

Testimony for the Prison Rape Elimination Commission

Written by Grace Bauer

Read by Gina Womack, Director of Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

Good Morning. My name is Gina B. Womack and I'm the Director of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children further referred to as (FFLIC). I first came to this work over 10 years ago as the office manager for Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana further referred to as (JJPL) as they were suing the State for ghastly conditions of confinement for kids in the juvenile prisons. At that time, I began talking to parents across the state and was shaken by the many horror stories about their children that were locked behind the prison bars in Louisiana. It was because of these stories that I lobbied JJPL to begin a support group for these parents that I later co-founded FFLIC. Grace Bauer was one of those parents that turned to JJPL for support because her son landed under the Department of Corrections where she was lead to believe that [*], her son, would get treatment in a rehabilitative system, after all that was what the system was supposed to do; only to find that her child would be NOT cared for under the punitive hands of a system that was then being run by the adult system and there was no rehabilitation going on, only punitive punishment and things really too awful to mention. Grace was so taken aback by what she had learned she became so involved in the work of FFLIC as she wanted to help prevent other children from experiencing what her son had endured and to help other mothers that felt as hopeless as she had. Through our work together I have come to know the Bauers very well over the last 6 years as we have worked to help Grace and her son try to heal from this gruesome experience.

* [] Indicates that the name has been removed for privacy reasons.

I feel honored that Grace asked me to come and be her voice this morning to unveil her son's story to you.

My name is Grace Bauer and this oral statement has been prepared for the Federal Hearing in New Orleans, Louisiana on December 5, 2007. Due to my being unable to travel at this time my statement will be read by Gina Womack, founder and Director of Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children and also a close source of support and care for both myself and my son in his years of incarceration in the Louisiana juvenile and criminal justice systems.

In a small town in Louisiana, in 2001, my 14-year-old son was incarcerated in the Tallulah Correctional Facility for Youth, better known as Tallulah. [] was deemed ungovernable by the state of Louisiana and sent away from his home and family to receive care for mental health issues and substance abuse problems. As his mother, I was told he would go into a 90-day program that would focus on his problem behaviors and help him to get back on track. **In reality what occurred was that he was sentenced to his 18th birthday in the care of the Louisiana Department of Corrections for stealing a stereo out of a truck and being in possession of tobacco.**

Up until January of 1998, my son was an honor roll student with excellent reading skills and a heart of gold. He had never been sent to the office or been a problem at school or home. The change that occurred that January, in the life of this little boy, was that his beloved grandmother suddenly passed away. In February, he was suspended for the first time, by April of that year he had been expelled from our school district. You might believe he had created some great chaos or cause physical harm to someone, but the person he would harm besides his family was

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himself. Every offense before stealing the stereo, involved tobacco; possession of tobacco by a minor, shoplifting tobacco and smoking.

In March of 2001, my son was sentenced to the Department of Corrections, where we were told he would receive the care he needed and be given the tools he needed to get through his grief and rebuild his battered self-esteem. **In reality what happened to this little boy was that his life was again changed but this time to such a degree, that today at the age of 21 he still struggles with nightmares and a very bruised and battered spirit and body.**

A mother knows certain things about her children and she knows when something is wrong. I knew something was wrong long before he was released through a hearing, which before my son had never happened in our jurisdiction – of Calcasieu Parish. He came home with no transition, no after care plan. My son's homecoming was a very special day in our lives. Soon after his return I began to notice behaviors in him that were unusual. If you went to wake him up he would strike at you, before waking fully and realizing where he was. You had to make him aware that you were approaching him or he would have an anxiety attack if he felt startled. He struggled with insomnia and anxiety beyond what a child his age should have experienced. As a mother, though I knew something terrible had happened I felt the best course of action was to leave the way open for discussion but not push him to discuss what his time had been like in prison. As his mother, I look back and know that it was likely my own mind that could not handle what had happened to my little boy.

My son did well for almost 2 years after his return home but inevitably the things that brought him down the first time and the abuse he endured would slowly creep

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back into his life. After losing mental health care and substance abuse treatment he began to use drugs again. Eventually this landed him in the adult system where he would stay until he was 20.

During his time in the adult facility, I was working with other families in similar situations to our own. Through one of these connections, I would hear what no mother should ever have to hear about one of her children. A young man, incarcerated with my son at Tallulah became his cellmate in the adult prison. After a sudden and inexplicable move of [] to another prison, this young man recounted a day he spent with [] in Tallulah in 2001. He said that he had witnessed the rape and sexual assault of []. This young man gave details of this savage attack that will never be erased from my memory. He told of my son being held up against a wall and having another youth rape him anally while my son screamed for help that never came.

It is to be **remembered** by this commission and **all** that hear of his experience that this was a **child! A little boy, far from home, suffering with mental illness and grief.** He was in a place where he was to **be cared for** and given the mental health treatment he needed. He never received any of the help we were told he would get and in the end he would be hurt so deeply that even today he struggles to remain sober and a part of this world. It is also to be remembered that had it not been for this young man telling what he knew I would have never known the truth about what happened to my son on that awful day. My son, at the age of 21, is tough and hardened by his 4 years of incarceration and the things he witnessed there. He will likely never say to anyone what happened to him or what he saw happen to others because in his mind he is strong and tough and tough men don't talk about such things. As his mother I can only imagine the shame, hurt, humiliation and how

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very alone he must feel. It keeps me awake at night and steals my thoughts and breathe away when something happens to trigger this thought in my waking hours.

I ask this commission to never forget what happened to my son that day and know in your hearts that he is not ALONE! We must stop the madness of over incarceration and begin to build our children, our families and our communities, rather than destroying them through horror and brutality. It is said that a society can be judged by the way it treats it's young, let us hope each of us, as Americans, are never judged by the savagery and brutality that my son endured that day.

My sincere appreciation to the commission for the opportunity to be heard today.

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