

Evans, Emunah Index

Alamance County-6
Benevolence Farm-2,5
Bonding Families-5,9
COVID-9
DSS-4,5
Family reunification-2,5,6
Foster Care System-3,4,6
Housing First-6
Incarcerated-1,2,3,4,5,8,9,10
Medicare-7
Michigan-1
North Carolina-1,6,7
Prison-1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9,10
Punishment-8,9,10
Reentry programs-1,7,8
Temporary guardianship-4,5
Triangle-6

Interview of Emunah Evans on 11.13.2023 conducted over Zoom

Emunah “Mona” Evans is a family reunification activist based in Alamance County in North Carolina. After her release from prison, Mona became involved with the reentry program Benevolence Farm which works to provide stable housing and employment to the recently released. Through her experiences navigating the process of reuniting with her children, Mona identified a need for a support group and founded Bonding Families. She continues to work to provide support and resources to people upon their release and advocates for a world beyond punitive prison. Mona envisions a world where individuals are truly rehabilitated, and punishments don’t last for a lifetime.

SAM ST. LAWRENCE: Alright, so just thank you again for taking your time to be here with me. Just to start, could you just talk a little bit about who you are and how you got into activism in general?

EMUNAH EVANS: So, my name is Emunah Evans. I go by Mona Evans for short. I'm originally from Detroit, Michigan. I grew up there. I was raised there. I have three children. I always say that because it's kind of like where my story started. Prior to me doing this type of work I did a lot of caregiving work. I was actually in nursing school. I wanted to be an RN [Registered Nurse] at the time. So, I was kind of dealing with anything that was in the health care field or the medical field. When I was living in Michigan, I was in an abusive relationship for quite a while, about eight and a half years, with my two youngest's father. After a while, it kind of got played out. So, I decided to move here to North Carolina and kind of start over, have a fresh start. Once I got here, I lived with family members. I lived with my uncle and his wife for a while. Everything was going good. I kind of felt that I had a fresh start. They were helping me care for my kids also because during this time I was not working. I was pretty much still trying to pursue my career as far as nursing. So, that kind of was just like, “Hey, you guys can stay here. You focus on graduating, and we'll help you with the kids.” Well, in the process of all of that everything, like I said, was going well for a while. Then about eight months almost to a year of me being here, I found out that my uncle was abusing one of my children. In the process of me confronting him, it turned into an altercation between me and him where he knocked my tooth out. I grabbed a knife, and I stabbed him. Once I stabbed him, he did subside to his injuries, and he passed away. That's how I ended up in the criminal legal system here in North Carolina. My first time ever being incarcerated. I was sentenced to four and a half years. I pled to voluntary manslaughter¹, which is a lesser charge from murder². Basically, it just says that it was pretty much self-defense, but it's very tricky around self-defense laws here in North Carolina. So, I pled to a lesser sentence and got four and a half years. I did my time and during that time when I was incarcerated is when I decided to stay in North Carolina, for one. I was kind of hoping to go back home, but when I was getting ready to get released and things like that, it was in my stipulations that I had to remain in North Carolina to finish out my parole³. So, I was just like, “Okay, well, I don't want to stay here for a year and get myself together and things like that and then I got to try to start all over again, back in Michigan.” Then I felt that I still needed to stay away from that situation I was still dealing with, with my girls' father. So, I decided to stay here. As I was

¹ Class D Felony that is an act of killing another person in the heat of passion wherein someone could not reasonably control their emotions

² Class A Felony that is premeditated act of killing another person

³ Early release of an incarcerated individual where there are certain guidelines of good behavior that must be met

staying in prison, I started working on myself—started doing a lot of stuff, development, taking classes. I started really thinking about “what did I want to do?” I pretty much knew that once I got out of prison that the nursing thing was over. I did have case managers telling me, “Well, it might be something you can do” and things like that. But I pretty much stayed in the law books when I was incarcerated. I realized with me having a murder charge, which was considered a violent crime, that I wouldn't be able to participate in that field again. I got to thinking about “Okay, where do I go from here? What else can I possibly do with my life?” My main goal was to reunite with my children. So, I started looking for reentry programs⁴. I found a program called Benevolence Farm⁵. I saw that this program offered employment. They also offered housing and that's one of the most important things a person needs when they're trying to start off their foundation [after incarceration] is housing and employment. So, I was pretty excited about finding a program that could accommodate that. So, I got accepted and I was released from prison into the care of Benevolence Farm on May 2nd, 2022. When I was here, I participated in the program, our employment, I learned how to make candles—that was the employment side. We are a farm, so I learned how to do a lot of gardening, how to grow things, how to harvest. I picked up a lot of different skills. Also, with marketing the candles and things like that. I learned a lot about the business side of things, like how to do inventory. How do you market? How do you make sales? How do you price things? So, I started picking up a lot of different skills with that. And I'm like, “This is really cool. I really like doing this.” But, like I said, my main goal was to reunite with my kids. So, as I was here, I was still working on myself, trying to figure out “How can I hurry up and get employment outside in the community? How can I get a house so I can have my children back with me?” So, I initially stayed in the program for five months before I decided to move out. During this process is when I went through my second greatest challenges in my life besides incarceration and that was finding housing and employment as a felon. It was very hard. I went through a lot of money by paying application fees, filling out applications, just so I can get denied because of my criminal background. Also, I experienced paying a higher security deposit than an individual without a criminal record would have to pay. So, I experienced a lot during that which was very unfair. So, for me, I did end up finding housing. I did end up finding employment and I've only found employment, honestly, because Benevolence Farm offered me a position here. They approached me with a position because they said that when I was here, I was one of the people that always had advice to give any parents that came in, as far as how to get their kids back or steps they can take to help them. I always used to try to help the residents with resources as far as anything like that. So, they approached me with a Family Reunification position here. I immediately accepted the position and that's pretty much how I got into activism work. Like I said, once I started experiencing all of these different injustices as a felon, once I got established, I didn't want to just leave it at that. I wanted to channel my anger into something, and I said, “Why not channel it into this? Fighting for the right thing. There's no point in me sitting up here complaining, ‘dang, this is hard finding housing. This is hard finding unemployment.’ How can I solve this problem?” Because I'm not going to be the only person that's coming home from prison. I'm not the only mother that experiences these injustices. So, I channeled my anger and that's how I really got into this work as far as trying to be an activist.

⁴ Programs designed to help recently released incarcerated individuals readjust to civilian life

⁵ [Benevolence Farm](#) Reentry Program

ST. LAWRENCE: Well, thank you for sharing that. I know that's probably hard explaining that again. You talked about how you were sharing resources with other people who came through Benevolence Farm. How did you initially find those resources yourself?

EVANS: I taught myself. So, like I said, when I was in prison, I was very self-motivated. I had a good lawyer. I had my grandfather and some family support. I would not say all, but I did have a little bit of support and they helped me navigate that system. But a lot of it was self-driven. A lot of it was by determination because I knew being incarcerated that I needed to keep that connection with my kids because of the simple fact that I was away from them physically. So, I tried to figure out other ways that I could connect, whether it was calling them once a week or writing letters every single day. I picked up crocheting a lot when I was in prison. So that was another way I connected with my children. We went through the whole blanket making process. They were very young, so they really enjoyed it. They got to pick out a character and what colors they wanted on a blanket. I did that once a month, they got a blanket for me from the whole time I was incarcerated and that was my way of keeping that connection with them. I realized that even though I didn't really have to navigate the foster care system⁶ when I was incarcerated, because I was one of the lucky ones where I had family members to come in and take my kids, but I still always kept in the back of my mind, even with family, you never know. So, I always kept in the back of my mind, that I needed to make sure I kept receipts. I needed to make sure I stayed in contact with them just in case I do have to go through that process when I came home. So, I noticed a lot of other women didn't understand it. They thought that when they got incarcerated, that you had to immediately sign over your rights or that the foster care system had the right to come in and just take your kids because you got sentenced. I wanted to be a voice for them to help them navigate that, if that makes sense.

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah, for sure. Could you just give a brief overview of what it looks like to reunite with your children or what it looks like when you first get incarcerated? What does that process look like for you and your children?

EVANS: So, for one, there's no black and white. There are no steps on how it really works when you're first incarcerated. Mine was literally, I went to sleep with my kids in the bed with me one night and the next day I woke up in a jail cell. There was nothing like on movies or TV shows where you can say goodbye to your parents. No, I never got a chance to talk to them, touch them, hug them. It was very dramatic and then also it was very traumatic. So, I experienced that for one, and at the time my daughters were two and three, my son was six years old. So, they went from being in a household every single day around each other to not having their mother in the home, and then on top of that, my daughters have the same father, and my son has a different father, so now they're split up. So, they were not even in the same household with each other all the way up until I came home from prison. My children were only seeing each other on birthdays and holidays when they went from being in the home together 24/7. So, when I say this is very hard it's because it's not something you can really prepare. It's not something you could prepare for. So, it's kind of like you got to take it as it comes. For a child, that can be very traumatic. For adults, it's very hard to deal with, being detached away from our kids. Imagine a two-year-old or a six-month-old, they can't even express their feelings at the time, having to try to navigate that separation. So that's kind of how the process is with incarceration. Like I said, there's really no warning, you know, you're

⁶ State provided placement of minors into alternative homes for those who cannot live with their parents or other family members

just taken. You're in prison or jail. You got to try to figure out a way to navigate it with your kids and as far as being reunited, that was the challenge. By the time I came home, my daughters were a little bit older. My son was 11. So, you have to think about it. I went from them being little babies to now they're talking, they have personalities. They're pretty much developed at this point. So, it's you get to the stage where you're trying to reunite, you're trying to rebuild a bond to them. They know you're mom, but you're still a stranger in a way. They want to be comfortable with you because you're their parent. But at the same time, you have to rebuild that trust with them. You have to nurture them for them to feel comfortable and safe with you. That process is very hard because, like I said, the experiences that kids get from parental separation, you never know how it can go. Some kids will act out, some kids will exhibit behaviors. So, you come home to, I would say, a brand-new child that you're trying to get to know. And it was very difficult for me. To this day, it still really is. Especially, I would say, with my son. My daughters are a lot easier. I kind of learned from the mistakes I made with my son, I would say. I'm working on that with them in an easier way. When I finally came home from prison, I immediately got him [my son] after five months. There was no, "Well, do you want to live here?" It was just, "I'm your mom, you're coming back to stay with me." I think that was my biggest mistake. not really thinking it through. So, I would say take it slow. You have to take it slow. You got to try to rebuild those bonds and build trust and just work your way up to that. Maybe start off with like summers or just hanging out, but just be mindful of the time that you were away, who the kids were with, the environment they were in, and just be mindful of that. I know every parent wants to be selfish and we're like, "We want our children with us", but just be mindful of their lives while you were in prison.

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah, that definitely seems like a hard thing to navigate because it's not the only thing on your mind after you just get released. Specifically, with how the whole process works when you first get incarcerated, are there any solutions that people have proposed as another way of going about where children get placed when their parents get incarcerated?

EVANS: From what I experienced, if you have children and you get incarcerated, DSS⁷ automatically gets involved. They get involved and they'll pretty much ask you, "Do you have any family members to take them? Do you have any other options for your kids to go while you're incarcerated?" If the answer is no, the children will be placed into temporary placement or foster care. That's a hard decision to make because as a parent, I feel like just because we have family members doesn't mean that we're comfortable with these family members caring for our children. Another thing that I had a misconception on was "Do I sign over my rights or do I get temporary guardianship?" or all of these different other formats that you can use besides just actually signing your rights over. A lot of women when I was incarcerated pretty much signed their rights over because they had no clue that they had other rights besides just terminating rights. So, I had my lawyer, which was my criminal defense lawyer, kind of help me with that. He helped me navigate that situation, and was like, "Hey, you have a release date. You don't have to sign over for custody of your children if you don't want to. There's this thing called temporary guardianship." Basically, what temporary guardianship is, you're just signing over a form to someone that you trust. [That form] is just saying that you give them the responsibility to care for your children. They have the responsibility as far as if [the children] have doctor's appointments, they can do medical records. They can make decisions as a parent, but they're not a legal guardian, if that makes

⁷ [Division of Social Services](#)

sense. Also with temporary guardianship, it can be stopped at any time. So, I actually had mine end on my actual release date. So, it's up to you and the party on where you want to agree as far as the deadline on when you guys want the temporary guardianship to end. So, I feel that would be a better option for parents. If you have someone that you can trust with your children to do that, because you have a better chance of coming home, getting established, and getting your kids back faster than the foster care system.

ST. LAWRENCE: You mentioned that your lawyer was the one who helped you through that. How does the lawyer that people get change what decisions they think are available?

EVANS: I think it depends on what type of law they're practicing also. So, like I said, I had a criminal defense lawyer. He was actually my lawyer to defend my case as far as my charge. He was not really there to navigate me through DSS. So, they have criminal defense lawyers that are family services lawyers that actually work with things like that as far as your kids. But I didn't have the financials to actually secure both. So, I had to make that decision, I had a very serious charge, so I really had to make the decision on "Do I want to invest in my freedom or do I want to invest in my kids?" That was a hard decision to make. So, for me, I kind of got lucky because once I explained to him the situation, he pretty much was navigating both for me. He broke it down, explained to me what temporary guardianship was. He even got the forms and brought it there for me to sign, got it notarized. So, he pretty much helped me through that situation.

ST. LAWRENCE: Is that a choice that a lot of people have to end up making where they're choosing between getting a lawyer to fight for their freedom versus fighting for their kids?

EVANS: I would say so if you don't have anyone that you can immediately just be like, "my kids can go with their father or my kids can go with my mom." Both of my parents were deceased prior to me being incarcerated. So, it wasn't like I could be like, "Well, my mom can get them, or my father can get them." I pretty much didn't have anyone to get my kids besides their fathers and my son's grandmother. She did keep my son for a while and then he ended up going back to his father, who was released about a year after I started my sentencing.

ST. LAWRENCE: Does this choice that people are facing disproportionately impact any certain communities? Are certain people impacted more by making that decision than others?

EVANS: I would say so just because of the fact that when it comes to incarceration, there's more black and brown individuals that are incarcerated. That's one of the main reasons why I wanted to be an activist for family reunification because I feel like families are our communities. If we don't have families, we don't have a community. There are so many families that are broken because of incarceration and like I said, there's more black and brown incarcerated individuals than there is any other race.

ST. LAWRENCE: I want to talk a little bit more about what the work that you've been doing actually is. So, could you just give a brief overview of what you've been doing with Bonding Families⁸ and your work with Benevolence Farms?

EVANS: So, Bonding Families is a program that I started. I am the founder of Bonding Families. Benevolence Farm helped me launch that program. So Bonding Families is a part of Benevolence Farm, and with this program, one thing that we noticed is when individuals come home from incarceration, housing and employment is huge. So, I always said that if I wanted to do family reunification, I wanted to start there. We have to start with the parents first. I always tell parents, "I understand your need to come home and that you want to get your child back, but there are steps that need to be taken. Also, you need to focus on mentally preparing yourself for this, because it's not a game and it's not for the weak. So, you have to be very strong minded individual." So, one thing we try to do first at Bonding Families is establish that foundation. At Bonding Families, we do in person meetings once a month, the second Thursday of every month. At these meetings, we focus on the parents, the caregivers, which is the individuals themselves. We work on a lot of things like self-confidence, healing, and working through trauma. Also, [this is] in a safe space where these individuals are building community support from people that have shared or lived experiences with them. So, they have people that they can relate to, people that have been in the same situation or similar situations as them that can offer them that support system. We have a Housing First⁹ fund, which is also very important, like I said, because housing and employment are so imperative for a lot of families that are trying to reconnect with their children. Whether they're in the foster care system, or they're with family members, you need a house to even be able to bring your kids home. So, shelter is number one. With our Housing First fund, we are paying individuals' security deposit. It's not much, but it's a start. And what we learned and the reason why we decided to launch this program is one, because when I was in my situation, I realized that because of my felony conviction, I was being charged double a security deposit. I already went through a lot of my savings for just application fees. Then, I got hit with, "Okay, you got approved, but I want double the security deposit." Because they felt that I was a liability because of my felony conviction. So, we put this program in place to help families ease that burden so that they can use that money that they were going to use for a security deposit for other things like buying furniture. Also, we do partner with a lot of different furniture ministries all over the Triangle¹⁰. These furniture ministries we refer them to provide the furniture. So, housing is a foundation. Making sure that your children are comfortable in the space is also very important. That's a part of their wellbeing. Making sure they have a safe bed to sleep in, that they have utensils to eat off, that they have a refrigerator to keep their food cold, and that families can cook adequate meals for their kids. So those are some of the things that we offer. Also, like I said, I am an advocate. A lot of these women don't have a voice. When you go to prison, you lose a lot of your dignity. A lot of them are still in the process of trying to get used to being in the community. Some of these women that I have worked with don't know how to navigate as far as that when you move into an apartment, you have to get confirmation that you got your lights cut on. A lot of these women don't even know where to start, who to call, how to do this process. What do I do? That's pretty much where I come in. I do a lot of the on the groundwork as far as calling these places. I'm not just assisting them, but sometimes I'm literally hand in hand with them, helping them fill out applications, helping them call these places to get their gas and lights

⁸ [Bonding Families Support Group](#)

⁹ [Housing First](#)

¹⁰ Area in central North Carolina consisting of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill (as well as surrounding areas in convention)

turned on. Even just assisting them pretty much on anything that they will need to make them feel safe and secure in their own places.

ST. LAWRENCE: It sounds like those are a lot of different resources for these people. Why do you think they don't really exist? Why do you think it's so hard for people to find those support resources upon release?

EVANS: One, I think I won't say the resources don't exist because since I've been doing this type of work, I realized that there are a lot of resources out here. I think that's a good question. Okay, I got a good one. For instance, I would say in a lot of low-income communities, the resources aren't really there. Also, rural communities. So, I stay in Alamance County¹¹ right now. We do have some resources, but as far as bus transportation and certain things like that, there's no resources available because we're out in the country. People really don't consider, I don't say country folks, low poverty people as a tourist attraction. So, I feel like all the money is going to get poured into communities. They feel like, "You know, it's going to make the city look good, if that makes sense. So, I am noticing though, when I'm these bigger cities here in North Carolina, like Gifford and Charlotte, like they have all the resources because they are very huge communities. So, a lot of resources are there, but my heart is trying to give access to those resources in these forgotten communities.

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah, that definitely seems like a big struggle. I feel like there's a lot of disparity between bigger cities in North Carolina and rural communities. how do you think we can go about redistributing where those resources go to primarily? What are some changes we can make to make those resources go to people in rural communities as well?

EVANS: Getting the word out. Another thing, there's not discrimination too much. I would say I haven't experienced this so far. Usually when I do find resources, whether I have a client that's in Burlington or they need a resource in Raleigh, they pretty much get it. It's just that these low poverty communities don't know about the resources, or they don't understand that they have the right to these resources. So, I would say, just giving people more access and more information on what resources are available to them, because I know a lot of people will come to me and be like, "Well, I didn't know that that place did that. I didn't know that I could receive this type of help. I never heard of a furniture ministry before," and I'm like, "Yeah, they're pretty much in every single county, and a lot of people are not aware of these things." So that would be the biggest thing is basically that these places that are offering resources share them. Sometimes I have worked with individuals before where they know I do this type of work. So, everybody that does any type of activism work, we keep a list of resources that we find. And for me, I share them. If I have someone else call and say, "Hey, I got a client that needs this." Whether that's my client, your client, or whoever's client. You know, we are all working on the same goal. So, it's just about sharing the resources so everyone can have it soon.

ST. LAWRENCE: Is that something that you think prisons should be taking an initiative of sharing with people before they get released? Is that something that prisons should be taking on?

¹¹ County in North Carolina within the 4th Congressional district

EVANS: Absolutely. That is one of my pet peeves as far as the prison system, and that's been my biggest struggle. It's been my driving force as to why I'm doing this type of work. You get sentenced and they say the reason why you're being sentenced is to rehabilitate you. I say this over and over again, I was not rehabilitated in prison. Prison did not rehabilitate me. Prison did not help me in any type of way to prepare for my life outside of prison. It was the reentry program that I came to after prison that prepared me to live in the community. So, when I was in prison, they gave you this packet with all of these places. They tell you all this stuff, "Hey, you can go here for free Medicare¹². You can go here for this." For this, that, and the third, and then you're released with \$40. You pretty much get dropped off in the middle of nowhere. If you don't have anyone to pick you up, it's just like "\$40, Here's your red folder, wish you luck." It really sucks because I feel like the case managers in prison and the social workers, that is what their jobs are. Their job is to prepare you for release, to make sure that you have a home plan, to make sure that you have everything in this so-called red folder to succeed and be able to sustain in society. The whole four years that I was there, I saw my case manager two times. So that kind of tells you how much involvement prison has with your aftercare after incarceration.

ST. LAWRENCE: Yeah, that sounds very frustrating. It almost seems like they just don't care. You mentioned how prison is supposed to be rehabilitative, but that's not what you experienced. Is that something you think the prison system as it functions now should just move to being more like what your reentry program was? Or do you have a different vision for what prison should look like?

EVANS: I have two visions when it comes to things like that. People ask me that all the time. I'm very aware I broke the law. I'm very aware of it. It was not my responsibility to take someone's life and to take justice into my own hands. So, I am very adamant when I say there should be different forms of how we punish people. Why punish people [in a way] that's going to damage them in the long run? A lot of people that go into prison leave more jacked up or they receive more trauma than before they even went to prison. So how can we prevent that? I think one, the whole time I was incarcerated, I met a lot of different people. I met people that were incarcerated for just selling drugs. I met mothers that were there for the same reason why I was there. It was like an intersecting circle. It was all one thing. I kind of connected the dots and one thing I realized was most of these people come from low-income communities. Most of these people didn't have access to resources. A lot of times people do things to just survive and that's how a lot of people end up in prison. So just putting more platforms out there to support people, more than punishment-based form will be a lot better for me. Then as far as like reentry programs, I love reentry programs. I feel like they play a huge part in individuals during their process as far as transitioning from being incarcerated to transitioning into the community. I feel like they are the stepping stone for that. But my focus is how do we prevent prison from even happening in the beginning? How do we even prevent it from getting to that point? And I would say just giving more people access to more resources, things that they need to survive—housing, shelter, food, things like that are essential to our wellbeing. Sometimes we're not grateful for the things that we have as individuals. Sometimes, especially when someone doesn't have food on the table and they don't have access to food every day or a hot meal every day, their instincts are to survive. You might get incarcerated trying to survive just by feeding your children. You want to go steal from the store; you're breaking the law. So just giving people more access to resources and walking people through these situations. Sometimes even with mental health and things

¹² Federal government health insurance typically administered to people of low income

like that, those are huge issues when it comes to our justice system because a person can have a mental health problem, or an undiagnosed mental health problem and they think that incarceration is the key. Even people that struggle with drug addiction. My father struggled with addiction all his life and he was incarcerated because of that. As a kid, I didn't understand it. But as an adult, that was not the answer for him. That's not what he needed. He didn't need that form of punishment. He had a drug addiction. He had a problem that he needed help with and locking him up did not solve that. He would do his time, he would be clean for a while, but then he picked up new traumas that he received while he was in prison. That just made him want to come home and fall right back into that because he couldn't cope with being out. So that's the way I feel about that. Yeah.

ST. LAWRENCE: Thank you for sharing that. I know it can be a lot, but with the conversation around what prison should look like and preventative measures, is that a conversation you think people are really having? And if they aren't, why do you think they wouldn't be having that conversation?

EVANS: I think there are a lot of people out here that are doing the same thing I'm doing. Whether they've been incarcerated or whether they've been impacted by incarceration. I'm a big fan of people that are affected by the problem being the solution to the problem. We have a lot of people in the office that have never been incarcerated making these decisions on how a prison should be. That's number one. So, having more people that are more justice impacted, that have experienced these things, they're the ones that can tell you how a prison should be. On top of that, giving individuals things they can do with their time. I was incarcerated during the peak of COVID¹³. On top of that, I did a lot of my time in county¹⁴ within those four years, because you have to sit in county until you're proven guilty or innocent. I wasted 16 months in county for them to decide that I was guilty. By the time I actually touched down in prison, I was not eligible to participate in a lot of programs because of the simple fact that I didn't have enough time left on my sentence. That's why I told you I had to navigate that pretty much on my own and work on myself. It was very self-driven. There was nothing that the prison put in place to help me. Even healthcare sucks, living conditions suck, the food sucks. And I get it. People are like, "Well, we shouldn't give you good food. We shouldn't give you a bed to sleep in." I'm still a human being. So, you treating me like an animal, that's not going to rehabilitate me. I'm going to start adapting to my environment and hopefully I don't come out worse than how I was before I came in.

ST. LAWRENCE: That attitude that you were talking about where people are like, "Oh, you don't deserve good food." Is that something that you also experienced after you were released? Is that something you interact with frequently, people's opinions of you because of your incarceration?

EVANS: I experienced that when I was incarcerated by my own family members. I have family members that would say things like, "I'm not about to send her any money. For what? She gets three meals a day. So, what she doesn't like the food. She shouldn't be there." Even as I got out of prison, like I said, I had my son full time immediately. I tried to participate in his school, be active in his school system, and wanted to get involved with the PTA

¹³ COVID-19 a global coronavirus pandemic that led to an international shutdown of businesses and other aspects of daily life

¹⁴ County jail; typically occupied by individuals serving shorter periods of time, not for long-term detention

¹⁵meetings and things like that. Once the other moms found out that I was incarcerated, you can picture how that went. So as a parent, I started kind of isolating myself. I didn't want to be around people because of that fear of people not wanting to accept me. Kids are also very mean. My son came home multiple times, even my daughters, crying about how other kids will make fun of them about "Hey, your mom was in prison", things like that. So, I think that overall, the whole stigma is one of the main reasons why I created Bonding Families. I didn't just create it because this was something that I felt the community was lacking, but this was something I was lacking in my own individual life.

ST. LAWRENCE: Do you think that stigma comes from the fact that it is such a punishment centered idea with prison? Or does it come from somewhere else, that stigma around incarcerated people?

EVANS: I don't feel like it comes from that, because for me, I kind of look at it like, if you're a child and you're on punishment. Your punishment lasts for a duration of time, right? Your parent might tell you, "Hey, you got a week on punishment. I'm taking your phone." Then after that, you regained your privileges. So that's how I kind of look at the criminal legal system. That's what makes me upset because once you get sentenced, the judge tells you this is the time you're going to get. Okay, I do my time. I do everything that I'm supposed to do as far as my sentencing. I do this time, I come home from prison. Why am I still paying for my mistakes? Why am I not able to access housing? Why am I having a hard time finding employment for something that happened years ago? I have clients and individuals that I'm currently working with that have been incarcerated. Their crime happened 16 years ago, and it's still affecting their lives to this day. So, it can't be a form of people saying "Okay, this is a punishment" because punishments don't last for a lifetime.

ST. LAWRENCE: Thank you for sharing. I know that's obviously a very frustrating experience and I know you do have to leave so I want to be cognizant of your time. So, we can definitely find a time later to finish because I feel like I want to give you time to talk about whatever else you want to put on the record.

¹⁵ Parent Teacher Association; collective of parents and teachers that often organize school events