

Sharon's Story

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I grew up in Rochester, New York. I'm the oldest and I'm the only one that went to reformatory school. I got sent away to Hudson, New York because I kept stealing. I was shoplifting and I kept running away from home. I would run away a lot because my friends wanted to go to parties and my mother did not play the house party scene — okay — you had to be in before it got dark. I wasn't the type to talk back to my parents. I never ever raised my voice, so my way of acting out was I would say, 'I'm going to the store,' and just wouldn't come back. I had a loving home. I just was rebellious and I just wanted to do what I wanted to do and consequently, my behavior got me sent away.

One of the incidents that probably did send me up the river — I went to Lerner's with some friends of mine because I ran away in the dead of winter and didn't have a coat. So, I stole this suede coat, but apparently, they had a camera system — and I wasn't aware of that. So, when they finally caught up with me and I was in court they were talking about the incident at Lerner's -- and I was like, 'well, I was never in Lerner's.' They put the whole videotape on -- a black and white video — and it was me! And still I was in denial — [I said] 'Oh, that's not me!' and I meant it. The judge wasn't having it — he was fed up. I wouldn't stay put and I wouldn't stop stealing. They decided the best thing for me was to go to reformatory school. So, I ended up at two reformatory schools. I think I went to Highland first — Highland School for Girls and then the second facility was Hudson. And I remember both of them; at one I did one year and at one I did 18 months. There was no going home early, you did your time.

When I was at Hudson I met a bunch of wonderful girls. I also learned some things that I was not aware of because I lived a very sheltered life. When you first go there and you go to the restrooms, you see like 'Mary loves Amy' or something like that... and you're like, "why does that say 'Mary loves Amy?'" I didn't understand that, so I said to one of the girls who was in my room — she loved Elton John and she introduced me to Elton John so, we'd listen to him on the radio — but, she was telling me, 'It's because they go with one another,' and I said, 'Huh? They go with one another?' I go, 'Isn't that wrong?' and she goes, 'It probably is, but here they do.' That was an eye-opener.

My best memories [were] when you could go for rec time. [Hudson Training School] had a room with a pool table — [they also] had a ping pong table — I love playing ping pong. They had a jukebox — we'd play music. I remember the mothers — the women that were there supervising us -- they loved Al Green. They would play the music for us. We would sing. They were really cool. They were really nice to us. It wasn't like you dreaded being there, you just dreaded being locked up.

I ran away one time with another friend of mine. I remember she said, 'Let's try to get away,' and I said, 'It's a long way to the front,' and she says, 'Well, they won't spot us at night. We'll be able to get away.' She had a family member right outside the reformatory school. That place was really huge. From what I remember it was a really big place, but somehow we were able to get off of it and we hitch-hiked our way to her uncle's house. While he prepared us sandwiches he told us he was going to take us to New York — but, you know what that asshole did? While we were in the kitchen having sandwiches he called the reformatory school and told them that we were there. We were picked up and because we were in trouble we got sent to isolation. Isolation for me was horrible; they had the lights on, you were in a locked-up room, the walls were padded. I was told the next time I got in trouble it wouldn't be a reformatory school. It would be jail. That scared me.