

# “You’re One Strong, Resilient Woman”

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*Featuring Calvena DeVoe and Marie Lafontant*

## **Rahim: 00:10**

From the greater Boston area, you are listening to the MyTERN podcast, brought to you by the Tufts University Education Reentry Network. These are stories of life during and after incarceration told by people who are living it and working to overcome the odds.

## **Calvena: 00:35**

When you're trying to find yourself, there are somethings you always will feel ashamed of, you always will feel less than even though you know, you're much more than, but it's a daily basis. It's a daily process. And for me school, it's given me a chance to live my dreams that I've always wanted to live, to have an education to get a degree that I put behind me, because of the life I was living. I am Calvena, I am a 49 year old woman, I'm a single mom of one child. I've lived my life with some trauma, I've overcome some trauma, and I still have some trauma.

## **Marie: 01:22**

My name is Marie Lafontant, just like Calvena, I'm a single mom of a beautiful 11 year old daughter. I was incarcerated at Framingham state for about 18 months, and I've been out for the past, almost, it's going to be about a year. It was very difficult because I was a single mom and my daughter was about six or seven at the time. And it was always me and her. So you know, like she, I think that, you know, a lot of the trauma kind of fell on her because I was gone, you know, for this long, and I've never been gone for that long. And her having been taken by DCF. And moving from household to household or program to programs had left a big scar on her that I kind of feel guilty about and felt like, you know, for the rest of my life, I'm gonna feel guilty about it.

## **Calvena: 02:24**

My experience with my child incarceration, my challenges were my son was also taken by DCF. And my challenges were, I had to find placement for him or he would be placed in DCF custody. And I didn't want that. I found a family member that took custody of my child and my child, till this day, he has a lot of his own resentment towards me. And it's through my incarcerations. You know what I mean, in and out of his life, you know, not being there for him. It is a very painful situation. It's not anything that any mother wants to experience being away from their children.

### **Marie: 03:04**

Having seen other women, or seen other single moms who have been incarcerated, who've been through the struggles, who understand your struggles, means a lot, you know what I mean, we've got to stick together. You know, it's a fight. When I got out, I had to fight to get her back, you know, because, you know, like the system. I mean, the way it works; it just doesn't work in a way where it, I felt like I was by myself, like, no one was for me, you know, I had to kind of stand alone and figure things out. And DCF didn't help with anything. So they just give you a list of things that needed to be done, and you just got to go figure it out. And it's hard. You know what I mean, like emotionally that you just came out of 18 months being in a place like prison, and then having to come out and just be able to keep your head up and go and get certain things done where you know, like emotionally I was just a mess. Financially, I was a mess, I just I had nothing so it, but my daughter, you know, she gives me hope she gives me strength. And I felt like she only has me, I had to fight for her. And if I didn't want to fight for myself, I had to fight for her so, so I decided to fight.

### **Calvena: 04:24**

I have two beautiful granddaughters that I'm fighting to see, that I want to see and that I know that I will get to see one day, I don't know when that will be. But I know that I have the resilience as Marie stated, and that it's the hope that I have through this program and through my dreams that I can better myself, that I am bettering myself to be able to have that relationship with my son again.

### **Marie: 04:48**

And going up like in Dorchester, or like in the neighborhood, I grew up in, there was, I don't know, it was just never, there was no one there. Like, you know what I mean, I would go to school. And you know, like, I go to school hungry, and I'll come back home and I'll be hungry. And you know, and my mom, you know, was working two jobs and most of the time I was home by myself and you know, so you are surrounded by people who are like you who has nothing to do, nowhere to go and, you know, who are also crying out, you know what I mean? And so you're looking at each other and it's like, I can't help you. You can't help me and there's nobody else there to help. I remember my mom, asking my mom for \$50 one time and to take my SAT. And she said, "where am I gonna get it from?" You know what I mean, and I'm just like well so "I'm not gonna take it?", you know and it's just like, "okay, then you don't take it because I don't have it." You know what I mean? So just, you know, little things that you could have done when you were younger to get out of certain life situation, but there were no doors for you, no avenues for you to go in to get things that you needed.

### **Calvena: 06:15**

For me drugs at a very young age, 14- 15, abusive men 14- 15, rearranging my face, being molested, being raped, you know, thrown out of moving vehicles, held at gunpoint, tied up. I wondered why nobody helped me. I wondered why I'm in school, my face, black eyes, busted up face. Where was my help? I know, these teachers see me, I know my mom knew what was going on. I didn't understand why I was out there, prostituting at the age of 15. You know, I didn't understand those things. I was a child.

### **Marie: 06:51**

You know, even though you know, going to the store to steal stuff was wrong, but, well, I need it, you know, and I mean, where else am I gonna get it? You're not giving it to me. You know, arresting me and putting me in jail. It's like, okay, then just, this is my life. And you know, for a long time, I just kind of felt like, this is the card that was dealt for me and I just got to play it. And I just I don't have, there's no other, I'm not being dealt any other hand. This is it.

### **Calvena: 07:15**

Like Marie said, we were children, we didn't know any better. We survived the best way we could. We shouldn't have been incarcerated, for being a drug addict; we shouldn't have been incarcerated for being abused; we shouldn't have been led to a cell for being in the situations that we were in. There should have been treatment, you know what I mean, there should have been program set up for us. And I begged them not to put me in a cell, to get me treatment. I begged on so many occasions.

### **Marie: 07:52**

And so now I'm at the place where I'm trying to heal from just having been, my dreams being shattered by being incarcerated and kind of felt like I don't know, like, who am I to dare to dream, you know, kind of thing? And, you know, I'm trying to get out of that mindset that, you know, having been incarcerated is not an end all be all that, you know, there's life after incarceration. And so I'm at this point where I am trying to begin to dream again, you know, what I mean? It's okay, you've done something, it's done. It's in the past. And now, we know, it's hard to move forward. You know, it's because you're still living in a system that controls you, you know what I mean, you still live in a system that at any time could tell you, "hey, you know what, I mean, this is not a place for you," you know? And, and it's hard, you know, like, I want to dream big. I want to dream for my daughter, I want my daughter to have big dreams, but these fears, it's hard to get rid of them. It's hard to push them down because they're so alive. You know what I mean? Like it is so alive today, like on a daily basis, we see it. So I'm fighting, you know, to dream again. But right now, I'm just trying to deal with that fear.

### **Calvena: 09:11**

Marie, I just want to tell you that life doesn't, does not, end after incarceration. It does not end there. I know some of those fears that you're facing. I live them, I still live them. But you will gain your trust back in the community. I will pray for you that you will gain your trust back, but it is, being your first incarceration, it is going to, those are things you are going to feel. My life doesn't end after incarceration. I'm still here, as you see my CORI is completely sealed. And those are things that you will continue to work on. And as long as you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, nobody's gonna mess with you. And you will overcome that. But I understand everything that you're going through, I did it, I lived it. I faced it after many incarcerations. And it'll go away, and I'm rotting for you, because you're one strong, resilient woman, one powerful woman. And it gets better. My thing was, I lived my life for others. I was in domestic relationships, I was in unhealthy relationships. I was abused a lot. I am not in those relationships today. I am in my own home, alone, with myself, and that's okay today. And I know that that's okay. I'm in therapy, I'm in

treatment, I'm in groups, I'm in counseling. It took a lot of work for me to get here, took a lot of me, a lot of work for me to say, I'm letting go of these relationships. I'm letting go of these people. Cuz I don't like to be alone. But I have to be alone, if I'm going to better myself, and I'm going to be better and help other people, I had to let go of some things, it was not easy. And that's okay,

### **Marie: 11:30**

I've never been into an abusive relationship. But I grew up with an abusive father who, you know what I mean - abused my mom, abused his girlfriend. My dad killed someone, just by he beat her up so much. And you know, what I mean, end up killing, you know, so like, part of my fear of being intimate with somebody is that I don't want, I feel like because I grew up in that environment, and, you know, my family is, you know, was in a very abusive relationship. So I fear relationship, you know what I mean? Because I don't want to ever be in that position. But when I see women that have been through it and come out for the better, you know, it just it does give me hope.

### **Calvena: 12:09**

Yes, Marie, I thank you so much for that. Yes, overcoming abuse isn't easy as well. Takes a lot of, takes a lot of resiliency to overcome abuse. You have to let go of a lot of relationships. You lose some people along the way. You lose family members along the way. But it's okay. It's okay, Marie. And I always tell you, when we do talk, you are going to be okay, you're going to get through all of that, and I am here to support you as well.

### **Marie: 12:43**

Tell yourself that you are worthy of going to college. Are you worthy of getting a career? Are you worthy of never having to be incarcerated anymore? Are you worthy of being a great mom? It was always hard for me because I felt like I've never like taken the time to deal with myself. And I always felt like I needed to be at a place where I felt confident enough that you know what I mean, I've, I've gone through my past, I've understood it, I've gone through it, I've dealt with it. And now I'm able to move on. And I feel like now since I've been in MyTERN, that I've started the process, you know what I mean? Just by writing and doing certain things that I have started the process of kind of like, putting the things that happened to me in the past, in the past, you know what I mean? For so long, I've carried them with me because I've never had anyone in my life to kind of look at me and say, "hey," you know what I mean, like "who are you?" And I felt like, you know, being here was the first time somebody said to me, "who are you, let me know, I want to know who you are," you know what I mean? And just, you know, with the students in MyTERN, and just people look at you and, you know, genuinely felt like they wanted to know, you know, and then so even though like I didn't, you know, I was a little bit hesitant, but at the same time, like you can't ignore, you know, as a human being, you want to be accepted. You know what I mean, you want to feel like somebody is looking at you, and somebody sees you.

### **Calvena: 14:24**

You have to build yourself a support. You have to build yourself a support network. You have to feel gratitude about yourself. You have to feel that you're worthy. You know, I never felt worthy before. You know, I feel worthy today. I didn't love myself before. I love myself today. You know what I mean? I was abused in my life. You know, I'm not abused today. I know that I'm not going to be abused today. I'm not going to tolerate any abuse today. You know, you mean I abused my child, not physically, but mentally. You know, I allow people to abuse me which led to me abusing my household. You know, I wasn't the parent that I should have been. Had I, you know, opened my eyes the way I do today, back then, a lot of things would have been different, you know. Through MyTERN, through just some of the support networks I have, Families for Justice as Healing, Sisters Unchained - you can see the worth in you.

### **Marie: 15:23**

To be able to come and, you know, get out of the mentality of, you know, I'm worthless, and I can't do anything. And even, you know, like, I tried to go back to school for like, over 10 or 15 years now, and just having the opportunity to be sitting in the classroom with other classmates. And I was the type of person that avoided conflicts, you know what I mean, and just being able to, you know, be in class, and if something went wrong, that, you know, like the professor, I couldn't be sitting with a professor and just be able to, you know, express what I feel, and then also felt like I was in a safe place that I wasn't going to be judged. And I think being in a place where you don't feel like people are judging you, for your past or for who you are, for what you've done. And just really want to see you better yourself moving forward. So I've had that. And, you know, I've had therapy with the Ria House, who's been very consistent, you know, and calling me on a weekly basis and make sure that I'm okay, and if anything is wrong, and I call and talk to someone. Same thing with Project Place. I've been with Project Place for two years, and they just every now and then I get an email just checking up or you know what I mean? A letter just checking up. So it's things like that.

### **Calvena: 16:45**

Just knowing that there's people out here that want to see us succeed, that in itself, that in itself is just like, it just makes you feel so good to know that people really do care about you, and that they really want to see you do good. It's just, it just makes your whole life, the whole outlook on life, so much better. It really does.

### **Marie: 17:24**

My mother never went to school, like she only did like, you know, second grade. And that was it. And then so. So growing up, like, my, it was just my mom and my two brothers. Even though there were opportunities for me to do something or go to college, I couldn't, because my mom didn't understand the concept of even going to college, you know what I mean? And also, there was nobody around that I looked up to that's been to college, so I had to, went to Bunker Hill, and I had to work full time and then go to school. And it was just a struggle having to like work and school and work and school, and to the point where, you know, work became more important, you know what I mean, because you know, you have to, you have to live, you have to feed yourself, you have to take care of yourself. So, school becomes less and less important, especially in the black communities, you know. Because we have to survive, you know, like

my mom, you know, I get to the point where now I had to help my mom out, you know, I mean, because she got sick or, you know, stuff happens. And you know, and that was the life for every single person I knew. I just kind of felt like, if I didn't come to the program, then I would have just stayed the same, you know what I mean, I would have just kept busy working, try to make a living, trying to take care of my daughter, and just never really take care of myself. And I said, the time that I spent, you know, I was only there for one semester; due to my daughter, I had to leave. But the time that I was there, I felt like I learned so much about myself, I felt I learned so much about where I want to be, you know what I mean? Like five years from now or three years from now, and I started this process here, and felt like if that opportunity wasn't available to me, that process would still be in a standstill. And so I am grateful for that.

### **Calvena: 19:13**

So I know that I'm very intelligent, you know, and I didn't want to waste my life. I wasted so much of my life. You know what I mean? I had to do something, I had to do something, to have an education, to get a degree, to just do so many things that I've always wanted to do that I put behind me because of the life I was living. Because I've always lived my life for other people. And I don't have to live my life for other people today. I can live for Calvena today. And that's the biggest thing that MyTERN has taught me. That I can live for Calvena today. You know this program has just, I've found so much of myself in this program. I could go on about so much of myself, just loving myself. I'm not stopping just here at MyTERN. And I will be continuing on with MyTERN. And I will continue to be here for everybody, like they were here for me. I will continue my education. God willing, I will get into college next year. And I will just continue as much education as I possibly honestly can, to aspire all my goals and aspirations.

### **Marie: 20:41**

Me or Calvena, we've struggled, but we've made it through a little bit and have made some pathways and stuff. But it's still hard. You know what I mean? Like, there's still people in my community that still feel the same way. That still kind of have to struggle to survive. They're still, you know what I mean? I've always wanted to, like help a lot of like, help teenagers, especially pregnant teenagers, because I've come across a lot of young people that are pregnant, and that are just on the street and have nowhere to go.

### **Calvena: 21:07**

Getting back to my community. And being able to give in a healthy way, is my biggest dream. When I was down at my lowest, there was someone there for me, and I want to be there, just in that same way. And that's how I balance it. That's how I look at it. I want to be there for other women. I want to be able to give somebody, lead them to help when they need help. When someone is calling for help. I want to be able to give them help, I want to be able to lead them to help. Women are worthy. And that's my message that I want to send out: is that you are worthy. You're so worthy. You don't have to be abused. I want the first signs of abuse to be known. And you get out right away. You get out. You don't stay for nothing. You don't stay, you know, and that's what I did. I stayed, you know, and that was my downfall. My future is, I see myself opening up my domestic violence home for women and girls. I see me writing books. I see me in MyTERN mentoring students. Mentoring these people coming from these cells. I see these cells demolished.

I see them completely gone. For real talk, I can't stand prisons. I see myself, I want to teach. I don't know what I want to teach. But I want to teach. I want to teach. And I have so many dreams and so many goals. And I can see them all, and I dream about them all. And it's just I got a clear mind today. My mind isn't fogged. It's completely clear. This is me talking. You know what I mean? This is myself.

### **Joseph: 23:33**

Thank you for listening to the MyTERN Podcast. The MyTERN program is a Tufts University-accredited program, providing education, mentorship, and career development support to — and by — those who have been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. MyTERN's objective is to provide an opportunity for each participant to rediscover and reframe their skills, interests, responsibilities, and commitments. This podcast is created and produced in partnership with Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life and the Bridging Differences Grant Program. Music brought to you by Bernell Jones II. Cover art brought to you by Rahim Gray (Instagram: @rahimgrayart). Learn more or support MyTERN at TUPIT.org.