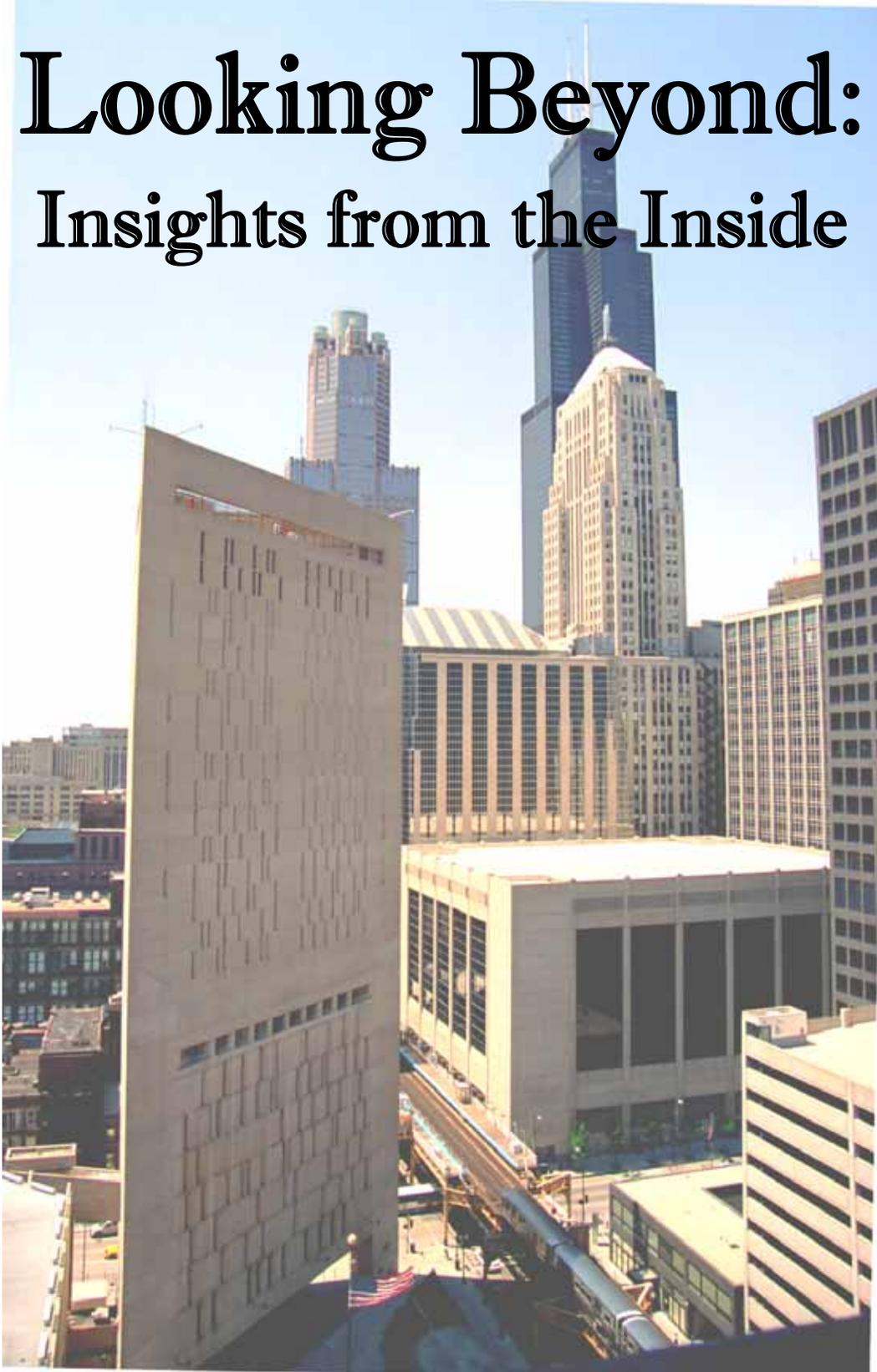


Looking Beyond: Insights from the Inside



*Writings from the Women at the
Metropolitan Correctional Center*

Writers' Circle

Fall 2006



Writers' Circle: Patricia Pitre, Alison Szopinski, Maribel Miramontes, Iliana Lara,
Abosedede Anibaba (not pictured)



Literacy Works

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**Thanks to Don Brown for use of the cover photo of
the Metropolitan Correctional Center of Chicago.**

Alison Szopinski

Program Director,
Literacy Works

It has truly been my pleasure working alongside the women at the Metropolitan Correctional Center during our eight-week Writers' Circle. I cannot thank the women enough for sharing their writing so openly with the group. It was great to be able to see everyone work together to improve their writing skills and learn to express themselves through writing.

I am incredibly touched by the women's honesty and willingness to share their most personal thoughts and feelings. Their words have truly opened my eyes to new perspectives. I have learned so much!

Many thanks go to all the women for sharing their hard work and approaching each day with trust and honesty.

I hope this book brings insight into the lives of the women at the Metropolitan Correctional Center.

A special thanks to the Education Department at the Metropolitan Correctional Center for all of their support with the Writers' Circle.



Abosede Anibaba

Abosede

Optimistic, honest, loving, and forgiving

Daughter of Adiat

Sister of Tola and Shade, Bolaji

Who feels thankful to God

Who likes people

Who needs love and encouragement

Who lives in a college dorm of all girls

Anibaba.



What I Would Change About Society

Abosedo Anibaba

The one thing I would love to change about society is how the law treats women. Women are the future of the whole universe. Women are the ones who give birth to world leaders, to teachers, to doctors, to famous people, to not famous people. I think women deserve more than they are being handed by society.

The laws incarcerating women for long periods of time are too harsh. It takes us away from our kids, from our lives, from our husbands and loved ones. I feel we as a society need to educate and rehabilitate women, open up doors of opportunity for us to have skills, to be self-sufficient, able to provide and fend for our families, whether married or not. I would say that the high statistics of women in jail today are because of wrong influences in our lives: “the opposite sex.” I’m not downplaying some of the terrible crimes which some women commit, but I feel that for non-violent crimes and first offenders, they at least deserve a second chance. In most cases the punishment does not fit the crime; women are being unfairly and unjustly treated by the law. I pray more will be done to steer women on the right path, rather than incarcerating them and throwing away the keys.

I feel there is still some goodness in everyone and I feel that should be brought out. Whatever mistakes we’ve made in our lives doesn’t define who we are.

I’m from Nigeria and the way our laws treat women is quite different from what is being done here in the U.S. In my country, the statistics of women in jail are very low because most women are traders, housewives, street vendors, and market women. This leaves little or no room for criminal activities.

Women with non-violent crimes in my country are surely given second chances, and the periods of incarceration are much smaller compared to here in the U.S. I’ve never heard of a woman sentenced to 30 years in prison for a non-violent crime. This is unheard of in my country. Also, there is nothing like conspiracy to commit a crime in my country. The law judges only those who actually commit the crime.

My First Day at the Metropolitan Correctional Center
Abosede Anibaba

I was arrested on May 23, 2005 at about 5 am and brought to the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) here in Chicago. I was handcuffed tightly to my back for hours, which made my wrists numb and lacerated.

On my arrival at the MCC, I was put in a cell where I was finger printed, had mug shots taken and filled out some forms.

The most dehumanizing part of it was when I was asked to take off my clothes. I thought why was I being asked to do that, but the shocker was that not only did I have to take off my clothes, but I had to strip butt naked. The female officer that was assigned to strip search me yelled orders at me to squat and cough facing the wall with my butt facing her. I burst into uncontrollable tears. I couldn't believe this was happening to me, it felt like I was in a bad dream, which I was going to wake up from.

I could not believe that parts of my body I couldn't see were being viewed by a woman I never saw in my life. It was so humiliating. I was virtually being stripped of my identity, of who I was, everything was taken from me, in just a few hours. The mental torture was unbearable.

I was given a tray of sandwiches after about five hours. It felt like I was chewing on cardboard, I couldn't swallow a bite. I was asked if I was suicidal, so that I could see a physician, "a shrink" or whatever the head doctor is called.

After about 10 hours in a processing cell, I was taken to the women's unit, where I was assigned a top bunk with five other ladies in the room, and six ugly lockers. I was given a towel, a mini toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo, deodorant, three panties, three bras, three white tee shirts, and three pairs of orange uniforms.

From then on I was on my own. In the unit we were about 30 women, both old and young, white and black, Hispanic, but we were all women.

This was my experience on my first day at the MCC, something I would never wish anyone to go through. I guess what doesn't kill you makes you a stronger person.

It gives me the shudders to even go down memory lane to think about that day. I begin to ask myself who I am. From that day you're only defined by your inmate number. Your whole identity has been taken away from you, you've become a nobody, just another criminal. But I know who I am, deep down inside of me. I am a mother, a housewife, and I believe that the mistakes I made do not define who I am. I'm on a journey that I know will surely come to an end some day.



Liana Lara

Lily

Positive, patient, open, non-judgmental

Daughter of Maria, which makes me blessed

Sister of Ana Maria, not by blood ties but our souls are the same

Who feels she is going through a rough time that won't last forever

Who likes to be surrounded by family, friends, good food

Who needs family, love, and forgiveness

Who lives away from home, for a little while, but will return stronger

Lara.



Being a Child of an Immigrant

Iliana Lara

Being a child of an immigrant has given me many lessons throughout my life. I have met many people with different backgrounds from mine and I have learned something good from every one of them.

As a child I didn't realize I was a child of an immigrant. When I was young I would visit my aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents and our homes were all similar. We had the same scents coming from our kitchens, the same music from our stereos, the same religious images hanging from our walls. We looked similar, spoke the same language, celebrated our holidays in the same fashion.

In grammar school I first came to see that my world wasn't everyone's world. As I made friends and got to know them and visit them in their homes, I was full of curiosity. I saw these differences through the eyes of a child. Going to my friends' homes was always fun and interesting. Their food, music, decorations were so different. Our differences were fun, they made us laugh many times, and we learned so many things about our cultures. I didn't realize it at the time, but I took so many good things from these friendships. Even today, many years later, I still remember them fondly.

My Neighborhood

When I was 12, my parents moved us back to Mexico. It was a day and night experience. Everything seemed so rich in color, taste, so loud. We went to a small town where everyone wanted to know us. In time I loved living there; in the afternoons all my friends would come and play till it got dark. We didn't have to worry about strangers because everyone knew each other, traffic, gangs, drugs—there wasn't any. My mom could stay inside the house knowing I was safe, that nothing was going to happen to me. All my neighbors knew me by my first name as well as my brothers and my parents. My mom never drove me to school, I walked there and back.

One of my fondest memories is walking home with my girlfriends, talking about school, boys, our favorite teen singers. We would stop at a little store on the way home and buy something to drink and a snack.

It just seems that there was always a lot of talking, music, and laughter. I enjoyed living in the U.S., but it was different, there was less talk, I didn't know my neighbors, you didn't walk anywhere, it was less carefree.

Respect

Iliana Lara

One of the biggest life lessons I have learned is how to respect one another. I believe we need to learn to respect our differences. Differences are not bad, it's what makes us unique. I truly believe the cause of many of today's problems, crimes, discrimination happen because there is little respect for anything or anyone. If we learned to respect each other's opinions, skin color, background, accents, so many problems would not arise.

Respect starts from our homes. We need to teach our children to respect their elders, teachers, parents, or anyone they encounter because everyone has the right to be respected until proven otherwise. We must remember, our children are tomorrow's leaders and teachers. We need to learn how to listen, to not impose our opinions. We need to respect each other and find a middle ground. Too many times we think we know best but we need to put ourselves in other people's shoes, try to see through their eyes. This will make us more understanding, more compassionate.

A Mexican President once said, "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz," which translates, "When we respect the rights of others, peace will come." I will teach my child respect, for himself, and for others. I believe we have something to learn from every person we meet in life. If given the chance, we might find a great friend, if we can look beyond our differences.

At the end of the day, we are all looking for the same things: happiness, health, the best for our children, a great job, house, or car. So why not look beyond our differences and try to create this together for our children and ourselves.

What I've Learned

Iliana Lara



I have been incarcerated for a few months and I still have a long journey ahead of me. Being here has made me realize how many things we take for granted. We think this could never happen to us, then one day your freedom is gone. Your freedom to make basic choices in life is taken away, from what time you wake up in the morning, to what you wear and eat.

To survive in here you must not think of your life outside. You must let your family and friends move on. You must understand that for them life continues, for me it is the same every day, every week, every month.

Even though I felt I had lost everything, as time goes by I am coming to realize that who “I am” has not been touched, they cannot take that away from me. You are free to decide what you want to make out of any experience—good or bad. I have made a choice to take this time and do something positive with it...learn new skills, improve the relationships with those I love, count my blessings.

I firmly believe in what they say, “If it doesn’t kill you it will make you stronger.” Life goes on and I’m missing it because of a mistake I made, but one day I will be out there again and I will be stronger to stand on my own two feet and grab life by the fullest. I believe this experience will make me a better person because that is the choice I have made.

Maribel Miramontes

Mari

Honest, open minded, great listener, compassionate

Daughter of Josefina and Juan

Friend of Denise “Cherries” and Brenda “BB”
whom I love and I am thankful for having

Who feels mad, sad, determined, and
sometimes happy

Who likes to draw and read poems

Whose children are her everything

Who lives on the 12th floor of the MCC

Miramontes.



My Life
Maribel Miramontes



I had a rough time in my life. I always felt like the black sheep in my family. I grew up in Chicago and moved away when I was 14 years old. We moved three hours away from Chicago to a little prejudiced town. I went to high school there for three years. I dropped out in my junior year because I found out I was pregnant. My parents took it very hard. I was only 17 years old when I had my daughter. My father wouldn't speak to me and my daughter was sick and needed a breathing machine. My dad felt bad and started talking to me again.

At 18, I was pregnant again with my second daughter. Then I ended up moving back to Chicago with my boyfriend Jose. We were staying with my sister and she was married to his brother so it was good.

My boyfriend and I went to visit my parents back in Mexico with our two little girls. I was 20 years old when I found out I was pregnant for the third time. My boyfriend and I ended up getting married in Mexico in January of 1996. We came back to Chicago and in July, right after I turned 21, I had the baby. We had a baby boy and named him Jose just like his dad. We were so happy to have a baby boy.

Sadly, that same year my husband was killed. He was shot in the back and died instantly. He was only 21 years old. My kids were so little, my son was only four months old and the girls were two and a half and three and a half. They were too young to remember what happened to their dad, or so I thought. My eldest daughter Erika remembered everything about her dad. She went through so much I had to take her to a psychiatrist. I should have seen one myself except I was too busy doing drugs and drinking to hide my pain.

After three and a half years I met my current boyfriend. He was a sweet guy and helped me with my kids. I never thought I would fall in love again, but God sent him down for me to love. We have been together seven years now, and even though we are going through a lot, away from each other, our love is still strong.

Life is a big obstacle, the ups and the downs, we just have to be strong and fight for what we believe in. I know everyone in this world has been through a lot, some more than others. One way or another we all get through it. Just remember, when you think you have got it bad just think there is always someone who has it worse.

A Day in Jail
Maribel Miramontes

A day in prison is like no other day. Females arguing over the little things, having to stand in line just to take a shower, use the microwave, iron your clothes, run on the treadmill, use the curling irons and so on...

Our freedom is stripped away in every way possible. We only get to see our families once a week, which is not enough time. When we have visits we can't embrace our husbands or boyfriends, we can't get up from our seats unless it's to use the restroom (and even then the guard comes in and watches us during our private moment). Our children can't do anything, and it's hard to tell a three year old that they can't play and they just have to sit there. I know how hard it is to see the guard yell at your kids and there is nothing you can do about it. After every visit we get strip searched on our way back up. Stripped from our dignity, ashamed and embarrassed of our nakedness.

The things they feed us in prison is always a mystery. You either eat the food or starve. You can order your snacks from commissary but it's not all you expect it to be. I think the only time I look forward to eating is when we have hamburgers or chicken (and it's not McDonalds or KFC either). The best food is on our visits when we get food from the vending machines. They have different things like White Castle, gyros, hot wings, chicken sandwiches, etc...I don't think I will ever take food for granted.

Our bedrooms are two to a room. All we have are bunk beds, a toilet, a sink, and our locker for our stuff. The cell is the smallest room I have ever had to live in.

If there is anything I've learned from jail, it is to have patience to survive in here. A lot of females sleep all day, but I can't do that because it feels like I'm sleeping my life away and I can't do that. The day will come when women can survive and beat the system. Until then, this is a day in jail.



The Worst Part of Jail
Maribel Miramontes

I think the worst part of being in jail is leaving your kids behind, having to watch them grow up behind bars...Not being there when they need you the most. I missed out on a lot. In just five months I missed out in taking my oldest daughter to her first day of Junior High. Brushing my girls' hair, going shopping, taking them trick or treating, having Thanksgiving dinner, watching my son win his first place trophy in baseball, taking my kids to see their dad at the cemetery and most of all just being there to talk to them.

I'm proud of my kids for taking everything so well, for understanding my situation. I feel like I failed them because they lost their dad ten years ago and now I feel like I have abandoned them when they need me the most.

We take for granted the things that mean the most to us. I had to come in here just so I can open up my eyes and see how much life is really worth.

Patricia Pitre

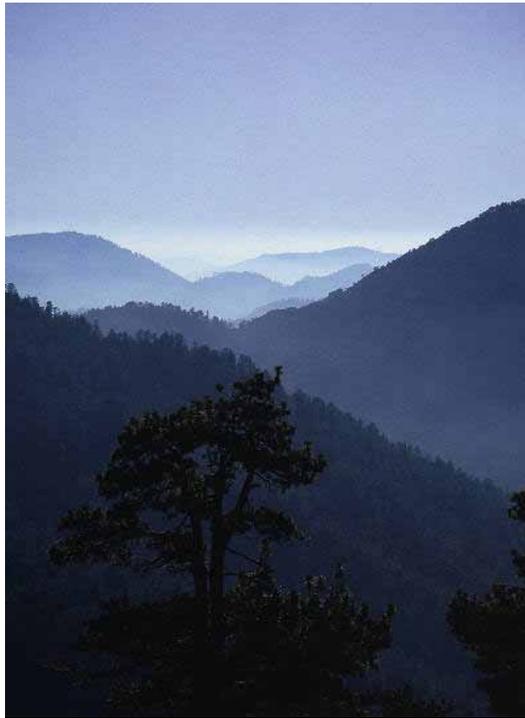
Patty Pat

Energetic, open-minded, reflective, positive
Daughter of Eva Battle-Campbell and Anthony
Battle who departed their earthly bodies in
September and January respectively in 2004
Sister of Anthony Jr., Cedric and very special
friend of David C.

Who feels like she is blessed and highly favored
Who likes to be able to go wherever God leads her
Who needs to be free to live anywhere God might
take her

Who lives in the United States currently in
captivity but is free on the inside

To be determined.



My Personal Journey

Patricia Pitre

I arrived at MCC a little over 2 years ago. I self surrendered, but not really. I was full of despair, anguish and I was miserable about how life had unfolded for me both on the inside and the outside of these walls. I left MCC in June 2004 as a designated add-on to FCI Danbury, and returned in October 2006 from revocation of supervised release for dirty drops* (who would have figured). I walked into a time warp, nothing had changed, not the guards, not the correctional counselor, not the inmates (different faces) same dissension, same disgruntlement, same disillusionment, not even my prison telephone access, it had never been disconnected, was this confirmation.

I, however, had begun to change, I found myself back in an institution reliving a nightmare from which I had not awakened. I believe the most uncomfortable realization for me was that I was here to put closure to an unfortunate part of my life from whence it began. To put closure to all the deaths that occurred while incarcerated, to the subsequent broken home (my final separation); to my divorce; to my backsliding into addiction...to the stammering U.S. Defense Attorney who hadn't even read my file until he entered the courtroom to defend my case...to my probation officer and supervised release (my life was no longer private); to the judges that impose incarceration based on guidelines (outward appearances); and finally to the U.S. Prosecuting Attorney who made a point to nullify my very being to whoever would listen.

We as a society, need to clean up our acts, and we need to be more apprehensive when focusing on outwards appearances as they are deceptive and misleading. We as a society, need to focus more on the inward beauty which is God given and therefore pure. We as a society are too judgmental. Take me for example; because I am a felon, I am classified as an outcast. We as a society classify people too harshly through TV, radio, books, our environments, social settings, school, church, circumstances, etc. Society scorns folks who have made bad and/or poor judgments in their past. The world makes it difficult for us to change—God makes that transition easy because He is forgiving. The world doesn't forgive us of our transgressions, it doesn't matter how repentant our heart. However, with the Lord thy God, a repentant heart is all that is required. I returned to MCC with a repentant heart to renew my relationship with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I backslid into an addictive state while in prison. I began orchestrating my drug usage once I was released from prison in Nov. 2004. I blamed everyone, especially myself and mostly my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I held Him accountable for all the loves that were lost to me forever. Consequently, what has happened, is that losing love, through death and divorce, I have rekindled an even greater love. It has become apparent that love is very important to me. Love of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the love of God who gave His only begotten son to save us from our sins. That love of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who died for our sins, has helped me acknowledge that God doesn't make junk; therefore I am important and worth loving, despite my past.

*A urine sample that reveals drug consumption.

The love of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has allowed me to learn to love everyone, and to give and share of myself freely. I could not have found this wonderful gift of love without learning to trust in Him totally and exclusively; which has given me more freedom than I have ever known. Through the death of my parents I have gained a stronger bond with my two brothers. Through the strife of divorce, I have discovered love again, twice in a lifetime, it's a miracle. To trust totally in my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has built a new bridge for me called salvation; attainable only through faith which has demolished the steel and concrete prison I had built for myself.

Finally, through backsliding into addiction and my time at the MCC, I have found the mechanism for closure to my past. I have received and am receiving a great measure of peace through the love and trust in God through my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God is...God is and has been the answer to all my prayers even when I didn't want an answer. My relationship with Father God has allowed me a great measure of serenity in prison. When I truly look at it, He has placed a protective shield around me—there are no bars, no clanging steel doors; no guards. I am here but for a season of time and then I will live without walls on the outside with my God who has many names and faces; *Jehovah Jireh*, the provider; *Jehovah Elohim*, the sovereign Lord God; *Jehovah Mekeodiskkheim*, the sanctifier; *Jehovah Uzzi*, the Lord of strength; *Jehovah Maginnean*, the defender, *Jehovah Mephalti*, the deliverer; *Jehovah Rophe*, the healer; *Jehovah Roi*, the shepherd; *Jehovah Shalom*, the Lord of peace, and *Jehovah Ori*, The Lord of light. I can see, and I know, I am never alone. It is no longer important to me where I have been, but where I am going. I am no longer a prisoner of my heart; of my mind; of my soul. I am free.

The Hardest Part

Patricia Pitre

When I got arrested and was brought in the courtroom by the U.S. Marshals, the expression on my mother's face—the hurt in her eyes to see her daughter shackled. I will never forget her eyes and the pain she must have felt.

I experienced that once again just a couple of months ago when I appeared in court on violation of supervised release. When the judge remanded me and revoked my supervised release, the look in the eyes of my guy felt and looked the same as the first time I saw that look on the face of my mother.

They were the saddest eyes I have ever known. These eyes were an expression of such hurt it is hard to get over. I still suffer with that.

What I Miss Most

Patricia Pitre

Kissing you and saying good night before we go to sleep.

Sleeping next to you
Snuggling up in the curves of your body
Playing footsies to keep my toes warm
Turning in unison while we sleep
Waking to see and touch your face in the morning
Saying Good Morning Babe.

Cuddling on the couch on Sundays while watching TV, listening to music,
Talking or just chillin...enjoying each other
Kissing and/or holding you whenever
That's what I miss most.

The sounds my puppies make when they are hungry, glad to see me, ready
to go out...
Angry cause I was gone too long or I couldn't take them with me
When they hear me coming
The accidents they sometimes make
Their mischievous ways
Their kisses, the way their tails wag when I walk in the room
That's what I miss most.

The smell of food cooking
Preparing food to cook either on the stove or in the oven
The smile on your face, the contentment you feel from a full belly
The pleasure that is felt from eating a home cooked meal
That's what I miss most.

The sounds of the city
Driving or riding in a car...Bumper to bumper traffic
The smell of rain
The wind on my face and in my hair (hot or cold)
And finally to be wherever we choose to be when the sun rises and then to
go wherever we choose when the sun sets
That's what I miss most.

“Looking Beyond: Insights from the Inside” is a result of Writers’ Circle, an 8-week writing workshop created by Literacy Works in partnership with the Metropolitan Correctional Center.



Literacy Works’ mission is to fulfill the promise of a basic human right: the right to read, write, and interpret the world.

We accomplish our mission by training volunteers to assist children, youth, and adults to comprehend, analyze and question the world they live in; empower themselves to develop their own skills, talents and gifts; and transmit to others the value of reading, writing, and critical thinking.

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