Prison

Can We Build a Better Women's Prison?

Prisons and jails are designed for men. What would a prison tailored to women's needs and experiences look like?

Sherita Alexander in her cell in a “high-level” block (reserved for women who are considered a risk for violent behavior or who are not participating in a work program) at Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility for women in San Diego County, Calif. (Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

By **Keri Blakinger**

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Lauren Johnson walked into the aging Travis County jail just outside Austin on a sunny Friday in July 2018 and steeled herself. Every time she passed through the door and the smell hit her, it all came rushing back: the humiliation of being shackled while nine months pregnant. The pang of seeing her children from behind a glass barrier. How she’d had to improvise with what little she had, crafting makeshift bras out of the disposable mesh underwear the jail provided. Between 2001 and 2010, she’d been in and out of the facility six times. Altogether, she’d spent about 3½ years of her life incarcerated.

Now she was returning to the jail, eight years after the last time she'd been released. But this time, it was to ask the incarcerated women questions that would've been unfathomable to her during her time there: What did they want? How could their experience be improved?

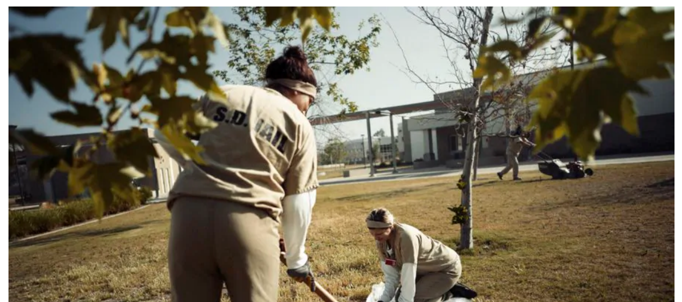
Johnson wore bold prints and her best jewelry that morning, and purposefully doused herself in perfume. She remembered how deprived she'd felt when she was inside; she wanted the women to see and smell the vibrancy of life beyond the razor wire. She sat in a dank jail classroom, surrounded by a dozen or so women wearing dingy uniforms. She told them about her past, then asked about their futures, and the future of the jail that housed them.

“Could we work for deodorant?” one woman asked. Like shampoo, conditioner and other basic hygiene supplies, deodorant cost money at the commissary, and the women had no income. There were other problems: They weren’t given bras or tampons (a possible security concern, according to the facility’s medical director). They wanted access to education, and to fresh vegetables. They wanted to see the sunlight more. “Basic f---ing needs,” Johnson told me.

As a criminal justice outreach coordinator with the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, Johnson is part of a committee of six women formed by the Travis County Sheriff’s Office in early 2018 to plan a new building, one that aims to set a higher standard for a women’s jail. The current structure is made up of 12 rundown housing units at the correctional complex in Del Valle, a suburb just over seven miles southeast of the pink capitol dome. The buildings on the suburban campus date to the 1980s and are starting to show signs of age, with peeling paint and recurring electrical and plumbing problems. Officials want better space for

programs, and the facility isn't set up to house all the women together. Instead, they're spread out across five buildings, making it harder to foster a sense of community.

These were all problems Johnson remembered well, and she walked out the door feeling relieved that she *could* leave. But she was also brooding about what she'd heard, and how to incorporate the women's wishes into the sheriff's office's reform effort. What would a state-of-the-art women's jail — one focused on rehabilitation and second chances instead of punishment and retribution, with an eye to women's specific needs — look like?



TOP LEFT: Perlita Coronado in the general population yard at Las Colinas. TOP RIGHT: Women fold the prison's laundry. BOTTOM LEFT: Inmates, from left, Ana Rocha, Samantha Gomez and Naomi Rincon in the sewing workshop at Las Colinas, making jumpsuits for inmates across the county. BOTTOM RIGHT: Women landscape the yard. (Photos by Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

The American prison system was built with men in mind. The uniforms are made to fit male bodies. About 70 percent of the guards are men. The rules are made to control male social structures and male violence. It's an outgrowth of necessity: Even though the female prison population has grown twice as fast as the male prison population over the past 35 years, about 90 percent of incarcerated adults are men. Pop culture reflected this invisibility, too, until 2013, when the Netflix show "Orange Is the New Black" brought the struggles of women in prison to millions of viewers.

Men and women have similarly abysmal recidivism rates — five out of six prisoners released from state lockups are arrested again within nine years, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics — but women are incarcerated for different reasons and

bring with them different histories. They're more likely to commit nonviolent crimes, involving theft, fraud and drugs. They have slightly higher rates of substance abuse than men, are more likely to be the primary caregiver of a young child, and typically earn less money than their male counterparts before getting locked up.

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The system does little to account for such differences. Women tend to pose a lower risk of violence, but they're still subject to the same classifications as men — so they're often ranked at a higher security level than necessary,

and, as a result, can be blocked from educational and treatment programs. And when violations do happen, they're often nonviolent offenses, like talking back to a guard. Whereas men might alter their clothes to show gang affiliation, women might do the same for style or fit, yet both could result in disciplinary action. On top of that, women often have fewer programming options, such as education, job training and 12-step programs. This is, in part, a matter of economy of scale. Because there are fewer women in prison, there are fewer rehabilitative and training programs for them.

These are all things I've experienced firsthand. Before I became a reporter, I did time. After nearly a decade addicted to drugs, I got arrested in late 2010 with a Tupperware container full of heroin. When I set foot in a county jail in Upstate New York for the first time, I noted the basic inequalities there. Women were offered one volunteer-led 12-step class per week, while men had four. There wasn't a low-security housing area for women, while there were four for the men. Women couldn't be "trusties," meaning the inmates who

served as porters and janitors and got extra privileges; men could.

The cellblock toilets were visible from the hallway, allowing passing male inmates and guards to see as you sat down to use the bathroom or change a pad. After I was transferred to a state prison, I watched male guards saunter around our dorms, sometimes peering into cells and cubicles as we changed clothes. It was a level of gender-specific shame and humiliation I did not know to expect, and at the time, I had no idea how widespread these sorts of problems were. Now, as a journalist focused on criminal justice, it's my job to know, and to see the data and patterns behind what I lived. But nine years later, I can still feel a rising blush of embarrassment in my cheeks as I write this.

"The women who come in have different issues from men," Travis County Sheriff Sally Hernandez told me. "They have abusive backgrounds; they're mothers; some are pregnant." When she took over the sheriff's office in 2017, Hernandez became responsible for the decaying county jail and found it ill-equipped to deal with

women's needs, lacking in everything from on-site women's health services and supplies to vocational programs aligned with women's interests. The $97 million building she and her team are planning will be, she hopes, at the vanguard of a growing focus within criminal justice reform known as gender-responsive corrections: the idea that prisons and jails designed for women will net better outcomes, with more stories that end like Johnson's. "If we're really focused on reentry and on helping people not come back," Hernandez says, "we have to change what we're doing."

Although Travis County aims to set an example with a facility made for and run by women, a shift toward gender responsiveness is already playing out in

jails and prisons nationwide. Sometimes the changes are small: supplying underwear and tampons or allowing small dignities like makeup and jewelry. Sometimes they're programmatic shifts, such as offering trauma-informed treatment or women-centered self-help programs. In New York state, a prison nursery program lets a small number of women who give birth while incarcerated keep their babies with them for up to 18 months. In Connecticut, the state's only women's prison began a small pilot program aimed at reducing recidivism through a focus on dignity and autonomy. The Harris County jail in Houston opened vocational programs to female inmates for the first time this year. Last year, NPR reported on the newly built Iowa Correctional Institution for Women, where officers are being trained to write fewer tickets, allow the women more freedom, and listen to them, rather than barking orders.

California has already enshrined gender responsivity into law, and the state's prison system created a Female Offender Programs and Services Office. The legal shift affected only state

lockups, but change has come to some county jails, too, including one now considered a gold standard for gender-responsive corrections: Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility, a women's jail in San Diego County.

Las Colinas was a full-scale rebuild, like what Hernandez envisions for the women's building of her jail on the outskirts of Austin. Jail officials in San Diego didn't want just a new building; they wanted something state-of-the-art. They called in Stephanie Covington, co-director of the Center for Gender and Justice, an organization that helps advise jails and prisons on how to address women's needs and treat them better. For two years, she and Barbara Bloom, who co-directs the center, reviewed Las Colinas's policies and operations, and advised officials on how to improve. They suggested policy tweaks, offered training for the staff and monitored with regular visits to make sure it was implemented properly. "In a jail setting, you want women to experience what it would be like to live in a community in a healthy way," Covington says. "The majority of women are coming out and living in

our communities, and we want people who are good community members."

That's the kind of outcome that Hernandez and her team aspire to. "As we did our research about what good stuff is going on in various places, Las Colinas was one that came to the fore," says Michele Deitch, a senior lecturer in criminal justice policy at the University of Texas at Austin and one of the nation's leading experts on women's prison issues, who's also on the planning committee for the Travis County facility. To see what the new Austin jail might become, I visited Las Colinas.

Khadijah Young gets her hair done by Tonia Toomer inside a high-level cellblock at Las Colinas. (Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

It's a warm May morning, and I've just made it through Las Colinas's security doors and stepped out into the Santee sun. "Welcome to Las Colinas!" chirps Jessica Barawed, the facility's reentry supervisor, while motioning across the grassy 45-acre campus. She's tall and blond, the spirit of a California postcard greeting me with a sincere warmth that seems out of place at a county jail.

There's a concrete amphitheater for movie nights to my left. Straight ahead,

women are landscaping a palm-tree-lined walkway under the gaze of a plaid-shirted horticulture teacher. To my right are dorms with volleyball nets out front and scattered pieces of exercise equipment for the women who've earned their way to the prime housing assignments. And surrounding it all — the lime green palo verde trees, the pink-painted utility covers and the 800 women who live here — is a brick wall. The five-year-old, $240 million facility is still a jail, but no razor wire is in sight.

More than 12,000 women pass through here every year. Although the facility can hold nearly 1,300, the average daily population typically hovers around two-thirds that, including inmates from maximum security all the way down to the "incentive-based housing" that's akin to an honors dorm. Most of the 24 housing units rely on a direct supervision model, meaning that the officers are stationed in the women's housing areas instead of separated behind a glass bubble. The idea is that keeping the guards closer will foster better communication with the women they watch, and maybe help prevent conflicts.

Women who have good behavior and a low-enough security level can attend a book club run by a group of female judges; a six-week trauma class; anger management programs; a handful of college courses; and vocational programs that offer certificates in culinary arts, sewing, landscaping and gardening. (The squash, tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers they grow in the facility's garden are sold at a farmers market for officers.) There's job-readiness training and a worker on site to act as a liaison with the county's Child Welfare Services. There's yoga every Wednesday, theater programs, Thursday meditation classes, soda machines in the dorms and a gourmet-coffee cart — which offers a vocational training certificate for incarcerated workers — available twice a week.

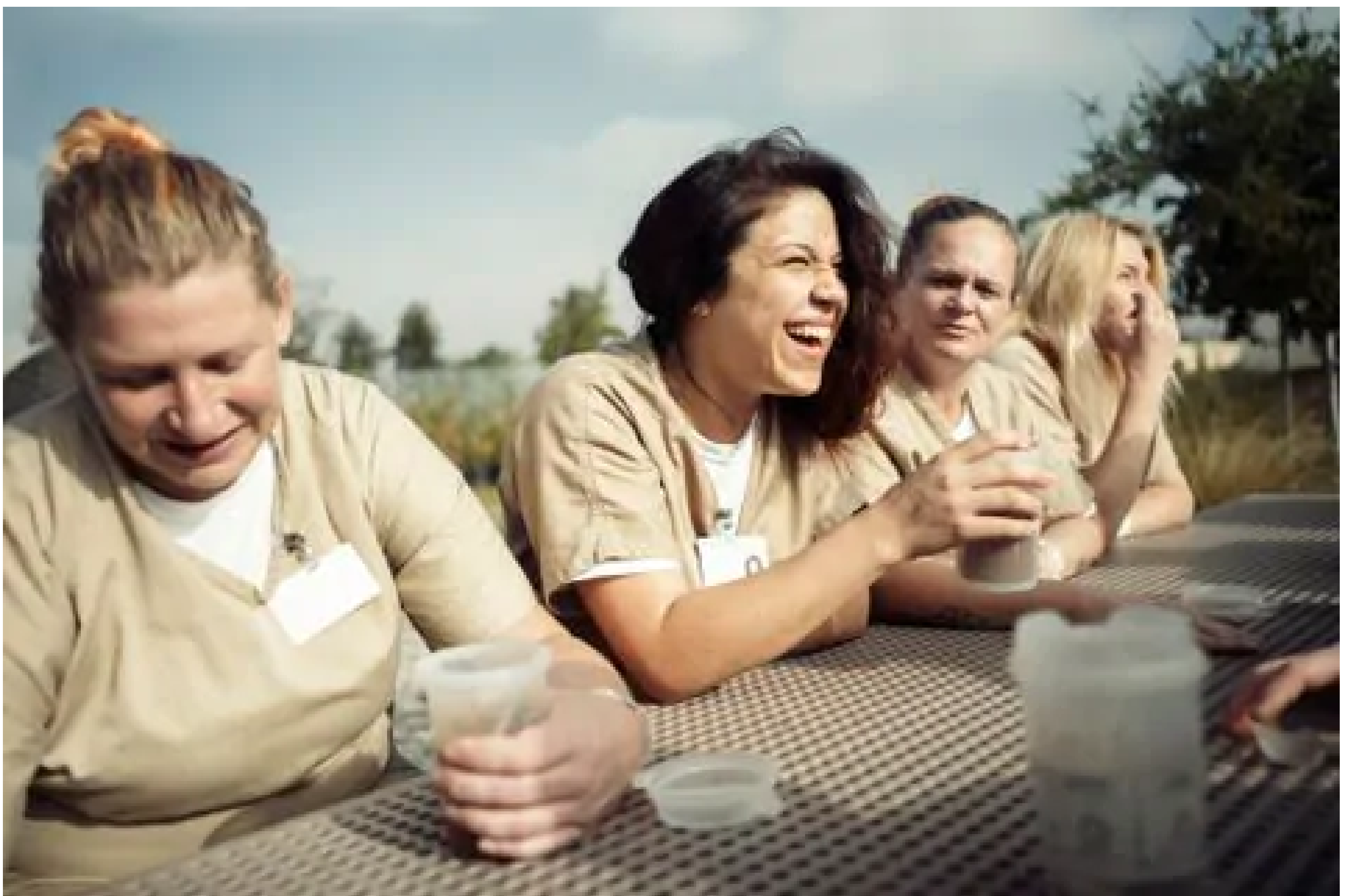
Capt. James Madsen has been with the sheriff's office for 26 years and is now Las Colinas's top administrator. He remembers when the jail did little more

than warehouse people. It offered 12-step programs, but some officials wanted something that felt more like a college campus and less like a jail. Years of tough reports from inspections helped grease the skids and push forward change. “There was some resistance initially,” Madsen says. “But these folks are going to get out of jail. Do we want people who are still broken coming out into our communities, or do we want to get them better tools? Why can’t we become part of the solution, instead of just keeping things status quo?” After the county built the new facility, assaults inside went down about 50 percent in the first year, he says, adding: “The inmates act differently because we treat them differently.”

To Madsen, the changes have become the new way of life at Las Colinas, but to me, they were almost incomprehensible. I’d never seen a jail like it. As a reporter, I’d done my research and knew what to expect when I arrived on campus; as a former prisoner, I was stunned. If I’d been asked to design a jail, a coffee cart and a farmers market never would have occurred to me — they just weren’t on

my radar. But other features felt obvious, and I wondered why they couldn't be standard for prisons across the board. At Las Colinas, the women have access to unlimited feminine hygiene supplies, including tampons. Unlike at some facilities, they aren't routinely strip-searched when they walk in the door. The visiting area has a playroom for kids.

On a basic level, some of these shifts are just about treating inmates more humanely and could help usher in changes for inmates of all genders, Covington says. "Here's what those of us who have focused on women's services have said for years: If we can get it right for women, we can then turn and get it better for men," she says. "If you only focus on men, it never seems to get better for women."



Women at Las Colinas drink coffee while on break from their shift in the laundry room. (Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

This kind of programming isn't cheap: Housing a woman at Las Colinas costs about $240 per day, between $35 and $115 more than at any of the county's six jails for men. And it's not available to every inmate. Only one-quarter of the women there can access most of the privileges. For most inmates — those who aren't in the special dorms for intensive programs or inmate workers — life at Las Colinas is not that different than in a regular jail. The women in the general population units spend much of the day in their cells,

typically venturing off the unit only to go to the mess hall, appointments or visitation.

Tabatha Laumer remembers the old Las Colinas, the one before the coffee cart and gardening classes. Her first stay was almost 20 years ago, when she was 17. She was in and out in eight hours and vowed never to return. But a week later, she did. And then she was back again, and again. Sometimes it was just a few hours at a time, when she got picked up for being under the influence. Sometimes it was a couple of weeks for theft. One time, it was six months.

Now she's in jail for the 29th time, Laumer told me when we met. Twirling wisps of dusty blond hair poking out from behind her ears, she rattles off her litany of past charges like a laundry list of regret: stealing, possession, transporting across the border.

When Laumer was growing up in Oceanside, Calif., her mother worked multiple jobs, so Laumer spent a lot of time with other family members — including a cousin who introduced her to drugs at age 8 or 9. "I didn't realize it

was wrong," she says. She still did her homework and went to band practice, but she also started smoking pot and took part in crimes for which she never got caught. Over time, it all escalated: There were blurry nights, hard drugs, weeks she wishes she didn't remember, gangs, robberies and rape.

In between trips to jail, Laumer had bouts of sobriety and held down a handful of jobs: deli manager, 7-Eleven clerk, door-to-door saleswoman. She had two sons, now 14 and 18. She'd start to turn things around and eventually slip up again. At one point, she began running drugs across the Mexican border, not even sure what was in the cars she drove in exchange for a few hundred bucks or a small stash of drugs. When feds caught her at the border in May 2018, they found 14 kilograms of methamphetamine in the trunk where the tire jack should have been. Once again, Laumer was on her way to Las Colinas.

The last time she was here, Las Colinas was a cluster of dark, decaying buildings with rotting floors. There were no college courses or Wednesday night yoga sessions, and limited

vocational programs. “This is a really nice facility compared to the old one,” she says. “You’ve got this huge team of counselors, and they offer college, therapy, programs.”

After she arrived last year, Laumer realized she wanted to change her life. It wasn’t just because of the shift in thinking at Las Colinas, although that certainly helped. At the old Las Colinas, inmates had to keep their hands in their pockets while they walked and turn to the side if an officer passed. Those are no longer rules, she says: “Not having to put your head down every time someone walks by — it makes us feel like we’re worthy. Not just another number.”

This time around, Laumer earned a slew of certificates, got A’s in college classes, and performed in a San Diego theater company’s renditions of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” and “Romeo and Juliet.” Somewhere during it all, she realized she’d spent years letting her life tick away. “I’m too old for this,” she says. “I’m 37 and I got nothing. But I’m not dead yet.”

TOP LEFT: Tabatha Laumer visits with her sons, ages 14 and 18, in the visiting area of Las Colinas. There is a no-touch rule in the visiting area, except for mothers with very small children. TOP RIGHT: Laura Mejia threads Angelina Ballon's eyebrows inside a high-level cellblock. BOTTOM LEFT: Inmates play cards featuring unsolved crimes. BOTTOM RIGHT: Elizabeth Cuevas receives her culinary diploma. (Photos by Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

Trauma is the common denominator underlying the life experience of the vast majority of female inmates, and trauma-informed care is a key piece of the gender-responsive approach. More than half of female prisoners are survivors of physical or sexual violence; 73 percent of female state inmates and 61 percent of female federal inmates have mental health problems. (Many men in prison have experienced

trauma, too, but incarcerated women are more likely to have been through trauma than their male counterparts.) Corrections officials are starting to recognize this, but intensive programs that treat trauma are not nearly common enough.

Trauma-informed care often includes cognitive-behavioral therapy, a type of counseling that challenges negative thoughts and the behaviors they lead to. But the approach is more than just a programmatic shift, Deitch says. Trauma-informed care "is a mind-set that infuses everything about how a jail or prison operates, as well as the programs offered in the facilities," she says. "It's about staff recognizing that the vast majority of women in custody have extensive histories of trauma, and that this history affects the women's behavior, thoughts and bodies. It's about training staff on communication methods and disciplinary approaches that are most effective with women, given this history. It's about helping women learn to self-regulate their emotional responses and defuse tense situations and helping them become more resilient."

In the 100-page report that Deitch's committee created for the Travis County rebuild, trauma-informed treatment is mentioned more than three dozen times. "Women that are coming into the jail have been hurt and traumatized and don't see value in themselves, don't see value in others, and they stay in a vicious cycle," Hernandez told me. "You have to address their trauma so you can redirect them and help them get back into society effectively."

The gender-responsive approach is still gathering steam in the criminal justice world, so there's not much research to support its efficacy. A 2016 meta-analysis in the journal Criminal Justice and Behavior looked at a few dozen existing studies and cited research that gender-responsive programs are at least as successful as gender-neutral interventions and more successful for women whose past criminal behaviors were specifically linked to gendered issues. But even if gender-responsive interventions don't directly reduce recidivism, Deitch says, they're still a vital step toward a more humane corrections system. And lower recidivism rates are not the only

marker of success. “The first goal is to do no harm,” she says. “Hopefully, we end up with better results. But that doesn’t have to be our first objective.”

Hernandez and her team have advocated tirelessly for the new Austin facility, along with the budget to implement it, and it’s wending its way through the approval process. If everything comes out as the committee hopes, the new jail won’t have bolted-down furniture, clanging doors, metal bars or congregate showers. “If a particular feature is not something that most people living outside a jail setting routinely experience in their daily lives,” the report says, “it should raise serious questions about whether it is essential in this facility.” They plan to prioritize privacy, with single rooms where possible (no bunk beds, reads the report, because “adults do not sleep in bunk beds”). The toilets should have lids, and the women should have access to laundry areas. They’ve planned for a breast-feeding room, natural light, no long-term segregation, and recreation areas with yoga mats and bicycles.

From the outset, the most outspoken opponents have not been tight-pursed

elected officials, but rather criminal justice reform advocates and activist community members. A jail is a jail, and they didn't want any new ones. "Some of those buildings are old and need repair, and I get that piece," says Annette Price, interim co-director of GrassRoots Leadership in Austin, who served prison time in Illinois. "But to me, more jails and prisons is not the answer." She'd prefer to see more diversion programs to keep people out of jail, she says. Like Lauren Johnson, Price was part of the jail advisory committee; she knows incarcerated women often aren't able to receive the programming, medical care and treatment they need. "But building a jail is not going to solve that."

Lakyesha Jenkins calls home from a high-level cellblock. (Brian L. Frank for The Washington Post)

Johnson understands those misgivings, even if the changes themselves are positive. As someone who spends her life fighting mass incarceration, she finds it hard to stomach the idea of supporting a new jail, no matter how bad the current one is. “Ultimately, I’d like to see us not incarcerating so many people,” she says. “But [given] the amount of trauma most of these women have encountered in their lives, having something that is built to their needs is so important. People don’t transform their lives when they’re being dehumanized.”

When you're stuck in the system, it can be hard to envision anything better — especially if you don't think you deserve it. A harsh system and a history of trauma can make it easy to believe you don't, just like the women Johnson talked to when she visited on that hot July day, who asked for the smallest of changes. I saw those same tensions playing out at Las Colinas, too. As I sat in the mess hall with the inmate workers during a lunch break, they griped a little about the bad conditions and shared their doubts about the good ones. So much freedom is "weird," said 28-year-old Isabel Mendoza. "It creeps me out."

If I hadn't done time, this probably would surprise me. But it's the sort of self-flagellating catchphrase of penitence my fellow inmates and I would repeat. "This isn't the Hilton," we'd say. "If you don't like the accommodations, don't make the reservations." We knew we shouldn't have to beg for tampons or offer sexual favors — as I saw women do when I was locked up — for more toilet paper. But many of us suffered from a kind of internalized oppression: No matter what we thought about self-worth and

second chances, it seemed that, on some level, a lot of us didn't really believe we deserved to be treated decently. Being yelled at, degraded and told we'd lost the right to expect more from life was what so many of us thought jail had to be.

As I walked the grounds at Las Colinas, I wondered if its focus on women could make a lasting difference. There are so many other factors that keep people out of jail: privileges like stable housing, money, family support. But being surrounded by people invested in our futures — college teachers, counselors, mentors — could have helped some of us. The sheer number of times some of my friends bounced in and out of jails and prisons seemed testament enough to the fact that being treated as something less than a human certainly wasn't working. I shared these thoughts with Laumer. "As nice as it is, I don't *want* to come back," she said. "Maybe I've grown up a little bit."

The women in Laumer's dorm were sitting in front of the building, playing cards on a picnic table. Laumer was running the show, dealing out a hand of

spades — the card game of choice in jails everywhere. It was barely 8 a.m. and the cluster at the table was positively giddy, joking about making a Las Colinas-themed hip-hop album as Drake played on a radio in the background.

I knew I was seeing only a small slice of these women's lives, but Laumer and her friends didn't seem quite as miserable as the women I saw in so many other corrections facilities. "Don't count your days," they say, riffing on a quote usually attributed to Muhammad Ali. "Make your days count." No one said that when I did time. Maybe it was just a show, or a fleeting, out-of-character moment. But as I watched them howl an out-of-key rendition of "We Are the Champions," I hoped so much that it was all real.

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