

**Happy New Year!**

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**The new Black view**

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## **A different holiday party**

By **STACEY THOMPSON**

All over New York people are going to holiday parties—parties with lights, candles, carols, candy canes, eggnog, and good cheer. That includes me, which makes this year very different for me from December 2003. Last year at this time I was in an alternative to incarceration program for women called Project Greenhope. I was glad to be in a program and not in prison, but sad not to be able to go home for the holidays.

Like hundreds of women each year, I had made a mistake and landed in jail. I felt desperate and jammed in a corner with no options; I wanted to buy gifts for Christmas and I also wanted to get high so I used my money for gifts and my body for drugs. Of the 2,900 women incarcerated in New York State prisons, the

majority are women of color from low-income communities who have committed drug-related, non-violent crimes like mine.

This season was different: on Saturday, December 18th, I went to a holiday party that was unlike the parties that most New Yorkers probably attend. It was organized by the Coalition for Women Prisoners, a group dedicated to changing the way the criminal justice system treats women. I met people at this party who've experienced the same thing I've been through. The women brought their children, talked to each other, shared experiences and ideas, learned about ways to get involved in advocacy, ate good food, watched videos, and received gifts. The event was a celebration of a community of women determined to live with

dignity and hope "on the outside," to re-integrate into society, and to make a contribution.

This is easier said than done. By the time you're actually in the criminal justice system, you not only have experienced the humiliation of getting arrested, you often have been abused, lived on public assistance, and experienced poverty and racism. You are a living, walking "stigma," a blemish, an outcast, or completely invisible. The truth is that most of the women who commit crimes do so because they don't have enough options. Education, job training and other support programs needed for women—especially women of color in poor communities—just aren't there.

So when I went to this holiday party, I really felt strong. I came as the Women in Prison

Project's Community Outreach Educator, a job where I share my knowledge and advocacy skills with other women who have been incarcerated, and I was with my new family, a group of women who can share their experiences and work together to change their lives and make a better system.

Many other women aren't as fortunate as I was; the holidays will come and go and they will remain behind bars, separated from loved ones and celebrations of joy and sharing. It is a horrible feeling to be incarcerated during this season, alone and without your family. My holiday message is to remind everyone that incarcerated women want to be with their loved ones and enjoy the holiday spirit too. More alternatives and programs would keep many women, most

of us mothers, from going to prison in the first place. If women were in these programs instead of prison, they would be able to rebuild their lives and their families, and society too wouldn't have to pay such a big price.

While we shop and drink and eat and sing, let's remember those women who will not open gifts, sit around the fireplace, or eat a meal with their families this year. Let's make our holiday toasts and New Year's resolutions not just to quit smoking and go to the gym, but to work together as a society, to make a criminal justice system that really is just.

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