

TWENTY

THE WOMEN WE ARE

Katy Brock and Darla Rouse

The purpose of this piece is to share the social and emotional influences which impacted the lives of two women in the context of national and international events that occurred during the lives of the two women. Darla is a resident of the Wyoming Women's Center (WWC), Wyoming's prison for women and Katy is doctoral student at the University of Wyoming. The two women met at WWC during a college writing course in which Katy co-facilitated and Darla was enrolled.

1976

Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak create Apple Computer Company. Patty Hearst is sentenced to seven years in prison.

Darla: I was born on September second to a wild-ish girl and a sweet young man. Their marriage did not last long because, from my mom's perspective, they were just too young. She was 18 and he was 19 when they married and I was their only child. Both of them got their GEDs and neither immediately proceeded to college. I refer to my biological male parent as my father.

1977

Jimmy Carter is sworn in as the 39th president of the United States. George Lucas' Star Wars is released in theaters. Elvis Presley is found dead at his Graceland home. David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, is arrested in New York, after a year of murders.

Darla: My birth parents decided to end their relationship when I was seven months old and, because he promised to do so in that event, my father took my mom back to her parents. This was a foolhardy promise he made to my grandpa, but my father aspired to be a man of his word so he fulfilled his promise. My mother vehemently refused to go which is why she ended up hoisted over my father's shoulder like a sack of potatoes, kicking and screaming. He set her down at my grandpa's feet on his front porch and she immediately ran barefooted down the gravel driveway. She is not aware that I know that story but I am glad that I do. It helps me understand her and myself a little better. My Nana and Papa's home became a refuge for me from then on.

Katy: I was born in Syracuse, New York. My mother, a New York native, was a school teacher in Syracuse. My father, a Floridian, a southerner through and through, was a law school student at Syracuse University. I had two older sisters, Tara (five years old) and Susie (3 years old).

1978

The television show Dallas makes its debut. David Berkowitz "Son of Sam" is sentenced to 365 years in prison. Pope John Paul I dies.

Katy: My father graduated from Law School at Syracuse University. Late in the year, my family moved to Florida, where my father had a job working in a family member's law office.

1979

McDonald's introduces the Happy Meal. The sport's channel, ESPN, makes its television debut. The Iran hostage crisis begins.

Darla: My mom married my stepdad when I was two years old and we lived in La Marque, in a trailer house that her daddy helped

them purchase. For the first couple of years I was allowed to go to my father and step-mom's house to visit, but Dad eventually put a stop to it. He once told me that I acted superior to him whenever I would come back from their house. Of course, at the time I didn't understand what that meant but I did understand that he was jealous and did not like it that I went to my father's house at all. This decision stopped me from having contact with my father and step-mom and I became convinced that they didn't care to have a relationship with me.

I did get to spend a few weeks of each summer at my Nana and Papa's house. Papa was my hero. He called me his "Little Helper" because I followed him everywhere and tried to help him do all of his work. He taught me about tools so I could hand him the right ones, he let me ride on the tractor with him as he mowed the pasture, I got to go to town with him to shop for groceries and every time he would buy me a small bag of Hershey's Kisses. They are my favorite candies to this day.

On Easter I got a new dress and I was so proud of it that I ran into the dining room where Papa was reading the paper and smoking his pipe to show it off to him. He was duly impressed and told me it was very pretty on me. I wonder why I remember that one moment so well, but I know it is because I was desperate for this attention and approval. He was sweet to me and at that point in my life I knew two men: my step-dad and my grandpa. Grandpa showed me love and kindness, so it's no wonder I loved him so intensely.

Katy: My brother was born in November. While my mother was in the hospital, my paternal grandmother and a couple of paternal aunts stayed at our house to care for my sisters and me. I don't recall my grandmother's visit being loving or joyous.

1980

The Mariel Boatlift begins in Cuba. Jimmy Carter requires 18-25 year old males to register for peacetime military draft. John Lennon is killed in New York City.

Darla: Mom and Dad moved our family to a trailer park off a Highway in Alvin, Texas, adjacent to a set of railroad tracks. I'm not certain how old I was in this memory but I remember being about chest high to the arm of the couch when I walked into the living room and I was greeted by a cloud of smoke being blown into my face. My parents had friends visiting and they were lounging around in the darkened living room smoking weed. Later in years, my mom admitted that she would sometimes give me a contact high to get me to go to sleep.

Katy: Each morning my mother set a bottle of orange juice on the kitchen counter. When I woke up, I took my bottle of orange juice to the living-room, where I would watch Sesame Street. The kitchen was a busy place, as my mom made breakfast for my sisters and got them ready for school. After my sisters left for school, my mom doted on my brother and me; reading and coloring with me while she cradled him. Each afternoon, she and I watched *Days of Our Lives*.

1981

President Reagan is shot by John Hinckley. Bob Marley dies from cancer. Indian Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark is released in theatres.

Darla: My little brother, Jeremy, was born at home, delivered by Dad. *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out and our family loved it. I remember this and every other Indiana Jones movie with clarity. They were fun times for our family. We started going to a big church called Livingstone's. I attended a private

school, where my mom worked as a housekeeper to pay my tuition.

1982

Prince William is born in London. The computer is chosen as Time magazine's Man of the Year. Texas carries out the first execution by lethal injection.

Darla: One day, when Jeremy was still a toddler, he was punished by my step-dad. I thought Dad was being too harsh with Jeremy, so afterward I pulled Jeremy into the recliner with me and told him not to worry, I wouldn't let Dad hurt him anymore. I made the mistake of doing this right in front of Dad and it enraged him. He jumped out of his chair, reached across the long coffee table between our chairs, and snatched me out of the recliner by my hair. He spanked me and yelled at me that I would never again tell him how he would discipline his own kids. This event was the birth of several dysfunctions in my life. It was the moment I learned the difference between being a step-child versus a biological child. It was the first of several severe spankings throughout my childhood. It was also the birth of extreme insecurities and an intense need to gain his (all men's and authority's) approval. I believe that need became a survival mechanism in my life.

My little sister, Shawna, was born on July fourth. She, also, became mine and I was absolutely convinced that she was the most beautiful baby girl that was ever born. The movie *E.T.* came out that year and Drew Barrymore became my favorite actress because we were the same age and I saw myself as being like her.

1984

President Reagan nominated Elizabeth Dole as Secretary of Transportation. Marvin Gaye is shot and killed by his father. The Soviet Union announces the intent to boycott the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

Darla: Our family moved to rural, Manvel, Texas. We lived in a small neighborhood on a little dead-end road. All of our driveways were gravel and most of the homes were trailer houses. This was not a nicely developed housing area. This was a lower-middle class to poor neighborhood. We, kids, loved it because we were able to play outside, in the street with other children from the neighborhood and not have to worry about traffic. We could play in the pasture behind the house. We could walk to other people's houses and still be in sight of our own.

For being poor we had a good childhood in Manvel. I have many good memories of playing outside with my siblings. I do have numerous memories of being inside the house but not as many of them are good. Our dad was a tyrant and a bully. I learned well how to be mindful of and cater to his emotions. Mom and Dad fought a lot. They argued about everything it seemed but mostly it was about money and us kids.

I received one of the worse spankings of my life for submerging the crockpot into the dishwater as I was washing dishes. Mom usually ran interference between us kids and Dad because he was too rough on us but this time she helped him. His spankings were so hard that I couldn't keep myself from trying to get away or block him. This time I must have fought him because they ended up sitting on my legs and arms as I was face down on the couch and spanking me until I was bruised. My mom was diagnosed with cervical cancer in December. The only memory I have of this event is seeing her and Dad sitting on the steps of the little wooden porch of our trailer, crying.

1985

Nelson Mandela rejects an offer that would release him from prison. Madonna launches her Virgin Tour. Arms are sent to Iran in exchange for hostages in Lebanon, later known as the Iran-Contra Affair. Pete Rose becomes baseball's all-time hit leader. Nintendo game system is released in the U.S.

Darla: Papa (Mom's father) died of a heart attack on August 5th. Years later, Mom told me that I slipped into depression for several months after his death. Until she told me that I did realize that I do not have any memories of his funeral or anything after that for a long time. He was my hero. Everything I did was to make him happy. I used to work hard to get him to smile at me. He called me his "Little Helper," which I considered a badge of honor. Papa didn't smile or laugh often but when he did it lit up my whole world. He was sweet to me, which was opposite of how my step-dad treated me. I sought to please my step-dad out of fear and I sought to please my grandpa because I loved him so much. So, my early relationships taught me that keeping men happy kept me safe and loved.

During the summers our parents would take us camping or, when their finances improved, to amusement parks in Houston, Texas. I was homeschooled for my fourth grade year. As I look back on this I think my mom probably did this to help me heal. We became the best of friends during this time. We both took care of The Babies (a nickname we used for the 2 youngest children when they were little) and the household chores. I learned quite a bit in this year of homeschooling. In fact, I moved ahead of my peers academically and I became a great housekeeper, like my mom.

Katy: When school let out for the summer my mother, sisters, brother and I flew to my mom's hometown in upstate New York. We stayed at my grandfather's house; the house my mother grew up in. The small town, where everyone knew each other, lent itself to freedoms we were not accustomed to. My siblings and I could walk anywhere in town and feel safe. Often, we were sent on errands to the grocery store, which made us feel very grown up. Toward summer's end, my dad drove up from Florida. For a week, we enjoyed the new country side, hiking, fishing and swimming. It was a great summer, filled with family and fun.

1986

U.S. space shuttle, Challenger, explodes after launching from Cape Canaveral Florida, killing the seven member crew. Out of Africa wins best picture at the 58th Academy Awards. Prince Andrew marries Sarah Ferguson.

Darla: In January, I was sitting at the kitchen table doing my lesson for the day when my mom called me into the living room to watch the launching of the Space Shuttle Challenger. I sat on the arm of my mom's chair while we watched the launch together. It was exciting. Then the shuttle suddenly exploded and we were both stunned into silence for a few seconds. In confusion, I turned to my mom and asked, "Mom, did it blow up?" I wasn't certain and was having a hard time accepting that the Shuttle, which held several people, had just exploded and those people had died. But Mom answered, "I think so, Honey." It was shocking and a little bit of the reality of their deaths slowly crept into my understanding. All we could do was hold each other as we both wept. I remember feeling desperation that my mom was upset and crying. I didn't fully comprehend the ramifications of the explosion or the deaths but I did understand that Mom being upset meant that something horrible had happened.

Mom started the Nursing program at the local college in the fall, we children played outside every chance we could get. If we were outside then we didn't have to be around Dad. I believe it was sometime in the summer that my "dad" sexually abused me for the first time. I gained a new kind of fear of him then. I add the quotations because good dads don't do those kinds of things to their daughters. I told my mom about what he did and she made him apologize to me, but he was defensive about it and said he wasn't trying to be gross, that he was only "showing me something". What I heard in his apology was that what he did wasn't really bad and that I had misunderstood his intentions. However, what I got out of it was confusion about good touch and

bad touch and a fear of him showing me attention. I went back into the public school system for my fifth grade year.

Katy: I was in 3rd grade when the Spaceship Challenger exploded. My class and I were walking from the lunchroom to the classroom when Ms. Dempster directed our attention to the white smoke in the sky. I looked around and saw teachers and students, who normally were not outside. Several teachers held their hands above their eyes as they looked up at the sky in. That evening, I watched President Reagan on television. He explained that the Challenger had exploded and all seven astronauts had died. Only then did I realize the smoke was from the explosion.

1987

Pope John Paul II arrives in Los Angeles. The USS Stark is hit by two Iraqi missiles, killing 47 sailors. CBS airs the first episode of "The Bold & the Beautiful."

Darla: I had always been able to go to Nana and Papa's house for several weeks each summer and I continued to visit after Papa died. This summer, however, "the babies" got to go with me. I was very upset about it. I was territorial over those summers at our grandparents' house and it felt like an invasion that my little brother and sister were going with me. My summers spent at their house were my reprieve from the stress of home, mainly from my step-dad. After a couple of weeks "the babies" went home and I got to stay with Nana for a little while longer. It was during this time that she discovered a lump in her breast. Within two weeks she was in the hospital for a double mastectomy and her house was full of family members. She received chemo treatments afterwards and went into remission, for a while.

Sometime during '87, my Dad did it again. This time Mom knew he really did do something bad. I remember she and I were sitting on my Nana's bed with my aunts and she was whispering to them about it. They were all angry and Mom cried. They felt sorry

for us both and took extra care of me during that visit. That Christmas I was overloaded with gifts. I had never gotten so many presents before in my life, but what I remember most is that my dad did not receive one gift. It took me years to figure out that they were punishing him. The effect was shocking to me and only widened the chasm between him and my mom's family. All I knew then was that he was my dad. I loved him, even though I was afraid of him.

1988

George H. W. is elected President of the United States. In a Senate testimony, James Hansen, NASA scientist, states man-made global warming has begun. Pan AM Flight 103 is blown up over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 passengers.

Darla: I got to go back to Nana's house for the summer, by myself. She moved to Oklahoma to be closer to her youngest daughter and grandchildren.

Katy: In February, my mother's dad died of cancer. I remember the phone call from my uncle. My dad answered the phone and talked to my uncle for a few minutes; my dad then handed the phone to my mom. My dad sat in his recliner in the living room and began reading the paper. Eavesdropping on my mom's phone conversation, we learned of my grandfather's death. My father had great respect for his father in law; his sadness was equal to my mom's. My mom flew to New York for the funeral, while my dad stayed home with us children.

1989

In Alaska's Prince William Sound, the Exxon Valdez spills 240,000 barrels of oil after running aground. Oliver North is convicted of charges related to the Iran-Contra affair. General Colin Powell became the first Black chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff.

Darla: I was about 12, almost 13, when our family moved to a real home in the same town. What I mean by "real" home is that it had a foundation in the ground, that it wasn't a trailer house. We called it The Yellow House. We were moving up in the world. Mom was going to school, Dad had a steady job finally and the house was nicer than the ones we lived in before. It ended up being the best house our family ever lived.

Mom slept a lot, and the household chores were left to us children; mostly me. The whole reason that she was trying so hard to get this degree is to have a stable career so that we were not solely dependent on Dad to be the main breadwinner of the family, as he was unreliable. He did not keep a steady job for any significant amount of time until we moved into The Yellow House. It was during this time in our lives that Mom and Dad started taking us to church on a regular basis again, this time to a small church called Grace Community Church. I also had a crush on the pastor's son, Nathan.

Katy: My mother enrolled me in a Catholic school because she wanted me to have a good education taught through a strong religious background so that, "when my back was to the wall, I would know where to turn." During my seventh grade year I convinced my mother to let me get a horse. His name was Thunder and he was a sad lonely little Appaloosa the local boarding facility. His owner had stopped paying his board some years before and had also has stopped visiting him. Thunder had one eye, having lost one to cancer, and a serious case of muck itch. The first time I saw him, he was covered in scabs from scratching on the walls of the stall. One side of his face had a hollowed out eye, and the other side had an eye that oozed and seeped. He was perfect!

Thunder and I had many wonderful adventures together. We would run across the pasture behind the stable; jumping fallen trees, splashing through trickling creeks, and weaving through saplings. We would then return to the barn, where I would hose Thunder off and bathe him in medicated soap. On the weekends we

would go on group trail rides to Scott Lake. All along the way, Thunder would lead the other horses with his slow, steady walk and calm, easy personality. At Scott Lake, I would throw off his saddle jump on his back and make sure I was the first one in the water. Thunder swam across the lake as smoothly and assuredly as he had walked there. Alligators splashing in the water from the banks, birds landing in the branches above us, and fish jumping in the water did not bother him. Thunder was just happy to be loved again, and I was happy to love him.

1990

U.S. President George Bush and Soviet Union President Mikhail Gorbachev agree to end the production of their chemical weapons. President Bush threatens to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Darla: Mom graduated nursing school with her Registered Nurse's License. Mom talked us kids (myself and the two youngest siblings) into going back into homeschooling. She had planned to work only on the weekends but when the time came to start school her work schedule changed and I was left being the leader of our education. I did not perform well. I was 14 that September and very undisciplined.

Katy: I began writing to a soldier, Jerry Huerta, who was serving in Iraq. I enjoyed writing letters and mailing packages to Jerry, as much as I enjoyed getting letters from him. I always asked my dad to mail the packages. Often, they were quite heavy; full of magazines, candy, nuts and beef jerky. He never complained about mailing the weekly packages. The only negative comment he made was, "chocolate might not keep well in Iraq." My mother also liked that I was writing to Jerry. On the way to the barn, to see Thunder, she would stop at the post office and I would run in and check the mail.

1991

Operation Desert Storm begins with air strikes against Iraq. Serial killer Aileen Wuornos confesses to the murder of six men. Dr. Jack Kevorkian is barred from assisting in suicides. Four Los Angeles Police officers are indicted for the videotaped beating of Rodney King.

Darla: At the beginning of the school year the two youngest went back into public school (we started referring to them as The Kids because they weren't babies anymore). Mom gave me the option of continuing to homeschool so that I could catch up to the rest of my peers in high school and then, if it went as planned, I would go back to public school and complete my senior year. I, also, started working part time at a ranch where I tended the horses that were used for taking customers on trail rides. Late in the fall, Nana had to start treatments for cancer again so she went into the hospital to have a port implanted, but something happened during the procedure and she came out of it incoherent. She remained in the hospital for several weeks until her children took her home to live out the rest of her life comfortably.

Uncle Tom (Mom's brother) committed suicide on Christmas morning. Up until that moment that had been the best Christmas our family ever had. We had opened all our presents the night before and had been abundantly blessed because both our parents had decent jobs which gave them more money to spend. We were getting along well and our parents were happy. It was a wonderful holiday. Then, at 5 a.m, on December 25th, my mom woke me up with the news of my uncle's death. It shattered our joy.

Katy: When I was in the ninth grade, my father walked into my room and said, "Kate, do you want to see my new apartment?" The simple invitation was the beginning of the upset of a lifetime. My father was moving out of the family's home, and that was how he chose to tell me. Confused and probably also dutiful, I said, "sure."

My father and I walked outside to his car and I climbed the back seat. My brother Danny, three years younger than me, was in the front seat. Danny's arms were wrapped around his long lanky legs, his face, red and wet with tears, was hanging down almost to his knees. The three of us took the 20 minute ride up to my father's new apartment. We walked around the two-bedroom apartment is my father pointed out the highlights of his new homestead. There weren't many highlights, and I think my father knew it, so he pointed out things like his bedroom had its own bathroom, each bedroom has its own window, the kitchen has a refrigerator with side-by-side doors, and then my father smiled pointed to the sliding glass door and said, "Kate, there is a fishing pond." For some reason my father thought that pond would help ease the pain of their divorce.

As a ninth grader, and at a Catholic school, I thought the worst possible thing that could ever happened to me was my parents getting a divorce. The worst thing was when my mother said, "Thunder has to find a new home." I lost Thunder in the middle of my parent's very bitter divorce. On a very dreary Sunday morning I loaded Thunder into a complete stranger's trailer. Thunder knew we were not going on a trail ride or to a show. He knew getting in that trailer was the beginning of our divorce. He would step into the trailer, and then quickly back out. Eventually, Thunder loaded up. Secretly, I was hoping he would never get in that trailer. After tying his lead rope securely, I petted his neck and poured his grain into his bin. Instead of eagerly diving into his grain, Thunder turned his one eye toward me and we said goodbye.

1992

Former heavy weight champion, Mike Tyson is found guilty of raping an 18 year old girl. The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson aired its final show. The Prince and Princess of Wales publically announced their separation. Bill Clinton is elected the 42nd president of the United States.

Darla: Nana lost her battle to cancer on January 12th, about 2 weeks after Uncle Tom's death. I was fifteen when she passed and I remember her funeral. I busied myself taking care of all the children. It made me feel useful and, on the inside, I was desperate for everyone to notice me and tell me that I was doing a good job. Throughout my childhood I periodically suffered from severe headaches. Finally, my mom took me to get a CT scan to rule out a tumor or any other abnormality. It was decided that my headaches were from stress. During the summer I went on a mission trip to Honduras for one week. The experience was amazing. I was able to save up most of the money for it and my parents pitched in the rest. I went with a group from Livingstone Church, the big church we went to when I was little. As soon as I turned 16, I got a job working at a grocery store.

Katy: At school, I explained to Sister Christina Rose my parents were divorcing. Sister Christina Rose picked up her bag, tapped me on the back and told me she was so glad my dad moved to Carlton Arms. She lived there and said it can be very lonely. She asked me to stop by sometime so we could have a tea. One weekend, while visiting my dad, I visited Sister Christina Rose. She showed me around her apartment and then made a pot of hot tea for the two of us. We sat her kitchen table drinking hot tea and chocolate chip cookies. Sister Christina Rose showed me the many rosary beads she had and explained from where she had gotten them or from whom she had gotten them. Before I left her apartment she asked if she could pray for me. Having spent almost 3 years in a Catholic school, I had grown accustomed to prayer. Sister Christina Rose prayed for me, and then I went back to my dad's. My mother had changed from a kind, soft-spoken, loving mother to an angry, raging woman who I did not recognize. Every moment of every day, it seemed, was filled with tension, arguments, and conflict.

1993

A car bomb explodes at the World Trade Center in New York City, killing 6 and injuring hundreds. Janet Reno becomes the first female United States Attorney General. A 51 day standoff at the Branch Davidian in Waco, Texas comes to an end.

Darla: Dad went into counseling and was diagnosed as being clinically depressed, and then prescribed medication. This was a turning point in my relationship with him, as it was for my step-brother. The medication transformed him from an angry tyrant into a loving dad, for the first time in our lives. Don't get me wrong, throughout our childhood he had moments of being loving, but those moments were few and far between. He and my step-brother, Jimmy, (his biological son from his first marriage) fought quite a bit when Jimmy came to stay with us. When Dad started taking meds we finally experienced, what I considered, a peaceful household, for a while. I got my GED enrolled in classes at the local college in Alvin, Texas. I also took SCUBA Diving classes, which I loved and was able to go on two SCUBA diving trips with the class. I came close to being able to go to Cozumel with them as well but ended up buying my first car instead.

Again, my parents talked about wanting to move and this time they convinced us that it was really happening, only to change their minds after weeks of debate. I discovered that they had started smoking marijuana again. This caused me a great deal of stress. I may have been a caretaker for the family but Mom was the main breadwinner and if she got into legal trouble then our whole family would suffer. It was the first time that I showed anger towards my parents and confronted them about anything, but to no avail. My Mom's response was to tell me to get over it, which is what they often told us when we got upset. It may have been the hard way but I did learn to be resilient.

I finally went on my first date with a guy I worked with at the grocery store. It was short lived though, because I got scared after our first kiss and broke it off. By that time, Mom and Dad had

drilled into me that I needed to remain sexually pure which meant that I shouldn't even have been kissing. I did not want to disappoint them, plus I was very insecure, so I didn't pursue the dating issue.

Katy: As a sophomore in high school, my relationship with my father and my mother grew more and more strained. The strained relationship is typical between parents and teenage daughter, and their pending divorce amplified the strain. I hated being at home. The anger that festered in the house grew to unbearable levels. My mother constantly pointed out that my father was an alcoholic. She consistently pointed out that he was selfish and did not care about his family. Before their separation, she said my father drank to calm his nerves. She often said he couldn't get over his childhood abuse and from a young age he learned to self-medicate with alcohol. She no longer used these excuses to protect him, instead she used them to humiliate him.

1994

President Richard Nixon dies in New York City. O.J. Simpson and Al Cowlings lead Los Angeles Police on a low speed chase. The last of Russia's troops leave Germany.

Darla: I started working at a small café as a waitress. It was fun and I found that I had a knack for it. Shortly thereafter, though, my parents decided, once again, that we were moving. They packed up "The Kids" and took a scouting trip to East Texas. They found a fixer-upper in the middle of nowhere and laid claim to it. This scouting trip was when my parents introduced "The Kids" to marijuana. And this was one time that I argued with my parents and held a grudge against them.

A couple of months later we actually did move to a blink-of-an-eye town in East Texas. I hated it. The house wasn't finished and was perched on the top of a slope that gave me nightmares of it sliding into the creek bed. I hated this house and I hated what moving there did to our family. We were doing just fine in The

Yellow House and then my parents had to go and ruin it by moving us to the country, completely away from everything and everyone that we knew. They started arguing all the time, they were broke, and the only jobs Dad could find were menial and low-paying.

Katy: My father's great uncle, Minor, was stationed in the Aleutian Islands during WWII. Some years later, he made Alaska his home. My father loved Minor and always held him in high regard, and with good reason. My father had told the story of Minor and Uncle Harry driving to Indiana, where my father, as a twelve year old, lived with his mom and step-dad. Minor and Uncle Harry "put a hurting" on his step-dad. With the help of Minor and Uncle Harry, my dad and grandmother left Indiana, and a child abuser, for good. When they returned to Florida, Minor bought a house for my grandmother, and a lawn mower for my dad. My dad loved Minor for saving him, and for giving him a way to make extra money.

Minor became my mother's ally during the divorce, and that hurt my dad immensely. During the summer, Minor invited my mom, my brother and me to visit him in Alaska. At one point, when we were driving along the coast, Minor turned to me and said something along the lines of; 'no matter what your dad does, he will always be my family.' For me, it was one small victory for my dad and I was happy he at least had one. When we returned from Alaska, I began working at my first job, Ryan's Steakhouse. I was making \$4.25 an hour as a hostess, and I loved the independence it taught me. I bought my first car, a Geo Storm for \$5,600. My father gave me \$1,000 for the down payment and I financed the rest. My payments were \$160 and made every payment on time.

1995

OJ Simpson's murder trial began. Toy Story was released by Pixar.

Darla: I don't remember when exactly, but I broke up a fight between my parents that came close to turning deadly. It was, of course, over money. Tension was already high from months of unemployment and lack but the last straw was when Mom spent way too much on a grocery shopping trip. The fight was traumatic for me. At one point, I had to wrench a gun out of my mom's hands and at another I tried to pull Dad off from choking her. I know now that if they had really meant to hurt one another I would not have been able to stop them so their "fight" was more drama than real trauma, but as a teenage girl I was terrified that my parents were about to kill one another. My sense of security ended up being the only casualty and my need to "fix" things grew. After their fight was over I thought, for sure, they were going to get a divorce, and yet, before the sun was up the next morning they were in bed together, having made up - again.

During this time in life I was the main caretaker of the family. I did most of the cooking and cleaning. I found a church I liked and took the kids to church with me. I loved going to church and felt a call to work in the ministry but I also did not want to forfeit all the trappings of youth like going to college, parties and dating. My desire to be a wife and mother someday was ultimate. So I started back up taking college courses at the local community college and eventually found a job waitressing in the closest town. My mom was working as much as she could and Dad was the "king of the household" so, of course, the household tasks were left to me, the oldest daughter. I state that he was "king" with sarcasm but that is exactly what he called himself and he felt that being the caretaker was my obligatory role in the family. This is also the time in my adolescence that "Dad" began crawling into bed with me after Mom left for work. He was always grabbing me and trying to hold me in a sexual manner, but he (and Mom) claimed that there was nothing wrong with it, that he was just playing and that "if he never teased me, then I wouldn't know that he loved me." I knew something was wrong with it but trying to object only ignited his anger so I learned to have acceptance of inappropriate things regardless of how it made me feel.

I started going out with a friend, not on real dates but as friends. Eventually, though, we started fooling around. It was my attempt at rebellion, for the first time in my life. That also, was short lived. I turned 19 in September that year and I was finally starting to want some independence from my parents.

Katy: My parent's divorce finally came to an end. My mother often reminded me of how short changed she was in the divorce. She had wanted to take my father to the cleaner's, but it seemed the Judge was impartial. My father, happy the divorce was over, rarely mentioned the divorce or any of the anger and animosity that led up to it. I think he was just happy it was over. I graduated from high school, quit my job at Ryan's and began working at the Sheraton Hotel as a desk clerk and enrolled in the local community college. I loved working at the Sheraton for many reasons. I made great friendships at the Sheraton, several of which remain. Also, I loved meeting the people who came from far away and exotic places. I liked their accents and hearing the stories of their travels. I hoped to be like them, one day. I also loved attending college. I enjoyed the independence of choosing my own classes, and the direction that they would lead me. I was hoping to be a forest ranger in Yellowstone National Park. It was one of many lifelong dreams. This was a very great turning point in my life. Much happiness returned and the future looked bright.

1996

Nine year old Amber Hagerman is found murdered in Arlington, Texas, prompting the creation of "Amber Alerts". Dolly, the first mammal cloned, is born in Scotland. Boris Yeltsin is re-elected president of Russia. A pipe bomb explodes at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta. The Prince and Princess of Wales are granted a divorce.

Darla: I got a job at a different restaurant 45 minutes away from home. Mom encouraged me to find a place to live closer to work

so I moved into an apartment with a friend. I was not mentally or emotionally equipped to handle my newfound freedom with dignity. In other words, I behaved poorly, mostly because I wanted to be accepted as part of the group and was afraid that saying no would jeopardize that. I started drinking with my coworkers, became sexually active, and experimented with marijuana.

In April, I met a guy while at work and I quickly became involved with him, moving in to his tiny rental within 2 weeks. I was enthralled with the idea that this guy liked me. It was amazing to me that he wanted to be in a relationship with me and his sexual attention actually felt good, like I imagined that it was supposed to feel, not like when "dad" tried to touch me. It is sick but that is the comparison I had in my head. Plus, my boyfriend protected me from my step-dad, which served to cement me to him. He was my first real boyfriend and our relationship was intense, dysfunctional, chaotic and, in the end, dangerous.

To make a long story short, we committed several, gradually worsening crimes together in Texas and in Wyoming. The last was when we kidnapped an elderly couple in Wyoming so that we could take their truck and trailer because, by that time, we were on the run from the law. The victims of our crime survived but the wife suffered injuries during her effort to save their lives. It is terrifying how twisted our thinking became, and how quickly that happened.

Viktor Frankl writes, "An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior." I would like to say that these crimes were out of character for me but as I look back on my life up until this point I realize that all the traits that I demonstrated in the course of them were learned behaviors and defense mechanisms. I was needy for approval, especially from men, to the point of putting myself and others at risk. I was insecure, a coward and I was easily influenced. I accepted immoral and illegal situations even though I did not want to because that kept me in the good graces of the person I was with. These were my "normal" and these are shameful traits to have had. I committed my crimes

because of these dysfunctions but those crimes were also traumatic events in my life that caused me further damage.

I became severely insecure and my need to seek approval grew immensely. I was a wreck. I was sent to the State Hospital for a psychiatric evaluation (because I had committed a violent crime at a young age) and while I was there the weight of what I had participated in came crashing down on me. That comprehension caused such pain that I wanted to die. The only reason I didn't take my own life was my mom. She was suffering severely because of what I had done and I knew she blamed herself. I didn't want to cause her any more heartache than I already had.

Katy: A guest, who was staying at the Sheraton, gave a friend and me tickets to an Olympic baseball game. A friend and I drove 8 hours to Atlanta to watch America play Japan in the Olympics. We had a great time on the drive to Atlanta. I can still remember conversations that involved tears through laughter.

1997

The Republic of Ireland legalizes divorce. President Bill Clinton bans federal funding on human cloning. Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh is sentenced to death.

Darla: On February 28th, I was sentenced on 9 convictions that were combined into 4 groups of sentences. These groups of sentences were stacked on top of one another and added up to a total of 53 years to life. It took about a year for me to get some clarity on the relationship I had with that guy. Actually, to get a healthy mindset about all relationships, it has taken me years. I didn't know it at the time but I was a very broken young woman, codependent, needy, and easily led. I entered prison on March 25th. As I lay on the bunk of my prison cell I cried and prayed. I had spent my childhood going to church so I was a Christian, and I knew that God loved me, but I also knew that I had just ruined my life by committing a terrible crime against two innocent people. It

was hard for me to believe that I actually did such an awful thing because I grew up trying to please everybody, trying to make everything okay.

I never wanted to hurt anyone, ever. How was it that I participated in such things then? I had a lot to think about and when I first got to prison I decided that I had to let God take control of my life. I had ruined it and caused pain in many people's lives. I did not want to keep living but I also did not want to make things worse by killing myself. Here again, I was trying to keep others "happy," however, that decision kept me alive and eventually, I started learning how to put things into proper perspective. I also decided that I was not going to be defeated by prison, that I would "get over" the dysfunctions that I had when I came here, meaning I was going to get healthy and not let prison make me worse.

I got a job working in the kitchen, and eventually began working in the Inventory Clerk's position. It was a good job for a young woman in prison, and my long sentence suited their preference for that job. As you would expect, people don't want to work when they come to prison because they don't consider it a "real job." I, on the other hand, liked to work and I wanted to please the authorities, as was my habit, so I excelled.

1998

Osama bin Laden forms Al-Qaeda. Senator Lloyd Bentsen's response to Senator Dan Quayle during vice presidential debates is, "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy."

Darla: Life in this prison was not that different than the home I grew up in. There were strict rules and an authority that was controlling, sometimes harsh and sometimes caring. I walked on eggshells, always afraid of getting into trouble but the lifestyle was familiar. I had a place to sleep and 3 meals a day and as long as I

did what I was supposed to I was going to be alright. I had to learn to cope with living with a lot of women but I got the hang of it eventually. Still though, I was broken about what I had done to get here. I could not believe that I was the kind of person that would traumatize other people. I didn't want to be that person ever again in life but it was hard to know exactly how to be different. I wished for specific directions, like a recipe that I could follow.

Katy: I was three months pregnant when my mother took me out to lunch. We were sitting in restaurant booth, waiting on our lunch to be delivered when my mother told me my father had been diagnosed with colon cancer. I can still remember that moment. My heart began pounding in my chest, my eyes filled with tears. I looked around the restaurant to see if anyone was looking at me. I wanted to run out the front door so I could cry and scream. Instead, I sat in the booth, choked back tears, occasionally gasped for air, and waited for lunch.

That year began a sequence of random family dinners. During these family times, my father often shared details of his childhood. Details that he had been hesitant to talk about when he was healthy. During my father's illness, he often spoke of the anger he had for his mother, for not intervening or protecting him when his step-father abused him. From the age of four or five until the age of twelve, my father was abused by his step-father. The details and acts of the abuse are inconsequential in this narrative, but the anger that festered in my fifty-five year old father are not. The memories of his tears; of sorrow and anger, will remain with me until the end of my days.

In December of this year, my daughter was born. I was a twenty-one year old college student with a newborn daughter. My relationship with her father ended soon after she was born. I knew the next few years wouldn't be easy, but I knew we would be okay. My mother was incredibly supportive of me and my new role as a mother. After my daughter was born, my mother went to church

and told Father Caulfield that she was a grandmother. He hugged her and told her “everything has a purpose.” In the years that followed, my mother would often restate those words, when times got tough.

1999

President Bill Clinton is acquitted in impeachment proceedings. Hungry, Poland and the Czech Republic, former Warsaw Pact members, join NATO. Bill Gates' personal stock in Microsoft makes him the wealthiest man in the world.

Darla: I took every class and church service that was available to me and I worked a lot. I set my intention to do well here in prison because I wanted to get out someday but I also struggled hard with still being insecure and people pleasing. I struggled, of course, with making right decisions, right friendships and missing my family.

Katy: My parents' divorce and the animosity that led up to it stayed in the past. My mother was my father's biggest support during his battle with cancer. She often made trips to his apartment to bring him groceries, wash and fold his laundry, clean his apartment and administer his medication. After a fairly serious surgery, she made daily trips to clean the incision and apply clean bandages. My mother was the epitome of unconditional love.

One day while I was driving to class, my mother called me and updated me about my father's condition. She kept telling me I needed to take better care of myself. I couldn't understand why she was so insistent. I left class and called my mother to ask if my dad's illness was worse than she had originally told me. She was hesitant, but told me his cancer had spread to his liver and lungs. I can remember the lobby I was in began to spin. Then my mother said, “The doctors only gave him 18 months to live, when he was diagnosed.” I tried not to remember when he was diagnosed, but it

was impossible. I left school early and went home and tried to sleep the bad news away.

My mother planned Thanksgiving at her house. My sisters, brother and father were all planning our last family Thanksgiving together. My father had intended to cook the turkey, just as he had for all the holidays of my childhood, but he fell sick the day before. My mom cooked the turkey and we all waited for my dad to arrive. When he arrived, I was shocked at the weight he had lost. His beige jacket hung from his slim frame. His movements were deliberate as he leaned on furniture or walls to navigate the house. However, I had never seen his eyes as blue as they were on that day. His eyes gave some hope to the despair that his body portrayed.

2000

Charles M. Schulz, creator of the comic strip "Peanuts" dies. The United Nations admits Serbia. The United States Supreme Court stops the Florida presidential recount, making George W. Bush the winner of the presidential election.

Darla: I started teaching a step aerobics class. This was a challenge and I would stand at the front of the class and wonder why in the world these ladies were doing what I told them to do. I was in awe and intimidated by the task, but I pressed through. At first, I simply showed them what I was taught, blundering my way through, but eventually I gained enough skills that staff encouraged me to request that the prison help me get certified as an aerobics instructor. I did become certified and soon was teaching the ladies of WWC about fitness.

Katy: In February, my father moved from the Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, FL., to his sister's house, also in Tampa, where hospice workers checked on him, and his sister, daily. The end of my father's life was near, but I didn't quite accept that.

I should have known the end was near when my dad told his sister that he wanted to confront their mom about the abuse he suffered at the hands of his step-dad, and the lack of protection she offered. His sister told him to let it go. Their mother was elderly and wouldn't be able to live with that guilt, again. I believe my father once again felt like the little boy of his childhood; pushed aside and forgotten.

I visited my dad, at his sister's house, almost daily. Often, when I arrived I would ask if they wanted me to get them something for lunch. My dad always wanted something special. Lobster, Chinese, fried chicken or fast-food. Whatever he wanted, I would get. By the time I returned with his special request, he was either asleep or had lost his appetite. He wanted to eat so badly, and he was so hungry, but his body just would not allow him to enjoy a meal.

On one of the visits to my dad, I brought my one year old daughter. She and I sat on the living room floor playing, while my dad watched us. Eventually, he asked if he could hold her. I happily propped my daughter on his lap and watched my dad rocked my daughter to sleep. I wondered if he was remembering the days he rocked me to sleep, just as he did with my daughter. As I was leaving that evening, I held my daughter to my father's cheek so she could kiss him. That was one of the last times he smiled.

On one of the hospice workers visits, she pointed out that he was very jaundiced. The whites of his eyes were yellow, his lower legs were cold; his liver was shutting down. The hospice worker asked if he thought about suicide. My dad replied, "That's for cowards." During the last few days, I often wished my father had been a coward. Watching him slowly die was agonizing. On February 13th, at the age of 56, my father lost his 18 month battle with cancer. His funeral brought friends, old and new. The doors of the funeral home were left open because the every seat was taken. People stood in the doorways and hallways, during the service.

Cookie Johnson, who I had never met or even heard of, was one of several people who gave eulogies. She told about all the

long, committed hours my father had given to the Guardian Ad Litem program. Unbeknownst to me, my father spent much of his free time advocating for children in cases of divorce and abuse. In many ways, my father never escaped his childhood trauma. Throughout his life, my dad remained a little boy pleading for help.

On February 18th, the day after my 23rd birthday, my dad was buried in Florida's National Cemetery. In May, I graduated from the University of Florida and was hired at the Polk County Public Defender's Office as an investigator. I was surrounded by the people who worked with my dad during his law career. It was therapeutic. I wished my dad had lived long enough to see me graduate from college. My mom tried to impress upon me that my dad was proud of me and knew I would graduate, her assurance was not the same as his presence. I chose not to attend my graduation. I wasn't ready to celebrate.

2001

George W. Bush is sworn in office as President of the United States. Andrea Yates drowns and kills her five children, while her husband is at work. Three U.S. passenger planes are hijacked by terrorists.

Darla: The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked. I was working in the kitchen that morning and the Lieutenant on duty made an announcement over the PA system to turn on the news on our televisions. I turned it on in the dayroom where I was living just in time to see the second plane crash into the Twin Towers. I wasn't even sure of what I was seeing at first but slowly it seeped in that I was witnessing a horrific event and that people were dying by the hundreds. Like the rest of the country, I will never forget where I was and what I was doing when that event occurred. I was glued to CNN for the next three days, crying and praying for our country and all those devastated families.

Katy: I was running late to work one morning, since I was already late I stopped at a convenience store to get coffee. The clerk and a customer were talking about a plane flying into a building in New York. I paid little attention to them or their conversation. When I arrived at work, I noticed many of the offices and cubicles were empty. I looked in a conference room and saw many co-workers seated and watching the CNN. Together, we watched the first tower collapse. At the time, I was not sure if it was real. I turned to my boss and asked, "Did that just happen?" I will always remember the look on his face and his words, "It is happening as you and I are watching it." September 11th brought about a new sense of patriotism. I wished my father had been alive to be a part of the patriotism. He would have been proud of how *we* responded to the attacks.

2002

George W. Bush signs the Homeland Security Act. The Queen Mother dies in England.

Darla: I sat on panels for tour groups that came through the facility. I started doing this a few years prior and, at first, it was about telling people what living in prison was like and a little about my crime. Eventually, though, I started to see that these times of sharing my story were teaching me not to sugar-coat the telling of my crimes. In those panels I spoke to strangers I would never see again, which gave me the courage to speak more honestly, with less fear of what they would think of me. They already saw me as an inmate who committed a crime so the telling of my crimes was not going to tarnish their opinion of me. I signed up for a class called "Building a Stronger and Healthier Life" that was facilitated by a volunteer, a man. He was a counselor who mainly focused on military veterans. I distrusted him intensely, at first. It was hard for me to get past the fact that he was a man, good looking to boot, and that he wanted to come into a women's prison to teach us about how to live emotionally healthier lives. It took a while but I ended

up learning so much that I attribute a change in my character to what this man taught me. I was also beginning to understand that God was putting people in my life that were helping me change and become the woman He wanted me to be.

Katy: I loved working at the Public Defender's Office. I enjoyed the intellectual conversations and the friendship that were to be made. I felt that the work that was conducted was quite controversial and also very important. People's freedom, and occasionally their lives, were at risk. I was also quite surprised to learn that many of the police officers from my home town were less than honest. Often, the police officer's testimony could result in someone going to prison, or the police officer losing his job. During my tenure, many police officers lost their jobs, and some went to jail. This reality made the role of the Public Defender's Office all the more important.

2003

The Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrates over Texas, killing the seven astronauts on board. U.S. and allied forces invade Iraq. Saddam Hussein is captured by the U.S. army.

Darla: This is first year that I was eligible to face the Parole Board to ask them for a recommendation for a commutation, which would then be sent to the Governor. Because of the length of my sentences I was only eligible to ask if the Governor would consider changing my sentences, not actual parole from prison. In preparation for this first commutation hearing I wrote a halfway house in a nearby town to ask if they would accept me as a resident whenever I was released from prison. I knew that I would not be released as a result from this hearing but I wanted to show the Parole Board that I was doing everything that I could to rehabilitate and be prepared. That halfway house assigned a community mentor to me, named Cheri. She was in her late 60s, a wife, mother, and rancher. Her role was to assist me in my efforts

to get prepared to leave prison and then, once I do, help to adjust to life among the masses. We wrote letters and she came to visit me a few times. She was very sweet and fascinated by my life in prison. I learned a lot from getting to know about her life as well. Knowing her opened a door to a new way of living and thinking. My request to the Parole Board was denied, which was expected, although still disappointing.

Katy: I bought my first house. My daughter was so excited to have a house of our own. The backyard had a large oak tree and swing hung from it. It was perfect for us and I was so proud. I painted each room a couple of times. Home ownership was a confidence boost, for me. I was in my car in the Wendy's drive through, when the radio station was interrupted. President George W. Bush addressed the nation, and informed us that war in Iraq was underway. I admired the president for his handling of the situation and still do.

2004

North Korea bans mobile phones. "World of Warcraft" is released. The John Jay Report releases the results of an investigation into sex abuse cases in the Catholic Church.

Darla: I faced the Parole Board again and was denied - again. Prison is monotonous and I find that I have not delved as deeply into the significant events of my prison years as I have my childhood years. I believe that is because I have had a lot of experience looking into and explaining what led me to commit my crimes and not so much explaining the events during prison. I find that I devalue events that occur in prison because the mentality here is that "real life" happens outside prison. We often refer to the outside world as the "real world." Also, when we call our loved ones they are just not that interested in what we do here in prison. We are not relevant to their world or to the outside world at all.

One thing we must work against while we are here is not absorbing the complex of being worthless.

Katy: My brother's alcoholism, addiction and mental illness began to overtake his life. He was my father, amplified. My mother and I would make the first of many trips to the local jail to bail my brother out. She and I would also share the responsibility of driving him to and from counselors. My mother liked to refer to my brother as "immature." I knew different.

2005

North Korea announces it has nuclear weapons for protection from the United States. Kuwaiti women are given the right to vote. Hurricane Katrina makes landfall along the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Darla: In February, I and several other women were transferred to a private prison in Haskell, Texas. As is the case for most prisons in our country right now, the Wyoming Women's Center was overcrowded and had been slated for expansion. We were not the first group of female inmates from Wyoming to have been sent out-of-state to serve our sentences; this is just the first time that I was allowed to go. I was told by a DOC staff member that it was because I was from Texas. In the past, one of the criteria for transfer was that inmates could not have certain high severity crimes and since mine was, I had not been eligible until Wyoming decided to send us to Texas. In fact, in Oklahoma my conviction of aggravated kidnapping is considered a capital offense, meaning I could have been sentenced to death. But the neighboring state of Texas was more lenient. An investigator told my family that had I committed my crime in Texas I would probably have been out of prison in five years. What a difference a state line makes. This prison in Texas was much different than any environment that I lived in before. I was used to structure and knowing what my boundaries were, given to me by my authorities. This new place had no structure except the fences and only a few locked doors.

The boundaries were all but nonexistent. I floundered for a while but gradually, through trial and error, I grew a backbone. I learned that I did not like being a passive person; I had strong opinions about some things, and making mistakes did not have to devastate me. I also finally understood that I could not please everyone. I did a lot of praying during this time, although my behavior did not always reflect it. I learned some hard won lessons from poor decisions that I made while I was figuring out my boundaries in that environment.

I faced the Parole Board again and was given a positive recommendation this time. That recommendation went to the Governor's office and we had to wait for an answer. My family was so excited that my case went to the Governor's office finally. It was a small victory. My families came to visit me several times while I was in this Texas facility. I loved it. I got to see both sets of parents and siblings, plus one of my nephews and my Aunt Lynda. My mom and step-dad came many times which helped us in our relationships. I got to interact with them in person, as an adult, which changed our relationships with each other.

Katy: My brother's drinking became more common, impeding his ability to be functional. He was consistently unemployed and lived with my mother. Tension at her house was very high. I didn't like going to her house, because my brother was verbally abusive to her and me. She often said that life was easier when he was in jail. I agreed with her, completely. My sister and I encouraged her to make our brother move out of her house. She never would take the steps necessary to evict him, afraid he would be found dead in a gutter.

2006

Twitter is launched. Saddam Hussein is sentenced to death. A space mission to Pluto is launched by NASA.

Darla: I was still waiting for an answer from the Governor's office. The Texas prison experience was much better the second year. One of the staff members volunteered to lead a band for the female inmates and I was one of the singers. The facility also started a dog training program for us, which I joined. Next to instructing aerobics, learning to train dogs became one of the best skills I gained. The man who facilitated the program was patient and kind, another person that I believe God placed in my life to help lead me on the path that He wanted me to go. I was amazed at how much I learned about life from learning how to train dogs. This too became an experience that changed me. My siblings finally found out about me being sexually abused by Dad. It caused even more damage in his relationships with his other children, for years to come.

Katy: After six years at the Public Defender's Office, I decided I need a career switch. With my mother's encouragement, I become a special education teacher at my local high school. My class was labeled "emotionally behaviorally disturbed." I enjoyed working with my students, many of whom were on probation and already familiar to me. However, as much as I enjoyed my work, I became very aware of the use of labels. Sadly, my students were also aware of the label they had been given. It was apparent that many of my troubled students lacked parental guidance and support. My students often came to class in dirty clothes, bad hygiene, hungry and without school supplies. Then of course, there were the students who only came to class if the truancy officer brought them to school.

2007

Steve Jobs announced the sale of the first generation iPhone. A shooting at Virginia Tech kills 32 people. Marion Jones returns her five Olympic medals for using banned performance enhancing drugs.

Darla: The Governor finally answered my commutation request in January and denied it. All of us ladies who were transferred out of state were brought back in April to the newly expanded Wyoming Women's Center. My first year back in WWC was terribly hard. I slipped into my longest depression yet. I started working in the gym which helped a lot. I ask the Parole Board again, later in the year, and they denied me because the Governor had so recently denied my last request. I took almost a full year before I began to feel okay again. I was different than I was before I went to Texas. I viewed life more clearly, without as many insecurities and as much of a need to please others. Cheri started to visit me regularly and by September her husband, Charlie came in with her. It was great to get visits here in Wyoming because I rarely got them before I was transferred out. Cheri and Charlie were wonderful and shared their life with me. Their visits were a God-send. They weren't blood relatives so I wondered at their persistence in visiting me and welcoming me into their lives, especially considering my crime that was against an elderly couple. I could only attribute their friendship to something that God was doing in my life and I was grateful.

Katy: In March I married. We had a large Catholic wedding, a dream come true. My brother was drunk from the night before and did not get out of bed to attend the wedding. In all honesty, I was glad he wasn't there. My mother's brother, Bill, gave me away. After the wedding, my husband and I honeymooned in Europe for two weeks. My husband was the brother of a childhood friend. I was happy to have a friend become my sister. From the very beginning, the marriage seemed to be ending. That summer, I asked my husband if he wanted to see Spiderman with my daughter and me. He replied, "She is too embarrassing to be around." Later in the year he told me he didn't really love me. He explained his friends were all getting married and he thought he should, also. Shortly after that, my daughter and I moved into my mom's house. I loved living with my mom, as did my daughter. My brother had many instances of difficulty, but he also could play

the role of a very good uncle. He loved my daughter, immensely. Many times he took my daughter out for ice cream or shopping. He was capable of being very loving. It was very difficult to understand him.

2008

Stock markets around the world plunge. Fidel Castro resigns as President of Cuba. Lehman Brothers file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Darla: The Parole Board denied my request for a recommendation again, this time because the Governor made it clear that he was not going to give any commutations. I had maintained my aerobic certification and started taking courses for other fitness certifications. I continued teaching aerobics and gaining experience. This skill improved my mental and emotional health as much as it did my physical health. I started attending the Celebrate Recovery service every week. The volunteers who led the service were the pastor and wife of the church that Cheri and Charlie attended. I liked the wife immediately. She was lively and vivacious and strong willed. I thought that I would like to have those same characteristic and she gave me hope that I might still be able to work in the ministry one day.

Katy: I began working at a middle school as a special education teacher. I enjoyed the younger students. The school environment was easier to work in and the students were more receptive to instruction.

2009

The Taliban releases a video of the beheading of Piotr Stanczak. The Sears Tower is bought by Britain's Willis Group and renamed the Willis Tower. Michael Jackson dies. The first African-

American president, Barack Obama, is elected President of the United States.

Darla: Another denial. I was pretty impressed with our nation for voting in our first Black president. I was sadly uneducated about politics so I had no opinion of my own about his agenda but my loved ones were vehement dissenters. It made me wish I were better educated on the matter because I felt so disconnected. I loved my job in the gym. I taught an exercise class and worked with ladies individually. We facilitated all kinds of activities and games. This kept me busy and moving forward in life. Because I am a social butterfly and enjoy serving people I excelled at this job. Throughout the years I learned that my desire to please people is not uncommon and is a characteristic that, kept within healthy boundaries, is good. I found my niche working in the gym and I learned better how to keep this character trait healthy.

Katy: My mother, daughter and I travelled to Arizona to see the Grand Canyon. My mother had taken me there when I was little. I was excited to visit it with my mother and my daughter, who named us “the traveling girls.” The three of us shared a room. Each night my mother and daughter, who were night owls, stayed up late talking, while I tried to sleep. Their conversations and laughter often woke me up, and they would tease me until I went back to sleep. I, the early bird, woke up early each morning and would tease them about their late night shenanigans. We could never get our sleep schedules aligned. When we returned home, my mother’s house was littered with beer cans and cigarette butts. My brother had lived it up while we were gone. My mother was furious, ashamed and humiliated. I encouraged her to evict him. She wouldn’t consider it.

2010

The oil drilling platform, Deepwater Horizon, explodes in the Gulf of Mexico. WikiLeaks releases 250,000 American diplomatic cables.

Darla: My father came to visit me by himself. It was the first time he made the trip to Wyoming to see me. This visit was extraordinary to me. I was extremely nervous. It turned out, he was nervous too and that helped me to feel better. I was finally getting the opportunity to develop a relationship with my father and I discovered that he was absolutely wonderful. He also came to my hearing with the Parole Board with me, which was denied. I saw the news about those 33 miners that were trapped in Chile. I prayed for them and their families, but I didn't really believe they would be rescued. I was utterly shocked when they were. That was a miracle from God. Wyoming voted in a new Governor in November.

Katy: I visited Wyoming and Montana with my mother and my daughter. While in Cody, Wyoming we attended a rodeo. I was having a great time until one of the horses fell in the chute and broke a leg. The horse was dragged out of the arena by a tractor. I lost all interest in the rodeo after that. For me, the highlight was Yellowstone National Park. We saw Old Faithful, buffalo, elk and deer. It was trip I dreamed about since I was a little girl. For my mother, any time away from my brother was welcome. To avoid calls from him, she turned her phone off for blocks of time.

2011

Prince William married Kate Middleton. Muammar Gaddafi is killed, ending the Libyan war. The United States formally declares the end of the Iraq War.

Darla: This was the new Governor's first year so I was sure he would not grant any commutations but I went ahead and asked the Parole Board for a positive recommendation anyway, which they gave me. As expected, the Governor denied my request, this time within a couple of months. My mom and dad came to visit for my birthday and brought my little niece with them. I finally drew a line with my step-dad. When he tried to convince me that a relationship with my biological father was foolish, I calmly told him that his objections were only going to cause a rift between me and him. I made it clear that I was going to continue building relationships with my father and that part of my family regardless of how my step-dad felt. That was the last time he spoke against my father.

Though uncomfortable, building boundaries was becoming easier. WWC created a dog program which I joined. I met a woman who became the best friend that I had ever had, up until then. This friendship was a pivotal experience for me because it taught me how friendships were supposed to be, without dysfunction. I learned what is good to expect from a healthy, God-centered friendship and how to reciprocate. That friendship became my example for what I wanted in my life. It also proved that not all friendships created in prison were bad. I did, however, have a roommate that turned out to be the epitome of the same kind of dysfunction I grew up in and exactly what I was warned against when I came to prison. She reminded me of my step-dad and my reactions to her were the same as they were to him. It took me over two years and four months but I finally made the decision to request to be moved. I learned a lot from her while we were roommates; I know to not care so much what other people think and how a little bit of attitude goes a long way when making a point to someone. I gained strength by being her roommate, but I also learned when to draw the line.

Katy: I planned a vacation to my mom's hometown in upstate New York. My mom, daughter and I looked forward to visiting my mom's brothers and her childhood friends. It was an important

vacation and planned well. A month before we left, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. The visit to New York was bittersweet. Her brothers and their wives were very supportive and inspiring. They offered prayer and words of hope. My mother was happy to back in home town, where her memories were all happy ones. The day we left, my Uncle Dale hugged my mom and said, "I will see you in the fall." When we drove away, I looked in the rear view mirror and watched as my aunts, uncles and cousins drove away.

In August my mom began a series of very grueling chemotherapy treatments. The last few months of the year, were filled with my mother's tears and occasionally her desire to give up. When she talked about giving up, I would secretly call her oldest brother and tell him her hope was dimming. He would then call and pep her up. By the skin of our teeth, we got through the year. My brother was no help during this time. In fact, he made the situation worse. His drinking was out of control and he readily bullied my mother. My uncle flew down from New York to help the situation, to no avail.

2012

The Summer Olympics are held in London. Queen Elizabeth celebrates 60 years as Queen of England during her Diamond Jubilee. The 2012 World Expo is held in South Korea.

Darla: Another positive recommendation to the Governor, and waiting... My best friend left in August which made me sad, but I had already figured out that I would rather care for people and practice developing good friendships with people while they are here in prison and then watch them leave than isolating to protect myself. This was hard to do but it taught me more about being resilient. My father and step-mom came to visit me for my birthday. It was wonderful. I was so excited that they were becoming invested in my life and welcoming me into theirs. In October my father was diagnosed with cancer. He was riddled with

it and the prognosis was grim. The doctor told him that he probably only had about six months of a quality life left. I was devastated at the thought of losing him when he so recently became a part of my life. He and my stepmom made it possible for me to start calling them on Sundays. I met Lyn and Russ in November. Our meeting was God-ordained, without a doubt. She was an aspiring author, researching for a book that she was writing and needed to interview a couple of inmates. She made the proper requests of the institution and I was asked to be one of the interviewees. We made a quick connection and made plans to continue our friendship through phone calls and letters.

Katy: In February, my mother had double mastectomy. I don't remember much about that day. Mostly, I remember sitting in the waiting room watching the clock. I was by myself for the majority of that day. My sister flew in from California later that evening, but my brother chose not to come to the hospital at all. It was lonely and frightening. By the end of spring my mother had completed her last radiation treatment. Her doctor said she was in remission and encouraged her to celebrate. To celebrate, she, my daughter and I flew to Wyoming. We visited Jackson, Cody and Yellowstone. In each town we visited, my mother asked me to find a Catholic church so she could pray for continued good health. Some towns had multiple Catholic churches, so we stopped and prayed in each of them. While staying at a ranch in Cody, my mother became friends with the ranch owner, who also was in remission from breast cancer. The two spent evenings sitting on the porch sharing stories of their childhood and adulthood. They promised to keep in touch. The vacation was filled with laughter, love and hope.

2013

Pope Benedict XVI resigns. Edward Snowden flees the United States after disclosing U.S. government operations to news

publications. Iran limits the nuclear development program in exchange for sanctions relief.

Darla: Waiting... My father went through treatment. Cheri and Charlie continued to visit. By this time I have met all of their children. They welcome me into their family as an adopted member. They became a large part of my life and I felt that God had given to me so I considered them family. They are my god-family.

Katy: In February, my mother called to tell me she was at Urgent Care. In a trembling voice she told me the doctor on duty thinks her cancer has returned, but this time to her liver. I left work and rushed to the doctor's office. He suggested my mother visit with her oncologist for a thorough diagnosis. The next day, I went to work as usual. While I was at lunch, I received a message that I had an emergency phone call. I ran to the office, where the secretary handed me the phone. My mom told me her oncologist made a noon appointment for her and my mom wanted me to be there. Shortly after, I was sitting in the oncologist's office when he shook his head and said, "I can't cure it. I can try to treat it." We were told that my mom would live 3-6 months without treatment. With treatment, she might live a year or two. My mom was determined to live two years, at least.

In April my mom was admitted to the hospital for anemia. I visited her every day. The nurses and doctor assured us she was getting better. On one of my visits with her, she asked me to go home so she could sleep. I stood up to hug her good bye, but she was too tired to notice. Reluctantly, I left without hugging her. The next morning, I received a phone call at 5 a.m. A nurse told me my mother's breathing was shallow. She was being put on life support. I was encouraged me to come to the hospital quickly. I called my brother, who did come up to the hospital for a short time. He sat with my mother and held her hand, then left to "do laundry."

That afternoon, I held my mother's face and kissed her goodbye as she took her last breath. I then sat in my car, and

thought I was suffocating. I still feel like I am suffocating when I think about that day. I wish I had hugged her the day before she died. After my mother's death, my brother steadily got worse. He wouldn't/couldn't hold a job. My sisters and I decided to sell my mother's house, more or less as a way of making our brother move out. We worried about his lifestyle and the damage he could cause in the house. I helped my brother move into an apartment across town. Because he did not work, I often brought him groceries and gave him small amounts of money. It was taxing, but I loved him.

2014

The United States military begins air strikes in northern Iraq, targeting ISIS. President Barack Obama announces positive diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba. Michael Brown is shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.

Darla: The Governor denied my commutation request in January, this time giving me permission to ask him again in a couple years. I love talking to my father and step-mom every Sunday. We were developing a wonderful relationship. I had surgery in December to remove a 3 pound fibroid from my uterus. It was frustrating that the medical department allowed it to grow so large but prison medical services leave a lot to be desired. I learned, however, that the medical services "in the real world" are not much better. Charlie got sick and almost died before a doctor finally figured out that his gall bladder was full of infection.

Katy: With the encouragement of family and friends, I decided to move out of state. I knew if I stayed in Florida, I would spend the rest of my life raising my brother. Although, I loved him, I could not make him healthy. He needed to commit to living differently, but he wasn't willing to. I moved from Florida to Wyoming with my 15 year old daughter. I wanted to do something to make my mother proud of me, and to be a role model for my daughter. Also,

I wanted to have a life of substance. I enrolled at the University of Wyoming and began working on my doctorate in education.

In November, my sister called and told me our brother was in jail. He wanted to be bailed out, but neither she nor I thought that was in his best interest. For two months, my sister and I talked to rehab centers and our brother's attorney. Finally, an agreement was coordinated. My sister would pay the bail, if our brother agreed to go directly to rehab, with the understanding that he had to complete treatment or return to jail. Eager to get out of jail, he agreed. However, there was not any change upon his release. He wasn't ready to change.

In December, after my last class of the semester, I went to a livestock auction in Colorado, just south of the Wyoming border. I don't know why I went there, other than I had never been to one and was curious. When I arrived, I was told that two men were there to buy horses for slaughter. I was also told that a beautiful Paint horse was in a holding pen. A woman who ran a horse rescue was also there, and told me if I bought a horse she would board it until I could move it to Wyoming. That night, I bought the Paint horse, Jackson, at \$.70 a pound. He was my Christmas present to myself. That night brought me more happiness than I had felt in years.

2015

Ireland legalizes same sex marriage by popular vote. NASA discovers water on Mars. Percy Sledge, singer of "When a Man Loves a Woman," dies.

Darla: I started the commutation process again, asking for all of my sentences to be run together. This time my loved ones hired an attorney to help. I had high hopes for this year because the governor instructed me to ask him again the last time he denied me, which was unprecedented. I believed that this time was it. I was a walking testimony of the effectiveness of prison, it had served its purpose with me. I prepared myself for potentiality of

leaving prison in May, because "when" (I spoke that by faith) the governor granted my commutation, I would be eligible for parole.

Katy: Bitsy, a sad and starved Quarter Horse who was supposed to ship to slaughter, won my heart. That winter, Bitsy and I spent many, many cold nights together in the barn. Her mane dried many of my lonely tears and her deep sighs calmed my nerves. Truth be known, I needed her as much as she needed me. We saved each other. I wish it had been that easy to heal my brother. Devin, horse shoer, was referred to me by a friend, Leia. Leia told me she thought Devin might be able to correct Bitsy's bad hooves. Really, Leia was hoping that Devin and I would become each other's love interest. She was right, on both counts. Devin had a calm, easy way about him, which made him easy to be around. He enjoyed riding horses, so we often rode Jackson and Bitsy together. He like me, also enjoyed going to plays, basketball games and football games at the University of Wyoming. We did not have a shortage of common interests.

2016

Donald Trump won the Republican Presidential nomination. The United Kingdom votes to leave the European Union. Nancy Reagan, David Bowie and Mohammad Ali pass away.

Darla: I didn't hear anything in January and I thought that was a good sign, but in the first week of February I received the denial letter. I couldn't believe it was happening again. I had been denied so many times and I really thought the governor would grant it this year. He did tell me to ask him again and he had never told any other inmate that before. I was crushed. For the next several months I reeled from this denial. It was hard to accept for my own sake but even harder to watch my loved ones be so disappointed - again. This time was worse, though, because we all believed I would get it.

I turned 40 in September and as of this August I had officially spent more time in prison than I did in the “real world.” The milestones of this year and the disappointments were staggering to me. Not only was I heartbroken over this denial but Charlie was diagnosed with cancer. Next to my father, he was the best paternal figure in my life and I had developed a relationship with Charlie years before I did with my father. While this was going on and I was trying to keep my head above water, the dynamics within the prison got worse. I hadn't experienced a time in prison that was as stressful as the first half of this year.

Katy: My daughter began her senior year of high school. She is hoping to attend nursing school at the University of Wyoming next year. I am wildly proud of her and, quite frankly, I am proud of myself. Raising a daughter, as single parent, is not easy. More than anything, I wish my mom could be here to see her only granddaughter graduate from high school and enter college. I know she would be proud!

When I graduated from high school, my mother penned a letter to me. Twenty one years later I still think of the letter my mother wrote; “I know life hasn’t always been easy. There have been many bumps in the road. But, life for me would not have been as grand, if I hadn’t had you.” In just a few months, I will share that same sentiment with my daughter, and I will know exactly how my mom felt when I graduated. I am a year and a half away from graduating with my doctorate. Saying that makes me proud. Much of my success, as a woman, is due to the love, support and unconditional love of my mother. She always believed in me and that motivates me. Devin and I often talk about moving away, buying a house with acreage and living happily ever after. We also talk about staying in Wyoming and living happily ever after. Anything is possible, we own each day, and the future is ours to write. That is great feeling.

REFLECTION

Darla: I need to admit something to you, Dear Reader. I have never actually read through someone else's personal narratives. Reading other people's heartaches and trials in life, even their good times, does not appeal to me. Then why did I write one, you might ask? Well, because Katy asked me. Had she not asked, I would not have ever imagined I would write my life's story, year by year. But, it seemed like a really good thing to participate in and I was intrigued with what I could learn from the experience. So, if you have read through this, you have my gratitude.

I would like to leave you with a few thoughts. First, God is good. He has taken my life from the garbage heap and restored me to right standing. That is called redemption and is available to everyone. Second, always, always, always have hope. Life is worth living, no matter what your address; as my grandma used to say, "If it's worth doing, then it is worth doing right." Live right! This and last, yesterday helped to create who we are today; today will help create who we will become tomorrow. Notice I stated, "helped." Yesterday's events are not the deciding factors, you are. You get to decide who and how you want to be in spite of, or because of, whatever happened yesterday. You decide; don't let yesterday do it for you.

Thank you, Katy, for inviting me to write this with you. It was an exercise in persistence and courage, qualities I would like to have in my character. I think about the fact that, had circumstances been different, I may have been living a life more like yours right now. You shared your life with me and I treasure the experience. This, and our friendship are factors in helping me choose who I want to become, in my tomorrows. Thank you, for sowing into my life and for allowing me to reap the benefits of yours.

Katy: There have been important and influential people in my life, but, indirectly, my dad has been the most influential. My dad carried his childhood abuse throughout his life. That abuse was the

cause of his deep depression and his alcoholism. I, as a teenage girl and young adult, became keenly aware of his destruction, but it was not until his cancer diagnosis that I really began to understand how much his childhood had impacted his adulthood. Without knowing it, until I began this writing project, I have spent much of my adulthood carrying my father's pain, trying to fix others. I, like my mother, am a caretaker. Whether it be a human or a horse, I have a difficult time walking away when a change could be made. I learned that from my mother, whose devotion to my father, during his last 18 months, left a long lasting impression on me.

Throughout my life, I have endured many struggles, many of my own doing. I have been fortunate to come across many people who never gave up on me. Everyone is able to make a positive change in the lives of other's. Change can percolate from a drive across several states to save a little boy from further abuse, an ex-wife who cares for her terminal ex-husband, a mother who motivates her daughter to live out her dreams, a daughter who looks to her mother for a role model, an impulsive buy at a livestock auction, a handsome stranger who mends a horse's hooves or an incarcerated friend who inspires you to share your story. There is not a shortage of difficulties in our lives, more importantly, there is not a shortage of good people who will help us understand ourselves and help us overcome our difficulties.

I want to thank Darla for participating in this writing project. Writing "my story" was daunting, sad, and often intimidating. I would have quit, if it had not been for you. Half way through, I asked you if *you* were comfortable sharing your story with others. You replied, "It is my story to share, I want others to learn from me." When I asked that question, I was really looking for a way out of the project. Looking back was often painful, there were many memories I didn't want to surface or share. You made me stay true to the purpose of the project; we are products of our environments, we are the reflection of those who love us the most, as well as those who love us the least. You made me brave, and I thank you for that, friend.