



# LIFE AND DEATH IN A CARCERAL STATE

NARRATIVES OF  
LOSS AND SURVIVAL

TEXAS AFTER VIOLENCE PROJECT

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NARRATIVES OF LOSS AND SURVIVAL

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## **Life and Death in a Carceral State**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Life and Death in a Carceral State: Narratives of Loss and Survival* is a collaborative research project that documents, archives, and shares the stories of those whose lives have been directly impacted by Texas' criminal justice system. Since 2007, TAVP's mission has been to use in-depth oral history interviews and digital multimedia to explore the impacts of interpersonal and state violence on individuals, families, and communities. Over the years, TAVP has built an archive of stories and other materials that serves as an important resource for community dialogue and public policy to create and implement more just, nonviolent ways to prevent and respond to violence.

In 2017, the Texas After Violence Project partnered with the Texas Justice Initiative, an open-data initiative that tracks deaths in police, jail, and prison custody. Recognizing the limitations of perspectives based solely on government numbers, TJI's mission is to build narratives about who is dying in Texas' criminal justice system, bring attention to the lives that have been lost, and provide a foundation for research to implement solutions that will save lives. In 2016, TJI launched an online interactive database documenting close to 7,000 custodial deaths in Texas between 2005-2015. Since the database debuted, researchers, advocates, lawyers, journalists and loved ones of people who have died have used it to learn more about the fatal impact of Texas' criminal justice system. Formerly housed in the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis (IUPRA) at UT-Austin, TJI is now an independent nonprofit organization.

This year, the Texas After Violence Project has partnered with Texas Advocates for Justice, a criminal justice reform advocacy group led by formerly incarcerated people and their families, to continue this documentation with a series of interviews on the impacts of incarceration on individuals and families. Generous funding from the Open Philanthropy Project has allowed us to facilitate free skills-based trainings for formerly incarcerated individuals and their families on how to conduct in-depth oral history interviews with people that have experienced violence and trauma, as well as trainings on how to operate audio-video equipment for on-camera interviews. We are also planning additional trainings on audio-video editing and creating multimedia projects for policy advocacy and movement building.

The Texas After Violence Project, Texas Justice Initiative, and Texas Advocates for Justice are dedicated to engaging in innovative qualitative and quantitative research toward the creation of justice systems that value restorative justice and community healing over revenge and harsh punishment. We see Texas as a carceral state not only because of its high jail and prison incarceration rates, but also because our politicians and policymakers have for several decades embraced a carceral state of mind, the misguided belief that increased policing and incarceration are the most effective ways to address violence in our communities.

The goal of the *Life and Death in a Carceral State* project is to create space for people to tell their stories in their own words, in their own way, without fear of judgment or reprisal. While we ask our storytellers to guide the direction of their interviews, we also identified several areas of inquiry: life history and family background; experiences of loss, grief, trauma, and healing; interactions with police, investigators, prosecutors, corrections officers, victim advocates, and others associated with criminal justice systems; physical and mental health impacts of incarceration; barriers to successful and healthy reentry into society; how justice systems succeed or fail to meet the needs of those affected by violence or trauma; visions of justice and fairness in institutional responses to violence; and, finally, what the public needs to know about the impacts of criminal justice systems on individuals, families, and communities.

We hope this project plays some small role in recognizing and honoring the experiences and dignity of everyone affected by interpersonal and state violence in Texas; experiences that are all too often co-opted, silenced, or ignored by criminal justice systems and mainstream media. We believe these narratives of loss and survival teach us important lessons about the real impacts of current law enforcement and criminal justice policies and practices. Although we only feature a few selected quotes from the collection of interviews, we encourage you to watch the full interviews, which are accessible online through our digital repository at the University of Texas at Austin's Human Rights Documentation Initiative.



Gabriel Solis  
Director, Texas After Violence Project

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have contributed to this project, from planning and fundraising, research and coordinating, conducting interviews and post-production, to helping construct the book you now hold in your hands. First and foremost, we'd like to thank the people that shared their stories with us: Angela Brown, Sue Gabriel, Lauren Johnson, Sara Mokuria, Vicki Mokuria, Jennifer Pumphrey, Jorge Antonio Renaud, Danny Sneed, JR., Doug Smith, Sybil Sybille, Melanie Young, and Nisha Young. They are the heart of this project, and we are so grateful to them.

Projects that document violence, loss, and tragedy require thoughtful, informed, and compassionate individuals to serve as researchers, coordinators, interviewers, videographers, and post-production staff. We are fortunate to be able to work with wonderful people who are dedicated to social justice and human rights. Our core team includes: Tony Cherian, Jane Field, Matt Gossage, Celeste Henery, Chelsi West Oheuri, Jorge Antonio Renaud, Gabriel Solis, Amanda Woog, and TAVP Project Assistant, Erin Bajema. Additional interviewers and videographers included Tray Frazier, Melvin Halsey, Annette Price, John Taylor, Matthew Wackerle, Cluren Williams, Fred Womack, and Mignon Zezqueaux. We were assisted along the way by many of TAVP's exceptional interns: Ariel Alexander, Bridget Carolan, Alisa Fayne, Bethany Lacy, Patrick Lee, Mehdi Mrabet, and Amie Tran.

We also consulted with several advocates and experts during the initial planning phase, including Maurice Chammah, Lewis Conway, Ariel Dulitzky, Erica Gammill, Cate Graziani, Cephus "Uncle Bobby" Johnson, Amy Kamp, Holly Kirby, Brian McGiverin, Mark Menjivar, Eva Ruth Moravec, Wallis Nader, Lise Olsen, Jorge Antonio Renaud, Gloria Rubac, Eric Tang, and Nissa Tzun.

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## LAMENTATION FOR LITERATURE A POEM BY JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD

We will not read this book  
unless you drive by  
and hurl it over the fence  
And we run under the red eye of the cameras  
unseen by the guards asleep in their towers  
dreaming of the arc of bullets tumbling through the air  
as the inmates flee  
into the bleeding horizon.

We will not read this book  
because the censors squatting in the mailroom  
their thighs chaffed  
by the stench of their suspicion  
will chew and spit the pages into the trash  
to mourn with other slashed seditious lies  
all lies  
unfit for our rehabilitation.

We will not read this book  
because it will very likely speak of possibilities  
beyond the borders of bricks  
of probabilities  
without accounting for iron  
and of impossibilities  
outside the shrinking circle of hope.

We will not read this book  
it will not whisper its histories to us  
we will not listen to its secrets  
be seduced by its sweet mysteries  
compelled to arise  
revoke, question, accuse,  
desire, confess, dream,  
love and die.

We will not read this book.

AFTER SERVING six years in prison for crimes committed as a direct outcome of addiction, DOUG SMITH is a dedicated advocate for criminal justice reform. Doug is currently a Criminal Justice Policy Analyst for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition.



Photo by Matt Gossage

# DOUG SMITH

*“ Texas was on fire.*

*Literally on fire. ”*

We would wake up in the morning barely able to breathe because of the smoke. The heat was brutal. Those old units were like ovens because it was all masonry. You can't put your back against the wall because the bricks are hot. The unit decides to have a lockdown in July. In a lockdown, you've got to put all of your belongings into a potato sack, pile up all of your bedding and somehow walk all the way across the yard to the gym for them to go through everything piece by piece, in July. There were 70-year-old men in those groups. Men with heart conditions, men with diabetes, having to carry their stuff across the yard and back in 100 degree heat. During that time, the shakedown crew goes through the dorm searching mattresses and crevices for contraband...

...My friend Nathan was a young man, but he was on medical care for heart issues. The shakedown crew had taken his mattress. We're on lockdown so it might be days before he gets another mattress. He's out of breath. He's tired. They've taken his mattress. The officer berates him. He's trying to advocate for himself, but that's taken as being too belligerent. Stress upon stress upon physical exertion in the heat with no access to air conditioning. He had a heart attack. Nathan's gone. He didn't die of natural causes. That was pure negligence on the part of TDCJ. There was a bill that they tried to pass this session that said, 'If you're going to do a lockdown in the summer months, make sure that that unit is air conditioned.' The bill failed.

DOUG SMITH



Photo courtesy of Danny Sneed, Jr.

## DANNY SNEED, Jr.

DANNY SNEED, JR. is a proud military veteran, formerly incarcerated advocate, and member of Texas Advocates for Justice. Danny works for US Vets, a not-for-profit organization providing housing and other services to military veterans, and is also program director for Path of Freedom, a reentry ministry through St. John's Church that seeks to raise awareness about the issues faced by formerly incarcerated people and connect them to resources in their communities.

“Prison  
is not  
a place  
of love.”

“God  
turned my wounds into  
wisdom and amazing opportunities.”

It's like the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. I use that analogy in my prison experience. I may not look like, act like, sound like I spent fifteen years in prison but if you get close enough to me you can smell the smoke. Maybe you wouldn't know from being around me, but the smoke is what I do in my life. When you hear my story, that story will smell of smoke. Many of my peers that have been in the criminal justice system that were in that fire were consumed.

DANNY SNEED, JR.



When I was in the fourth grade, they put me on a bus and I met my grandparents for the first time. They put me in a car and drove me to Huntsville, and it's one of the images that stays in my head, even though I've been to Huntsville, the Walls, more than once myself. But when we went up to the building, the first thing I noticed is that it was a tall building and it had wires on the top and somebody standing up there with a gun. And still a kid, still don't know where we're going, and we went in the facility and we waited. I sat in a booth with glass, and a man came and sat in the chair. And he said, "How you doing, Junior?" ...

... I was made aware that was my dad and I picked up the phone and said, "If you're my dad, why I don't know you?" I often replay that in my head. Not what I was feeling because I really didn't feel anything. I didn't feel anger or anything. The sins of the father falls on the son; at all points in my life that could never be my go-to to rationalize and justify what happened to me. My biological father would go in and out of the criminal justice system more times than I did. I was incarcerated when he died, but they let me attend his funeral.

DANNY SNEED, JR.

SUE GABRIEL was arrested and jailed in Houston in 1982 for trespassing after trying to retrieve her security deposit from an apartment manager. During her arrest and incarceration she was beaten multiple times by police officers and jail guards, and continues to suffer from the injuries she sustained thirty-six years ago. Ms. Gabriel is a member of Texas Advocates for Justice and ministers to incarcerated women as part of the Bridges to Life restorative justice program.



Photo courtesy of Sue Gabriel

# SUE GABRIEL

With stories that are *hard to carry*,  
what helps to be heard by others?

You need an audience that is willing to listen and not judge, and that is hard to find. You cannot just find that anywhere. You need to feel that you are worthy. It takes a while but you need to feel that you're worth something. It takes opening up to drop some of those rocks off your shoulders.

With the right type of media, the voices can be heard from the prison, from the street; but this is not happening. It seems like the ones who have the power to listen do not have the guts to listen. They are afraid of the truth. They don't want things to change, so they don't want to listen. Let it stay like it is; and with people like me speaking up, that's a threat to them. The way they deal with the threat is to shut us up.

SUE GABRIEL

“The ones who have the power to listen  
do not have the guts to listen.  
They are **afraid** of the **truth**.”



Photo by Jane Field

# JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD

JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD is a writer, poet, and community organizer who was incarcerated for twenty-seven years. Formerly a policy analyst at the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition and statewide coordinator for Texas Advocates for Justice, Renaud is a senior policy analyst at the Prison Policy Initiative. His writings have appeared in *Huizache*, *The Americas Review*, *The Texas Observer*, and the *Threepenny Review*. He is the author of *Behind the Walls: A Guide for Families and Friends of Texas Inmates*.

“How do you stop that  
cycle  
from perpetuating itself?”

*The prison dehumanizes* everyone who goes into it: the guards, the prison administrators, everyone. You have to see that. You have to see what we are doing to our communities, not just to these people who are incarcerated. So you have to demonstrate the benefits of treating people in a humane fashion. It's a cycle. It's not just them, but their children get involved, their children get caught up in the process, and then *their* children get caught up in the process. How do you stop that cycle from perpetuating itself?

JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD

I am never in life going to tell you that my incarceration helped me do a goddamn thing. Sorry, that's not going to be me. I will tell you that anything I got from incarceration, I got out here. Anger against the system. Rage against history. Historical oppression. Anything in there I got out here too. I don't believe it is anything at all that is accomplished by incarceration other than separation and inflicting more trauma on people. Any education I picked up in there are skills I could have picked up out here without being brutalized. What my incarceration might have done is made me more woke...

“I am never in life  
going to tell you that my  
incarceration  
helped me do  
*a goddamn thing.*”

...I used to say, 'It's our responsibility, our history, our fault.' But seeing how folks get set up over and over and over again. My god. It's not that you deserve it. It's not that you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Incarceration is not an experience that befalls you because you're just a flat out psychotic criminal. Incarceration is the result of forces that have set up a system that funnel people through that system and use trauma and economic inequality as a way to profile individuals and then put them into that system.

JORGE ANTONIO RENAUD



Photo by Matt Cossage

# ANGELA BROWN

ANGELA BROWN is the sister of KEVIN BROWN, who was shot and killed by Austin Police Department Sergeant Michael Olsen on June 3, 2007. Only 25 years old at the time of his death, Kevin was a loving father, son, and brother, and an active member of Mount Zion Baptist Church on Austin's East Side. Angela has become an outspoken advocate against police violence and mass incarceration.



Photo courtesy of Angela Brown

Kevin Alexander Brown

I'm trying to be a voice for him. I think that's how to keep his spirit alive. Hopefully one day, something will actually change so families don't have to deal with this. I'm hoping to make him proud by continuing to do this.

All this death is, I think, God's way of saying to me, 'Use your voice. This is what you need to do because there are people who are in your situation and can't handle the stuff I've put you through. Just don't give up. Don't let death defeat you. **Defeat death.**'



Photo by Jane Field

# JENNIFER PUMPHREY

JENNIFER PUMPHREY is a formerly incarcerated advocate and member of Texas Advocates for Justice. Jennifer was first incarcerated at the age of eighteen after taking a drug charge for her boyfriend at the time. With the help of the Substance Abuse Felony Punishment program, Jennifer has been in recovery since her incarceration.

Tell me about a *day in your life* when you were incarcerated.

## Cold.

Cold is in every meaning that you could possibly come up with. The sounds, the colors or the lack of colors, the temperature, the emotions. It's just pretty much all around cold. It was very apparent that you're alone. I tried to stay in the background. I thought if they don't know me, they don't know my name, I stay in the background I'll be okay. I did what I was told. I followed the rules.

.

When you're incarcerated, on a daily basis you're treated like an animal, at least not human. So, once you're back out into society, it's very difficult to interact with people who aren't treating you like that because you get accustomed to being treated like that. It's difficult to gauge who you should or shouldn't talk to, whether you're going to be rejected, or how much you can share. I feel like I'm one of the lucky ones. I feel like I was able to get out and find peace within myself enough to not ever want to go back, and to stay on a path where it's not going to lead me back to that place.



MELANIE YOUNG (right) is the sister of Vincent Young, who died while in the custody of Harris County Jail on February 13, 2017. NISHA YOUNG (left) is Vincent's younger cousin. Melanie and Nisha, along with other friends and family members, have been actively trying to get answers from jail and county officials about the circumstances surrounding Vincent's death. Through the family's "Justice for Vido" campaign, they have organized several rallies and protests in the ongoing quest for truth and justice.



## NISHA & MELANIE YOUNG

“I went into a blank space for  
thirty days.”

I needed to see him because I know my brother wouldn't do that to himself. For thirty days I couldn't sleep. It's like I was just coexisting. I was moving but I wasn't aware that I was moving. It took me a while before I knew thirty days had passed, then I snapped back to reality.

MELANIE YOUNG



Photo courtesy of Melanie Young

A native of Houston, Vincent Young was a father, son, brother and a valued member of the Fifth Ward community known for his charitable work with the homeless. According to the Harris County Sheriff's Department, jail guards found Vincent hanging in an infirmary cell. But his family disputes the county's findings that Vincent committed suicide, pointing to the fact that he was due to be released the following day, and that he had told them that he would be killed if he ever went back to Harris County jail. He was 32 years old.

*“ People need to know him as  
a person.*

*Not as a convict.*

*Not what you hear on TV. ”*

He was a person who was loving and caring. He was a father. He was a cousin. Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and he was there cleaning up and helping. He was a human being. Out of all of this, he was a human being, and he should have been treated as such. He was loved, and in order to be loved you got to give love. He left a legacy and he left loved ones.

NISHA YOUNG

**WE**are not going to stop marching. We are not going to stop rallying until something is done. And if rallying and marching is a circus show to you, then I'm sorry. But to us, this is personal. This is the most painful thing that I've had to go through. All I can do is fight.

MELANIE YOUNG



Photo by Matt Gossage

# LAUREN JOHNSON

AFTER BEING incarcerated for several years in county and state jails, LAUREN JOHNSON emerged as a forceful advocate for formerly incarcerated people, inmates, and their families. She has worked the Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable, Texas Inmate Families Association, the X-Offenders Council, and the Grassroots Leadership Criminal Justice Program. She is currently the Criminal Justice Outreach Coordinator for the ACLU of Texas.

*“I’d take my  
contraband radio  
and stick an earbud in my  
belly button . . . ”*

. . . then lie there and listen to music. Being stuck in jail added a layer of depth to that experience, spending the whole pregnancy knowing that I’m gonna be separated from this baby. There’s nothing I can do about it. I was shackled on the way to the hospital. Then I had a little baby. I got to spend two days in the hospital with him. I didn’t set him down. When I went back to jail, my t-shirt I had gotten to wear at the hospital still smelled like baby. I did not wash that t-shirt for the whole rest of the time that I was there.

LAUREN JOHNSON



Photo courtesy of Sybil Sybille

# SYBIL SYBILLE

SYBIL SYBILLE is a formerly incarcerated motivational speaker, poet, veteran, advocate, and member of Texas Advocates for Justice. Sybil is also a founder of the organization Sybillionaires, where she works as a recovery coach and specialist in peer support, mental health and substance abuse recovery.

“If we *don't* make

**noise,**

WHO is going to make the noise

*for us?”*

**P**EOPLE make mistakes, and they do their time. Please give an individual an opportunity to show who they are now, not who they were. Who they were may not be who they are because that is truly a learning experience. You cannot judge a book by its cover, so please give someone an opportunity to show themselves who they are at the time and not base their past experiences on whether you hire them or whether you give them a decent accommodation to live. We should not have to pay extra money to live in a place that should be a standard way of life, not somewhere that is mediocre and unacceptable. You haven't ever made a mistake? Society should understand that we go to prison and we come out and we still have to live, not just exist, so give us that opportunity to live.

**Please give us a chance to live.**

SYBIL SYBILLE



Photo of Sara Mokuria by Matt Gossage

# SARA & VICKI MOKURIA

TESFAYE MOKURIA, an Ethiopian political refugee, was shot and killed by police officers of the Dallas Police Department in 1993. His daughter SARA MOKURIA, only ten years old at the time, witnessed the shooting. His wife, VICKI MOKURIA, was left to raise two young daughters on her own, and fought for years to access to counseling for her daughters through Crime Victims Services. Sara has become outspoken about the deep social and emotional impacts of police violence on families and communities. She also co-founded Mothers Against Police Brutality, a multi-racial, multi-ethnic coalition uniting mothers nationwide to fight for civil rights, police accountability, and policy reform. After twenty years as a public high school teacher, Vicki is currently pursuing a doctorate in Urban Education.



“This is my story.

This is what happened.

**I was calling for help.”**

**WHO** do you call when someone is having a mental breakdown? Who do you call when someone is on drugs? Who are you going to call for help? Oh, you're going to call the police? You think the police are going to help you? Tesfaye was unjustly killed because police only know one way to deal with volatile situations.

My entire focus became how to raise my children in a way to honor their father for who he was as a human being. To raise them to be happy and healthy. In addition to the deep anger and sadness and confusion and horror, we had been traumatized. I took us to so many counselors. That was the extent of the advocacy I could do for us to function as human beings, to try to get us counseling. Rely on my buddhist practice. Keep working. Because any kind of trauma, you have to go through the motions of living and trying to find ways to heal.

VICKI MOKURIA

We all went outside to watch the sunset. It was one of those beautiful Texas sunsets with the really strong magenta, orange, and pink, like a fire in the sky. The last thing I remember him saying to me was “I love you” after we had seen that sunset.

*“It was an eerily **ordinary** day.  
An eerily ordinary day that ended  
in the most **violent** way.”*

I started wearing extra large clothing, like men’s sized large shirts and shorts. Looking back, I think I was just trying to disappear. I felt like there was a separation between me and the world. I didn’t know how to engage with people. It felt like the Grand Canyon and I wanted to disappear. I had so much anger from all these different angles and I just didn’t know how to articulate it or make sense of it or why I was so angry or who I was angry at. I was angry at the police officers. I was angry at the system. I was angry at my dad. I was angry at myself. Why didn’t I yell “stop?” Why did I duck down? Why did I survive? I felt like I was saving myself by ducking down instead of standing in front of him. I felt like I was disloyal to my father.

SARA MOKURIA

