

# LET'S START

*a support process for families impacted by female incarceration*



## Meet Vivian - A Participant's Story



Vivian thanks God every day for the ability to go outside her home without being in handcuffs or shackles. It wasn't that long ago, though, that she was going through the hardest time of her life. Vivian began smoking marijuana when she was a sophomore in high school. At the time, her mother was ill, and Vivian smoked to "not feel the tough feelings." Being the only one able to help at the time, Vivian became her mother's caretaker until she passed away in 2000. It was during this time that her use of marijuana significantly increased, as her world began to spiral out of control. Vivian became depressed, and was involved in unhealthy relationships.

On May 5, 2010, Vivian was locked up for the first time for domestic violence against her boyfriend. The relationship began as a verbally abusive one, but Vivian thought that would eventually change. However, that day, it became physically dangerous, and Vivian thought she had to defend herself in fear of her life. This was the beginning of a year-long sentence in the Workhouse. It was one of the worst experiences of Vivian's life. She was embarrassed to be shackled and led around by guards almost 24 hours a day. She knew this wasn't the life she dreamt of, and didn't seem like the right life to be living. During her time in the Workhouse, Vivian lost her sister, father, and grandmother. She was only able to attend her sister's wake because she was being released at the time, and put on three years' probation.

Vivian did not like her probation officer, so she stopped attending mandatory meetings, and was required to stay at MERS three different times. She soon realized that skipping meetings with her probation officer was not the best plan of action. In 2012, she was sent to Vandalia for 36 days, and then to Chillicothe for eight more days. She was then released to MERS with an extra two years' probation due to her previous violation. Having missed funerals and her daughter's graduation, Vivian had a wake-up call, and knew she did not want to miss out on any more of her life with her family and friends. She discovered that her way of doing things was ultimately the wrong way.

While at MERS, Vivian decided to take advantage of the weekly opportunity to attend the Let's Start Tuesday evening women's support group, and has been attending ever since. She looks forward to coming each week and hearing others' stories and socializing with the other women, who have become like family to her.

On May 14, 2016, Vivian graduated from the drug treatment program at Queen of Peace. She has been working with a sponsor on a consistent basis, attends NA meetings, goes to church as often as possible, and has had her own place to live for two months. She feels she has accomplished so much. Vivian is close with her daughter and now sees other family members, with whom she celebrates holidays and life events, and enjoys making up for lost time.

Today, Vivian stays busy by going to Queen of Peace almost every day for computer classes and a support group for those who are grieving. She talks with her daughter daily. Vivian is proud of herself for changing people, places, and things in her life, and wants to help others by becoming a sponsor and peer specialist to mentor other women. She takes advantage of every opportunity to tell people her story.

Vivian is happy to say she has remained sober for four years, and will be off probation at the end of August. After that, she plans to take a trip to Mississippi where her mother and father are buried, to honor them like she has wanted to do for so long. Vivian lives by the motto, "An idle mind is the devil's workshop." Remembering that, she stays busy and keeps a daily routine. When asked about advice for other women going through similar circumstances, she says, "Give the person a hug and remember that no one is there to criticize... Take one day at a time."

### Quick Links

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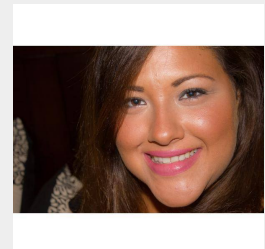
### Mission

Let's Start aims to break the cycle of incarceration in families by working with formerly incarcerated women and their children to support reentry and recovery, mitigate the impact of parental imprisonment, educate the public and inform policy.

### Save the Date

July 31 - Bus trip to Vandalia prison  
 September 22 - Let's Start the Music  
 September 30 - Symposium: "Gender Impacts: Women in the Criminal Justice System."

Meet Samantha Case, our new Intern and team member. Samantha is completing her graduate degree in Social Work from St. Louis University, and is actively involved with Let's Start this summer and fall.



Welcome aboard, Samantha!

***Stepping onto a brand-new path is difficult, but not more difficult than remaining in a situation which is not nurturing to the whole woman.***

**- Maya Angelou**

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