



27 Years in Prison for a Nonviolent Offense: Hamedah Hasan Tells Her Story

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Whoa! Talking about sleeping in the bed you made. Imagine trying to turn over and your bedding is so tight you can't move. Your mind is heavily sedated with a strong dose of sleep. You try turning to your right side from your left. You lay there fighting between sleep and fixing your bedding. Your bed is pure 100 percent concrete with blankets of steel. No kiss good night, no bedtime story. You have just been tucked in by Uncle Sam.

I am one in thousands of American POWs. I know I'm not the kind you think of first when you hear those words. I'm a prisoner of America's Drug War, currently serving a 27-year federal prison sentence based on laws established in the late 80s. In 1991, at age 24, I was indicted, arrested and subsequently convicted, and sentenced -- initially to natural life -- for cocaine and crack cocaine related offenses. While I am responsible for my own criminal behavior, being a first time, non-violent offender makes my sentence of decades in prison impossible to accept quietly.

This experience has taught me that not one choice, action, or lack thereof is without consequence. This includes making laws without a sense of redemption -- that diminish the worth of human lives and attack the very foundation of the family unit. Struggling to help raise my three daughters and instill in them useful bits of wisdom has by far been my greatest challenge. I have often wondered at the end of a 15-minute phone call, sometimes split three ways: Did she get it? Will she learn from my mistakes? Am I giving her enough? No matter the answers, I knew I must continue to do my best.

My daughters and I have experienced many obstacles along the way. Prison is the type of situation that magnifies things on the outside. No matter how "bad" something actually is, not being there makes it worse. Learning my daughter was pregnant at age 14 was definitely a moment I seriously questioned my effectiveness as a parent. I felt as though I let her down. Having been a teenage mom enabled me to eventually put my daughter's needs and those of her unborn child in perspective. Unconditional love, communication, guidance and support were of far greater value than anything else.

Despite the limits to which our bond has been tested, I feel very blessed to share such a loving relationship with my daughters. I believe communicating frequently and openly about things that affect us individually and collectively has helped keep us close across the many miles. The most significant lesson my daughters have taught me is that whatever I pass along to them, they are still going to have their own experiences. So when I give them space and watch them like a mom with her tot learning to walk, I celebrate their courage, intelligence and resilience.

I did not walk into prison with a plan for how I was going to survive the next week, much less how I was going to maintain the family bond. Among other things, I had been labeled angry, defiant, militant and poorly educated. I felt those labels were somehow meant to diminish my self-worth and justify my sentences; a notion I readily rejected. I remember reading a quote: "it's not what people call you, but what you answer to." I used that as motivation to do the best I could despite my situation. I began by building upon the commitment I made to God, learning what that meant, and trying to maintain a sense of balance. Throughout the years I've tried to fill my "basket" with as many skills as possible.

My case has been the subject of several newspaper and magazine articles. Reading some of those articles taught me not everyone interested in my "story" has my best interest in mind. So in 2000 when first approached by Melissa Mummert about being the subject in a film on women in prison I was a bit hesitant. Also, I didn't know if my daughters were okay with that type of exposure. After discussing it with my family, praying and getting a better understanding of Melissa's vision, I took her up on her offer. As I have gotten to know Melissa over the years, the thoroughness, dignity and respect in which she told my family's story came as no surprise.

To share my mistakes and humiliations with strangers, as I knew participating in *Perversion of Justice* would do, I felt very vulnerable. The fact that I learned from those mistakes enabled me to realize the importance of sharing my journey regardless. There are thousands of federal prisoners that are in similar situations, many whom have no voice. Whether *Perversion of Justice* has a direct impact on my release is an expectation I refuse to put upon my dear friend and filmmaker. Sometimes amidst our best-laid plans and greatest efforts, God has something different in store. *Perversion of Justice* has already educated masses beyond "the walls," served as a tangible reminder of injustice to policy makers and given a voice and hope for change to the thousands of America's drug war prisoners. An extraordinary accomplishment.

The U.S. Sentencing Commission recently passed and made retroactive an amendment to the sentencing guideline for crack cocaine offenses. Currently I have a motion pending before the district court seeking relief. The original judge had to recuse himself since he had already ruled that my sentence should be shorter. Consequently my case was re-assigned to another judge. In the still of the night, lying in this warehouse-style dormitory, I wonder if I'll serve the remaining eight years of my sentence. The knowledge of that lies with God. My family, friends and I remain hopeful for the extended hand of mercy.

Perversion of Justice is an award-winning 30 minute film about Hamedah. A short version of it can be viewed online [here](#).

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