

WHAT WOMEN WHO ARE JUST GETTING OUT OF PRISON REALLY NEED



Photo: Courtesy Of Lee Wexler/Images For Innovation.

Vivian NIXON embraces one of the graduates from the College and Community Fellowship. Vivian Nixon has a simple message when it comes to women just getting out of prison: Don't be ashamed of us.

Growing up in New York, Nixon dreamed of majoring in theater and eventually making it her career. But behavioral problems in high school knocked her off track. By the time she was a freshman in college, mental health issues, coupled with drug and alcohol abuse, caused her to flunk out after just one year. Nixon's dream of getting an education would be put on hold once more.

This time, as she served three-and-a-half years in prison for falsifying business records and forgery.

While in prison, Nixon connected with the nonprofit **College and Community Fellowship (CCF)**. In 2001, after she was released from Albion Correctional Facility in New York, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree and eventually became an ordained deacon. But overcoming the stigma of a felony conviction has been tough, which is why Nixon, 56, has dedicated her career to helping women like her redefine themselves.

Nixon, now the executive director of CCF, sat down with Refinery29 at the White House's first-ever United State of Women summit in Washington, D.C.

*Eventually, I Committed Crimes — Forgery, Cashing BadChecks, Things Like That — And I Ended Up In Prison.
Vivian Nixon, College and Community Fellowship*

Tell us a little bit about your own personal experiences and what brought you to do this work.

"I grew up in a family that really cared about education, a lower-middle-class family. But I had some struggles. I always tested very high in terms of my abilities, but I couldn't concentrate in school, I felt bored. And at that time, it wasn't very popular for families to seek out medical conditions for what they thought were behavior issues. Like if you don't pay attention to school, the solution at that time was to punish you. So, I think that my parents didn't understand that I probably had some type of attention deficit or mental health issue, even as a child.

"By the time I got to high school, even though I was very capable of doing the work -I wasn't attending class. I just became kind of a delinquent, quite frankly. Then, I tried going to college and flunked out the first year. I went through a deep depression...all of that just led me into a very bad place. I ended up working odd jobs here and there, office jobs, but always using substances to make myself feel better.

And eventually, I committed crimes- forgery, cashing bad checks, things like that -and I ended up in prison.



PHOTO: Courtesy of Lee Wexler/Images for Innovation.

"When I got to prison, the thing that really surprised me was that there were women of all ages, starting from 17 all the way to 80. The thing they had in common -no matter what their age, no matter what their ethnicity or background- was that they had very little education. Lack of education was a big theme in prison. I used to have to help read letters to people, help them write letters, help them understand their legal documents.

"You have to work while you're in prison, so I took a job in the adult education school at the prison and I just fell in love with helping women learn, because I saw how it changed their lives. Before I got out of prison, I found out about College and Community Fellowship through a flyer they sent around. It was a new organization at the time and

they said: 'If you're coming out of prison and you want to get an education, we will help you.'

So, I joined the organization when I got out of prison, because I wanted to go back to college and finish this time, which I did. After I finished college, I came to work with them."

When You Would Talk To Them, You Would Find That Most Of The 'Crimes' That They Committed Were Survival Crimes. Like, 'I Needed To Feed My Kids.'
Vivian Nixon, College And Community Fellowship

In Addition To Lack of Educational Opportunities, What Were Some Of The Other Factors That Had Brought These Women To Prison? Were They Starting On A Level Playing Field?



"No, they never started on a level playing field. They come from communities where, even if they had access to school, they were not high-quality schools. But they also came from backgrounds that were full of domestic violence, substance abuse, and many from homes where their parents were involved in substance abuse...most came from backgrounds of poverty. So, it was like there was nothing for them.

"And when you would talk to them, you would find that most of the 'crimes' that they committed were survival crimes. Like, 'I needed to feed my kids.' And then, some were [there] because of mental health issues. I have severe empathy for women who are locked up for hurting a child or something. Because we look at it from the outside as, 'Oh my god, how could a woman hurt her own baby?' But you know, postpartum depression is real, And if people don't get treated, bad things can happen.

Photo: Courtesy Of Lee Wexler/Images For Innovation.

"There were other women who had defended themselves in domestic violence situations and ended up doing time for hurting someone who had been hurting them repeatedly for years and years. It was just a combination of things that made me want to be in this work."

How Big Is the Female Prison Population And How Are Women Of Color Disproportionately Affected?

"In general, the entire prison population disparately impacts people of color. One of the biggest reasons for that is for many years, the drug laws were very disparate. For instance, powder cocaine and crack cocaine were treated differently in the courts. Powder cocaine is used mostly by wealthier, white people and crack cocaine, which is sold on the

streets for very little money, was used in poorer Black communities. So, the prisons were filled with people [arrested] under those laws. I think we're still suffering those impacts.

"But also, there's bias in terms of access to adequate legal representation. So, if you're poor and you don't have money, you get a public defender that's overwhelmed, has a caseload of way too many people and is going to plea-bargain you out. The courts are designed -if you don't have money- to convict you of something. Because the first thing they're going want you to do is plea bargain rather than fight your case, because the courts could never sustain it if every case went to trial. There are a lot of reasons for the disparity."

I Just Want Women To Not Be Ashamed Of Those Of Us Who Have Been Convicted Of Crimes, Because We're Suffering From The Same Problems That Other Women Are Suffering From.

VIVIAN NIXON, COLLEGE AND COMMUNITY FELLOWSHIP

I feel like society very rarely shines a light on people, who are in prison, particularly women who are in prison. The biggest Hollywood portrayal that we have now is *Orange is the New Black*. Are you happy to see people watching a show about female inmates and talking about it?

"This is hard to answer, because [*Orange Is the New Black* creator] Piper [Kerman] is a friend. I like Piper. I think when she wrote that book, she was really trying to uplift the real stories of real women that she met in prison. What the show has turned out to be I don't think was her vision. But that's Hollywood, right?"

"On the other hand, it has opened up a conversation and some people are going to look at it and say, 'Hmm, let me find out what the reality is,' and some people are just going to look at it for the entertainment. Either way, I don't think it's a bad thing that the book is out there and that the show is out there...you know, now it's become fiction, because it's not just her book, it's beyond that. I think that the fictionalized portrayal of women in prison can do damage if it's not equated with a real understanding of what's happening to real women and families. Because most women who go to prison are primary caretakers of their children and it impacts their entire families and communities."



Photo: Courtesy of Liz Holliday/College & Community Fellowship.

What Do You Want To See Done In the Immediate Term, The Middle Term, And the Long Term to Help These Women?

"One of the reasons I work on the education issue is because I believe we have to work at both the front end and the back end. I'm working on the back end: These women have already been convicted of crimes, have already done time in prison. I just feel that a college education gives them kind of a way to reinvent themselves. So, they re-identify not as a woman with a conviction, but as a woman who is a college student or a college graduate and they're able to go on with their lives.

"On the front end, I think we need to find other ways to deal with the problems women have socially, other ways of dealing with poverty and addiction and mental illness. If a woman commits a crime, there are so many other ways to really evaluate what the underlying problem is and how we can address that underlying problem. [Like] diversion programs that say, 'Okay, we're not gonna send you to prison, but here's the help you need. And if you get the help you need, you won't have to go to prison.' That gives people an opportunity to make the shift."

*you'll finally get to a place where you understand that the
journey doesn't have to be smooth, you just have to get
where you're going.*

VIVIAN NIXON, COLLEGE AND COMMUNITY FELLOWSHIP

What Do You Want Women to Know About Women Who Are Coming Out Of Prison?

"We're just like other women. We suffer the same discrimination, abuse, the glass ceilings. Don't be ashamed of us. I read a lot of women's magazines and it really hurts when you don't see yourself reflected in a magazine that's about women. I remember the first couple of years when I came out of prison; I was reading one of my favorite magazines, *Essence*. I kept looking for a reflection of what was happening to women in the criminal justice system and it just wasn't there. And it hurt, because as a young teenager and as a young woman, I had been so inspired by that magazine. To no longer feel it related to me, for some reason, it really hurt...I just want women to not be ashamed of those of us who have been convicted of crimes because we're suffering from the same problems that other women are suffering from."

*When I Was Talking To My Mom About Having To Go To
Prison, The First Thing That Came Out Of Her Mouth Was, 'Oh
My God, I Hope That You're Still Going To Be Able To Vote.'*

VIVIAN NIXON, COLLEGE AND COMMUNITY FELLOWSHIP

Recently, states like Maryland and Virginia have **changed their laws to allow felons to vote** again.

How Do You Feel About Those Bills and Why Are They Important?

"Oh, it's critically important. My mother was a social activist. She was the head of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] on Long Island. She's been an activist all my life.

I think that's where I get my passion for activism from. When I got convicted and I was talking to my mom about having to go to prison, the first thing that came out of her mouth was, 'Oh my God, I hope that you're still going to be able to vote.'

Because she always instilled in us how important it was to have that voice. Because our ancestors literally fought and died for that right to vote.

"Thank god in New York State, you do get your right to vote back. When my mother passed away a couple of years after I got out of prison, I was going through her belongings. I found in her wallet her original photo-I.D. card from the day she turned 18. And I treasure it, because it reminds me how important it is to speak your mind, to have a voice in our society, and to be a part of what the solutions that our society needs to make it the place we want to live in."

What Is Your Advice For Young Women?

"Life is not easy. It's hard. There are twists and turns and struggles. And sometimes, you're going to fall and sometimes you're going to get pushed down. But always get back up. Every time you get back up, you're a little smarter and a little stronger. And you'll finally get to a place where you understand that the journey doesn't have to be smooth, you just have to get where you're going."



Editor's note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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