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## Serena's Story: Letting Go and Making Room

by Emily Andrews

**S**erena Steenholdt was 10 years old the first time she landed in a juvenile center. Growing up biracial in a mostly white South Dakota town, she experienced major racism—even from her own half-siblings and other white relatives. She never knew her father. She also suffered abuse from her uncle. Serena struggled to cope with overwhelming emotions.

Distrust and resentment toward her family and her community darkened her heart, and Serena began acting out.

Her rebellious behavior grew worse. Her mother didn't know where to turn. At age 12, Serena was placed in a psychiatric hospital. She remembers taking 13 pills a night.

"I didn't know if God would hear me, but I felt like He heard them."



Photo by Zachary Lucy Photography

After a painful childhood, Serena became a young mom to three kids she struggled to support. But it took going to prison for her to finally find hope and healing.

Serena's life kept spiraling out of control. By her mid-20s, she had three daughters with two different men, and one of the dads wound up in prison.

Struggling to make ends meet, she became desperate to support her kids financially. She tried several things but still came up short. As a last resort, Serena turned to drug trafficking. She soon found herself in handcuffs and

headed to prison at age 27. Serena's children were split up, with her mother and sister as caretakers.

**Letting go of worries**

In prison, Serena felt she had let her children down. She also worried they would follow the same destructive path she had taken.

Despite her fears and disappointments, she smiled in her cell, thinking back to

one older Christian couple she knew growing up who were like adoptive grandparents to her.

"I always believed in God, but ... whenever I needed prayer, I'd ask them to pray," says Serena. "I didn't know if God would hear me, but I felt like He heard them."

Serena found comfort in that couple's prayers when she was younger. In prison, she wondered if their connection

to God was something she needed for herself, now more than ever. One day in the prison chapel, she heard a lady sing, "Jesus, lover of my soul ..."

"That just grasped me, and it broke me down," remembers Serena.

After that day, she began her own personal relationship with Jesus, finally seeing God through her own eyes instead of through the elderly couple's eyes. She started reading the Bible and spending time with other women in the prison who shared her new interest in living life God's way.

"That support kept me grounded, and in prison, God really breathed life back into me," she says.

**The gift of connection**

Serena was finally taking care of herself physically, emotionally, and spiritually like never before. As she discovered her value as a child of God, she still thought about her own children every day. They meant the world to her.

Each birthday, she scrounged up what she could to send a gift, even if it meant spending months of her

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## 7 Tips for Better Sleep Behind Bars

by Stacia Ray

**"D**on't go to jail if you want a good night's sleep," jokes Chad, a former Louisiana prisoner. There's no doubt about it: Prison can keep you from catching many z's.

Inside Journal asked former and current prisoners about their sleeping experiences. The majority had trouble sleeping, especially their first weeks, thanks to uncomfortable mattresses, a snoring cellie, the noise of officers' keys, banging doors, screaming or loud talking,



Photo by Tim Kitchen/Getty Images

**TO HELP YOU SLEEP:**

- 1) Make your sleep area more comfortable.
- 2) Watch what you eat, drink, and view.
- 3) Pray and read Scripture.
- 4) Journal/write out your worries.
- 5) Find your "mental safe place."
- 6) Do breathing and counting exercises.
- 7) Try a simple grounding technique.

anxiety, safety concerns, and flushing toilets.

Getting less than six to eight hours of sleep can negatively affect your body, mind, and spirit. Sleep deprivation is also downright dangerous. According to the National Sleep Foundation, extremely sleepy people are 70 percent more likely to have a workplace accident.

Studies show long-term sleep loss can cause weight gain, memory problems, a lowered immune system, high blood pressure, and an increased risk for diabetes, depression, irritability, and more.

*Continued on page 2*

# My Missing Piece as a Mom

by Annie Goebel

**A**fter being released from prison, I was so thankful to have my three daughters back under my care. Their father remained in prison for seven more years. Consequently, I lived the life of a single parent. I was also a stay-at-home mom. I stayed home with my children for a couple reasons.

First, I was finally living clean and following Jesus, and I cherished this opportunity to be with my girls, to care for them as a nurturing mom. Second, I had no education that would offer me a job adequate enough to pay for day care, let alone raise our standard of living. And though we were quite poor, I did all I could to provide as “normal” a life for my girls as I could.

One thing I couldn't do, however, was be their dad. That was the missing piece I could never fill. So, when the opportunity for him to send them gifts through the Prison Fellowship Angel Tree program was offered to us, I was thrilled.

I still remember their little faces on Christmas morning. Each girl lit up as she opened a gift picked specially for her by her daddy. It was almost as if he were there, telling her she was loved by him. And, in that moment, I felt the love of my Father, my loving and gracious God, telling me we were all loved by Him. The Angel Tree program is a priceless gift, in more ways than one.

If you're a mom who wants to restore a relationship with



Photo by Taralyn Quigley

your child or just connect with them in a new way, I invite you to sign them up for Angel Tree this year. Every year, nearly 300,000 children receive a Christmas gift and a personal message from their parent behind bars. (Restrictions apply. We make every effort to serve every eligible child but may not be able to in some circumstances. See the bottom of page 3 for more information.)

This edition of Inside Journal is all about restoration. Page 1 has an article about how to get better sleep so you can wake up feeling restored. On Page 3, learn about renewing your heart through genuine, healthy trust, the kind that hasn't yet been jaded by our adult need to feel in control. And on Page 4, you'll hear from a former prisoner who is now in the same prison she served her time, only today she's teaching other women how to trust again after building up a wall around their hearts like she once did.

I pray this edition brings you restoration and inspiration.

## ANGEL TREE WORKS LIKE THIS:

- Applications are shipped to the chaplains of participating prisons.
- You fill out an application asking Angel Tree to give your child a gift from you at Christmas.
- You suggest what kind of gift your child might like and write a personal message to your child.
- Your chaplain collects all the applications and sends them to Angel Tree by the deadline.
- In the fall, Angel Tree volunteers call your child's caregiver to verify what gift your child would like to receive.
- Before Christmas, Angel Tree volunteers buy and wrap the gift.
- The gift is then delivered to your child at home or at an Angel Tree Christmas party.
- Your child is told that the gift is from you—their mom who loves them!

Annie Goebel is the director of programs and special events for women at Prison Fellowship.

P.S. Do you have an Angel Tree story to share? Write to: Managing Editor, Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. ■

## Tips for Better Sleep

Continued from page 1

To know if you're getting enough sleep, ask yourself, are you:

- Waking up not feeling refreshed most days?
- Feeling sleepy most days?
- Struggling to concentrate and stay alert during work or activities?
- Feeling depressed or on edge?

If so, here are some tips for better sleep, as shared by prisoners and psychologists:

### 1) Make your sleeping area as comfortable as possible.

Buy earplugs, a small fan, or a radio with headphones and use them to block out external noises. Also, make sure your body isn't too warm or cold.

Get creative with your blankets and pillows. “My mattress is not conducive to a good night's sleep, but I fold up a blanket [to put under] my hips,” says Steve, a current prisoner, about his flat, hard bed.

### 2) Be kind to your body and mind.

Avoid anything unhealthy or negative before bed, including junk foods and violent TV shows.

According to many sleep experts, including Dr. Michael Breus, you should avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. and stop eating or exercising several hours before bedtime.

Many prisoners agreed, adding it's also important to exercise and eat right daily.

Joseph, another current prisoner, says he buys melatonin (an over-the-counter sleep aid) at the commissary to help him.

### 3) Pray and read Scripture.

Prayer has helped many prisoners to get better sleep, like Zane, who says, “Surrender things beyond your control to God or a higher power.”

After struggling with awful sleep, night terrors, and cold sweats, Zane dug into prayer and Scripture. Eventually, he was free of his sleep issues for good.

Michelle, a former prisoner in New York, had a similar experience. “I slept better because I began the process of forgiving myself and started attending chapel,” she says.

“Evening devotionals also help,” adds Joseph.

### 4) Write out your worries.

Several prisoners we spoke with found journaling to be an effective way of getting thoughts out of their heads for better rest.

“My anxieties, if allowed to go unchecked, will keep me up at night,” explains Marvin. “An unsolved problem will

float through my brain until I write it down,” adds Jesse about his incarceration worries.

### 5) Find your “happy place.”

James Peasley, a Minnesota therapist, explains that if negative thoughts or worries are running through your mind, you can change your thoughts just like you would change the channel if something bad came on television.

To change your thoughts, he suggests finding your own personal “mental safe place,” somewhere you've been that has really positive memories, ideally somewhere in nature. Close your eyes and vividly visualize the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of that place until you feel calm.

“This can actually cause you to get control over troubling emotions,” Peasley says.

“It doesn't mean the troubling situation won't happen or doesn't need attention, but it resets your brain” to stop the obsessive worrying.

### 6) Breathe and count.

Peasley also suggests placing your hand on your stomach and slowly breathing in through your nose for a count of five and out through your mouth for a count of five, for five minutes total.

Breus tells people to count backward from 300 by threes, which requires concentration, thereby taking your mind off all other worries, and is boring, thereby putting you to sleep faster.

### 7) If you're still anxious, try grounding exercises.

Observe your surroundings, including the feel of your body getting heavy on your mattress, and then slowly list, out loud, five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

Experiment until you find what works for you, and then stick to it, doing the same things at the same time every night. And remember, sleep habits, like any habits, don't happen overnight.

“It took me close to a year to calm my mind down and start to embrace the fact that I couldn't keep feeling so guilty,” says former prisoner Michelle.

In time, restorative sleep behind bars is possible. So rest easy. ■

## Serena's Story

Continued from page 1

wages. She didn't want them to ever forget how much she loved them.

Then Serena saw a flyer for Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship® that enables incarcerated parents to sign up their child to receive a Christmas gift.

“[So] my whole goal was to not let my daughters suffer like I did. But what could I do now that we were separated? Angel Tree became the answer, and I thank Jesus.”

(See Pages 2 and 3 for more information on Angel Tree.)

At Christmas, all three daughters received a personalized gift from Serena, delivered by Angel Tree. Even though they were physically far apart, Angel Tree connected them in a special way. The program also gave Serena a way to share with her children about her faith in Jesus and the true meaning of Christmas.

“When I went into prison, I felt like such a worthless parent,” admits Serena. “[So] my whole goal was to not let my daughters suffer like I did. But what could I do now that we were separated? Angel Tree became the answer, and I thank Jesus.”

For the woman who struggled to trust anyone, Angel Tree changed everything. She finally realized that she didn't have to try to control everything. She could surrender to God, and He could connect her and her family.

After two years in prison, Serena returned home a new woman—and a better mom. Now living in Arizona, she has found a strong church community and has volunteered with Celebrate Recovery, a biblically based recovery group. She volunteers as an assistant to Prison Fellowship field staff regularly.

And Serena and her daughters have served as Angel Tree volunteers, giving back to the program that once gave so much to them.

“Even when money was tight, my daughters would rather do without a gift of their own, just to get a gift for another child,” Serena explains. “That's how much Angel Tree matters.”

Serena admits that life and motherhood are still challenging at times. But she faces every step of the journey with hope and joy. Through tears, she says, “God is so much bigger than I ever thought.” ■

# When a Father Really Does Know Best

by M.M. White

I remember when our oldest son received his first vaccines. I took him to the doctor's office. I carried him in and placed him on the table, while the doctor prepared the shot. My adorable baby boy just cooed and smiled up at me. He didn't even realize I was holding him down for the doctor to insert the needle.

So, it was a complete surprise to my baby when he felt pain.

I never left his side, but I did allow him to be pierced by a needle, despite knowing it might not feel good to him. His cries let me know that he did not understand. As a baby, he did not grasp that even though it hurt, it was for his own good. Even though it was painful, and he didn't like it, it would protect him from disease and help him grow healthy and strong.

As I hugged and consoled him afterward, I knew this was the first of many uncomfortable or painful encounters my son would not be able to understand or control. But as he calmed and soon forgot the shot, even falling asleep in my arms, I realized that through it all, he still trusted me.

## The quest for independence

When we were infants, we relied on others for everything. But as we grew and got more capable, we longed for the independence of full-fledged adulthood.

When I was a kid, I remember I thought, *I can't wait to get out of my mama's house so I can run my own life.*

But let's be honest: Even when the years pass, and we're good and "grown," are we really in charge of our lives?

Even with our independence, we still have family, friends, and neighbors. Teachers, coaches, pastors, mentors. Bosses, coworkers. We interact with all of these folks—or some combination of them—and they shape who we are and who we become. We may be a little more independent, but we're still influenced.

As we get older, we decide just how much we let others influence our lives, for good or for bad. I'm probably not the only one who grew up with a mother who countered peer pressure with this old favorite: "If your friends jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?" Whether we wanted to admit it as a hard-headed teen or not, who or what we let influence us can make or break us—and even lead to

our freedom or the loss of it.

So what does God have to say about our independence? While the Bible says we all need to act responsibly and carry our share of the load, we also need to take a page from the youngest among us.

In Matthew 18:3–4, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven." In other words, unless we learn how to be dependent on God, we will never experience life as He meant it to be lived.

## A Father worth your trust

When we trust in God, we become the children of a King (1 John 3:1). He knows what's best for us and fulfills His promise to provide for us. In return, He asks us to trust Him and follow His guidance.

In short, we don't run our own show anymore. We humble ourselves, which, according to one of my favorite preachers, means not that we think less of ourselves, but we think of ourselves less. We stop the "my way or the highway" approach in relationships. We stop making

## ARE YOU A "MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY" PERSON?

Do you try to control everything, including other people, only to end up frustrated or anxious? It's time to depend on God instead.

In Isaiah 30:15, the Lord says, "Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved." And James 4:7 says to submit yourself to God. Once you stop trying to be so independent and start relying on God, you'll feel free, knowing you can just take things as they come. You no longer have to juggle everything alone. You can surrender your life to the Father who knows what you need.

If you don't know where to begin, start with this prayer:

*"Father God, show me how to let go of my controlling ways and seek You instead. Teach me to submit my life to You, so You can guide my actions and relationships each day. Amen."*

To discover how to let go and let God lead you, sign up for a free correspondence Bible study through one of our trusted partner organizations by writing to "Letting Go" c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790. To request a large-print Inside Journal Life Recovery Bible in English or Spanish, see offer on Page 4.

Frank Sinatra's biggest hit our theme song, "I did it myyyyyy waaaaay!"

Why? Because if we turn our lives over to Jesus Christ, not only does He forgive us for all that is past, but He also makes us brand new (2 Corinthians 5:17). And in Him we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28). That makes Him worthy of our

absolute trust.

Sometimes, it takes something traumatic to make us dependent on Christ. It can even be something uncomfortable or painful that our Heavenly Father allows to come our way—just to remind us we are not in control. In those moments, we must trust that even through the pain, we are safe in Jesus. ■

## A GIFT FROM YOUR HEART TO THEIRS ...

REMIND YOUR CHILDREN THAT

# YOU LOVE THEM



NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE

This Christmas, your child can wake up to a gift from you through Angel Tree®, a program of Prison Fellowship®. Ask your chaplain or program coordinator for an application today!

### ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS:

1. You must be the child(ren)'s father, mother, stepfather, or stepmother.
2. There must not be a court order restricting your contact with the child(ren) or their caregiver(s).
3. Your child(ren) must live in the United States.
4. Your child(ren) must be 18 years old or younger.
5. The form must be filled out completely and legibly.
6. The form must be signed.
7. The form must be postmarked by **Sept. 3, 2019**.

**Contact your child(ren)'s caregiver to gather the most current information for your application.**

Angel Tree makes great efforts to serve every eligible child. However, if your information is incomplete or inaccurate, if local volunteers are unable to locate your child(ren)'s caregiver, or if the caregiver refuses to participate, we may not be able to deliver gifts to your child(ren).



# Coming Full Circle: The Ultimate Journey

by Emily Andrews

**T**ammy Franklin is the program manager at the Prison Fellowship Academy® for women in Kate Barnard Correctional Center—the prison where she once served time. The Academy helps women deal with many of the issues, including problems with trust, that often brought them to prison in the first place. She sat down with Inside Journal to discuss her own journey with trust, identity, and reconciliation.

**Inside Journal: What is it like to serve as Academy manager in the very prison where you were once incarcerated?**

Tammy Franklin: Many of the women in the program were at one time my peers. It caused me a great deal of concern in the beginning. People will always have opinions—some good, some not so good.

But true integrity is living to the best of your ability, not according to what others might think. [Thankfully,] I have been treated with nothing but respect from both the staff and women who are incarcerated here.



Photo by Drew Darby

**IJ: Was it hard to believe the prison staff could truly trust you at first?**

TF: It was. Many were there when I was incarcerated. But I had learned a lot about the importance of trust during my incarceration.

I worked for a chaplain. The more she demonstrated trust in me, the more I wanted to be trustworthy. The more she and the other volunteers listened to my opinions, the more I realized my opinions mattered. She believed in me and in the other women, and the more she showed that, the more we believed in ourselves.

**IJ: What were your trust issues when you were incarcerated?**

TF: Most of my life, I think my issue was really trusting too much. If you gave me the attention I was so desperately seeking, I opened my life to you with no questions asked. I had no boundaries. You could say anything, and I'd want to believe it, no matter what the evidence said to the contrary. That came out of a hunger to be accepted.

When you operate with that level of need and shame, you tend to settle for anyone. It causes a great deal of pain, because trusting untrustworthy people can lead you into some bad situations.

**IJ: How did you eventually learn whom you could trust and whom you couldn't?**

TF: During my last incarceration, I met a group of women whom, in my past, I would have had nothing to do with. I called them “the church ladies with the sparkling eyes.” When I gave my life to Christ, and He began to transform me, these women suddenly intrigued me like no others. I noticed that when they said they would be there, they were there. When they spoke, their words were true. They wanted nothing from me in return.

The healthier we become spiritually, the more obvious the “unhealthy” people become. When you are stuck in addiction and criminal behavior, you really do have scales on your eyes. But God changed all that [for me].

**IJ: How did you deal with regaining your loved ones' trust—especially that of your kids?**

TF: I've been home for four years now, and it's still a process. It hurts when your family is still remembering the pain from the last time they saw you. [My family] wanted to believe, but my past behavior left them skeptical. I had to move at their pace.

I learned that actions speak much louder than words. If I

say I'm going to call, I call. If I say I'm going to write, I write. Today I have my grandkids and both of my sons in my life. They have scars, but we're making progress.

**IJ: What advice do you have for someone who is struggling to gain a person's trust?**

TF: Trust is earned; it's not a given. We have to love the other person enough to let it happen in their timing. There's no quick fix. But the reward is so worth it if we're willing to stay the course.

We have to be willing to do the right thing—even when we don't get mail or get an answered call.

God is faithful. He can do incredible things if you allow Him. Every day, I walk up that hill to my office, and I see the window to the room where I stayed as a prisoner.

That visual, every morning, is a reminder of what God can do. I'm a staff member, trusted with a set of keys to an office.

I hold on to Galatians 6:9: “So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up.” ■

## News + Notes

### Second Chance Month Unlocks Opportunity

People across the country are joining together to raise awareness of the barriers men and women face when returning home from prison. In April, more than 300 organizations joined Prison Fellowship to celebrate Second Chance™ Month, which recognizes the potential of people with a criminal record and the importance of removing obstacles that make it harder for them to succeed once released.

On March 30, the White House issued a proclamation, signed by the president, declaring April 2019 as Second Chance Month for the second year in a row. Several states, counties, and cities also declared their support.

Social media campaigns, Second Chance Sunday church services, Road to Second Chances prayer walks, a press conference, a Second Chance Month Gala hosted by Prison Fellowship, and other activities took place around the nation. Supporters participated in the Second Chance 5K in St. Paul on April 13, while

Minnesota prisoners ran or walked in similar 5Ks on the yard, coordinated with the permission of the Minnesota DOC. The new Minnesota DOC commissioner even got in on the action, running alongside prisoners in the Stillwater facility.

Second Chance Month participants like Pastor Denise Strothers, National Director of Operations for Healing Communities USA, were proud to show their support. “For the broken, those who feel forgotten, those in prison ... we stand in the gap for you,” Pastor Strothers said at the D.C. Prayer Walk on April 6.

Second Chance Month reminds us that there is power in community. We are all stronger when we lift each other up.

### Son of Prisoner Nominated for NFL's 'Man of the Year'

Kenny Clark, nose tackle for the Green Bay Packers, was nominated for the 2019 Walter Payton Man of the Year Award. Clark, who grew up with an incarcerated father, was one of 32 NFL

players considered for the national award that was announced prior to Super Bowl LIII.

In 2018, Clark took part in the “My Cause, My Cleats” campaign, wearing specialty cleats to support Prison Fellowship and the Angel Tree program. Clark received Angel

Tree gifts for much of his childhood. Having his father gone was hard, says Clark, “but Angel Tree definitely helped that process out. He's still gone ... but Angel Tree definitely helped out with [softening] the blow.”

When he has time, Clark, who is 23, returns to his

hometown of Rialto, Calif., and hosts football clinics for local youth, including children with an incarcerated parent.

The Walter Payton Man of the Year Award is given to an NFL player for outstanding community service activities off the field as well as excellence on the field. ■

## NEED A BIBLE?

Get a free NLT Life Recovery Bible from Inside Journal!

Write to:

Tyndale House Publishers  
Attn: Inside Journal Bible  
351 Executive Drive  
Carol Stream, IL 60188



## DON'T FORGET!

Include this information to make sure your Bible gets delivered:

- ✓ Your complete name and prison ID number
- ✓ Your facility name
- ✓ Your facility address for prisoner parcel delivery
- ✓ Whether you want English or Spanish\*

\*Bibles are available in large-print English or large-print Spanish. Limit one Bible per person



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703.478.0100

Editorial Manager:  
M.M. White  
Managing Editor: Stacia Ray

Writers: Emily Andrews,  
Annie Goeble, Stacia Ray,  
M.M. White

Graphic Designer:  
Jaron Davis

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