

**Texas After Violence Project**  
**Interview with Mignon Zezqueaux**

Date: April 15, 2018

Location: Home of John Taylor,  
Houston, Harris County, Texas

Equipment: Sony FDR-AX1, Sony FS7

Recorded on: Sandisk ExtremePro SD Card

Interviewer: Sybil Sybille

Videographer: John Taylor, Matt Gossage

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mignon Zezqueaux is the mother of three boys, Solomon, Joseph, and Ghabriel. In her interview, Mignon speaks about the 2008 murder of her son Solomon and how his death affected her, Joseph, and Ghabriel. She speaks particularly about its impact on Ghabriel, who was introduced into the juvenile justice system shortly after the loss of his brother, and is now incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Mignon details their interactions with law enforcement, the court system, and the prison system, with a specific focus on mental health in the criminal justice system. She explains how those experiences inspired and inform her work as a criminal justice activist and member of the Texas Advocates for Justice. This interview took place on April 15, 2018, in Houston, Harris County, Texas at the home of John Taylor.

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[CLIP 1]

SYBIL SYBILLE: Yes, thank you. This is Texas After Violence Project. This is an oral history of how we have been affected or how this particular young lady right here. I'll let her introduce herself. What is your name?

ZEZQUEAUX: My name is Mignon Zezequeaux.

SYBILLE: Zezequeaux, and my name is Sybil. I'm with Texas Advocates for Justice. We will be doing— asking Mignon some questions about how she was affected by some things that happened in her life and why she is a part of this particular project.

[GOSSAGE: Sybil, I'm sorry to interrupt, could we adjust your chair a little bit?

SYBILLE: Yes.

GOSSAGE: More front facing. Better.

SYBILLE: Okay.

GOSSAGE: And just make sure that's okay for the camera. I wanted an angle and less of a profile. Alright, thank you.

SYBILLE: Is that better?

GOSSAGE: Sorry about that, yeah.

SYBILLE: No, that's not a problem, I'm the one that's off a bit.

(cross-talking)]

SYBILLE: Okay, Mignon, where are you from?

ZEZQUEAUX: Well, I'm a military baby, so when you say “where are you from,” I equate that to where I've spent the most time. And that's been in Houston, Texas. I was born in Germany. Come from a military family. Both my mother and father were in the military so we did a lot of shuffling around in the US. We spent some time overseas in Southeast Asia and Thailand. When my father retired, he retired here in Houston, so we've been here ever since. But I have since, in my lifetime, I've also been residents of Richmond, Virginia, North of Virginia, Portsmouth. So I came back to Houston in 1988. My mother had suffered a major stroke. I was really concerned about her health so I moved back here to take care of her.

SYBILLE: Okay.

GOSSAGE: One second. Sorry about that. Okay. Thank you. Sorry about that.

SYBILLE: Okay, so you moved here to take care of your mom. I totally understand that. Sounds like family is extremely important for you.

ZEZQUEAUX: Definitely, definitely.

SYBILLE: Can you tell me a bit about your family? You have children. How many?

ZEZQUEAUX: I had three sons. The oldest is Joseph, the middle son is Solomon, and the youngest son is Ghabriel. Solomon and Ghabriel, I had them in Virginia, and Ghabriel I had here in Houston. I had the most amazing births because I had my kids at home.

SYBILLE: Oh, that's wonderful!

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, I didn't go to the hospital. I was against that at the time. I wanted a wholesome birth and things like that. For religious reasons too. [phone ringing] I had Joseph at home first. Excuse me, I'm sorry.

SYBILLE: It happens.

[TAPE CUT]

SYBILLE: You were in the middle of saying that because of religious reasons you had your babies at home.

ZEZQUEAUX: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, I was into a natural way of living. And when I discovered that I was pregnant, I was in training to be a mid-wife, so I had never actually seen a baby being born so my first class I was at a live birth and I was so amazed at this whole process and the lady that was giving birth she had several children. Hers was really kind of easy, but then I thought about my own. It was funny, because the church was on a tour and they had come back and we were gonna have this picnic in the park and I wanted to go to that picnic so bad and I told my son and I said, just wait until after the picnic and he heard me.

SYBILLE: Well.

ZEZQUEAUX: Because after the picnic I went into labor. My water broke and I went into labor. But I was in labor with him for about 12 hours.

SYBILLE: Wow.

ZEZQUEAUX: When it came time for the birthing, I had to actually sit on the milk crates with my feet up, because that was the only way he was coming. When I sat on the birthing stool, he stopped and everything stopped. But when I got into the right position, he was like, "Okay, it's time now. Here I come." And he was such a quiet baby. He was

such a quiet baby. The second one, Solomon, I thought Solomon was an immaculate conception. I promise you I thought he was immaculate.

SYBILLE: (laughter) Forgive me but—

ZEZQUEAUX: Girl, I went through two weeks of talking with God, trying to reason that I was not a virgin. You know that— why me? Why me? But at the time I was working two full time jobs and I had a flea market booth on the weekends. I was tired. I didn't know what had happened to make babies had happened.

[laughter]

So, for about two weeks, I was just amazed that God had chosen me. But I think when in retrospect, where I am today, I think that was a blessing. That birth was very, very special. I had no pain with him at all. It was a clean birth. It was beautiful. And the way that I felt after that birth. I was on such a high that all I was doing was smiling, just smiling. Kids had come into the room during the birthing. The two ladies that were acting as midwives they were so nervous that they didn't even pay attention to the kids. But I did. And they were so very quiet like something definitely holy was happening. I saw them, nobody else was paying attention to them you know and they quietly watched that birth and it was really, really beautiful. Ghabriel— no one wanted me to be at home having Ghabriel. I had gestational diabetes, so that was the factor about not having him at home. But he came very quickly and he was surprising. When he came out he was just like "Ah, I'm here. Thank ya, I'm out. Whew. Okay." It was so funny.

SYBILLE: But it was at home?

ZEZQUEAUX: No.

SYBILLE: It was at the hospital?

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes, it was at the hospital, and it was some beautiful children. The only thing that I think went through my mind, I think, with each pregnancy, was that these would be young black men and when they would be born they would be in danger. So it would be my job as a mother to make sure that they were educated and protected. I mean, that was just fundamental with me.

SYBILLE: I can certainly understand that. That time, and even the times now, how they are. Let me ask this, Mignon. What made you want to do this interview right here? What inspired you to participate in this interview?

ZEZQUEAUX: I'm a criminal justice activist, but in my personal life, there are things that bring you to the level—there are things that bring you to the realization that you know that you have to continue with some kind of activism in order to get the stories of these tribulations told, because as a young woman, I witnessed not only from history, but from friends and associates how black men were profiled and how the criminal justice

system is an injustice system when it comes to black males, so I always had that in the back of my mind.

But when I became intimate with the system through my children, it changed a lot of aspects for me. First of all, we were victims of homicide. We were victims of crime. That led to, I believe, one of the reasons my youngest son has been incarcerated and with that there comes— it's multifaceted because the trauma that we went through from the murder of my son, from the murder of Solomon, triggered so much emotion, so much trauma that it changed behavior, especially in Ghabriel. Solomon was not only his big brother, that was his father figure, that was his trainer, his encourager. My oldest two— my oldest son,

SYBILLE: Joseph.

ZEZQUEAUX: Joseph, yes. He had gotten his GED. Solomon was in his senior year of high school and he was assisting his aunt in raising her two young sons and one day she put him out. I didn't find out about it until about a week later and I was incensed about that because one, I wasn't notified. Two, that completely messed up his senior year. You know, he was due to graduate.

SYBILLE: Understandably so.

ZEZQUEAUX: And he was playing basketball then. He had a lot of opportunities opened to him and they were swept away. And so Ghabriel— we focused on Ghabriel. Not only was he in school but he was playing basketball and he was being scouted, so they had a really really tight bond as far as that goes. We knew that Gabe was gonna go to college. He was gonna play basketball and that was what the track was for him. Yeah.

SYBILLE: Sounds like to me there was a plan in place.

ZEZQUEAUX: Oh, yeah.

SYBILLE: You knew what the plan was, the kids knew, your boys—they knew what the plan was. How important was education for you? For them?

ZEZQUEAUX: Well, education was always important. I come from a family of educators. My father was a professor, my mother worked with children with disabilities. She had her degrees. She was also an amazing artist, so we had that influence, and from looking back in my family, everyone was in education and I felt the same for my kids. My oldest son, he was prolific at a young age. In kindergarten, he was tutoring math for other kindergartners. They loved science and they loved math.

When Ghabriel came along they, you know, were just— everyone was just into school and about getting education and we had our challenges just like any other parent. You had some days that they didn't wanna go to school but they had to. I worked at night so that I could be available for them during the day when they got out of school. I worked at

night for seventeen years while they were all coming up and I was determined that I would be there for them during the day when they came home. So, the time that I would go to work, they usually would have a babysitter.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, yeah, until they got much older.

SYBILLE: So sounds like you raised them as a single parent for the most part.

ZEZQUEAUX: For the most part yes.

SYBILLE: Okay. Then something horrific happened.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes. We had talked as a family about my retiring and what we would do once I had made that break. We were excited about that because Solomon and I wanted to go to school together for two years. He wanted an associate's degree. I hadn't really made a decision as to what I wanted to do. I had been to nursing school at one part in my life, but I didn't complete it. That was due to my mother's stroke when I came back to Houston. So, I was in school then, but I didn't pick it back up. So I really didn't know what I wanted to do because I had come from journalism and I had done some theatre. I had done a lot of things. So, I didn't know exactly what I wanted going back. It was an opportunity for me to just explore. You know, what was out there and what was it that was gonna catch my fancy.

So, we had also planned because I would be retiring, there would be a difference in income. So, with the retirement funds, we were going to start a real estate company. We wanted to create homes for homeless families. So we wanted to take—we wanted to purchase tax delinquent properties, rehab it and keep on that till we had about maybe ten houses. We had a formula for the tenants. You know, everybody would start out at \$1000, but you got discounts for things. You get a discount if you had a job.

SYBILLE: Wow.

ZEZQUEAUX: You got a discount if both of you were working. You got a discount for each child. You know, if you were on the bus you got a discount. So by the end of calculating all of their discounts we wanted a person to not have to pay a person no more than \$500 a month in rent period across the board. That was our goal was to make sure that rent was affordable because we had been homeless before so we knew the challenges of that.

SYBILLE: So that's what inspired you to move that way?

ZEZQUEAUX: Oh yeah, definitely.

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: Definitely, definitely. When you've been through that situation—and my boys were always so brave. You know they were like, "Okay momma, we moving, we're gonna do this." I didn't keep things from them. I wasn't the type of parent that was gonna hide a real situation. If momma couldn't make rent, you all knew that she couldn't make rent too. If the bill was high, or something—I didn't leave that out for them because one day they were gonna have a family and these are things that you're gonna have to go through, especially if you're gonna have children. So I need you to understand that there are some struggles that you're gonna go through. But what had got us to the point of wanting to help homeless families was through our own experience. We were involved with ACORN [Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now] at around '98-'99 and we were trying to get a homestead ordinance passed.

SYBILLE: Can I just ask you for the purposes of this interview what ACORN is?

ZEZQUEAUX: ACORN was an organization at that particular time. They were definitely involved with voters' rights and in issues of predatory lending at that time, 'cause that was just, it was—we were hearing horror stories across America about predatory lending and how people were losing their homes and things like that. In our neighborhoods we had abandoned properties. People had left properties because they were tax delinquent, or this reason or that reason, but they were viable houses that just needed some good rehab and someone to invest in the time and the energy to make it a home.

We were working with the city of Houston at that time. Mayor Lee Brown was Mayor. And we were working to get this homestead ordinance passed and using the existing homes that—some of them weren't even on market but we knew within the neighborhood, you know, this has been abandoned. Ain't nobody lived there in ten years, or nobody has been to this house in five years, and it's just sitting there dilapidating. We had identified 20 houses that we wanted to use for a project, just to see how it would go. We had rules, regulations and it was—we used Habitat for Humanity as part of the model, because we wanted to be able to come in, do the work ourselves on the house, which would equate to down payments or whatever the city was gonna require from the tenants.

It was good work, but like some organizations have histories, ACORN had a history too, and we watched things collapse from within here in Houston and it put a damper on what we were trying to achieve. That experience, we had to reach out to our Congresswoman. Because it was just—it became too much confusion into what was going on. The house that I had identified actually belonged to housing and community development but it had been abandoned for several years. Once that was established then the city wanted me to get out of there, and they were trying to evict me and I really didn't—and we didn't have a place to go but the city did assist us in finding a residence for the family.

SYBILLE: So then, you ended up in one of those homes and that's how you got into the city wanting to evict you?

ZEZQUEAUX: Oh yeah.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: But it wasn't too nasty or anything like that, but Sheila Jackson-Lee [Congresswoman] wanted to make sure that we were secured and we were. We were—we had a pretty good run of it.

SYBILLE: That's good. That's good.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, there are people who are in city governments and our local governments that are about assisting families, that do care about our communities, so, yeah.

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: We try to keep a relationship with them.

SYBILLE: I recall you saying, when you and your son, you were going to go to school together—

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah.

SYBILLE: And you told me that he was really good in building things and rehabbing. He had a knack for that, which led to one of the ideas of why you wanted to go into this particular type of business to help people who were challenged financially and with other things, as far as living, housing—their basic needs being met. I commend you on that.

ZEZQUEAUX: Well thank you,

SYBILLE: I really, really do, because we have to give back.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, and you have to go through and experience in order to understand it. You know, and I think that's why I am where I am today because of those experiences, the impact of those experiences and what can be learned from them.

SYBILLE: No doubt, no doubt. Now, let's talk about Solomon, your middle son who was murdered. Tell me how that affected, made an impact on your entire family's life. How it impaired the behaviors of your younger son, the older son, you. The state of mind that you guys had to be in. I guess that's a broad question—two part, because I want to know about that grieving process. I can't imagine for myself what it might be like to lose a child. I can only empathize. What was that like for you?

ZEZQUEAUX: Most everybody that knew me, knew that I was about my boys. If you knew me you knew my boys. It was always my boys. They were always together, so as a parent I never even entertained the thought of losing one of them. That never

occurred to me. So like I said, the relationship I had with my sons, I didn't hold anything back from them. I didn't baby talk them. From a young age they knew the parts of their body, they knew what kind of people that they should avoid. Who was friends, and who was not friends and I kept a close watch on them you know. And I'm sorry, but my memories are coming through as you talk to me, so you need to refocus me.

SYBILLE: I will. So: One, I know that when your son, Solomon—he got killed. I know that you watched out for them. Now, since you did that, and you as a parent and anybody as a parent does not think that your child is gonna go before you. What did that make you feel like when that happened— when the trauma hit you that, “Okay, my son is dead,” and you didn't find out, 'cause we talked about it before now— nobody came to tell you between 11:30 pm and 2:30am. Here you are, the helicopter is going and it's actually a life flight for your child. What was that like?

ZEZQUEAUX: I was—there was like, this commotion going on in the apartment so I stepped out onto my balcony and I could see a lot of reflections from sirens and things like that. I had heard the helicopter just before—I could feel the vibration it was just that close. I was like "man what is going on?" And then I thought you know it must be a bust because we had problems with traffic coming through the apartment all times of the day and that was one of the things that used to keep me woke was the cars coming back and forth and back and forth and I had talked to management about it because when we went to the pool there was all of this activity and you really couldn't enjoy the apartment pool.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: So I'm thinking, “Okay, it's a bust. They're looking for people, they got the helicopters after them and stuff,” and you know, yeah, yeah. So about 2:30 that morning, I'm hearing this knock on the door and I come and it's my oldest son. And he's falling through the door in my arms talking about “Solomon's gone.” I'm like, "Gone where?" "Momma, he's gone, he's gone." I'm like, "Gone where?" Because I was getting irritated, because I was like, you know, we was supposed to be in the school tomorrow to register for our classes. What you mean he's gone? I looked at him and he was just crying and he was overwhelmed and he couldn't stand up. He was like, "Momma, he's dead." I just started screaming at him. I don't even know what I was saying. I don't even think I was audible.

And then Ghabriel got up and he was like, "What's going on? What's going on?" And just before he came in the house, I had remembered I had stepped outside on the balcony and I saw an ambulance coming through the back gate. Didn't have any lights on, you know, no sirens or anything. The light was on inside the ambulance, but it just eased on out the back gate and I just watched it. For some reason I just watched it. And then Joseph is coming through the door and I'm—it was hard for me to comprehend what he was saying but I finally got out of him that Solomon had been shot and he died and I immediately was in rescue mode. I called a couple of people and I don't think that I had really grasped what had happened. I think at some point I was still believing that he was alive. But I had to get to the hospital.

I had to get to the hospital, and one of my friends came, and we all went to the hospital. And I remember going there and asking if they had received Solomon there and they told me that they had. And I was like, "I need to see him." It took a while, but one of the head nurses came and because I had had a nursing background—some training in nursing, I had the utmost respect for the nurses on duty. And she took me to a room and she said, "Ms. Zezequeaux, I really don't think you should view his body." I'm like, "What? What you mean?" You know, I mean, that was not the thing to tell me at the time. And she's like, "he had a gunshot to the head. I think it would be best if you do not remember that picture for the rest of your life." And I just looked at her and I knew that she was sincere. I couldn't be mad at her. So, sometimes I feel like I punked out because I didn't go see his body, and at other times I think that that was merciful for me because I didn't understand, but I knew that if she gave me that warning that I needed to adhere to it.

SYBILLE: It was for a reason.

ZEZEQUEAUX: Yeah, because I didn't know—you know she's a health professional, she kinda knew, I think, what I had would have to endure going forward. I didn't. You know, I didn't. So, they finally convinced me to leave the hospital. I couldn't go to sleep, I was just screaming. I couldn't. I couldn't get a grip on what had happened. It's like I was going through two different personalities. One I was being the strong mother and holding everybody together and then at the same time I'm falling apart because I can't believe that this has happened to my child. And no, it couldn't have been him, but yes, it was. You know, going back and forth with that, back and forth with that. And when I got back to the house, I noticed that my oldest son Joseph wasn't around, I thought that he might have left with his father. But I called his father and he wasn't with him. About 6:30 the sun was just coming up. I get a phone call and my oldest son says, "They got him." They got the man who killed Solomon. They got him.

I ran out of the apartment because I was ready to jump into the car and whoop that man. The rage in me was so—they had to stop me because they saw me coming. They had to stop me and I said, "Is that the one who killed my son? Is that the one who killed my son? I want to see his face."

SYBILLE: Right, right.

ZEZEQUEAUX: You know, and they were like, "No you can't, you can't, you can't." And I ripped the police tape and I was—you know, I didn't know what I was doing.

SYBILLE: A mother in rage is what you were doing.

ZEZEQUEAUX: Yeah, I went back to the apartment and I remember early that morning that the apartment manager came and she was like, "I am so sorry." I said, "Do not say anything to me, because I told you all that there was drug activity in this apartment complex." Now then, I didn't know any details. Other than no one had come to my door, no one knocked on my door and said nothing. You feet away from me. You got people telling you—you know, telling these sheriff officers, look his mom lives right there, you

need to let her know. But instead they took down— it was Solomon's friends, it was three of them that was in the apartment with him, it was four all together. It was three that the police took down to check them for gun powder residue. Are you kidding me?

SYBILLE: Hmm. Why do you think that was, Mignon?

ZEZQUEAUX: I have no idea. Those kids were traumatized. They did not have the gun. The gun was nowhere near them. Someone attacked with a gun. They did not have gun powder residue on any of them. So that really raised some issues for me because I felt like his friends were being profiled. I really felt that they were being profiled. There was no reason whatsoever to take those kids through that. None, none, none. I still say that today. There was no reason for them to have to go downtown.

SYBILLE: Now, you're talking about that night. You have said about Joseph. We know where Solomon was, where was Ghabriel during this time? Your youngest son.

ZEZQUEAUX: Gabe had gone for a walk earlier that night. His championship game was the next day and Ghabriel knew where Solomon hung out at, 'cause the apartment that Solomon was at was in the back section of the apartments and he was feeling restless. Now, me at the time, I was crocheting a lot, so I was quietly crocheting and he went for a walk and then he came back and got in bed. We heard the shot. Gabe heard the shot, I heard the shot, but I just didn't think anything of it, at that particular time. I was still crocheting.

SYBILLE: It was common occurrence in the area?

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, yeah. So for a long time, for several years, I couldn't remember where Ghabriel was that night. I could not remember where Ghabriel was that night. So I wrote him in Aston to explain to me where he was that night. Now mind you, let me rewind— No, I don't need to rewind yet. When Ghabriel went for his walk, he ran into the man that was gonna kill his brother before it happened. The man that killed Solomon was posted up in the stairway. And he saw Gabe and they shook hands and he wished him good luck on his game and everything and then went back to sitting on the stairway. Gabe didn't think anything of it.

SYBILLE: 'Cause everybody knew your boys.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, and Gabe was like, "Cool, you know, I'm gonna walk on back home and try to get some rest and go to sleep." I had texted Solomon earlier and told him, you know, not to stay out too late, but I knew where he was and sometimes he spent the night over there. I was perfectly cool with that because they get to watching their movies and they do teenage stuff. They weren't outside, you know, creating havoc or anything like that so I was fine with that. It took me six years to find out that tidbit.

SYBILLE: That tidbit being?

ZEZQUEAUX: Gabe going out for a walk and then coming back into the house.

SYBILLE: And having shaken the murderer of Solomon's hand.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, I had no idea that that had happened. I had no idea that that had happened. That was the hardest thing for him to deal with and I felt like he was dealing with that by himself, 'cause I didn't know. I didn't know who knew that. That was just something like I felt that he kept inside and it broke my heart when he told me. Because he suffered with that by himself. By himself, he didn't tell nobody. You know, I tried to get him to counselors, the MHMR [local mental health clinic], everything I could do for him. Because I knew if I was going through something, I knew he was going through something. And so was Joseph. You know those were the people I was concerned about, Joseph and Ghabriel and what they were going through. Ghabriel more, because Ghabriel was at home with me. Joseph wasn't. And to realize that he lived with that and blamed himself for allowing it to happen. He felt like that was his fault that it had happened, because he didn't stop him, but he didn't know.

So he didn't know. He didn't know.

SYBILLE: He didn't know.

ZEZQUEAUX: There was no way he could've known. Can we take a short break?

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: Ooh, okay. Because I got a lot of memories going through my head.

SYBILLE: I know you do.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay, let me step outside...

SYBILLE: Stand up, yeah. Drink some water. Get a mint or something. I know. Listen, I know it was difficult. I'm feeling...

[END CLIP 1]

SYBILLE: Okay, Mignon. I tell you what, I'm glad we had a moment to breathe. That was so gut wrenching. So I'm gonna take it down, kinda redirect just a bit, all right? I remember you saying that in the— at the beginning of this interview that it was important to you to make sure that your children, your boys— you said your "boys"— that you had three men of color— not just any color, but black, men. In a time that it does not appear to be so healthy to be a black man, yet we don't ask for the color of our skin. You said that you had to teach them how to behave, how to encour— how to live in society, that it was so important that they be educated, well-mannered, have respect, and know what to expect of the world around them. Would you elaborate a little more on that?

ZEZQUEAUX: I didn't want my children to grow up thinking that they were limited. Uh, I could see as a parent that they had seeds that weren't usual. You know? I could tell that their minds were not usual. That's what I'm saying. See, I never talked baby talk to my children. I didn't minimize certain things that were happening within the family, I didn't want to keep anything from them. Now, I understood that they were children and there were certain things that only children could understand. You know, I didn't teach 'em like— didn't treat them like they were adults when they were children, it was that they were children. Be yourself. You know? But let's explore this. Let's explore that. One of the things that I did was to keep my children at SHAPE Community Center. Which was an enrichment— they always had enrichment programs and things like that, and I wanted my kids to identify with their culture, and I was blessed to find programs for them, like specifically African drumming.

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: And they learned that when they were young, they learned how to make the drum, how to skin the goat, how to do things like that. Yes.

SYBILLE: Powerful.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah. So I wanted them to have that enrichment comin' up. Uh, they were involved with the Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, which was a program that not only encouraged them to be who they were, that summer they got a stipend and they had their own money. That made a big difference to them. When they started getting in sports, Joseph was phenomenal. I wish he could've had more opportunities, because he showed ability to be an awesome gymnast. You know, we'd watch him flippin' up and down the streets, and things like that. So I didn't put them in an environment to where they would be lookin' to their mama trying to make decisions. "Is that right? Is this right?" No. No, no, no. I wanted to keep everything as even as I could. I think I did pretty good with that. I think I did pretty good with that. Because I wasn't one of those types of parents where if they started dreaming about "I can do this," or "I want to be the best basketball players," parents hear that from their kids all the time. But I did not discourage it.

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: I didn't discourage it. They would find out during their own lifetime, you know, if this worked or if that worked. But for me, it was to make sure that they had a good foundation. You know, I always addressed them as sir, they used to address me as ma'am, and it's not because of—how do I want to put it? I wasn't trying to be dominant over them or anything like that, it was that I wanted them to learn respect. And if I give you respect, you're going to give respect to someone else. So I always got reports about how well-behaved my kids were, and this that and the other, and that makes a parent proud.

SYBILLE: Absolutely.

ZEZQUEAUX: Of course they had their little kid things that they went through, but for the most part, I didn't have problems with them. In school? Mm-mmm.

SYBILLE: Joseph, Solomon, and Ghabriel, they were not average boys, as you used the word "unusual".

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah.

SYBILLE: I love that. You didn't— they're not a product of their environment. Just because of the situation or the environment was typical, they had an atypical mother who believed in them wholeheartedly, made all the difference in the world. A mother that was strong—

ZEZQUEAUX: I tried.

SYBILLE:—who continues to be strong, who's still there for her kids.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah.

[00:10:02]

SYBILLE: Now, when it comes to Ghabriel, you said that you wrote him. And it was six years later that you found out what was going on with him, that you found out that he was carrying a very large burden. Why did you write him? Tell me, why did you have to write him? Where is Ghabriel, Mignon?

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay, after this— this— the murder happened, emotions, feelings was everywhere for— for Joseph. He had his own issues that he was dealing with as far as his relationship with his brother. Ghabriel had his issues that he was dealing with as it related to his brother. But they were trying to protect me.

SYBILLE: As the young men that you have raised them to be.

ZEZQUEAUX: They were trying to protect me. And I think part of their mission was that they didn't want me to really know some of the things that Solomon was about and stuff,

but the kind of mother I am—I know were in a gang. I knew that was gonna happen before you got in there. Because I know the signs, I know the situations, I know what you gonna run into at school. But I don't need you to be afraid to tell me about something. Tell me the truth. I don't care how bad it is, but tell me the truth. So when they— when they're going to school, you know, I made sure I went to the games, you know, I had relationships with teachers and things like that so they— that was another reason why I worked at night. See, I didn't want it to be an excuse of "well, she can't get off work right now," oh no, I'm on my way. I'm on my way. You know, so um... Give me the question again, 'cause my mind is—

SYBILLE: Where was Ghabriel?

ZEZQUEAUX: Gabe, uh—

SYBILLE: You had to write him to find out the burden that he was carrying.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay, that's what I wanted to talk, too, about, uh, mental health.

SYBILLE: Right.

ZEZQUEAUX: I was going through serious PTSD. Uh, I had holes in my memory. There were things that I could not remember that I should've been able to remember. There were um—there were just complete blanks, and I could not—I couldn't see Ghabriel in the house, I couldn't understand where he was when all of this was goin' on, it was a complete blank. And that had been bothering me for several years, but I didn't speak about it either. You know, and it just came to the point one time when I had to ask him, because I didn't know. And he wrote me back, and he detailed what happened that night. And it broke my heart.

SYBILLE: Again, where is he? You had to write, so the communication was through writing. So he's not here in Houston.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right. Ghabriel is currently incarcerated. He has been for the last five years. He has a year to go on his sentence. He has a robbery conviction. What started Ghabriel on that path was the murder of this brother. First of all, he felt like an income had been lost to the family, and it was his duty to make that up. In reality, if you don't have a job, if you not in a program or something like that, then you're able to get into mischief, okay? But he didn't think like that. It wasn't that he was trying to do something for him. He was trying to relieve a burden off of me by taking a burden onto himself. Which he didn't understand that he didn't have to do. But he felt that that was the right thing for him to do. So he started things like pushin' pills. Okay, and he got busted with that and he was into the juvenile— got introduced into the juvenile system. He got probation on that. Then the next thing— because we were homeless. We were able to stay— I was able to sustain us for a year after this happened, but without me having another income and everything being completely shifted, we lost our lease. The apartment people would not let me out of my lease.

[00:16:15]

SYBILLE: Mmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: I tried hard to get out of that lease. They would not let me out of my lease. That's what they needed to do.

SYBILLE: Right.

ZEZQUEAUX: But they didn't. So with my children knowing what's going on in the household, you know, he's thinking, I can't let mama break down, I can't—I have to shoulder some of this responsibility. Where at the time, I'm like no, you don't have to do that. But we're not seein' each other's view of that. So he went through that. We thought everything was gonna work out okay. But while we were homeless, we—I was sitting a house for a friend of mine, and he was supposed to be going to get some movies for us to watch. And one of his friends called him in a panic because he had a situation with his sister and this that and the other, come to find out she had coerced her brother, which was Gabe's friend, and Gabe, over there to her and her boyfriend's apartment. And because she was mad at him, she wanted them to take some of his things, and it was just a big mess. Anyway, Gabe got caught. And they charged him with burglary of a habitation.

SYBILLE: Mmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay? I spoke to the guy whose apartment it was. Because he liked Ghabriel. You know, they were in music together. He had respect for Ghabriel. He didn't want that charge on Ghabriel. At all. He did not want that charge on Ghabriel. We talked to the law—we had a court-appointed attorney.

SYBILLE: That's a whole 'nother story, I'm sure.

ZEZQUEAUX: That was what changed all of us at that point. Not only were we dealing with the loss of Solomon, but when you're dealing with the criminal justice system, and you're dealing with juveniles, this court appointed attorney made it seem like he still has a future even though he's got a felony, this that and the other. And somethin' just wasn't clickin' right to me. But I'm like, but this is a court appointed attorney, I know she's fighting for Gabe. Blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. No.

I mean, but I didn't learn that 'till afterwards, you see. Because they wanted Ghabriel to plead guilty so that he could come home, so that he could go back to school, so that he could join the military, so that he could do this and he could do that, that was all a lie. That was all a lie. Once you have a felony on you, that felony is going to stay. Don't give me that expunge and—you know, we can expunge the record, and we can do this—bull. You're lying. You're straight up lying to my face. I'm telling you that the man does not want to testify. Why do you want Gabe to plead guilty? I couldn't—It just wasn't computing right for me. And when Gabe plead guilty to that charge, I never will forget,

he turned around and he looked at me like this is not right. And I'm looking at him like this is not right. But he made that plea. And he got—

[00:20:28]

SYBILLE: Was that his decision, to make it? I mean, there was—

ZEZQUEUX: That was what we—I feel like we were coerced to do.

SYBILLE: To do, mm-hmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know. This lady had a hell of a lot more knowledge than I did.

SYBILLE: Yeah.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know, as to what the repercussions of this was. You know, you not explaining to me that this is no longer a juvenile type of, you know, incident. This is a felony, this is what grown folks deal with.

SYBILLE: How old was Gabe at the time, Mignon?

ZEZQUEAUX: Gabe was 16 when he first— when he got arrested. By the time he went to court, he was 17.

SYBILLE: Okay. Still a minor.

ZEZQUEAUX: Still a minor, but they tried him as an adult. Yeah. Yeah. But the thing about it is, is that the man did not want to testify against Ghabriel. Period. You know. But the other choice was, you know, your mama can't afford an attorney, you know, you missin' school. You know, we want you to graduate, these kind of things. You got basketball, you got all of this stuff. We just want you up out of there. That's what they push on you. You know, just get him out of here, and just get him out of here. No. No. No. Okay, so while he was on probation, he was trying to establish a relationship with his father. Which I was never gung-ho about. I was—I just didn't think that was a healthy situation for him.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know. And his dad one time thought it was— it was cute that he had a friend that made cannabis brownies. (mocking) "Imma give Gabe one."

SYBILLE: [laughter] Forgive me for that, but uh—

ZEZQUEAUX: No, but— and I understand that, because it's a simple fact. This boy is on probation and you gonna give him—

SYBILLE: Right, right, right.

ZEZQUEAUX: —something that's gonna show up in his UA. He has been clean up until this point.

SYBILLE: Did Gabe eat the brownie?

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes he did.

SYBILLE: (laughs) Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: But he didn't know until after he consumed it, what was in it. Well, we done all messed up now.

SYBILLE: Yeah.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay, because that caused such a setback for us, because his probation was revoked. His probation was revoked, then they sent him to SATF [Substance Abuse Treatment Facility] in Atascocita.

[00:23:28]

SYBILLE: And had he not eaten that brownie, he would've probably I would assume that he would have completed probation successfully and not be in the criminal justice system where there is no justice to this day.

ZEZQUEAUX: Exactly. Exactly. So. Now we're dealing with this. Now he's in a treatment facility. Gabe didn't have a drug problem. And that treatment facilities he had to get his GED. That broke his heart. That broke his heart. Because he wanted to walk that stage. He wanted to be the one to walk that stage.

SYBILLE: Well, being an aspiring basketball player.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So reality is setting in. You're going to need to change some of your goals. He gets out of SATF and he's good for a while. He's good for a while. I'm trying to get him services—mental health services. Even with the school. Now let's rewind a little bit. Ghabriel didn't tell anybody what had happened when he went to school that Monday.

SYBILLE: Oh, wow.

ZEZQUEAUX: His best friend knew something was wrong but Ghabriel couldn't talk about. So finally he had told his friend what had happened. Gabe was so angry and I could see it building. It was that quiet anger that you know you don't talk to anybody. You don't interact with anybody, you're just there with your rage. Okay, so that Monday they had a basketball game. That boy was so focused that they won that basketball game.

SYBILLE: Hmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay. But after that I started noticing how he would withdraw. And I knew things was happening with him. Things were happening with me, because I could be washing dishes and then all of a sudden I could get into a fit where I'd start crying and I'd be on the floor. So I knew that each one—I knew that Joseph had to be going through something. I knew that Gabe had to be going through something. I finally got with his counselors at his school and we were trying to find resources for him—

SYBILLE: To get him to talk.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right to get him to talk, to deal with it. Anything, anything so his anger was really pronounced. When you're in a school situation and they have a zero tolerance policy, you have to be careful of how you deal with students that are going through mental issues. 'Cause see at this point, Gabe has mental issues.

SYBILLE: He was traumatically affected.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right, exactly.

SYBILLE: Who wouldn't?

ZEZQUEAUX: And his anger is nothing that I could even comprehend. I'm trying to comprehend my own anger. You know and I know he has it. I know he has it. It's impossible for him not to, so when there was something that would happen at the school. If they thought a rumble was getting ready to jump off or they heard that this gang was getting with this gang and there's gonna be— and they're gonna tear it up at the lunch time and this then—he would not be in school. They would give him an excused absence. But even with that you can only have so many, okay.

SYBILLE: That a delicate situation when you have to negate what is going on in, again, in another system that does not embrace trauma-impacted students. Let me say that, trauma-impacted students. As a parent that's a big trauma for your youngest child to be afraid. Fear—living in fear to let his mom down, brother gone and feeling that he's to blame and holding all of that in and you don't know what direction to turn because you yourself are dealing with a trauma that you don't even know nothing about.

ZEZQUEAUX: Oh no.

SYBILLE: You don't even know nothing about. I can't imagine. Again, I have to just say, I appreciate the courage that you are taking to do this interview 'cause it's tear jerking me and I'm just doing my best. I'm talking 'cause I need to hold it together. Not trying to take away from the interview, but my God.

ZEZQUEAUX: Well, we have to—I went to therapy for a long time, because victims' services does offer that for a while but it's limited. It's been ten years. It will be ten years

this year and I still have issues. I still have nightmares. I still—I find myself sometimes waiting for him to come home and I'm like, girl, get a grip, but it happens. You know so I was always the person that had to deal with the truth of things.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: By taking care of other people I really wasn't taking care of myself. I wanted to make sure Gabe was okay. I wanted to make sure Joe was okay. And he had so many friends. I didn't realize how many people Solomon had befriended until his funeral service and it was packed for a Monday.

SYBILLE: Wow.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, and so I learned a lot about Solomon afterwards through his friends. I knew that his relationship with his brother Gabe, that was one of the things that Solomon treasured. And after the SATF, when he came home from that—

He had to change schools and the school that he went to, Solomon had gone to.

SYBILLE: Hmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: He was doing okay. He was doing okay though. He was doing okay. Then I remember his probation got revoked. That's what sent him to SATF. He came home from SATF and he was in school and then when he got through with all of that you know and back on track. We still trying to get the counselors and stuff but Gabe withheld a lot. He kept a whole lot within. And while he was in SATF, they put him on medication. Okay, now I researched his medications that they had him on. And he should have been monitored.

SYBILLE: Plural?

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, plural.

SYBILLE: Okay, medications, plural.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right, and he should've been monitored not only because of the medicine itself but because of his age. And the brain is still forming and so you have to monitor when you give them depressants, anti-psychotics or whatever it is that you give them, you need to monitor them.

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay. So when Gabe came home he you know, he had medications that he was taking, and things. Being a young man, he was out socializing. He met a young lady and they became very close and had a very close relationship. They would periodically—she would periodically come over and stay awhile at my apartment and for

some reason I thought that she was homeless and this that and the other. Found out some more background about her and knew that we had common acquaintances. I knew her grandmother.

SYBILLE: Oh, okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah. Her grandmother actually helped raise my two boys before Ghabriel was born. Right. when I was working at night.

SYBILLE: Wow.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes, so they became fast friends and things. But she had issues and she understood that he had issues and I looked up and I noticed that I hadn't seen Gabe for three days. They had moved out and got their own apartment. I was like, ohhh, you wanna be grown. Okay. Well make sure that you report to the probation officer and make sure you do this. Make sure you take your medicine and stuff like that. 'Cause you wanna be grown, go on and be grown. Okay. Shortly thereafter I found out that they were robbing people like Bonnie and Clyde. I'm like what? What? They get caught. I don't know how this happened but Gabe got six years. She got like seven days. I don't know what happened during that negotiation. I don't. I never have. I never have appreciated none of that. Okay, and there's many times that I feel guilty that I just didn't bum rush them and take over everything because it would've been a different outcome. I have thoughts of that. At the time, Gabe was trying to be independent. You know he had a good job and he was trying to be independent. Okay, I was young once too. I wanted to leave home and be on my own too. Okay, but I didn't think the time was right for him, but it happened and it was okay. So when they do this crime, I really examined it because first of all you're not a violent person but you used a BB gun. You stole a backpack. What did you get out of it? An iPhone? What are you doing? What are you doing? What's happening up here, 'cause this is not like you. Neither one of y'all are gangsters. Why are you trying to take on the persona that you are. Let me just be real with you. Why? You don't know. You don't know. That lets me know that you have mental issues that are not being dealt with. Mothers are good for something.

SYBILLE: Indeed. Indeed.

ZEZQUEAUX: Mothers are good for something. I understood. Okay. But the time that he's been behind bars for this past five years has matured him. He has grown. He has missed his childhood. You grew up in prison. You learned your adult stuff in prison. But by me being a praying mother. Okay, by me writing him constantly. You know I send money when I can. I let him know I got bills too. I do what I can when I can. I will come see you when I can. You know, we've held it together.

SYBILLE: That is a hard pill.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah.

SYBILLE: That's a hard pill to swallow.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, and when he was in Garza he made friends. Every place that he's been at, he's made friends but he's also had to fight.

SYBILLE: Prison will do that to ya.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yeah, yeah. Don't think that I'm oblivious. You're a good looking young man. Don't tell me that's not a challenge for you. You've got to protect yourself. I know some of the things that you face in prison. I don't want to know it, but I do because I have to real about it. There's rape, there's gangs. There's assault.

SYBILLE: Drugs.

ZEZQUEAUX: There's drugs. You know it's not just the inmates that are dealing with that. You've got a commerce that goes on with the guards and the inmates and it's a whole other world that I don't understand. Okay. I know that sometimes he's tried to explain to me. I'm like if I send you commissary that commissary is for you, but you got a partner over here and ain't nobody sending him nothing from nowhere. I can understand you being kind to another person but don't let someone else take advantage of you. Okay? There are people that have been in prison there for a long long time. Now when he went to Garza he was on medication.

SYBILLE: Is that where he got his first medication?

ZEZQUEAUX: No, no.

SYBILLE: Where did that happen?

ZEZQUEAUX: He got his first medication at the SATF for the Atascocita.

SYBILLE: Okay. Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right. And there have been so many but I can't remember all of them, but I do remember looking them up and seeing what types of effects that they have on the brain.

SYBILLE: So then, the first time that he actually got any real mental health help or diagnosis was when he got locked up?

ZEZQUEAUX: Right, right. We knew that he was depressed, but he couldn't stick with a counselor long enough for diagnosis. It made him so uncomfortable. He would not talk about things.

SYBILLE: It's unfortunate that we have to get locked up to get the help that we truly need.

ZEZQUEAUX: But do they get help? Ahh. See that's the thing. When he came up for parole and I wrote the parole board and let them know that the medications that he was taking needs to be monitored and we can monitor him better outside and get him the help that he needs outside because you all are not monitoring him. He got to a point when he was at Garza that he stopped taking his medications. He said mom, "it makes me anti-social. It makes me feel a certain way. It makes me feel aggressive."

So he stopped taking it. Once they realized he stopped taking it, they transferred him out. Yeah, they transferred him to another unit because see now he doesn't have the same restrictions that he did while he was taking the medication. Taking a medication you're restricted as to what kind of jobs you can work and I think some education opportunities as well. So, he stopped that because he felt like he needed to be doing something else. He needed to be working. He needed to be doing something, not feel like he's a zombie all the time. Like I said about him being a smart kid, his very nature is gonna go against that.

SYBILLE: Right.

ZEZQUEAUX: So when he got to DeTorres unit, he was with some hardened criminals there. At Garza, that is a transfer facility, you're only gonna be there for about two years or whatever unless you're on medication. So then when he went to DeTorres unit, he had fights of his life. I know he did. You fresh coming up in here. But his attitude was I may look young but don't try me. You know, I always taught my kids to defend themselves. Don't pass the first lick but if somebody licks you, you lick them back.

SYBILLE: Love it.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay. So I didn't want them to always be afraid of things and of situations. Stand your ground. You know and I meant that. Stand your ground. You be in the right, but defend yourself. If you have to defend yourself, you defend yourself because that could be your life.

SYBILLE: That reminds me of what you said about teaching them how to be men. You have three male children and you have to teach them who they are. Let me ask you a final sort of question, what would you have done differently knowing what happened then and what you know now what would you have done differently?

ZEZQUEAUX: Ohhh. First of all, knowing what I know now?

SYBILLE: Yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: And having the convictions that I have now, that court appointed lawyer would have not been on his case. I would have went straight to the judge. I would have went straight to the judge, I didn't know how to do anything as far as criminal justice at the time—I didn't know. But since I've joined Texas Advocates for Justice, I've been able to learn about not only the criminal justice system itself, but about jails, that there are different kinds of jails, that your medical, while you are in jail, is limited. Your health

care is limited when you are in jail. Do you get the proper care that you could while you're outside? No, no. You can't convince me of that. Because I've seen it for myself. The—what did you say?

SYBILLE: What would you have done differently, that's it.

ZEZQUEAUX: That, I think, is the biggest thing for me because that was like a chain reaction, that started off a chain reaction.

SYBILLE: Mm-hmm.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know, knowing what I know now, the witness that did not want to testify against my son would have been brought to the judge.

SYBILLE: Yes, yes.

ZEZQUEAUX: Okay, so I think that would have changed everything. I think that if I could have held onto him while he was going through his own changes, I may have been able to influence him more, you know, as a teenager, you know, we look to other— their peers.

SYBILLE: Yeah.

ZEZQUEAUX: For information and things like that. I wish I could have had more income, because that would have made a difference, because maybe I could have paid for an attorney for him. Yes, I know that you wanted a relationship with your father, but I really wish that that did not happen.

SYBILLE: And now I'm sure he does, too. He understands.

ZEZQUEAUX: Well, he understands where I was coming from.

SYBILLE: Yeah, yeah.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know, because in retrospect, he's like, how did this dude do this?

SYBILLE: Every boy wants their dad though, so we can't stop what human nature.

ZEZQUEAUX: Exactly.

SYBILLE: We can't stop it.

ZEZQUEAUX: What else would I have done differently? My relationships may have been different. You know, my housing would have been different. There are a lot of things that I go back and I can't help it. I have flashbacks like that, what if this, what if that, what if this, what if that. That's a repeated thing that I go through quite a bit.

SYBILLE: Something I know for myself is self-care. This is over, it is ending. Your son will be coming home in a year.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes, yes.

SYBILLE: Now, what type of self-care or preparation are you doing, if any?

ZEZQUEAUX: When you talk about self-care, first you have to realize that you need it.

SYBILLE: [laughter] Oh yeah.

ZEZQUEAUX: I'm serious!

SYBILLE: I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to laugh.

ZEZQUEAUX: No, but—

SYBILLE: My god that is true. My god.

ZEZQUEAUX: You have to know that you need to take care of yourself. You cannot take care of everybody. You can't do it.

SYBILLE: So are you?

ZEZQUEAUX: I'm starting to get there.

SYBILLE: In acceptance of—?

ZEZQUEAUX: I'm starting to get there but that's because of what I've had to deal with with Ghabriel being gone, because while he was here, I was more focused on what I have to do every day. With him being gone, there's other influences that like to come in and want to take up my time. So, I've had to go through relationships that were not cool, relationships that devastated me, relationships that could have been different, could have changed everything. All of that going through your mind constantly is overload, and you have to figure out a way to let it go.

SYBILLE: Well said.

ZEZQUEAUX: You know, that's why my church is very important to me. I go to St. John's downtown, Pastor Rudy Rasmus and Juanita Rasmus. Pastor Tiffany and Jason. These people help to guide me, they're not with me every day telling me this and telling me that. They are showing me the power of forgiveness, for one, and it was Pastor Juanita that broke me down crying one time when she was talking about the power of forgiveness and she started talking about Hitler, and I'm like, what? That spun my head for a second, but she said, but what if he was given love? And had a different upbringing and had a different reverence for human beings? Would we have endured what we did?

So, when I look at forgiveness for me, you tell me I got to forgive that man that killed my son, while he was high on some wet? While he knew my son? I'm supposed to forgive that? I haven't been able to answer that question yet, but I can say that he's not prominent in my mind anymore. He received his sentence. He's got to deal with that sentence. He heard what I had to say at the impact statements.

SYBILLE: Impact statements, the victim's impact statement?

ZEZQUEAUX: The victim's impact statement, yes.

SYBILLE: Okay.

ZEZQUEAUX: And so I'm at peace with that aspect of it. When I talk to God about it, I let him know I don't have no feeling for this person. Why do I have to forgive him? Why? And that is something that really works with the mind. Because your faith is telling you one thing but your heart is telling you another, and your mind telling you something else. You know, so you have all of that jumbled up together, and to find peace through that takes work.

SYBILLE: And time.

ZEZQUEAUX: And time. You have to learn to be able to talk to people about what it is that you're going through. You have to be able to talk to people who will listen. You have to guard yourself because there are people out there who will continue to victimize you because you've been through this, I want to keep you down here, I want your emotions to stay down here so I can be over you. I want to convince you that you need somebody to take care of you. So you don't have to think for yourself, you don't have to have any more aspirations or anything like that. No, no, no, no.

SYBILLE: To the contrary, huh?

ZEZQUEAUX: It's, no. No. I embrace Solomon's spirit. Solomon was a young man that had conviction, and he knew what he wanted to do.

SYBILLE: Looking at this photo, this portrait right here, it screams conviction.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes, yes.

SYBILLE: It screams, I'm gonna get whatever I put my mind to.

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes. Yes, and so we talked a lot of history in my household, I was a history buff since I graduated from high school. And one of the things that Solomon wanted to do was to teach history, but his idea of history was more than just black history, it was world history, and what did one entity have to with the other, and where are you gonna go today? I believe that if he had been alive, that he would have been one of those teachers that took a busload of kids to Ferguson. You know, that would take kids

to Sacramento, so that they could be around what is really happening, but also be kind enough to know that if you've got a student who's involved in a gang, that's because he doesn't have a father at home, or because, that's the child he would take under his wing. That's what I said in the victim impact statement. Your child is gonna be growing up without you, you're gonna wish that you had somebody like Solomon that would embrace your child and let him know that you don't have to follow in your father's footsteps. That's who you took out of this world.

Ghabriel got Solomon's spirit, after he passed. I could tell that he was changing, and Solomon was, he was a prolific rapper, you know, he spent hours and hours on lyrics. Gabe is doing the same thing now, it's like it hopped from Solomon over to here, it's like Solomon said, here, bless you, let me give this to you while I'm leaving here, because I never thought, I was never one of the people that did the, 'oh, that's what God wanted, that's his will.' No. No. No. Solomon was ready. He was going to get baptized that Sunday, okay? For his birthday, he was getting baptized, he was making a commitment, but anybody who knew him said that Solomon was about education, brotherhood, let's get it done. You know, so he didn't use the gang persona as something to stay in the streets, he used that as a stepping stone to what I believe he would have been in a fraternity. You know, because that's the way that he embraced that, he wanted to take care of the kids from the inner city. He related to them, he knew what they were up against, he knew what it was like to get into, you know, what did they call it? Initiated. He knew what all of that was, he knew the pressures. And he wanted to be that coach in that school, teaching history with his team. You know, he wanted to make a difference, and I think in a way, he still is. He still is.

SYBILLE: It will be revealed through Ghabriel.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right, exactly.

SYBILLE: What is it, Mignon, that you want the people seeing this interview to know to really get? What's the meat for you that you want the audience to know and understand?

ZEZQUEAUX: The criminal justice system is just that, it is a system. If you do not know how to work that system, you will be lost. It takes family members, those who know those people who are being prosecuted against, who know that some of them are innocent, you know, some of them don't need to be in jail. We need to be active in monitoring this system, especially when it comes to the school-to-prison pipeline. They use zero-tolerance as an excuse to put handcuffs on your child. Some of them will misinterpret your mental illness as a behavioral issue when it's not. So there's things that we have to be aware of. Parents need to be aware of their children. Where they go, who their friends are, that is not something old school. That is something that needs to be done, you need to encourage your children, when they want to do things. I didn't make a differentiation between my children. Each of them had different personalities, and different talents. I didn't group them together, I want you to be you. When it comes to the criminal justice system, and you've got a child that's going, you need to learn everything that you can about the process, about who's interacting with your child, and their

truthfulness, because we were just straight up lied to. There has got to be a way that that is stopped. You can only do that, you can't do it just one person at a time, it takes a group of people. A group of like-minded people to do that. Mental health, I can't stress enough, how access to mental health will help deter people from going to prison. You have too many examples of it today. Danny Ray Thomas, he's walking around, he's got his pants around his ankles.

SYBILLE: Pants down.

ZEZQUEAUX: Do you really think that he's in a sane state of mind? No, but there was no reason to kill him. He was killed. You didn't think, you didn't make—you didn't try to understand what the situation was going on, that was going on. To any of us that would look strange, but it's not worth me pointing a gun at you. It's not like that. When these kids have anger issues in school, they need to find ways to diffuse that. There are so many schools now, introducing yoga, meditation. Get into that child, make that child feel safe. Not cast them out and think that, I'm just not gonna deal with you, call the police because you know, I can't do it. No. Real teachers, real counselors call a parent. And they talk to you, and you can talk to them. Don't be afraid to go to your school, don't be afraid to talk to those people, because if your child needs help, he needs help, or she needs help. Know what's going on in your children's life.

SYBILLE: You wanna look into the camera and say that again? [laughter] Know what's going on in your kid's life. I mean, that is so freakin' important.

ZEZQUEAUX: Parents, you need to know who their friends are, who they hang out with, who their teachers are. Not to be overbearing of them but just be aware. Because I didn't have a problem telling my kids, I don't think you should hang with so-and-so, because of this that and the other, and if you get caught up, they gonna get caught up, and then you all entangled in some mess. Uh-uh. Uh-uh. Uh-uh. You've got neighbors on your street, your children are walking home, those neighbors need to know your children.

SYBILLE: Like you said, old school is not old school, because that's how we were raised.

ZEZQUEAUX: That's right,

SYBILLE: Man.

ZEZQUEAUX: But it kept us safe.

SYBILLE: It did.

ZEZQUEAUX: It kept us safe. So, I continue to be an advocate for mass decriminalization. I believe that schools need to be more interactive with students. Look for warning signs. When it comes to dealing with juveniles, especially in the criminal justice system, you have to be involved, you have to be. These are kids that we're dealing

with. Yeah, I know that there are some bad kids out there, but they have circumstances. What were their circumstances?

SYBILLE: I'm glad you said that, because people really need to ask 'What happened?' People don't ask that, we need a more trauma-informed community being educators, emergency response teams, as you mentioned, the Danny Ray Thomas case, why wasn't it a policeman that was trauma-informed, that could access, who has been informed on mental health de-escalation, there should have been something done. Is there anything else that I should have asked during this interview that you did not get an opportunity to reveal?

ZEZQUEAUX: I think—excuse me—I'll probably think of things later that I should have said, but the main thing that I want parents to know, mothers to know, is that, don't give up on your children. A lot of them make mistakes. But we as parents have to be able to understand what the system is about. The system is about mass incarceration, it's not about equality. It is not about equality at all, and I see trends that make me realize the way that it was set up, when you talk about the history of mass incarceration, you have to go back to slavery, and you have to understand that when the emancipation proclamation was made and that huge migration of people that left from down south, you know, what kind of void that left for them, when the 13th Amendment says unless you have been duly convicted of a crime, who are your criminals? Well you over here is a vagrant, you not doing nothing, I'm gonna put you in jail. By putting that person in jail, they can become a slave. No questions asked. That has been going on in America for centuries. Well, not centuries, I'll say decades.

SYBILLE: Incarceration is a legal form of slavery.

ZEZQUEAUX: Exactly.

SYBILLE: And if people do not know that, then they live in a hole.

ZEZQUEAUX: Right. And I don't, I never wanted my children to experience that, never. Never. I thank God that Ghabriel is resourceful, I'm grateful that he studies. He's learned a lot of things since he's been away, and I'm not just talking about how to play dominoes. He's been into some very serious books, he's been able to get time to himself and talk to other people, and talk to older inmates that are in there. And about Solomon, I miss him every day. Every day.

SYBILLE: Of course.

ZEZQUEAUX: And I live my life now thinking about what he would do. How would he approach the situation?

SYBILLE: He would light the flame and pass the torch.

ZEZQUEAUX: That's right.

SYBILLE: That is what I have gathered from you. Mignon, thank you for this interview, thank you for your time.

ZEZQUEAUX: Well thank you.

SYBILLE: Thank you so much. I know that this interview will impact so many people.

ZEZQUEAUX: Well I'm glad that I was able to share my boys with you and to reenergize myself, because I don't talk about details much, as to what happened, because there's also the trial and what happened with that, and there's so many aspects of it that has just absolutely changed our lives, but I believe, like I said, that Solomon was chosen because he was ready. I don't have a feeling of why did God do that, why did he take my baby? No, no no no no, no no no. I feel that right now, he's in God's army. And he's not just a soldier, he's commanding.

SYBILLE: Can I give you a high five for that?

ZEZQUEAUX: Yes, yes.

SYBILLE: Alright. Alright.

ZEZQUEAUX: I thank you.

SYBILLE: It was a privilege and an honor. Thank you. We good?

[END CLIP TWO]

[END OF INTERVIEW]