was stepdad though, so.

SIMMONS: We could talk about him if you want? They have a stepdad that they can look up to?

VENABLE: Yeah, um, Johnny's been around, I've been with him for like, twenty-one years. So, um, he's went through all this with me. Yeah, he's been there for them kids. He has not been locked up or anything like that. I mean he's you know, he's a good guy.

SIMMONS: Can we talk about, um, prison visitation? We talked a little bit about you getting to visit your youngest in the Texas youth prison system, but let's talk about - let's talk about your oldest baby. Can you just walk me through, you said that all of her visits, you didn't ever get to contact, have contact with her last incarceration.

VENABLE: Yeah, no, I did not.

SIMMONS: Can you - imagine trying to describe to someone that has never visited anyone in prison what the whole process looks like? Can you walk us through that?

VENABLE: Oh wow. Well you go in there and they treat you like an inmate, you know, you get searched, you go through metal detectors, you get patted down. They talk to you like crap, you know what I mean? Um, you finally get to see your baby and she's behind glass or in a cage or whatever the unit has. You have to buy their food and have to open it

up and put it on a plate and give it to the guard to give to them. You can't even give them their own food. You know, you have to take it out the packages and everything. It's just really humiliating, really kinda, you know? Um, basically, um, there was one time that I went to visit Brittany. I believe she was a San Saba or Lockhart. I think it was Lockhart. Anyway, um, they strip-searched me. And, ah, that was really humiliating in- I was really upset about that, because, uh, I had a wire on my bra. So I had to go in the bathroom with the officer and, you know, show her. That was kinda- that was kind of bad, you know what I mean?

SIMMONS: She had to remove your clothes?

VENABLE: My top, yes. To show her that it was a bra with a wire in it. I mean, she clearly can feel that, you know. I think the guards have a lot of issues with having no control at home. So they come there and they, you know, act like they're running something. I guess they really are, ha.

SIMMONS: Hmm.

VENABLE: Yeah. That was- that was more stringent I had visiting my child but at the end it was worth it because I got to see her at least, you know? I got to touch her through the glass with our hands.

SIMMONS: Were you able to communicate with your children in any other way besides visitation?

VENABLE: Um, I didn't get very many phone - I didn't get any phone calls from Brittany while she was in prison. I got letters and stuff like that but now they have tablets and stuff. So I get to talk to my oldest boy, now, you know, on the phone and stuff. We don't really write that much now that they have tablets and phone calls, but-

SIMMONS: [00:14:10] What kind of things would you write? Like, to your oldest daughter? Tell me about writing her. What- what would you try to tell her through the mail?

VENABLE: To just be -just to be good. Just-we're gonna make it through it, you know. She'll be home in no time, you know. Told her what was happening at home and -sometimes I didn't tell her everything that has happened at home, you know, 'cuz I didn't try to give her all bad news. So, uh I tried to encourage her a lot. Yeah, emphasize how much I missed her and loved her. And I was proud of her because she's - I mean, she did get her GED and she's-she's accomplished some things in there, you know?

SIMMONS: Who picked -

VENABLE: (interrupts) I think it's better-

SIMMONS: Go ahead, please.

VENABLE: I think it's better, I mean, it's made her better, I mean really - I mean, she found you.

SIMMONS: We did meet. We did meet in prison. Um, I wish it could have been somewhere else.

VENABLE: Yeah, but you know what? It happened for a reason.

SIMMONS: Um, let's talk about Brittany getting out of prison. What did that look like? How did you know she was coming home?

VENABLE: Well at first, I was on my way - I was gonna go get her, and she had a hold for Delta County. For a charge. So, she had to go there after I was almost to her to pick her up. Um, they called and Delta County picked her up instead, I wasn't allowed to

pick her up, so I had to wait a couple of days, I think it was like four or five days, and then she went to court in Delta County, so I got to go to Delta County and pick her up. I did not go to the courthouse, Johnny did, and it was like forever in a day. I never thought they're going to come out. I didn't know what was happening but finally he came out and we [00:16:10] waited for her to walk back across the street [inaudible] the jail and get booked out and when she came out, it was great. I mean, she had on them lovely looking clothes that they give you, but was great, you know, I got to touch her and I was happy, it was a good day. It was a real good day.

SIMMONS: At that time when Brittany got out of prison, where were your other kids? Do you remember?

VENABLE: Um, I believe CJ and Dustin were locked up, I don't know where Haley was. I don't remember where Haley was. Oh, she was living in Hubbard, I think. But she came that day when she got here, she met us here, I think you got here right before we got here, the house, and she was here when we got here. So, she got to see her.

SIMMONS: How did that feel, seeing your girls together in the same room?

VENABLE: It was good. It really was. It was so good. I was kind of scared because Haley's boyfriend was here and Brittany wanted to beat him up, but they acted right. So, it was okay. But Haley felt like she was overwhelmed or whatever. So we went out to eat, you know, and, um, Haley decided not to go 'cuz she thought it was overwhelming for Brittany, which I think it was a little bit overwhelming. I mean, cuz she was locked up for six years and you know, it was different coming out, you know? But it was really good though. Real good. A happy day.

SIMMONS: Shortly after Brittany came home, I think that your oldest son got out around that time?

VENABLE: Yes.

SIMMONS: Can you tell me about your first Christmas with those kids out of prison?

VENABLE: It was- it was good. Um, CJ, he had this girlfriend and she was shy I guess about coming around us or whatever, and she didn't really come around. So he wasn't here that long on Christmas day, but he did show up. And it was, it was good. It was good. Haley was here. Dustin of course, Dustin wasn't here, he was locked up. No, he was out. No, he was not out. I don't remember if he was out or not that first Christmas to be honest with you! I have not had all four of my kids out at one time since they took 'em from CPS. That's the last time I had 'em all four out at same time, it was right after CPS.

SIMMONS: And they were little kids.

VENABLE: Yeah. And ever since then one of 'em's always been locked up. It was Dustin or it was CJ or, you know, they're the ones that got into trouble when they were minors, so you know, Brittany waited 'till she was a big girl. But yeah, they were always, one of 'em gone. I have no family portraits of all four of my children together. I have to crop them in.

SIMMONS: Tell me about that, describe what that picture looks like.

VENABLE: Uh, I have a couple of 'em. Some of 'em, most of 'em when I was in jailhouse uniform, cropped in or - It's just odd. It's odd.

SIMMONS: So you had a family portrait and then, um, whatever family member might not be there you add them into the picture.

VENABLE: Yeah. So they're like, totally gone, ya know what I mean? They're not like, I mean, just like totally off-picture. It's not normal. But it's okay. You know, you do what you gotta do. Yeah.

SIMMONS: Stacy, did your mom ever have substance abuse problems? Or was she able to stay away from that?

VENABLE: No, she never did. I mean she got high one time off of some hash or something? And, oh shit. And she wanted, um, my dad to take her to the hospital because she didn't like the way she felt, she thought she was dying. So my mom really, uh, has not experienced anything after that ever. I mean she does good to drink a margarita, you know what I mean? It's like, she's square. And then she has me, you know, the black sheep. But it's okay. (chuckles) It'll be alright.

SIMMONS: Tell me about - um, I'm sorry because I just have all of these pictures running around in my mind of your sweet family and I'm just trying to think about what you think this Christmas will look like. You have this new grandbaby.

VENABLE: I do have a grandbaby. Um, I don't foresee Dustin being here for Christmas. CJ won't be here Christmas. But I have my girls and I have a grandbaby. And they'll call on the phone. It'll be ok.

SIMMONS: You do something for your kids at Christmas time when they're gone.

VENABLE: They always get presents. They don't visit a holiday or birthday when they come out, they have all the presents for the whole time they've been, you know -five years, six years, whatever you know, ask Britney she had stuff from- for six years for Christmas to come home to. You know, her Dallas Cowboys shirt is like six years old because you know, it was six years ago [inaudible] but, yeah. (laughs) They're never forgotten.

SIMMONS: How do you make sure that they feel that they're not forgotten while they're in there? Like CJ, for example, um, your oldest son that's incarcerated right now. What do you do for him to make sure he knows he's not forgotten about right now?

VENABLE: Um, I talk to him. I mean I answer his phone calls. I visit him. I have a visit actually on the 7th to go see him. Um, his birthday's on the 26th. Should have made it for that day, but I wasn't thinking at the time so, I just- I try to be there for him, you know? I do what I can for him.

SIMMONS: Stacy, what is your hope for your grandbaby, Rowena?

VENABLE: I hope my grandbaby just don't go down the same road. I hope that he breaks the chain, the cycle. Um, he's my second chance. I wanna try something different with him, you know? Maybe shelter him a little bit more than I did my children. But not too much because I don't want him to live in a fantasy world, you know what I mean? Um, and he's gonna know his daddy. I'll make sure of that.

SIMMONS: If you could go back to twenty-year-old Stacy-

VENABLE: U-huh

SIMMONS: -what would you want her to know about life?

VENABLE: [00:24:16] That it's not what everybody makes it out to be, you know? It's not fucking easy. And uh, you don't have to stay with somebody to make a family. You can have family without having to be with somebody that does you wrong. You know? And you need to make yourself happy, nobody else.

SIMMONS: Stacy, is there anything that you had in mind that you wanted to share that we didn't talk about?

VENABLE: No, I don't think so. I don't know.

SIMMONS: Ok, I'm gonna turn the recording off. Thank you so much.

VENABLE:

All right.