

## **Reproductive Injustice and Neglect Behind Jail Walls: An Account of My Time at the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre**

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Sometimes life puts us in situations that we have no control over. We do however have control over the way we handle them. I would like to take this opportunity to tell you my story. I was born on 25 September 1986 in Toronto. At the age of two, after my parents divorced, I moved with my mother to Cornwall, Ontario, where I would grow up. If you are not familiar with the town it has a population of about 60,000. It is located between Montreal and Ottawa and is also a border town located next to the Mohawk Nation at Akwesasne. Cornwall has a reputation of smuggling, trafficking, and fast money. There is also a huge problem with people using prescription medications to get “high” and unlike other drugs these are highly addictive. Anyone who has ever become addicted to them will tell you how bad the withdrawals are and how they would basically sell their soul to avoid going through that.

By the age of 25 I had experimented with these drugs here and there but never used on a regular basis. I was in an unhealthy relationship and became pretty depressed over it. Some of the people I was hanging around were using on a regular basis and before I knew it, I was using on a regular basis too. At the time it made me feel better, it took the pain away and I thought I had it all under control; I could stop any time. That could not have been any further from reality. I was starting to need more and more to feel that same feeling I did when I first started, which meant more money. These pills were far from cheap. That was when things started going downhill for me because I was doing whatever I could to get them. I hurt a lot of people who cared about me along the way and the honest truth is that it did not faze me at all. My judgment started getting cloudy and I was losing touch with what really mattered to me, because as bad as it sounds, all I was worried about was where and how I was going to get my next pill. I blocked out anything and everything that mattered. Addiction is a very powerful thing and once it gets hold of you it will change you and turn you into a person you do not even know. Which leads me to the beginning of my story: a bad decision that turned into a 4-year nightmare.

In 2010, I was stopped in a vehicle with a large amount of marijuana. I was the driver. This would be the beginning of a long road through the justice system. I was charged with possession for the purpose of trafficking and possession for the purpose of exportation. The exportation charge would later be dropped due to insufficient evidence. These were both federal offences and even though I did not have a criminal record, the crown was requesting a period of incarceration of 2-3 years. At the time, I did not think I realized the severity of what I had done or how much this would later affect my life. I was sent to the Ottawa Carleton Detention Center [OCDC]. I was held there for two weeks. I ended up meeting people in jail who had drugs – and yes, you could find just as many drugs while incarcerated as you could on the outside.

This should have been a wakeup call but it was not. Eventually I was bailed out on a \$15,000 bond, with a surety – in other words, someone who would be the eyes of the court and make sure I was following my conditions. I was forced to give up my home to live with my mother, who signed to be my surety. I was not allowed to leave the residence without her, and not to associate with anyone known to possess, use or sell narcotics, or with anyone known to have a criminal record. From what I have told you so far you can understand why these conditions would be difficult for me to follow.

After my release I sat down with both my parents and told them the ugly truth about my addiction. They did not know how much control my addiction had over my life, but they would later learn that I had absolutely no control anymore because the drugs did. And to be honest, I did not think I knew either, because up until then I was making fast money and was able to support my addiction. We went back and forth trying to figure something out when the topic of methadone came up. I agreed to start the program to make them happy, but the truth is I really had no intention of stopping. One thing you must know about addiction is that if someone does not want the help you cannot make them get help. The truth is as soon as they went to sleep, I called someone I knew and within the hour I had a few OxyContin in my hand, my drug of choice.

The problem now was that I was on such strict conditions that I was basically broke and was having a really hard time supporting this habit. That was when the lying and stealing started. Even if I wanted to stop I could not, because I was too scared to go through the withdrawals and was not ready to deal with reality.

Fast forward to the summer. I had snuck out of the house and gone to a house party. I was still hanging around with all the wrong people. Someone who I considered to be a friend and who was also a drug user had stolen jewelry. She had no ID and promised me half the money if I went to the pawn shop and got rid of it. I knew it was wrong but at the time I was in so far over my head I really did not care. A few weeks later I was contacted by the person who threw the party and was told that this “friend” had put it all on me, and if the jewelry was not returned, they would be going ahead with charges. The jewelry was long gone at this point, and I did not have the money to get it out. So, they followed through with charges and issued a warrant for my arrest.

My mom had signed a bond for \$15,000 and if she did not report me for what I was doing, and if I was caught breaching these conditions, she would lose the money. She knew how bad I was at this point, and she did not want to turn me in, but I was not following my conditions at all; I was not even living there anymore. I did not care about anything or anyone – as awful as that sounds. A few times they went to her door looking for me and she made excuses and covered for me. My heart broke every time I thought of what I put her through. At the end of the summer some of the friends that were not users came by to see me, and they knew right away I was not the same person that they knew. I lied, I tried everything to get them to leave, but from what I was told they came back later that day to check on me and found me lying in my bed and unresponsive. Not knowing what to do, they called my mother. She called an ambulance, and because it was drug-related the police were also called. I snapped out of it when I heard her on the phone and ran to a neighbour’s and asked them to call a taxi. I knew I would be going back to jail. I made it to a friend’s house; but about 10 minutes later the whole street was covered with police and I was arrested on the spot. They took me to the hospital and then back to jail I went, only now I had four new charges which were provincial offenses.

The first week back in OCDC was honestly a blur to me. I was experiencing withdrawals for the first time. I was placed on medical observation. I had never been so sick in my whole entire life. These withdrawals carried on for almost three weeks. This time around there were no drugs; I had no choice but to deal with it. My parents had decided that they were not going to try and bail me out and that it was best for me to sit there and dry out. At the

time I was really upset with them, but I knew now that they did it because they loved me, and they did not want to see me end up dead.

Eventually I had gotten used to being in jail – well, as used to it as you can get. I was offered a plea deal of four months in jail for what I had done. I accepted the deal because waiting for a trial meant I could be sitting there for a year waiting for my day in court. This is why so many people end up pleading guilty, even to things they had not done. So, I completed my time but here was the tricky part: I was still waiting to go to trial on my federal charges. I was in OCDC for a little over four months and the conditions inside the jail were awful. It was filthy, overcrowded, more often than not we were three people to a cell that was only meant to hold two. I learned really fast not to ask the guards for anything. I had heard guards say not to knock on the door unless someone was dying. I knew that to survive in there you had to do as they said even if it was wrong. I caught on very quickly that the guards run the show and to keep your mouth shut because if they did not so much as like the look on your face, they would be sending you to the hole, aka solitary confinement.

After being there for over four months I had time served on my provincial charges, but my federal charges were still pending. That meant that I would have to go for bail again, and the judge denied it. That meant I had to wait thirty days to reapply in Superior Court. My mother could no longer be my surety because I had broken the law on her watch, so this time my uncle volunteered. When it was my turn to explain to the judge why I should be let out I explained that I had been battling with addiction and that I took the time I did in jail to get sober, that I had learnt my lesson and I just wanted to be home with my family. The crown on the other hand was fighting to keep me incarcerated.

I still remembered waiting for the judge's decision. He decided to give me another chance, but if you thought the first set of conditions were strict, these new conditions brought it to a whole new level. Not only could I not leave the house without my surety, I had to literally go to work with him. My uncle was an independent contractor. I had to keep a diary of my weekly activities and submit them to the court. I was not to be left alone for any reason, not even at home, and because I had a 10 p.m. curfew, my uncle did too. The only time I was allowed to go anywhere alone was to treatment or counseling. I was honestly surprised my uncle even agreed to it. We both signed the paperwork and within a couple of hours I was walking out of the

courtroom and moving in with my uncle. A few weeks into this I met the man who would one day be Gionni's father. Because I could not leave the house, he would visit a lot. We could not really do normal things couples do because I could not go anywhere without my chaperone.

About three months into this I got a knock at the door, and it was two police officers. I had not done anything wrong, so I invited them inside. They told me that they had grounds for my arrest. My heart dropped. They told me that someone had made a complaint that I was at the grocery store without my surety. I tried explaining that he was there, but as we were walking in, he had received a phone call, so I had gone inside to get what he needed. They were not going to listen to anything I had to say. My mother and my uncle were pleading with them not to arrest me, telling them how good I was doing, that I was staying sober and was following my conditions. I had really bad anxiety so with all the commotion going on I ran upstairs and hid in my uncle's room. The police later said that I had left the residence when they had not even checked to see if I was there in the first place. Four new breaches were added to my criminal record.

Three weeks later I was taken back to jail for my third time in OCDC. When you first got there, they had you see a nurse and asked you questions about your health, and if there was a possibility that you may be pregnant. I really did not think that I was, but I told them it could be possible. I did a urine sample and did not give it another thought. I was really depressed, being back there for something I really had not done. I remember this like it was yesterday. Around 10 p.m. a guard came to my cell and brought me out to the day room where a nurse was waiting for me. It still was not registering for me. She told me to sit down and that my pregnancy test had come back positive. I was completely shocked: a million different emotions went through my mind. I went back to my cell and thought about it all night. In the morning I called home and told my mother and my boyfriend the news. Everyone was so happy, and I was too. Now I was really eager to get home and be with my family.

For the first week or two I was going back and forth to court. When I came back one night the guards told me I was switching cells. I did not even know where I was going until I was led to a segregation cell. I was told that they had a suspicion that I had drugs on me and that I would be "dry celled". This meant that you were left alone in a cell with no running water; they took your mattress from nine in the morning until nine at night and they left

you with a blanket and a bible. These people knew I was pregnant, but they could not have cared less. You had no human contact, and you were not allowed to call anyone except a lawyer. This kind of punishment was cruel and unusual, and it really should only be used as a last resort. In OCDC it was a regular thing. I called my lawyer and asked if he could see if there was any way out of this. Was that ever a mistake. I had guards laugh in my face, and honestly, they probably kept me segregated for longer because I told someone what they were doing to me. There was no point in complaining to anyone while you were in there because until the day comes that you get to leave, they had complete control over what they did with you. Segregation is a common approach in prisons to maintain order and penalize what the system considers to be problematic behaviour (Chartrand, 2015). Many women were placed in segregation for coping behaviours such as substance use or self-harming, which was only exacerbated by the increased isolation and restriction that women endured in segregation.

Twenty-one days later I was placed back into the general population. For a couple of weeks, I stayed in a “maximum security” cell, and then was placed in a dorm, which was considered a privilege. It was a big room with sixteen bunk beds, three phones that you can use from morning until 9 p.m., and a TV on until 11 p.m. or 2 a.m. during the weekends.

I was offered a plea deal of 30 days, time I had already done. But if I pled guilty my uncle would have had to pay a \$5000 bond, because of the admission of guilt. I asked my lawyer to get me a fast trial date. But it was three months before I would go to court. I ended up beating all the charges and was re-released on my uncle’s watch. Unfortunately, my uncle had decided that he no longer wanted that responsibility, and he revoked his surety the following morning. I was taken back into custody.

I was devastated and also four months pregnant. All week my mother and partner were trying to find someone who would be willing to be my surety, and finally my partner’s family member agreed to help us out. But my first day at her home, we realized there was nowhere for me to stay because her apartment was so small. She told me I would have to find somewhere else to stay, a violation of my bail conditions that would send me back to jail. I knew that if I went back to jail, the scary reality would be that I would most likely be delivering my son in jail. So, there I was, stuck between a rock and hard place. My partner and I decided we would stay at his brother’s house close by, and that I would just go there at night to sleep and spend my



days with my surety. Other than my living arrangements I was following the conditions: I was clean, sober, and very excited about the arrival of our son. Then my surety decided she was no longer going to be my surety. I remember feeling so desperate because I was eight months pregnant and I knew that if I was going back to jail, I would be having my son there. I remembered begging and pleading with her to just wait until he was born. Her decision was to go ahead, revoking her surety.

I knew I could not run from the police, being eight months pregnant. To be honest, I was so sad and devastated I was really starting to give up at this point. So, it was the 24th of September 2012, the day before my birthday, and I was having some pains in my stomach. We decided to go to the hospital. Gionni was not due until October 29. On our way to the hospital, an undercover police officer saw me and stopped the vehicle. I was informed that my surety had officially revoked herself, and I had to be taken into custody. Again, I found myself begging and pleading with them not to do this, but because of my conditions there were no other options.

Once I got to the police station, I told them that I was having abdominal pain, wanted to be taken to the hospital. The hospital doctor told the police officer that if I continued to have pain that I should be brought back immediately. After a couple of hours lying in the holding cells at the police station, I started to feel worse, and again asked to be taken to hospital. Back at the hospital, the doctor said I need to be monitored and he was keeping me for observation. The next morning, a police officer said I could either stay in the hospital or go to my bail hearing. I figured I should go to my bail hearing and try to get released to avoid having my son in custody. At the hearing my lawyer even presented a letter from my doctor saying I should be on strict bed rest. I also had an opportunity to plead my case to the judge, I begged and pleaded with her not to send me back to jail, because I did not want my son being born in jail.

When it was time for the judge to make her decision, I remembered being full of anxiety listening to what she was saying. She told me she was not granting my bail. My heart literally dropped. I would never forget what she said to me next, “No matter where you go, you’ll get the health care you need”. This statement could not be further from the truth. Pregnant women experiencing incarceration consistently have their most basic medical needs neglected (Fiander, 2016). Courts are also less likely to be receptive to claims related to health care when the plaintiff is incarcerated (Iftene et al., 2014).

All I could do was cry. A million emotions went through my mind, and it was honestly one of the worst feelings in the world, knowing that my son would now be born in custody, not knowing if Children's Aid would come and take him away because I was incarcerated, knowing that his father would not be there to see his son born. The court officers came to transport me to OCDC and when we got there, they said that yes, I had been in the hospital and that "nothing was wrong with me". After being processed they brought me to a cell with two other women around my age. A couple of days later, the night of the 28th, I had really bad heart burn and I kept throwing up, and I was starting to feel very weak. Around 5 a.m. I threw up in my bed and had to ask the guard to get me new sheets. I did not sleep much but I knew Gianni's father was coming to visit the next day and I was looking forward to that.

On the 29th of September, after being sick all night and not sleeping much, I woke up for breakfast, but I really could not eat. I remember one guard telling me that I was obviously a bad mother because I was refusing to eat, when in reality I was so sick I could not eat; she told me that she was going to be making a call to Children's Aid. I had no energy to argue. Around 11 a.m. they called me out of my cell for my visit and I was still pretty weak, so I took my time and walked downstairs to the visiting area. As soon as my partner saw me, he said, "you look really sick Julie, your skin's turning grey", and I felt so weak by this point that I was having a hard time sitting up. I remembered laying my head against the wall and talking to him through the phone because all visits are behind glass and are no contact. After our 30 minutes or something was up, I remembered lying on the ground waiting for the guards to unlock the door and bring me back to my cell. I remembered telling one of them that I felt really weak, and he dismissed it by saying "that's what pregnancy does to you". Keep in mind this was my first and only child, so I really had no idea what was normal and what was not.

Lunch time rolled around and I was starting to feel worse. I really could not eat, so one of the guards told me she was bringing me downstairs to see the nurse. The nurse had me lie down, checked my blood pressure and told me I had heartburn and gave me Tums. No internal examination was done, and she did not check to see the baby's position. Now at this point not only was I weak but I was starting to get sharp pains in my stomach every couple of minutes, and the guards just told me to lie down or that they would let



the nurse know. A couple times the other cell mates even knocked at the door and said, “She’s pretty sick, I think she needs help”. They never took it seriously. The sharp pains I would later realize were contractions – I was actually in labour – and they were coming closer and closer. I thought I was bleeding and was told, “oh it’s nothing”. It was my mucous plug but again this was my first pregnancy, so I did not really know.

The pains were starting to come closer and getting very painful, and this one guard was getting very frustrated with me and told me to lie down and, “If I couldn’t handle it, then why did you ever get pregnant”? I was punished by OCDC guards for being disruptive with my cries of pain and pleas for medical care (*Julie Bilotta v Her Majesty the Queen*, 2014). After supper a guard was so sick of hearing me complain and telling me to shut up that she informed me I was going into a segregation cell by myself (Smith, 2012). I begged her not to move me – I was scared, and I did not want to be alone. Not only did she tell me to shut up because I was making too much noise, but she made me carry two mattresses and the rest of my stuff to another cell. I was crying and pleading with them. Here I was, eight months pregnant, exactly a month away from my due date, and something was very wrong. Another nurse came and demanded I get out of bed and stand at the door. She asked me what was wrong and told me she would contact the doctor.

Around 6 p.m. I felt a gush of water, my water breaking. I banged at the door to tell them; I was told that I had wet myself. The prison system aimed to hide the violence that it perpetrated through trivializing or minimizing the experiences of incarcerated women (Chartrand, 2015). The pain was getting more and more intense and was back-to-back at this point. Again, I was told to stop whining and to lay down. The pain was so unbearable, and I was banging at door, and screaming for help. At this point, other prisoners were getting upset that nobody was helping me; after all, I would not be the first woman to go into labour early. Medical staff working in prisons are held to lower standards of care compared to medical staff working within the general population (Iftene et al., 2014).

About an hour later I inserted my fingers inside myself, and I felt something hard. I knew right away it was his foot, I remembered feeling his toes. I was beside myself and I was screaming, and a guard came to the door and had the nerve to ask me if I had a “package”, referring to drugs (Gillis, 2016). The guard told me I was being silly, that it was not my son’s foot, and it was probably my mucous plug. I knew enough to know that

your mucous plug is not hard. I was literally panicking now because no matter what I said, no matter how loud I screamed, nobody was taking this seriously, and I knew at this point that my son was coming out feet first which is extremely dangerous for both of us and had I been in a hospital I would have had a C-section. Women experiencing incarceration are more likely to experience medical complications during pregnancy and less likely to receive sufficient pre-natal and post-natal care compared to non-incarcerated women (Fiander, 2016).

Around 8 p.m. I looked down and my son's foot was outside of my body. I was in full panic mode at this time and I banged and banged at the door; I could barely stand at this point. I backed away from the door so they could see now that this was not a joke. I still remembered the look on her face, like she could not believe what she was seeing, as if I had not just been begging for help for eight hours at this point. Within minutes my cell was full of guards and nurses, and they had me lying on my bed and they were telling me not to push, but to anyone who has ever had a baby knows that your body starts pushing on its own. I was not even listening to them because I knew my son was suffocating from the way he was being delivered and I just remembered lying there for what felt like forever, like when was help going to get here, why was not there an ambulance here yet? I later found out that for 49 minutes after they came into my cell, nobody called an ambulance.

By the time the paramedics did get there, half of my son's body, both legs and his bum, were out of me and the paramedics told me I needed to push. I think I pushed three times, and my son was born shortly after 9 p.m. with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck (Rahr, 2017). I was on a stretcher at this point, and I was asking them if my son was ok and I was fading in out at this point, but I would never forget the fear I felt when they told me they did not know if he was going to make it. I forgot about what just happened, as all I was hearing was that my son might die.

You could imagine how hysterical I was at this point. I was fighting to keep my eyes open, and I remembered holding him in my arms for the first time and just looking at him. He was so perfect. He was everything I ever dreamed he would be, and I told him how much I loved him and that I was so sorry for what was happening, but he had to be strong, and he had to pull through this. I had no idea that I had lost half the blood in my body or how my health was – I did not even ask, I did not even care,

because I needed to be strong for him and that was all that mattered and that was all that had ever mattered. As soon as we got to the hospital we were separated. He was taken to the neonatal intensive care unit, and I was taken into an operating room. I had to be sedated because the placenta was not coming out. It was a little fuzzy for me after that, but I remembered coming to and it was about 5 a.m., and I asked the guards if I could call home to tell them that I had had the baby. I was told I could wait until morning. Not once did they ask if I was ok, not once did they ask how the baby was. At about 9 a.m. there was a new shift of guards who said I could only call my mother. I said, "Hi mom", and she knew right away something was wrong because I was calling so early, and I told her I had had the baby. I could hear the panic in her voice, but staff from the jail surrounded me, and I could not really tell her what happened. I had already been told to lie and say I had my son in the ambulance. She told me that she was getting my partner and was on her way.

My son was on a feeding tube and a breathing tube, and he was in rough shape. I kept asking if he was going to be ok; they told me they really did not know. I was not much of a religious person, but I had never prayed so hard in my life that my son would be okay. I was getting ready to leave my room when a woman walked in, and I knew right away that it was a Children's Aid worker. She told me that someone had said that I might be using drugs and that I was in an unhealthy relationship. I told her that both allegations were false, and so she asked if I would submit to a drug test and to the baby being tested for drugs. I immediately complied: all tests were negative. She said that they would need to speak with my partner and that was also fine with me. He and my mom showed up while I was speaking with her, and she wanted to know what the plans were going to be for Gionni until I was released. I had discussed this with my mom and partner when I knew that I was going to be having him while incarcerated. My mother automatically said that she would take Gionni home, and she and my partner would watch over him. After the Children's Aid worker left, we could see Gionni. It was awful seeing him in an incubator with all these tubes attached to him. We could not hold him or anything but there he was, 5 pounds 9 ounces, with a head full of hair. He was so beautiful, and we were so proud. I needed two blood transfusions from the high-risk birth (Gregoire, 2013). I was feeling exhausted but was physically ok. Mentally not so much: on the third day, I had to go back to the jail, and leave Gionni there, and they still did not know

if he was going to make it. I kept thinking what if he did not make it, was this going to be the last time I saw my son?

When I got back to OCDC, it was business as usual. The same staff who had treated me so badly were working and not one guard apologized. One nurse did. A couple of guards did ask about the baby but that was literally one or two of them. They put me in medical observation for two days, alone in a cell again until the jail doctor cleared me. The last thing I wanted was to be alone. Then I was back in general population in a cell with two other women. It was hard being away from Gionni but felt good to talk to other people. My focus was on getting out and being the best mom I could be to my baby.

One day I went to see the worker from the Elizabeth Fry Society and told her what they had done to me. She was disgusted and she told me it was not right at all. I had not realized the severity. I guess you could say I was desensitized. The next day the Director of Elizabeth Fry came, and I told her detail after detail. She asked if I wanted her to contact the media. I was hesitant because I did not know how long I was going to be in custody, and I was scared of the backlash I could get from bringing this kind of attention to the jail. But I said yes, you could go to the media with my story. She also contacted the ombudsman's office for me. I remembered the first time a guard came to my cell and told me that there were reporters calling the jail to speak with me, and they told me I "didn't have to". They were telling me they would prefer it if I did not, but I did not care what they wanted, they could do whatever they wanted to me, my son was in a safe place. Gionni's health was improving. Within two weeks he was on his way home. The public and the media were outraged, and the story was picking up a lot of traction. After my story became public a group of doulas, nurses, midwives and social workers in Halifax, Nova Scotia created an organization called Wellness Within: An Organization for Health and Justice, to advocate and provide services for criminalized women (Paynter and Snelgrove-Clarke, 2017). Another wonderful group of women even protested outside of the Ministry of Corrections with signs saying they needed to reunite me and my son. If any of them were reading this now, I hoped they know how thankful I was for that.

My lawyer was arranging for an emergency bail hearing, and while that was going on, my first visit with my son was coming up. However, the jail was on lockdown – meaning visits were cancelled. I later learned

the men in the jail had found out what had happened to me and Gionni, and people were not behaving too kindly towards the guards. I guess the media were waiting at the gate when my visit was cancelled, so it made the newspapers. They arranged for me to have a special visit outside of visiting hours a couple days later. A few guards remarked on the “special” privileges I was getting!

There I was, waiting to see my son, and he and his father came into the visiting room and it was behind glass, so I did not get to hold him, but I was so happy to see him. He was the cutest thing ever and for once I had happy tears. I was finally getting to see him.

My lawyer came to an agreement with the crown attorney that I could be released to a halfway house in Ottawa that offered counseling and programing, and Gionni could come live with me (Lindell, 2012). I was going to be with my son and I could not wait. I remembered getting to the half-way house and opening the door to the office and there was Gionni, asleep in his car seat, and I thought I actually asked if I could hold him which is kind of silly since I was his mother. I could not tell you how happy I was to finally have him in my arms. I just started crying. I agreed to speak with the media and let them see me and my son finally reunited. I still watched that interview a lot. I did that interview because there were so many people supporting us around the world, I figured they would like to see that all the protesting and all the media coverage really did have a lot to do with my release from jail and my reunion with my son and family!

After the interview, I was brought to my room where I had my own bed and Gionni’s crib. Generally, people were two to a room, but we had our own room. Generally, visiting hours were from 7-9 p.m. every night, in common rooms, and other residents were not allowed in each other’s rooms. But I was allowed to have Gionni’s father from morning until 10 p.m., in my room. This caused some issues with other residents who did not think it was fair, and a few people made false complaints to staff and to Children’s Aid.

I was seeing Children’s Aid on a weekly basis, voluntarily. I also had a nurse from the Healthy Baby Program coming to visit us on a weekly basis to make sure Gionni was meeting all his milestones and he was doing great: strong and healthy and growing bigger and bigger. The halfway house staff helped me a lot; when I needed little breaks, they would watch Gionni. I had pretty bad postpartum depression. At the time I never dealt with all that

I went through because my son needed me. I put all of that aside and I took care of my son the best way I knew how.

After a couple months at the halfway house, I sat down with our Children's Aid worker, and I asked her about closing our file. She said every time there were complaints from other residents, a new worker would have to come see us, and it would be in my best interest to keep the file open because she was already aware of everything that had happened. I decided to continue to let her see us. I was also recovering from a leg infection, most likely contracted in jail. I was on a few different medications. One night I got up to get a bottle for my son. I felt weak and passed out. A doctor said the medication was dropping my blood pressure to a dangerous low and it had that effect on me. Within two weeks of this incident, I was told my Children's Aid worker was there to see me with her supervisor. I got a bad feeling. They told me that I was done parenting at the halfway house, and they would be taking my son away from me. I could not believe what I was hearing. I started asking questions, and I told them that if Gionni was going anywhere, it would be to my mother since I had signed kinship over to her in the event that I had to go back to jail or if something else happened. They told me that he would be placed into another family until they had things sorted out. I was beside myself; they would not even give me a straight answer as to why they were taking him away from me. I thought I would had a great relationship with my worker. As if we had not been through enough, now this.

I put my feelings aside, I knew that I would fight for my son to the end. I informed them that without a court order, my son was not going anywhere. I left the meeting and contacted a family lawyer. I was not going down without a fight. One day went by and nothing, then the second day and nothing, and on day three I got a knock at my door and was told that someone was at the door to see me. I came out and I knew right away that they were there for Gionni. CAS was there with a police escort and a warrant to take my son. I started losing my mind. They gave me a few minutes to get my son dressed and then took him from me. I broke down; I could not believe this was happening to me. I just wanted to wake up from this nightmare.

I set up a meeting with my lawyer and we began court proceedings to ensure visitation with my son at least three times a week. Gionni was Aboriginal on his father's side, and they were supposed to place the child



with a member of the family, and if that could not happen, he was to be placed in an Aboriginal family. Papers had been signed stating he was to go directly to my mother if removed from my care. CAS ignored it all. One morning I was visiting my son at the CAS building, and the supervisor told me she could not understand why he had been taken away as I seemed to be a great mother.

Two weeks passed. Then the police came to the halfway house and I was told I was going back to jail. I was petrified at the thought of going back to OCDC as by then people had been fired, reprimanded, and suspended because of what they had done. I called my lawyer from the police station, and he arranged for me to go to the Quinte jail in Napanee instead. After a week there, he said I could go to another halfway house in Barrie for 6 months. I declined and told him I would stay in jail because that way I could come home earlier. I was willing to do anything to get back to my son as quickly as possible. In the meantime, my mom was going to court and was awarded temporary custody of Gianni, which took a lot of stress off my back.

The conditions at Quinte were like day and night compared to OCDC, and the staff were cordial and polite. Two and a half months later, I went to court and the judge sentenced me to 18 months of probation. I cried because I knew that part of my life was now over. Children's Aid agreed that I could visit my son as much as I wanted while they asked for a 3-month supervision order. Everything was going perfectly. I was with my son every single day and I was so happy. I would never forget the big smile he had on his face when he saw me, and I just held him in my arms for what felt like forever.

Come September, Children's Aid agreed that they would be giving Gianni back to his father and me, so we were slowly integrating him back into my home. I would have officially had him back full time October 15. About a week before Gianni's first birthday he got sick, and I brought him to his doctor who put him on some medication. He did not seem like his happy self. He had taken his first steps. His big day came, and I had thrown this huge birthday party for him, but he still was not feeling the greatest. We brought him to the hospital and was told he just had a cold and he would get better soon.

On October 12 I remember all Gianni wanted to do was cuddle so he laid on my chest for a good two hours and I just held him tight. Gianni was and always will be the love of my life, he meant the whole world to me. I was not feeling that great that evening either, so I gave him a big kiss, held him

tight, told him I loved him and then his father put him to bed. Around 5 a.m. I was woken up to my partner screaming that Gionni was not breathing. I ran so fast to his room and was on the phone with 911. He was completely unresponsive, so we began CPR while waiting for help. I had never felt so helpless in my whole entire life, but I was trying to keep it together because my son needed help. About three minutes passed and the police showed up and began performing CPR, and I remembered just screaming for help and calling my mom to let her know that Gionni was not breathing. About four minutes later the fire department showed up and started giving him oxygen. I could not believe this was happening. Six minutes later the ambulance was rushing in and taking him away. The police drove us to the hospital where we were put in a waiting room and I was in complete shock. I remembered my mom and partner crying and to me it just was not registering. I kept asking the nurses what was going on, but they really could not tell me much. Every minute that went by felt like hours.

Finally, the doctor walked in and told us there was nothing else they could do for him. I dropped to my knees and pleaded with him to keep trying – they could not just give up on my baby. By now everyone was hysterical, and they asked us if we wanted to come and hold him for the last time. I took my son in my arms and I was just lost. For me this part was a little blurry. From what I was told I just kept saying that it was late and I needed to take him home. It was not registering to me that he was really gone. Around 8 a.m. I was told that they had to take him now. I remembered kissing him goodbye and not wanting to leave him, but I had no choice.

I was standing outside of the hospital when they had the nerve to bring my son out in a body bag to be put in the back of a van. I started screaming and I tried to jump inside of the van but one of the police officers pulled me out. My heart broke a million times that day. How could this be that my son was now gone. After everything that he went through, he should have had his whole life ahead of him.

The first couple days were hard for me to remember. We had family with us at all times. To be completely honest it was probably a good thing because after Gionni died, I felt like I had no more reason to be alive and that I was going to be with my son. I no longer saw the point of being here and I thought everyone knew that, and that was why they never let us out of their sight. You know in life when you thought of having a baby, you pictured yourself buying baby clothes, strollers, and toys but you never

imagined picking out coffins, planning funerals or burying your child. No parent should ever have to lower their child into the ground. I was a complete wreck: Gionni was my heart, and you could not live without your heart. I fell into a horrible depression after my son died and I would find myself at his gravesite just crying and talking to him.

My life changed forever that day. Every day since has been a struggle. Every night that I go to sleep without him, every morning that I wake up without him is hell. It has now been ten years since my son passed away. Losing my son has been the hardest thing that I have ever dealt with. They say it gets easier in time but for me it does not. I think you just learn how to cope with it.

I would like to thank every one of you who has taken the time to read my story. You have no idea how much that means to me. I am going to continue getting my story out in hopes of raising awareness. To everyone who has been through tough times while incarcerated, who is going through it right now, just know that you are all in my thoughts and prayers. To the staff at OCDC, I really hope you have learned some compassion through all of this. But I will not be giving them any more attention because they do not deserve it. They no longer have control over my life, and they cannot hurt me anymore. I am going to continue to fight for the rights of people who are incarcerated, and I want you to know that you will see better days. You will not be there forever so stay strong.

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## ABOUT THE AUHOR

*Julie Bilotta* is a survivor of incarceration and mother to Gianni Garlow, a prisoner rights’ activist and a makeup artist.