

STITCHING STORIES



A PRISON AWARENESS
QUILT

TABLE OF CONTENTS



- 02** PRISON AWARENESS QUILT HISTORY
- 03** A GLOBAL PANDEMIC HITS
- 04** FEMALE INCARCERATION TRENDS
- 05** ARTISTS' STATEMENT
- 06** THE CROCHET ARTISTS
- 07** STORIES FROM THE TEAM
- 08** AT-A-GLANCE
- 09** RIBBONS AND BOWS
- 10** AN INVITATION/STITCH A STORY
- 11** WITH GRATITUDE
- 12** IN MEMORIAM

PRISON AWARENESS QUILT HISTORY

Before you know kindness
as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow
as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

~Naomi Shihab Nye

The **Stitching Stories Quilt** was crocheted with love by the H.A.T.S. (Handmade and Totally Special) group at the minimum-security Canary Unit of the North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women (NCCIW). H.A.T.S. is a group of women who volunteer their time to crochet for charity, raising money for Our Children's Place and the MATCH program (Mothers and Their Children) at the prison. The women knew the crochet arts had the power to make a positive difference in society, and they began to envision a quilt that might tell the stories of the women around them – stories of women doing time for fighting back in situations of domestic

violence; stories of complex entanglements; stories of children left behind during prison sentences; and stories of lifers being held in prison for more than 30 years with no release date, but being allowed to work jobs outside the prison walls.

In the fall of 2019, they began to imagine a quilt in which every square represented a year that a woman had served behind bars. The group began to visualize how ribbons could be used to represent the individual struggles that each woman had overcome: addiction, mental health, domestic violence, sexual assault, and/or serious health issues. Knowing that incarceration impacts family systems, they began to imagine smaller white bows to represent each child left at home, and black bows for each loved one who had passed away while a woman was inside.

Stitching Stories: A Prison Awareness Quilt was born.

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC HITS

“Only together do we somehow keep coming through unsurvivable loss, the stress of never knowing how things will shake down, to the biggest miracle of all, that against all odds, we come through the bad of the world, again and again – changed but intact (more or less).” ~ Anne Lamott

In March 2020, COVID hit the world, North Carolina, and NCCIW. Visitations and classes at prisons were canceled. Women could no longer go out to work. In the minimum custody unit where the women were creating the Stitching Stories Quilt, 103 incarcerated women contracted COVID in just one week. All of those women survived COVID with one painful exception.



As the women of H.A.T.S. sat for month after month living with the restrictions of COVID in prison, the vision for Stitching Stories shifted: the quilt would tell the story of a representative group of women who survived COVID together, and it would memorialize the one among them who did not.

The women who crocheted Stitching Stories finished the quilt just before Mother's Day 2021. North Carolina prisons were still under COVID restrictions, and the quilt became a way for the women at the Canary Unit of NCCIW to honor each other on a Mother's Day that marked more than a year of being unable to physically see their own children and families. Women at the unit were invited to tie the ribbons and bows on each other's squares.

FEMALE INCARCERATION TRENDS



↑ 834%
twice the rate of men

The number of women in U.S. state prisons has increased by a whopping 834% over the last 40 years, which is more than twice the rate of men. Reforms over the last decade have reduced the total number of incarcerated people, but the decline has been mostly for men. There are over 230,000 women and girls currently held in prisons and jails in this country. The U.S. incarcerates females at more than 10x the rate of peer countries.

over
230,000

10x
rate of peer countries

Women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population. With more than half of them locked up in jail, 82% of their crimes are non-violent, low-level offenses such as public order, property, or drug offenses. Nearly 10% are girls in juvenile facilities who are incarcerated for status offenses like running away and truancy.

82%
non-violent

ARTISTS' STATEMENT

Before we entered prison, we gave little thought to this segment of society and assumed incarcerated folks were deserving of their fate. We didn't consider the children they left behind, their home life, their financial situation, or their mental health. It didn't cross our minds if they'd suffered from abuse or struggled with addiction. We judged them by a three-minute clip on the news or an article in the newspaper, if we thought of them at all.

Then "we" became "them." What we came to understand as incarcerated women ourselves is that we are more alike than we are different. By sharing our stories with one another, the outcome of our histories began to make more sense. And while it didn't excuse or justify our actions, it helped us understand that we are not bad people and that we are not alone. Our stories created bonds between us. In turn, this allows us to lend hope and healing to others as they come through the gates of prison.

The Stitching Stories Quilt is the collective effort of a small group of women with a big vision. The crochet arts offered us a way to tell individual stories and present a collective narrative. We want the world to know we are more than the numbers of mass incarceration – we are individual women with a personhood. We are mothers, daughters, sisters, wives, and more. We are you.



THE CROCHET ARTISTS

Violet Satzman, 58

is a mother of two, and a grandmother of five. She is Japanese and American Indian, was raised Shinto-Buddhist, and is now a Christian. Violet has been incarcerated for 22 years and will be released in 2023.

"I knit and crochet for my loved ones and crochet for H.A.T.S. to give back to the outside community."

Barbara Stager, 72

is a mother, sister, daughter, and friend, who has been physically separated from but spiritually together with loved ones for over 30 years. She is a long-time member of H.A.T.S.

"Crocheting the individual squares together for each woman to become a picture of her incarceration signified a form of healing for the individual as well as for me."

Saida Elizondo, 39

is the mother of three children, two girls and one boy. She has missed out on six and a half years of her children's lives so far due to a drug trafficking conviction. She keeps her mind occupied with arts and crafts, educational classes, work, and volunteer groups.

"I hope for the world to see this quilt and possibly gain an understanding of how mass incarceration affects families as a whole, lives uncontrollably changed forever."

Shirlye Grandy, 58

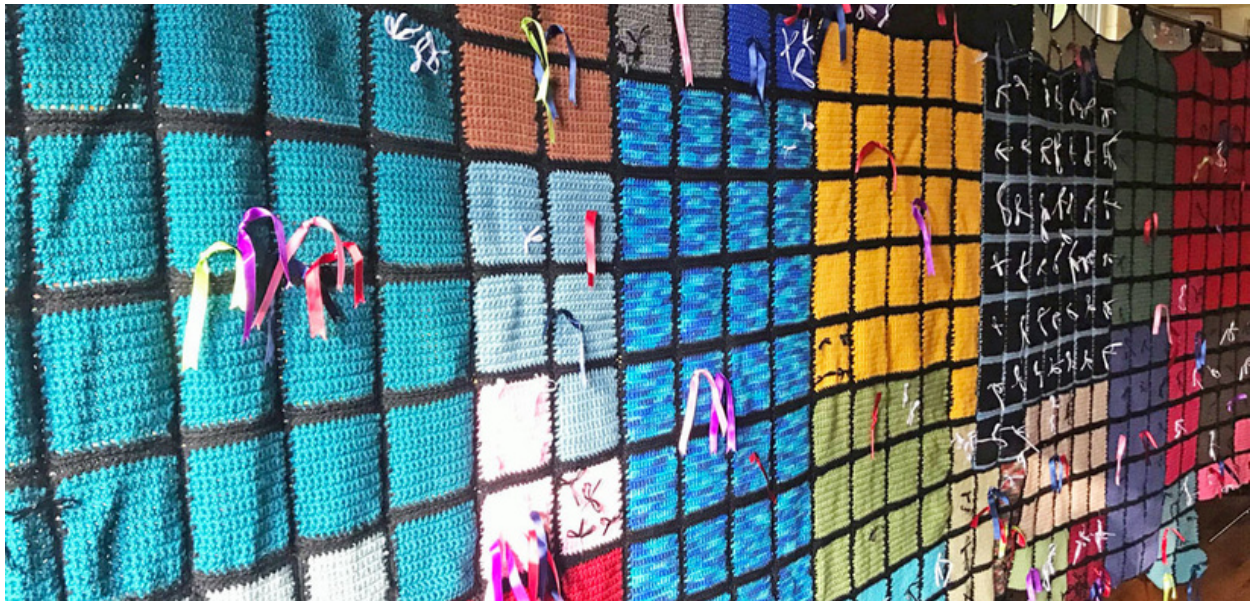
is the special daughter to her parents, both heavenly and earthly. She serves as the Chaplain's Clerk which gives her the opportunity to participate in bringing projects like this to life and has helped cement her love of ministry.

"Coming to prison helped me stop running from God and say 'yes' to my calling."

STORIES FROM THE STITCHING STORIES TEAM

While we hope the quilt will speak for us and our friends, we also wanted to take the time to tell you our own stories – the stories behind the ribbons, bows, and squares that you see here.

Scan the QR code below to listen to our individual story in our own voice.



SAIDA ELIZONDO

Saida shares about being separated from her children.



BARBARA STAGER

Barbara shares about having a life sentence while being in minimum custody.

VIOLET SATZMAN

Violet shares about generational cycles of sexual assault and domestic violence.

SHIRLYE GRANDY

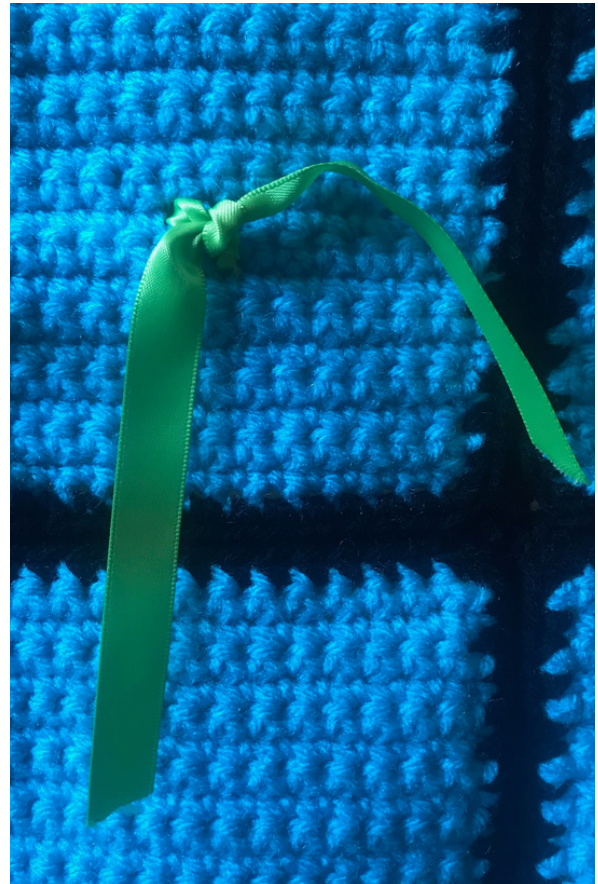
Shirlye shares about losing her mother while in prison.

AT-A-GLANCE

"Beauty is a miracle of things
going together imperfectly."

~Anne Lamott

- There are 62 women represented on this quilt with a total of 751 squares. The quilt measures an eye-popping 23'5" x 5'2".
- A group of squares in one color represents one woman.
- The number of squares in that color block represents the number of years that woman has spent in prison.
- Some women chose the color of their squares, and many colors were chosen by the members of H.A.T.S.
- The prison sentences on this quilt range from one year to 44 years.
- The women are represented anonymously on the quilt and their identity is known only to the crochet artists.
- All women in the Canary Unit, whether they chose to be represented on the quilt or not, were invited to help tie the ribbons and bows to the finished quilt.



Keep in mind, every single woman represented on this quilt is classified as minimum custody. Among other things, this means that they are trusted to work jobs offsite from the prison. Some can even go out with a community volunteer to churches and other locations. No one represented on this blanket is still considered a risk to the wider community and some continue to serve extremely long sentences.

RIBBONS AND BOWS

The ribbons and bows tell a story for each of the 62 women represented on the quilt. Many of the women have survived addiction, domestic violence, sexual assault, mental health issues, and/or COVID. Many are mothers, and many have lost friends and family members while inside.

- **Blue = Addiction**
82% of incarcerated women have experienced substance use issues.
- **Purple = Domestic Violence**
77% of incarcerated women have experienced partner violence.
- **Pink = Sexual Assault**
86% of incarcerated women have experienced sexual violence.
- **Green = Mental Health**
Nearly 1/3 of incarcerated women suffer with serious mental health conditions and 2/3 report a history of mental health problems.
- **Red = COVID**
Incarcerated people are infected by COVID at a rate of more than five times higher than the nation's overall rate.
- **White = Child left behind**
58% of women in state and federal prisons are mothers and 80% of women in jail are mothers. The majority are single moms.
- **Black = Death of a loved one**
Many women lose a family member or loved while incarcerated and seldom get to attend the funeral or memorial service. This can hinder and complicate the grieving process.



AN INVITATION

As you encounter the Stitching Stories Quilt, we invite you to reflect on the following:

- How has incarceration touched your life or the life of someone you know?
 - As you look at the quilt, what most surprises you?
 - If you had a set of squares on this quilt, which ribbons and bows would be on your squares?
 - If you had to condense your reaction to the quilt to just one word, what would it be?
-

"We are one leaf on the
great human tree."
~ Pablo Neruda

STITCH A STORY



After you have had some time to reflect on the quilt, we invite you to engage more deeply with the individual stories represented. Feel free to discover other stories the quilt has to tell as well.

- Can you find a pink and purple ribbon together on the same square? Did you know that women who have experienced sexual assault as a child are more likely to end up in an abusive marriage?
 - Can you find five white bows on the same square? This woman has five children left at home, including one that was born in prison and separated from her immediately after birth.
 - Can you find at least one woman who has all five colored ribbons? Many women respond to sexual assault or domestic violence by self-medicating through drugs and alcohol. Sometimes trauma can create mental health conditions as well. The issues that women have survived on this quilt are often interwoven. The very things that women do to try to survive can lead to their incarceration.
-

WITH GRATITUDE

Thank you for your time and attention to this important story that is playing out all over America. If you feel moved by your experience with the quilt, please tell a friend, write a letter, or donate to a prison reformation group. And, if you want to stitch your story up with ours, we welcome you to be in touch!

A warm thank you to:

Our Children's Place of Coastal Horizons Center for the donation of yarn

H.A.T.S. members for the donation of yarn

Life Lines Collective for the Audio Stories

Cathia Friou for the creation of this Stitching Stories Booklet

Yolanda Williams for the design of this Stitching Stories Booklet

updated by Regina Jaynes

"There is no greater agony than bearing an
untold story inside you."

~ Maya Angelou

IN MEMORIAM

In loving memory of **Ms. Faye Brown**

Beloved community member Ms. Faye died of COVID complications on May 6, 2020. She had served 44 years in prison for being in the back of a car when a friend killed a police officer nearby. She beat cancer twice and was almost released from prison in 2009 when the Governor stepped in to overturn the decision. Her loss was devastating to the women of the Canary Unit, as well as to many of the staff, volunteers, and others outside the prison. Ms. Faye was one of the many unnecessary COVID deaths of an incarcerated person during the pandemic.

Ms. Faye, 67, was a mother, grandmother, and friend to countless incarcerated women in the four decades she lived in North Carolina prisons. Because she was incarcerated before she could become a mother, any woman who considered herself family to Ms. Faye – a daughter, granddaughter, sister, or trusted friend – was invited to tie a white bow on one of her squares.

Ms. Faye's squares are black bound with blue to set the loss of her life apart from the lives of those who survived. Ms. Faye's squares were crocheted by Barbara Stager, a dear friend who served 32 years behind bars with Ms. Faye.



"Embrace your
grief, for there
your soul will
grow."

~ Carl Jung



ARISE
Collective



CONTACT US

Arise Collective
PO Box 25901, Raleigh, NC 27611
919-829-0311 | info@arise-collective.org

www.Arise-Collective.org