

Surviving Juvenile Justice: Imagination, Kindness and a Toasted Sandwich

An interview with Sarah

Sarah can be contacted c-/ Dulwich Centre Publications

This interview with Sarah, who spent much of her late childhood within juvenile justice institutions, describes her experiences in these places and the ways in which imagination and occasional acts of kindness made all the difference. It is hoped that this interview will be of relevance to other young people who are currently within juvenile justice settings, and to those adults who previously spent time within them. It is also hoped that it will be relevant to those working with young people as it clearly demonstrates the significant differences that caring workers can make. The interviewer was David Denborough.

Keywords: juvenile justice, assault, sexual assault

I can remember my very first night when I was locked up. I was twelve years old. The experience was horrible. I was taken to a police station first, declared by my parents to be 'uncontrollable'. When I arrived I went through the process of being strip-searched, finger-printed, the whole nine yards – at twelve. Then I was taken into the cells. It was so claustrophobic although the cells were huge, at least they were to me. It was all dark. I knew I was underground because I'd headed down a concrete ramp and the cells were cold and damp. There was a gym mat on the floor, and another woman in there who was high on something. She was carrying on and it scared the hell out of me.

When they then took me to the juvenile justice centre it was in a police wagon. They handcuffed my wrist on the inside of the wagon so that by the time I got there my arm was really painful. Once inside, they did the paperwork and actually the workers who were there that night weren't too bad. They searched me again, but a female worker took me into the toilet and they issued me with pyjamas. By then it was about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. I remember distinctly that one worker made me a toasted sandwich because I hadn't had anything to eat for so long. All the other young people locked up in that centre at the time were boys. I think these workers may have felt sorry for me because I was this little girl going into a place full of big boys. Anyway, they put me to bed. It wasn't until I got into the bed that I started to cry because I was all alone in this dark little room, and I suddenly felt so scared.

Why did the tears come then do you think? Was it that somehow you had got through until then, knowing that it wouldn't be right to cry in the other situations?

I think it was more that I wasn't really scared until I was alone. I just didn't know what was going to happen to me. The isolation was the worst thing for me as a kid. When I was in these lock-ups, in the 1980s, the cruelty in the places wasn't anywhere like it had been in the 1950s, '60s & '70s. I have read accounts of what people used to go through in those days. I mean, I had to scrub the toilets with the toothbrush and all that sort of stuff and I had a fair share of punishments, but it wasn't

systematically abusive like it was 50 years ago. The cruelty only came from certain workers. In fact, a lot of the workers were great. There was a particular worker who loved various rock bands – ACDC and the Angels. I remember that she had 'I love Doc Neeson', who was the lead singer of the Angels, written on her sneakers!

Was it significant that she was really passionate about something and this sort of flowed over in some way ...?

Yeah, but it even more significant that she simply talked with us about what she did on the weekends! It meant a lot just to sit there and hear her stories. We felt like we were in it with her. I have never seen the Angels live, but I have seen them in my head over and over again because every time she went she would tell us everything about it. I could picture the lights and the band on the stage. Her stories helped us to travel to these places. I never really got into drugs much and, considering my lifestyle, this was pretty unusual. A lot of young people I knew, who went through the same things as me, they all ended up dying of overdoses. I think the reason I didn't was my imagination was vivid enough to take me places. All I really needed was to hear someone else talking about something good that they went through, and I was there with them.

Can you say more about this, about your imagination? I'm sure that this is true for other young people who are locked up ...

When I was locked up, I was living with fear, intense fear of what was going to happen next. Sometimes for me, the fear itself was the worse thing. Living as a young girl in an institution with young men meant that fear was around a lot. So, finding ways to distract myself from fear became really important. My imagination could steal me away from where I was. I could go somewhere else. And this was the only way I was going to be travelling! In those places, you're really stuck. You're locked up. You've got Perspex windows that you can't get through. You've got walls that you can never climb. You've got too many workers around you to ever get away. So imagination means everything.

Can you tell us a bit more about these skills in imagination? Where would you have first developed that skill do you reckon?

Oh god, we don't have enough time! [laughter]

Does it have very long histories? Does it go back to when you were growing up?

Yes, right from the start basically. I've got many stories. Here's just a quick snippet. My mum lived with a guy when I was about seven. We were on a farm and this man was not 'all there'. I don't think he had a mental health problem, I just think he was a bad man. There's a difference between someone who's suffering from illness and someone who's just a bastard. Well, he belt me up and my mum said: 'That's it, we're leaving'. We lived two kilometres from the nearest house and he chased us with a shotgun for those two kilometres. We were running through the mud but I don't remember the fear. Instead, I remember when I looked up there was a full moon, and I said to the moon: 'You have to watch me, you have to watch over me, you have to make sure I get there okay, and please don't be mad at me'. I had this conversation with the moon the entire time. There were huge old trees all along the road, they formed a canopy above us but there was just enough of the moonlight shining through. I knew this light from the moon was somehow touching me. I felt connected with the moon and we got there to safety. I know that sounds really bizarre ...

It sounds beautiful.

I guess I have always been an imaginative person. We had a really strange life when I was growing up. I went to fifteen schools. By the time I was twenty I had lived in fifty houses. With all this crap going on all the time I had to have somewhere to go that would always be the same. In my imagination I could do this. Sometimes it got me in a lot of trouble. When I was about five I was pretending to make special little castles out of what I thought was white sand. But it turned out that it was my babysitter's teenage son's drug stash! [laughter] I had opened capsules I'd found under a bed. They had pretty white sand in them. I got the hiding of

my life for this. I can remember not understanding what the big deal was! ...

When I was first locked up, it took some work to get my imagination back. That very first night, I could hear and feel my heart in my ears, banging, banging. I was just so scared ...

Being the only girl in an institution like that and being only twelve, that is a terrifying scenario.

It was. But I got used to it. It's kind of strange what you can get used to. A couple of times, I was assaulted in there. Well, more than a couple of times. When the assaults were actually happening, it was like my brain was fast-forwarding. You know when you watch a movie that you've taped from the TV, when the advertisements come on you just fast-forward through them to get back to the movie? It was kind of like that during the assaults.

Some of them were over quickly which was good. The first time I ever got physically assaulted in the juvenile justice institution, we were having a barbecue, sitting outside. I was sitting in a chair, eating, and this big guy came up behind me. He had a knife and he pulled it straight across my neck. He didn't do it hard enough to really do any damage, just enough to graze my skin and draw a little bit of blood. But he scared the hell out of me! My instant reaction was to twist and stab him as hard as I could in the stomach with my fork. I didn't think about this, I just did it. His instant reaction was to king-hit me in the face. I flew back in the chair, my head hit the ground. My whole face closed up. It was like I had no eyes for a while.

How old would you have been at this stage?

Thirteen maybe. It was during my first stint in there. It happened quickly, and I know it sounds really strange but, once it had happened, I felt less scared rather than more scared. Up until then, I had just been dreading what was going to happen. Whenever there were people behind me, if there was a quick movement, it might just be a shadow from a cloud, but there was a constant weight of worry. Every second I was wondering what was going to happen. When the actual assault happened, it was kind of like, oh well, if that's all it's going to be I can handle that.

The worst attack came a few years later, from two seventeen-year-old girls. It's not just men who are violent and it's not just in co-ed institutions. When I was the only girl amongst boys and young men, I used being flirty with the boys to get by. If they thought I didn't like them then they'd beat me up. So, I was forever flattering them, saying: 'Oh, you're so smart', and all this kind of sickening stuff. I'd also play the poor damsel in distress sometimes. Believe it or not, fourteen and fifteen-year-old boys would very quickly respond if I told them they were so big and brave and acted out that I was so pathetic!

But those ways of dealing with things don't work with other girls. So when two other girls came in, some years later, I was in real strife. My coping skill of flirting was the very thing that was getting me into trouble with these girls. One day they said that they wanted to pierce my ears. I knew they were looking for an excuse to fight so I said okay. We went into the toilet and they got the needles and it was so painful. It really hurt and there was blood everywhere. Next they said 'We want to give you a haircut, you look like a dickhead, your hair's stupid'. So they chunked my hair off on one side of my head – just one side. I can't remember how it progressed, but basically they ended up belting the shit out of me. They kicked my face in and they cut off my hair.

Not long afterwards I got out and went to school in a beach town down on the south coast. My head was still shaved because of the attack and I felt totally alien. My ways of protecting myself in the past no longer worked. People took one look at me and said: 'Oh my god, jailbird!' So I couldn't reach out to the boys in the ways I used to, and I didn't really know how to relate to girls because I'd been surrounded by boys for so long. The sad thing was, when I got out, I realised I'd been happier inside because I belonged more there.

Despite the violence and the fear, you found ways of belonging inside? How did you do this together?

We'd all been rejected by our family at some stage of our lives, whether it was the day we were born, whether it was somewhere along the way, whether it was an actual: 'I hate you, get out', or: 'I'm taking you to the cops and getting you locked up', or: 'I don't care what you do'. Somehow, somehow, every

single one of us that were in there had parents that had said: 'You know what? You're our flesh-and-blood but we couldn't give a crap!' Regardless of our different backgrounds, regardless of our socio-economic status, race or culture, we had that in common. Actually there wasn't much racism inside. There were Maori, Asian, Aboriginal and white kids all living in there together and there was much less racism in there than I saw on the outside.

So these were two things that made belonging more possible? That you all had a common experience of rejection from family and that there wasn't much racism ... How did you communicate that belonging with each other?

Smoking was one way! We smoked together. And if someone was willing to give you the last drag of their smoke, you knew they were willing to give up something that was important to them, for you. It sounds crazy, but we knew that was a sign of some kind of care and affection. It wasn't a place where you were likely to go around hugging one another! So other symbols meant a lot to us.

I remember a time when my mum came to visit me. Because I was under sixteen, I had begged her to bring me a letter to say that I could smoke so that I would be allowed the government allocated cigarettes. She said this would be fine and so I had bragged to all the other kids about it. I thought it was really cool that I was going to be allowed to smoke, that my mum was going to give me permission. But when my mum rocked up, she stood in front of me and tore up the letter she had written. She said: 'Fuck you', and threw the scraps at me. She'd driven 45 minutes to see me and I kept thinking to myself that this was quite a long trip.

One of the workers had seen this happen and was horrified and told everybody, saying 'Give the girl a break'. In that place, there were a million layers placed between us and the rest of the world, a million layers that wouldn't enable someone to get close to us. It was as if there was a thin sheath that coated everybody. At that moment, when I came back from the visit, it was like one of these layers had lifted. It was as if everyone was thinking: 'We know what that feels like'. While no-one actually said it, I felt it. I felt that people were with me. I felt closer to them all. After that I got given maybe two

drags at the end of a smoke, and none of the other kids minded if a worker favoured me and treated me really nicely.

There was one worker actually who was like a kind dad to me. He'd come and sit on the edge of the bed at night and go: 'How're you going? Are you okay?' I'd say: 'Yeah' and he'd know that wasn't true but it was just nice that he asked me. Then he'd say: 'Okay' and he'd pull up my blanket like a dad would and walk out. There was never anything inappropriate. He was a good kind man.

Did his actions make a difference?

A huge difference. He was actually the man who was on duty the first night I came in who brought me the toasted sandwich. I can still remember eating that toasted sandwich. I can actually just about taste it. It was a moment in which I was surrounded by all these horrible people and yet this nice person came out of the woodwork. Those actions meant that the fear became less consuming.

The same worker spoke to the warden once and got permission to take me out for the weekend. He used to be involved in sprint car racing. He took me there one time. I remember he bought me a hot dog and it was just such a great feeling to be one of his family for the weekend [tears]. I slept in a nice comfortable bed that I felt safe in. His wife was so kind. She didn't look down on me. She'd say things like: 'Oh, you're such a lovely girl', and she'd touch my hair. And the boys were just like: 'Oh yeah, whatever'. They weren't overly involved. It was just like how you'd be with your cousins. It was such a nice feeling. Going back was horrible because I knew it was never going to happen again, but how I loved it at the time. And I held onto the memory. His name was Ian. I wish I could remember his last name. Hopefully it's in my records somewhere and I'll be able to thank him. If I ever do get to write to him I will tell him that he was a little thread that kept me in touch with sanity the whole time. I still remember those times. Every time I see the sprint cars on television, I think of Ian straight away.

What do you think he saw in you? Why do you reckon he responded to you in these ways?

I think he knew I wasn't a bad kid. He recognised this. I wasn't mean. I wasn't cruel, I wasn't the

leader. I was the follower. I did bad things if I thought it was going to save me in some way and I think he knew all of this. On that first night when he gave me the toasted sandwich, everybody knew that the only reason I was in there was because I had run away from home. That's all I did. I hadn't hurt anyone. I'd just run away and the law saw fit for me to be locked up with all these other young people who had done all sorts of things. One of them had bashed and sexually assaulted an old woman. I remember thinking that it was kind of strange that they put me in the same place as him.

There was another worker, when I was older, who also made a difference. Her name was Lyn. She was a youth worker in a refuge I stayed in when I was fifteen. She said to me that every child deserves to be loved by their parents. They deserve to be loved, they deserve to be hugged, they deserve to be financially supported, they deserve to be nurtured and nourished emotionally, physically, spiritually. She also said: 'But it doesn't always happen. So don't be a person who cuts off your nose to spite your face and fucks up your life just to satisfy them.' This really meant a lot to me. I remember one day I had a really bad anger attack and I smashed the one thing that I loved. To this day, I don't know why I did it. There was an old piano in the refuge and I used to play it. It was something I loved to do. But then one day I lost the plot and smashed the piano to splinters. There was nothing left of it. I kicked it and punched it and smashed it. Basically, I killed this piano.

Yep, it sounds like it!

Everyone was so angry and I remember Lyn sitting down beside me and saying: 'Honey you might have to leave'. And I said: 'I know'. [tears] Then she said: 'I really wish you wouldn't go because you're a really good person.'

This was just when the piano had been killed?

I had just smashed this piano and she told me I was a good person! She was really significant because, no matter what I did, she never gave up on me. I don't know what she saw in me, because this was a time of my life when I was a pretty horrible person. I was preying on everyone around

me. But somehow she could see that I was capable of more. I don't know how she knew this.

But somehow she kept seeing a different person, and relating to that different person?

Yeah. People like that, you never forget them. These were times when I was drowning and they were holding my hand. They never, ever let go. (tears) I'm sorry I keep crying!

Please don't be sorry for these tears. Tears need to be shed for these histories. At the time there were not enough tears being shed about all that was going on in these places. The stories you are telling will mean a lot to others who are going through similar things now. It's only recently that people are beginning to speak about these histories of violence and sexual violence in prisons and in juvenile justice institutions, and how young people and adults have endured this. I know you approached us initially through the Preventing Prisoner Rape Project. Would you like to talk about sexual violence in the juvenile institutions you were in?

During the times I was locked up, I was never assaulted by workers. The two times I was sexually assaulted were by boys who were in there. Still, it is an issue for workers to think about. The main reason these assaults happen, I reckon, is because most of the people who work in these contexts can't care for those who are locked up. I understand this. Most of the young people who are locked up are going downhill, they are in strife. Difficult things are going to keep happening in their lives and the workers often aren't able to cope with this. They're not able to care for you, to connect with you. This makes sense to me. It must be incredibly painful to reach out to young people in detention, to genuinely care for them, and then to see the destruction that so often happens in their lives. Workers also must feel so hopeless when young people leave the institution and they never see them again. In this context, most workers simply can't cope emotionally. So they don't connect, they don't care, they remain one step removed, and this means they don't notice the warning signs. And if you don't notice the warning signs you can't prevent the violence or bring comfort after the assaults have occurred.

If workers were in tune with how young people were feeling, then they'd notice subtle changes. They'd notice that one young person was looking at another young person in a way they shouldn't be. I think that workers distance themselves, they emotionally turn away, and then they stop noticing the important but subtle signs.

The times when I was sexually assaulted, I don't know how the staff could have missed it! The physical assaults they obviously saw, because there were the physical injuries. But sexual assault doesn't necessarily leave you with visible bruises. Both times I was assaulted I didn't fight back. I was too scared to fight back. I just pretended it wasn't happening. I said nothing and did nothing. But surely, if the workers were in tune with me, they would have picked up on what had happened. Maybe Ian did, maybe that's why he reached out to me hoping that maybe I'd speak to him about it. But at the time I didn't think anyone had noticed what was going on.

The first time I was sexually assaulted it was very quick. I can still recall that moment when it was just starting to happen, when I thought: 'Oh my god, it's happening'. I didn't move. I thought, if I don't move then it won't get any worse. It was quite quick and then it was over. Afterwards, I kept saying to myself: 'Okay, I'm not dead. That wasn't the worst thing that could happen. Waking up with a knife hanging out of my chest would have been a lot worse. I'm not dead.'

Getting through these assaults was also like a rite of passage in some way. I could say to myself: 'Okay, I've dealt with that now'. The guy I mentioned earlier, who punched me in the face, he was very well known in the system. A lot of people were scared of him. After he hit me, whenever someone else threatened me, I thought to myself: 'Well, if I dealt with him punching me in the face, don't think I'm going to be frightened of you'. I had to use those experiences to build my courage.

After these assaults, you saw your survival of them as a rite of passage in some way ... ?

Yeah. Well the second assault was so obvious. I knew it was coming. This guy sexually harassed me all day everyday. He was a bad guy. He was probably only fourteen when he assaulted me but

he was huge. He was strong. I wasn't petite. I had sort of an athletic build for a girl. But he was really powerful and he dominated me and intimidated me all the time. He'd just do little things, like walk behind me and flick me in the back of the head. They were things to keep me on the edge all the time. When he did assault me, I said to myself: 'Okay, it could have been a helluva lot worse than that. He could have beaten me until I had to wear a colostomy bag for the rest of my life. He could have bashed me until my jaw had to be wired shut. He could have done all of these things and he didn't.' These assaults hadn't been unexpected. In a place like that, I expected it to happen. And the fear of it happening had been wrapped around me. When it happened, I'd survived it. It could have been worse.

That's a philosophy of life isn't it?

Yes, yes it is. I still think that way. It's not pessimism. It's just that from a young age I have known that very bad things can happen. You can lose your life. It can be gone so quickly.

It sounds like through all these experiences, you have a particular way of honouring life itself, of valuing it ... is that true?

Yes. I don't know why, but I do. I guess I went through a lot when I was pretty young. It's so strange to think that my children are now the age I was when I was first locked up. I look at them and I can't believe that anyone would think of incarcerating them. My son, who is thirteen, still kisses me when he goes to school each day. Sometimes he still calls me Mummy, although only in weak moments! He still hugs me. The idea of locking him up where I was locked up is beyond me.

I'm going to get my state records soon. They formally document all those years. I'm going to read them, and then I'm going to light a fire and watch them burn. Then I'm going to really enjoy living the rest of my life!

Thanks Sarah. I know your words and stories will mean a lot to others. Would you be happy for workers to share these stories with young people they are working with?

Of course!

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