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The Principal Theory

*Jennifer Twist and Merienne Star Blake**

INTRODUCTION

Society has always held women to a higher standard, yet when we are victimized we become an issue. We are expected to be smarter, wiser, and more responsible, but what happens when, as victims, society turns their back on us? My friend and I write today to make society aware of women who have lost their lives due to mistakes that were driven by fear, hurt, and painful pasts.

There is a judicial system that has no qualms with throwing away lives of mothers, daughters, and sisters, all on the basis of “they were there.” And most of the time they weren’t. We are two of hundreds of women who are currently serving life sentences on a theory. It’s called “The Principal Theory.”¹ This theory contains and entails that being at the scene or near the scene of the crime indicates a guilty demeanor as much as the person who actually committed the crime. In our case, it was *First Degree Murder*, but it is used in robberies, theft, assaults and all kinds of crimes. To hand out sentences of such magnitude as if we have no chance of rehabilitation, they do not look at mitigating factors of trauma either. Theory in the dictionary is defined as Hypothesis, proposed as an explanation; reasonable guess or conjecture. So what about the mitigating factors of victimization that even leads women like us to be around the men who commit these crimes? Well, let’s look at Florida’s statistics. The majority of lifers without parole are women under 25.² Seventy-five percent are the co-defendant, 85 percent

* Authors Jennifer Twist and Merienne Star Blake are inmates serving life without parole at the Lowell Correctional Institute Annex in Ocala, Florida. The authors thank *Hastings Women’s Law Journal* for helping them to spread their letters.

1. “Whoever commits any criminal offense against the state, whether felony or misdemeanor, or aids, abets, counsels, hires, or otherwise procures such offense to be committed, and such offense is committed or is attempted to be committed, is a principal in the first degree and may be charged, convicted, and punished as such, *whether he or she is or is not actually or constructively present at the commission of such offense.*” Fla. Stat. § 777.011 (emphasis added).

2. *E.g.*, Adriana Rodriguez, eighteen years old, suffered drug abuse and physical abuse. She is serving life without parole on a Principal Theory. She was a first-time offender. Victoria Jackson, twenty-one years old, suffered drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual abuse

have a history of drug abuse, lowering the mentality of choice and covering up mental illnesses that exist. Ninety-five percent are victims of sexual, verbal, physical and mental abuse. All mitigating factors, which should have been taken into account during trial and sentencing, were swept under the rug.

Instead of facing the problem or neglect that these women suffer, their only concern is a conviction. The State of Florida Department of Corrections has become a human warehouse. Money is the only goal, not equality, justice or liberty. Nobody cares anymore in the Judicial System even if you weren't a part of the crime. The hopelessness in a natural life sentence is so mentally and physically crippling, that many have given up completely. But there is hope.

The programs that are available need to be taken into account. What we have done, the sobriety, the good behavior, the process of learning to become good, productive citizens, women of integrity and character. Most of us women did not have full time parents to show us that these things are or what we should be. Where is the sense that taxpayers pay millions to keep women imprisoned that are assets to other women? To their children, to their families? Where does the insanity stop? Where are and when do the people say enough is enough? Several women are willing to speak on this matter but when will society listen or show concern? We are real people, despite our ridiculous time. It's time to stand up. It's time to save lives. It's time to be a service. We are women with a voice. We want the world to know that this "Principal Theory," these life sentences without parole or a second chance in life are not right. Where is the justice for truth? Where is the justice for those who are rehabilitated? The one's who wake up in the morning seeking, praying, strong enough to fight for the weak . . . we open up to you. We are handing you a passion for women all over Florida.

The two of us are victims. Where was society, where was the judicial system when we needed them? There was no help until it was too late. We stand up as warriors for this cause. We scrutinize this ridiculous theory. A theory that has taken young mothers from their children, daughters from their mothers who need them and sisters from sisters. Where does any theory justify that to an extent of no women? Women who choose to be heard. Now is the time.

since age fifteen. She is serving life without parole on a Principal Theory. She was a first-time offender. Jennifer Mee, eighteen years old, suffered drug, sexual, and physical abuse since age twelve. She is serving life without parole on a Principal Theory. She was a first-time offender. Latoya Jordan, twenty-three years old, was homeless at the time the crime occurred. She is serving life without parole on a "principal theory." She was a first-time offender. Maranda Joy Martin, twenty-three years old, was a college student at the time the crime occurred. She suffered drug abuse and physical abuse since age thirteen. She is serving life without parole on a Principal Theory. She was a first-time offender.

LETTER FROM JENNIFER TWIST, INMATE 816719

My name is Jennifer Laurie Twist. I was given my first taste of loss and abandonment when my mother left me with my grandmother for two years. I got my first sexual experience at 7 ½ years old when I was molested. For over a year I was molested and terrorized by someone 8 years older than me. At 8 years old, I learned what marijuana tasted like. By 11 years old I tried cocaine. By 13 I was hooked on both. For me there was no source of supervision. My stepfather was a womanizer. I watched him beat my mother. He was never home because of his gambling addiction. At 7 ½ when I tried to tell about my sexual abuse, my offender cracked my face open. My mother's co-dependency upon my stepfather left me susceptible to all my trauma.

At 15 years old, I was living with three girlfriends and one night we went to a bar. That night I was involved in my first criminal activity when my friends and I stole a bunch of purses from inside the bar. The next seven days we bounced \$43,000.00 in fraudulent checks. At this time, I was pregnant and it was 1988. My stepfather kicked me out because I refused to have an abortion. I honestly don't know in my numbness from the emotional trauma and drug abuse what I was thinking. But at 15, seven days later, and pregnant, I was arrested. There was no investigation as to why I was being labeled a rogue teen, and my parents had to pay restitution. Shortly after at 6 months pregnant, I called my mother to my apartment where I was living with a man who intentionally drugged me and as I was sleeping he would rape me. At that point I chose to put my baby up for adoption. After I delivered her, I lost my will to live. I felt like a part of me had died. I ended up with a woman and started smoking crack and committed trafficking offenses of stolen property that were purchased off the credit cards we stole. I was seeking peace in drug abuse and excessive spending, but nothing helped. I ended up with a 9 ½ year sentence where the system just fed me antidepressants and anti-psychotic drugs to get me high, numb and make me sleep.

The medications hindered and there was no help. Prison was kiddie camp. We had our clothes and meetings at the park. They did not offer therapy, yet no one questioned why an underage girl was in such a mess or why her mentality was so distorted. I served 6 months 9 ½ years and went out with the same mentality that I walked in with, but became a better and smarter criminal. I learned about sugar daddy's, how to get one, how to use him to get what I wanted because at this point it was just about me, I was too numb to care. It was 1991 when it went in and came out in 1992 when it was just about me, I was too numb to care. It was 1991 when I went in and came out in 1992 when I was 19. In 1994, I came back on a violation because for a year and a half I ran hard, checks and credit cards, money . . . I just wanted

to be in. I wanted the jewelry, clothes, the flash, the acceptance and I served 9 months on the violation charge. I felt so ashamed, so unloved, unworthy. I now had a past I never faced. Nowhere and no one to turn to. I felt I had to buy friends that no one would be around me if I wasn't that person. A person I didn't even know. A person I did not want to be but thought I had to be. The biggest mistake I made was the friends that I chose. I don't care if this doesn't free me. Prison has been my mentality since I was young. Before my life sentence I lived in a prison of my own. Trapped in hostile relationships, lost confused, mentally I was still that little girl lying on the bed being raped. I was just being socially raped and didn't even know it because no one was there to show me. I got in trouble . . . money got me out. I got abused and got high to numb the pain. I lost a daughter because she wasn't accepted and killed myself to let her go. There is no logic to these decisions, just emotional, mental wounds that the mind couldn't process because it was immature. I am not the only women who has suffered. There are millions of us with similar stories yet no one to speak and still yet no one to listen.

In 1996 my final conviction of life with no parole came after a trial that lasted 9 days. The judicial system gave me a conflict of interest attorney. The state prosecutors were nothing but smoke and mirrors. Upon my arrest, the cops stripped me naked and tied me down with my arms spread, legs spread and shot me up with a medication. I begged them to let me go. The officers confined me and told me they'd only let me go if I spoke to Patti Lumpkin. I complied to be set free from my bondage. During the interview, Ms. Lumpkin had to keep strapping me to keep me awake. She fed a story to me, kept telling me "no," this is what happened . . . right? I don't even remember anymore. After that interview I was in solitary confinement on medications. The police continued to question me, feeding me stories, versions they wanted to hear of what happened. All of this was presented to the Judge and was denied suppression. The Judge never gave it a second look. It was all on camera. The truth . . . what is the truth and what does it matter when the State of Florida wants a conviction? I was sitting in the car waiting for my co-defendant to use the bathroom while unbeknownst to me he was committing murder.

There was no preconceived notion or knowledge of what he was going to do. I had no idea. The victim was my friend. July 25, 2015, will start my 20th year of incarceration. My first 10 years were really hard. I continued to use drugs in prison and stayed in trouble. Around 2003-2006 I started to try working on myself. It has been a long hard road, but I am proud of the women I've become. When I came to prison I had an 8th grade education and was completely broken. A certified cosmetologist by the Florida Department of Education. I have a diploma with hands on experience in gardening, landscaping and diploma with highest honors in Hotel/Restaurant Management. I have just recently completed a yearlong Faith/Character

program and I am a computer technician in the program. At 42 years old, I have learned the value of life. I'm clean, sober and productive. I keep a clear record because I chose to live a better life, where even if here it is very easy to get in trouble. I have all the skills to be a productive citizen in society, yet 20 years ago, I was a "Principal" so Florida says there is no second chance. Where is the justice in that?

LETTER FROM MERIENNE STAR BLAKE

My name is Merienne Star Blake. I have been given a life sentence with no chance of parole. I have never been arrested in my life. I was 26 in 2012 at the time of the crime. I had my own house, was about to start a new job the next day, with two beautiful bright children and a drug addiction.

At 4 years old, I was sexually molested by the man my mother would eventually marry a year later. During the ages of 4 to 7 he became physically abusive to all three of my brothers and myself. My mother had a daughter with him as well. But at the age of 5, I told my mom what was going on and the church she attended, did a prayer circle and called me a liar. Two years later, I told my brother when we were home sick from school. He said, "Go tell MOM, you gotta tell her!" I remember saying that I did and she didn't do anything. I came home from school the next day and he was gone. That man only got 6 months in jail for a lesser charge of Lude and Lascivious behaviors for the two minors, me and my brother.

That charge and sentence was the same county I got sentenced in. I was in and out of counseling, physical abuse was still relevant because there were 5 children and just my mother who was the only provider. The same church that called me a liar and picked me up on the bus just never came anymore. I remember being the only one dressed for church that day and the bus never came.

At thirteen, I skipped school to have friends because I was not allowed out of the house. I had to be home to take care of my little brother, cook, clean, watch the house all while mom was at work. I was practically made the mother to my younger brother and sister and not only that my mentally handicapped brother needed me too. During this time, I found out my real father had died when I was one. I became depressed, suicidal and I started cutting myself. My mother then put me in a mental facility and they said I was just looking for attention. To me that was a slap in the face.

I was sexually assaulted at 14 the first year in high school in front of the class room in the hall. I ran home crying when only one person stood up for me and the other students said I asked for it. He was sentenced to classes for offenders. I had to switch schools because the kids ridiculed me and made fun of me and would say "they didn't want to touch me." I did graduate high school but with major difficulties. I was medicated and had anxiety attacks so for 6 months of high school I took classes over the phone after the incident. I found, once I acclimated and stopped hating myself, pretending

to be cool, I found the greatest friends. I created a distorted figure of myself though. At each twist and turn men were still trying to get me like I was a piece of meat.

I graduated and started doing drugs. It went from drinking to smoking pot at parties till nobody partied anymore. Then I was left alone with the mental struggle. I couldn't be alone with myself. I knew no other way. My mother never taught me character. She never taught me to do make up or taught me what a woman of integrity was. Growing up, men were in and out of our home. I did not know what "STABLE" was. I was not mentally stable. My drug use went to cocaine at 19 years old and when I had my son at 21, I swore that I would stop. But post-partum set in and I was pooping Xanax to be okay. Loritabs to have energy, Xanax to take away the worry. I was afraid someone would hurt him. I wouldn't even let him crawl on the floor if it looked dirty. When I started working I remember walking a mile home because the father of my kids wouldn't answer the phone. I thought he left with my son that I just walked out of my job. By then I was taking ecstasy to feel better. I got pregnant again and knew that I was scared half to death. We were living with someone else practically homeless, on drugs, so I wanted to give the baby up for adoption. But we kept her. She was a girl. I didn't go to the doctor because I was in denial but at delivery we found out the baby was a girl.

The father of my kids had to coax me to hold her because I wouldn't. I was afraid because it was real. I wouldn't breast feed because when my son was born he stopped breathing and had to be resuscitated while I was holding him. He caught an infection at birth. I saw my new born son's body turn blue. At 23, I was a stay at home mom. We had a home, he had a job and was gone from 6 am to 6 pm, finances were hard and I was still struggling with addition. They put me on antidepressants but they didn't help. I started cutting my hair and cutting myself, questioning what was going to happen to my children when I couldn't be there. At this point my sons 1 ½ and my daughters 5 or 6 months. The father of my kids and I argued all the time because he says it's all in my head. "There's nothing wrong with me," he says. I hated myself. The first victimization still followed me. I was afraid for my children, my future, that I wasn't enough. I was secluded in that home, alone with each and every thought and I snapped. Verbal arguments went physical fast. We began throwing things and breaking things in anger.

I was backhanded and flew off the porch into a seizure because I hit my head on the rocks. After that I took my children and left. I beat myself up mentally and it became reality. I did not know what love was. I didn't know why I couldn't stop using drugs. I just wanted to be happy and didn't know how. I just didn't know how.

I got pregnant again at 24 by the same man. I chose to give him up for adoption. I started working to keep him and take care of myself and my other two. I had a great job when I was 3 months pregnant. But once again I was

sexually assaulted. The police were called the next day, nothing was done because the other men there said it never happened. At the birth of my son, I lost a piece of me. I was sober, but couldn't stay sober. I was a failure, no one would help me. My mother kicked me out at 6 months pregnant.

At 26 my crime was committed. My co-defendant was 19. He was spending the night because I was afraid of the drug dealer coming back because he kept showing up at my home. I was smoking crack that weekend, but that night I was asleep in my bed when at 3:30 am there was a rattling at my back door. Prior to my last mental facility visit in July 2011, I was diagnosed with PTSD, Major Depressive Disorder and Borderline Personality. My Borderline Personality was documented at the age of 13. My PTSD was documented at 24 and major reoccurring depressive at 25. But I was always since my first counseling visit labeled depressed, basic depression since I was 12. People don't understand why women do the things we do or how we ended up with the company we kept. Three out of four girls are sexually molested, and one in three boys. That's the statistics of our society. Yet they continue to allow these victimizers a chance after chance. The domino effect of fear, hurt, self-hate, that dirty little secret has had major effects on all the people involved. That fear has a child followed me, my whole life. In the drug use I found myself numb. The pain was too much to bear alone.

In my incarceration, I've found comfort, forgiveness, peace, integrity, character, self-worth, and I know God doesn't intend these prisons to be what the judicial system has made them. In my case I was in the other room when the murder was committed, rocking back-n-forth with my daughter in my arms, in for the shock. I called the Police. I did not know he was dead till I was on the phone with Police. Testimony from the officer states I was in shock upon arrival. But none of these are mitigating factors in the systems eyes. But what about the people's eyes? What about truth, fairness and justice? What about the Independent Act? That rebuttal to the Principal Theory that the courts undermine and toss aside to get convictions? Enough corruption. Women die each day, inexcusably, unexplainably and it's swept all for the sake of the dollar. There is no justification as to why women come to prison and have to die. We understand that some mistakes cannot be corrected, but why not correct the person who made the mistake with a feasible chance to live again.
