

It's hard being lonely in prison

POSTED AUGUST 7, 2018 SABRINA JOHNSON

My name is Sabrina and I've been in Perryville Women's Prison just shy of the year. Now almost halfway through my sentence I've learned and come to realize more these past 12 months than I could have ever imagined. While I was in Maricopa County jail awaiting court/sentencing my only mindset was a common one... "What can I say or do to somehow get out of this? I don't deserve this! I'm a good person, I just messed up!" And I didn't have a change in my outlook until much later when instead of spending a week or two at a time in jail I faced the prospect of losing my freedom for perhaps years at a time. It scared the hell out of me, to say the least.

When I got to Perryville I spent a lot of time at first just observing and taking in everything around me.



I still had the feeling that I didn't really belong, but I tried to look at it in a different way. I had **something** in common with all these women after all. We were all stuck here because we screwed up, so I made a very conscious effort to put all judgment out of my head and really look for other things that we might have in common with each other. It was very humbling, to say the least, to learn that my background was the polar opposite of so many of them, yet here we were, in the same place, at the same time. Of course, I felt sorry for myself a little bit, thinking about how much it sucked to be me. "I'm in freaking prison!" But looking around I saw that the vast majority of these women had it even worse- they were surviving and trying to cope essentially all alone. While I was blessed to have a family and a sober best friend who wrote letters, called and visited, a huge number of them had nobody in the outside world who cared about them. It made me stop

and really think how much of a difference it made to know there's someone thinking about you, maybe worrying about you and praying for you. Someone who cares how you're doing. There is this saying, more of a mantra around here, "*You come here alone, and you are going to leave alone*". And while that's technically true, that way of thinking only increases the loneliness women feel from being locked up and separated from the outside world. I thought that if that **one** thing could be changed for these girls it might make a huge difference. So, I asked my mom if she would send a little card to a friend of mine who had no one writing to her on the outside. She was on board and promptly sent a note to my friend Tiffany. When she got mail for the first time it was so exciting for her, she couldn't wait to write back and get to know my mom. It gave Tiffany somebody she could tell her struggles and her triumphs to that she knew would care

and offer advice and also that she felt was genuinely proud of her. In fact, she took to a standard salutation on all her letters of “Hey Mom,”.

The beauty of the whole thing was that it was rewarding to both the person writing the letter and the person receiving it. So, I found a couple of other girls who I thought could benefit from a pen pal and my mom wrote to them as well, and the result was the same. It was such a huge boost to these girls! One of them said to me that it was amazing to talk to someone who didn't know them or their past mistakes. It was like a clean slate they could get to know somebody who saw them for who they were and didn't already have a biased opinion. I realized later that it was actually very rewarding for a third party as well- myself. I just loved seeing how happy they were to get mail and have someone to send letters to. I couldn't get enough of it.

Prison is a major struggle, but I decided a long time ago that I refused to let it be a waste of time. Time itself is too precious to be wasted, there's never enough of it and I wanted to make it worth the struggle. So, I did my best to spread that way of thinking. The kind of 'feel good' that I got from setting up this little pen pal thing lasted long after the 'feel-good' from getting high. I also came to realize that doing something for somebody else that made a difference, no matter how small it might seem, took my mind off my own problems and gave me a sense of purpose, of being needed. A lot of people in here forget what feels like to be needed and have a purpose. It can really change everything for them. I still have bad days and major obstacles to overcome, but everything has changed since I started thinking about what I can do to make it 'worth it'.