Movements Against Mass Incarceration Lab & Oral History Archival Project

Oral History Interview with

Linda Small

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Linda Small conducted by Michelle Daniel Jones on April 5, 2024. This interview is part of the Movements Against Mass Incarceration Lab & Oral History Archival Project.

Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Transcriptionist: Descript	Session #1
Interviewee: Linda Small	Location: New York, NY
Interviewer: Michelle Daniel Jones	Date: April 5, 2024

Small: Logan was going to share some questions, just so you know she didn't get to do that.

Q: And of course, as you know, in any interview, if there's any question you prefer not to answer, you do not have to answer. It's your comfort here. And basically we're here to lift up those community organizing skills of women. Okay. This is Michelle Daniel Jones, I'm with the Women Transcending Oral History Project and Movements Against Mass Incarceration Oral History Project. And I am with Linda Small, and we are interviewing her regarding her oral history regarding women organizing inside and out. I will spend a few minutes capturing some background information. So where did you grow up?

Small: I'm a Maine native. I grew up in Maine, and I've lived there all my life. I've been fortunate enough to travel, but it was a nice place to grow up in. We were in a nice neighborhood. We had some wooded areas down the street. A lot of kids on the road in our area. So it was a nice spot to grow up in.

Q: Cool. So what was going on historically in the time when you were growing up? What era was it?

Small: That was in the 1960s. There was some turmoil, but there was also a sense of community as well, at least within our little network. In the larger sense in South Portland, an offshoot of the largest city in Maine, which is Portland. So it was a bedroom community. A

lot of young children, it was part of the baby boom era. I'm a first generation student as well, so not a lot of modeling for me for what I wanted to do in my life, in terms of education and career.

Q: What's one beautiful memory that you have growing up?

Small: I would say one of my favorite activities was my mother would give me a pot, and I would walk down the street into our little wooded area and I would pick blueberries for her. Wild blueberries [*laughs*] Maine blueberries. And that's probably one of my favorite memories, yes.

Q: You talked a little bit about what you liked about growing up in your local community. What were some of the challenges?

Small: I would say that, I didn't realize it then, but we were not a diverse—we were mostly white, lower middle class. We are definitely on the low end of the socioeconomic scale, and that created some challenges for us, it was a hard time. We had good community, but it was also presented challenges in terms of food security and those types of things. And that can be really hard, especially growing up in an area—it was the largest school in the state at the time. When I was in high school, there were over five hundred in my high school graduating class. Huge school, which has its good points and its bad points. You can get lost in a school like that. And if you are not one of the wealthier families—which there were plenty of—that also presented its own challenges.

Q: Wow. So what do you feel is important for us to know about your early life to understand you as an organizer and the work that you do today? What's the connective tissue?

Small: Great question. I would say, growing up poor. And I was a middle child, and I think that gave me a great sense of independence and ingenuity, and thinking about things like, at an early age, breaking that cycle of poverty and no education and just, Could there be a better life and what would that look like and how do you get there? Not having a lot of mentorship or role models. And even when I got into high school, and I talked to my guidance counselor about what I wanted to do, she said, "No, that's not possible." And yes, so a lot of discouragement, not a lot of encouragement while I was growing up. That was extremely challenging for me to keep that mindset.

Q: So what did you want to do?

Small: At that age and early on, I wanted to be an archaeologist. And I got told that just wasn't the place for a woman, number one. And that also there were no job opportunities. And we didn't have money for school. No one talked to me about college or funding or opportunities. So it was just a really tough time.

Q: So was there anyone in your childhood who you saw as a source of inspiration? They could be someone in your local community or in the world.

Small: Yes. I don't know if I have a particular name, but I will say, watching strong women on television, whether I knew who they were or not. I watched a lot of PBS, and I thought, Hallelujah, people are doing things. They're out there. They're changing the world. And how could I be even a tiny part of that. And there was no clear path, and there was no one in my immediate circle that had that clear path. So it was a lot of stumbling and creating and trying something new and then doing it all over again.

Q: Wow. I think that's really great. I was very enamored of Wonder Woman as a child, and then Debbie Allen as a teenager. I thought that woman on Fame has got her life together [*laughter*] . And I found so much inspiration from her. So we learned that you wanted to be an archaeologist when you grew up. And we talked about the arc of growing up in the community and learning what you could and stumbling. So where did you land with your values? Coming out of the childhood that you had and experiences that you had, what are your values today?

Small: That's also an excellent question.

Q: Or what do you value?

Small: Yes. I value integrity. I didn't see a lot of that growing up. I also grew up in a violent household. I value boundaries and personal safety and what that looks like for myself and anybody else who I come in contact with to understand that's different for everyone. I also value equity and equal opportunities for everyone.

Q: Can you give me the arc of your educational journey? Maine, a very close-knit Maine community, secondary, high school, college, what was that arc of your educational journey?

Small: We had a lot of neighborhood schools while I was growing up, so most of the time I walked to school, until I got to high school and we took a bus. And that was fine. And then, when I wanted to pursue more and got told no and had no place to turn, I had no idea. I was eighteen and came from a poor family, very limited opportunities, and no one seemed to take an interest in whether I moved forward with education or not. So I didn't. I went right into the workforce. And it wasn't until years later that I was incarcerated, that education began to

appeal to me. That I could see the real value of it changing people's lives. And that's when I really found myself as an advocate and an organizer.

Q: That's wonderful. And I heard the word advocate and organizer. In a few other words, advocate, organizer, do you have a third and fourth word that would describe you today?

Small: I would say also mentor and role model.

Q: So, the next section we're going to talk a little bit about is life during incarceration. And so we're going to go up in a helicopter, we're going to come down to the particular, and then we're going to go back up. Okay.

Small: Okay.

Q: So what do you think is important for people to know about your experience behind the wall in incarceration? So like high helicopter, key things that you think people need to know.

Small: I would say, no one cares about women while you're incarcerated, that's number one. We are an invisible population inside an invisible population. Where we have no voice, we wear men's clothes, men's shoes, and your basic needs are not met. Even personal care items for women are sometimes a challenge to have. There is no gender responsive attitudes. Most of the women come in—at least in Maine—over ninety-five percent come in as trauma victims themselves, trauma survivors. There is no attempt to lessen that burden or ease that burden. Matter of fact, it re-traumatizes people, particularly women, and almost all of us come out worse than when we went in.

Q: Thank you for that. So we've gotten to the helicopter, and we're going down to the particular. What was incarceration—your conditions of confinement, your livability behind the wall—like for you?

Small: I never even knew anybody who'd been arrested before. So for me, it was like walking into a whole other world. It was a different planet. And when I first arrived, I couldn't even understand the conversation sometimes. It was really totally foreign to me. The culture was completely different. I spent my first few months absolutely in awe and sometimes in shock, when I would get to know a woman and then her mother would come in, or her sister, and I think that just was so confounding to me is, What is happening here? This is not right. And I spent a lot of time listening, and learning, and trying to understand what was going on individually. And then I learned about systems and what systems were doing, and the systemic issues that brought women in the first place. It was an educational experience for me.

But it was also devastating in terms of sitting in a cell—a concrete bunker, if you will—with open barred doors that slam. With a metal slab bolted to the wall as my bed and a stainless steel toilet bowl right next to that. And imagine, if you will, using the toilet and anybody can walk by at any time. And I'm directly looking at the guard tower from my room, that's all glass windows, which are all white males. I'll say the other thing in micro that was really horrifying. I spent two years—let's see, one year in county and then I went to the women's prison. And you have to go through a process before you're allowed to have a contact visit. And so when I transferred to an area for my first contact visit after two years, I was thrilled. And I had that lovely visit and then afterwards, I was crushed because I had to have a strip search. And I didn't know that at the time. Still wet behind the ears, didn't really know the process. For a woman, that is incredibly degrading. And there is no way to do a humane strip

search. And so while you're in visits, you can't have any immediate contact. You can hug when you first come in. You have electronic eyes on you and human eyes on you. So why, in addition to that, do you need to be stripped of your dignity and your clothing?

Q: Thank you for that. Yes, you brought up some memories for myself as well. Literally, your description took me right into that room. Because it wasn't even a true closet, it was like the hallway between the door that leads out and the door that leads into the visiting room. So this place in between, basically, I had stripped in a hall. So what issues became the most important or pressing to you while you were incarcerated?

Small: There were a few. I was a vegetarian when I went in. Food was an issue. Particularly for me, but also when I look at the quality of the food. Particularly for women who had diabetes or they were pregnant or whatever the case may be, the span of all different health issues and of course most of us gained health issues on the inside because of that. So poor nutrition, that was huge for me. Education became on my radar. And providing basic needs for women. When I looked at the commissary list, it was mostly geared towards men. And there were weight lifting gloves and all those types of things, but you couldn't buy a tampon, so that was a huge issue. And for my Black and brown sisters to not have hair care and the things that they needed was infuriating.

Q: Did you have any previous expectations or notions of what prison and jail would be like that countered the actual experience of living in it?

Small: As I said, I hadn't known anybody who was arrested, and when I went through the process, not even my attorney prepared me. Not that he would understand, particularly from a woman's perspective, because I think what the system projects is quite different from its reality, and that's intentional. And I can share one experience after I'd been in for about two

years. I'd met with another woman, similar situation, had nobody in her family who'd ever been arrested, found herself incarcerated.

And we were talking about this very same issue, about how to prepare. And she said she got online to the Department of Corrections website. And she said they had cake decorating on there—classes—hair care classes and all these types of things, right? Her children were young and she sat around and told her kids, "This is what mommy's going to be able to do." So, not to worry. Okay. So then you come into the reality, the grim reality of not only do you not have a hair care class, you can't buy a comb. So it's really challenging. And I think if someone tried to describe it to me emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, I can't imagine preparing. How would you do that?

Q: Yes. So, we're gonna move further into the facility. What made you decide that you would become a part of implementing change? What made you decide that the change needed to occur and that you needed to be a part of it?

Small: Good question. I took the job as a jailhouse attorney, and that got me starting to get a better feel for advocacy work. A better communication style in terms of speaking with staff, including senior administration staff. I worked for a captain, and I did that for eight years. And on the other side of that was hearing women's stories and understanding a little bit of their history. And also, many of them shared their discovery with me and asked—we tried to work through some of that and helping them write letters to the court. And so, it gave me a much better idea of the systemic issues of what was happening to women in general.

And that really lit a fire under me and it became intolerable. Conditions inside became intolerable, and the conditions that brought women to prison became intolerable. And I felt like women were sleepwalking. Most of the women were on medications, which also

infuriated me. And essentially what the system was doing was creating a bunch of docile bodies to go lock in, walk down and go get your food, go back and lock in, or maybe play cards, right? No one was doing any intellectual activity. No one was having deep conversations about what was happening to them, their families, or the world. And I just thought, This is not right. Somebody needs to wake up these women and wake up the system. And I felt like, I can't wait for somebody else to do it. They would already have been doing it before I got here.

Q: And what did you do?

Small: I was classified as a longtimer, and in my facility that was a ten years or more sentence. And I started spreading the word quietly. I said, "We're going to create a longtimer support network. And any woman who has more than a ten year bid, we're going to get together once a week and we're going to talk about what we need, what we want, and eventually what we're going to demand and how we're going to demand it." We would start meeting and staff would come. And that limited our conversation, but what I was able to do—we had a whiteboard there, the women would come and I would just say, "Start telling me your main concerns." And I'd just write a bullet point list and then I had a friend who would take these notes. Say, "Okay, now we have this list of what we want. Let's prioritize them." And so we took our top three priorities, and then I started writing proposals to staff. Said, "We need to address visits and this is what's wrong with visits. We need to buy these items on commissary, and this is why we need them."

And so, just started attacking those top three issues. And I think after we had a couple of small wins, that got people saying, "Oh we can make change for ourselves." And more women started to come. And then that's when I said, "Okay, we really got to get organized.

Let's have a vote, right? Throw your name, and if you want to be president of the longtimers group, you want to be VP, you want to be the treasurer or the secretary. Let's have elections. Let's do this right." And we did. And I ran for secretary and got voted as the president [*laughs*] . And so it was all hands on deck after that.

Q: What inspired you, how did you know you wanted to create a fully democratic structure for the Long Termers Group [Long Timer Support Group] ? Like, where did that come from?

Small: Yes, that's a really good question. I think that came from feeling like I didn't have a voice. And I didn't want to silence anybody. And I didn't want them to feel like I felt, like I didn't have the right to speak or I didn't have value and everybody who showed up had value. Everybody who showed up had a vote, had a say, and was as deep into this work as they wanted to be. And some women came along for the ride, and some women just took the bull by the horns. And it was okay on either end of the spectrum. However you showed up, we want you.

Q: Do you experience that moment as a political awakening or political advocacy? Do you consider the creation of the Long Termers Group a political act? Can you go into that?

Small: Yes, great question. At the time, I did not. At the time, we were taking baby steps about getting our needs filled on the inside. And it wasn't until we got momentum there, and I was able to sit down with the commissioner with a list of our needs, and hand off our proposals and hand over letters of support from community members. So essentially saying, "We mean business and we have support." And until that moment, it felt like we were completely isolated. We were just trying to survive. And now, you know what? We're trying to build a power base here and we're going to shift and change things. And I think it was that moment. When the commissioner actually deemed—I was thinking—deemed I was worthy

of having a conversation. Because we were doing so much work on the inside. So, yes, I think that's when it was—

Q: So, how did you bring in the community members?

Small: I asked at one meeting, I said, "We're doing some really good work, but we need more support. And we need to make sure that our concerns are relayed to the community. They need to know what's happening in here." We wrote some form letters and I said, "Here you go. You can choose who you want to send it to. Your clergy, a family member, your former employer, whoever you think in your community, they need to know this information." And so, we put a letter together, formulated three or four different ways depending on what type of person you were going to send it to, announcing who we are, what our purpose is, and then our ask. And our ask was simply to please write back and let us know, Will you support us if we write and ask you to write a letter to help us with classification or help us get clemency or whatever the case may be, will you support?

Q: Did you understand the need to commit to draw in community members, also as a way to protect a particular vulnerability of being incarcerated women? Like, where did you meet? Were your meetings sanctioned? Were they allowed? There's constraints with gathering in prison. That moment when you decide that you need community support, outsiders, what's the trigger? Is it just that you just wanted to build a larger capacity or was there a moment where you were worried about the sustainability of the group?

Small: It was both. I was concerned about retaliation. And so, we needed to go public. That was one of the main reasons. Eventually, I developed a very good rapport with senior staff. And so probably after about six months, they let us have—I negotiated us to have a weekly meeting for the longtimers with no oversight. I said, "We're in a room, we have cameras,

there's windows everywhere, and staff walks by constantly." I said, "We're going to have a one hour meeting once a week," and I said, "These women will talk about what's really bothering them." I said, "It can become a safety issue on the inside. If you allow us to do our own conflict resolution. If you allow us to talk about what's truly bothering us in a brave, safe space, there'll be less conflict and issues in the unit for you to deal with."

Q: Who did you make that argument to?

Small: I made that argument to the warden at the time.

Q: Okay.

Small: Yes.

Q: And so the warden responded with giving you guys access to have your personal meetings.

Small: Yes.

Q: So then, how did the meeting with the commissioner occur, where now you secured some extra support from the community? How does it get leveled up to the commissioner?

Small: I think the other half of protection against retaliation was trying to shift the balance of power. And for someone in that position to see us as a force, to see us with connections, and to build more of a sense of power behind us that I was not coming to the table by myself. I had a long list of people behind me and not just the women in your care and custody, but I mean individuals that I can write. Do you really want the spiritual community hear that you won't listen to us? Do you really want our employers to hear this and maybe our future

employers? Do you want our families to write you letters? Because they will. If you don't listen to us, they will write because we're going to tell them to write and we're going to tell them what to say. So I think that was part of the issue. I also think I was very mindful and respectful and never broke any rules, right?

And I walked that line. I was firm but respectful. And, that meant something in there. And, they knew I was a role model for the women. They knew I was an organizer. I'd had that, in our organization, inside for us, the person who was the disciplinary counsel substitute, which is what I was, was a position of respect. I interacted with staff constantly, right? Every time a woman got in trouble, I was working directly with staff. And I think that there was some legitimacy there, and a little bit of more power behind me than just me saying it.

Q: Were there particular issues that Black women faced that weren't being addressed that also factored into your organizing of the Long Termers Group?

Small: Yes, absolutely. We had Black and brown women coming to our meetings. They had their own issues. It started out particularly with personal care, with the things that they needed and why they needed them. And so, we certainly put that in the forefront and got some of their needs taken care of. And I think it helped us build solidarity as well across racial lines, which I thought was really important.

And there's a woman that I talk to now on the inside quite a bit. And she'd say to me, "Linda, sometimes I'll go a couple of years and I'm the only black woman in here." And recognizing that support is needed because almost all the other Black and brown women are either in seg or in some sort of isolated area, which was also a major concern, right? Maine has one of the worst racial disparities for incarceration in the country. We're number six. We're a mostly

white—I think we're a ninety-eight percent white state. There's something really wrong with that.

Q: Yes, that's definitely fair. And it's got me thinking. So we hear a little bit already about the impact. You're able to change the conditions of confinement and the quality of life for several of the women in the facility. How did you see, or did you see that impact spread to other areas in the facility? To folks who weren't a part of the long termers group, did you see expansion of the impact from creating the long termers group?

Small: Yes, there was definite impact. We organized based on the women who had ten plus years. And that became—because we needed a foundation, and we needed women we knew were going to be around for a minute so that we had time to build community and structures for advocating and mentorship. So that was the reason behind that, and longtimers have different needs than a short-timer does.

However, almost everything that we negotiated for benefited everyone because if it was on commissary, you could buy it. Didn't matter whether you were there for two years or ten years or fifty years. When we negotiated better conditions for the women, when we negotiated better food, a better way to move from one unit to the other to get more privileges. That affected all women. But I thought it was important for us to have a collective that was going to be around for a minute so that people understood it wasn't just a fleeting thing. Particularly staff, right? Because they were going to have to deal with us for a while. Yes.

Q: What was the racial makeup of that first long termers support group?

Small: I would say probably sixty percent white, forty percent Black and brown.

Q: You're pushing against the system, you're organizing, you're having impact, you're having change. How did the system respond? I know that you were able to get a meeting with the warden and ultimately with the commissioner. But what were the costs? Were there any costs involved with this community organizing behind the wall? What was the retaliation and what did it look like?

Small: Yes. Yes. It's very subtle. And that's one of the issues, and one of the things that makes it so challenging to counteract. No one was overtly segregated or written up for a specific act that had to do with advocacy work, so the system's very sneaky in that manner, right? But they certainly can take away some of your privileges. They can lock you down more often than not. They can cancel events, like visits, or the women—women in particular because we're relational and that's what drives us in the system in the first place, right? Relationships of loss of those that go awry. And so, when we arrive, we create families on the inside. And so, in doing that, we celebrate each other's children's birthdays. We celebrate Christmas, right? We create our own traditions. And those can be taken away. And they were.

Q: What skills and strategies were deployed in order to work around the cost that came with organizing.

Small: We had meetings in bathrooms. We had meetings in the chow hall. We passed notes. All that underground stuff was born out of necessity. But you make it happen anyway because it is that important.

Q: That's great. Obviously, community organizing isn't always win, win, win, win, win.

Small: Right [*laughs*] .

Q: Can you share a moment of a setback and then how you might have responded to that and challenged to that? Can you talk about a moment of, Oh crap, we lost that one.

Small: Yes, big moment of crap. All the longtimer women, whether you're on—there's a risk assessment that determines your custody level. And even though you rank in the low risk, if you have a long sentence, they bump you up to maximum security. The result of that is being chained and shackled whenever you have a doctor's appointment or any of those types of things. That was a really big bone of contention with me. I waived my right to going out for mammograms and all types of other things because I went out chained and shackled in the community once with two guards with guns side by side. I'm thinking, Okay, so I can only take six inch steps forward at a time. Where do you think I'm gonna go? I'm a hundred pound woman and you got three hundred pound guys watching me. What is the risk? You know I'm not a risk. After doing that, unless I was in dire straits, I refused medical appointments. And I was not the only woman who was doing that, foregoing that incredible humiliating experience.

Q: Can you start that sentence again?

Small: Yes. From the humiliating experience thing. Yes. Going out chained and shackled into the community was incredibly humiliating. I'll share one experience with that, where I had an appointment with a gynecologist. I was taken to that appointment by men. And at that time, they did not leave the room. I remained chained and shackled, I was in a room, maybe six-by-eight with the exam chair, my physician, and two staff members. And the nurse came in and it was so cramped that one of the guards had to shuffle out of the way to open the door, get her in, and close the door. This is how close, and I'm like, Okay, I'm never doing this again, and no other woman who I know is ever going to do this again.

One of the setbacks was writing that proposal to say, if a woman—based on your own risk assessment, we're not asking for exceptions, I'm saying in your own internal risk assessment—if I come out as minimum risk, which I did, you will no longer override me. You will no longer override me, and if I need to go out to a legal appointment or a doctor's appointment, or whatever the case may be, you can handcuff me, but I'm not going to be chained and shackled. And so, we did as much research as we possibly could, wrote to a couple of community members to get information back, since obviously no access to internet.

So, got all the information we could, wrote that proposal, got a note from the deputy warden, said, "This is an excellent proposal, we'd be down to talk to you about it." I thought, Oh, this is headway. Okay. And so he came down, told me a flat out no, that there was no room to negotiate this, and that was how things were going to be. And I said, "You know, I quoted Department of Corrections policy. There is no legislation that says we have to be chained and shackled. There is no policy that says we have to be chained and shackled." I said, "This is a practice. And so since it's a practice and not policy, that means there's wiggle room in there. You have no legal right to do what you're doing. And this will not be our first proposal based on this." That was a bit of an ugly conversation. But it was a flat out no. And it was a flat out no for the rest of my years there. I spent thirteen years incarcerated. And I'm absolutely thrilled to say that there are some long-time women now who now, based on that particular custody structure, are known as trustees. And they can go out without being chained and shackled to their doctor's appointment.

So that's the other thing that I want to make clear, things in systems in general, but particularly in carceral systems, they move glacially. And so the other issue, the reason why we had longtimers, or I thought that was important is because I knew the arc of change was decades long. And most of the things that we pushed and negotiated for was for the women

coming in after us, right? We were not going to directly benefit. Sometimes we did, but a lot of times we don't. And there's a tremendous amount of relief and gratitude to know that the woman coming behind you isn't going to suffer quite as much as you did.

Q: That's perfect. Oh, that's such a perfect example. Can you give me a timeline or how many years can you estimate from the proposal to the trustee creation? And that arc of getting that particular privilege for those type of women.

Small: We started those discussions, I'm going to say in about, 2014. And it's 2024, so nearly a decade for that to happen. It was even longer, twenty-one years for women's education. So yes, it takes a long time.

Q: Wow. So we talked earlier about that first moment where you all got together and you had three priorities and you worked on that one or two and you got some wins, right? What kinds of collaborations and partnerships were you a part of while you were incarcerated? We understand that you reached out to community to strengthen your argument about the changes you wanted to make before the warden. But, were there other collaborations and partnerships, other campaigns that you thought was super important to work together to accomplish a goal as a team, as a long termers group?

Small: Yes. I think education came to the forefront. I think trying to work more with staff on a daily basis became important. To break down that barrier of, we're just a number. So if you know me, you know my name, you know a little bit about me. It tends to humanize me. And perhaps just create a softening of how women were treated. To bring back a little bit of dignity and respect became very important through the process. Because it's great to have wins, they come every once in a while, but the daily grind of being incarcerated needs to soften. And so we can do that by holding respect for one another, but if you're oppressed

twenty-four seven, year after year, that weight is crushing. And I would bring in staff members and just say, "This is what we're doing." And then sometimes you'd get support from the oddest places. And that's okay. Or even not objection was okay. Just being neutral sometimes was all that you could hope for. And I find those interactions extremely helpful and encouraging other women to do that. So when you're going down to visits or you're waiting in line to visits and there's a staff member there, talk to them about your kids. Talk to them about what's right, what's going on, and just let them know you're a person.

Q: That's great. You're lifting up some strategies. You're lifting up some goals of community organizing to soften the daily grind of incarceration. And bringing the staff in to be a part of the conversations is about navigating the power differences, so I appreciate that for sure. Do you have any suggestions or advice of wisdom to impart to other women who are incarcerated, who are trying to build something on the inside to build capacity for immediate everyday life change? What are some things that you would lift up, here's some advice to doing something similarly?

Small: I would say, start where you're at and start with something small that is achievable. And I would say, don't worry about—start small. And that's also with your organizing. So if you want to organize something around a lunch table, you can do that. You can do that at a picnic table in your outside rec area. You can do that in the bathroom with the women on your walk. That's what we call them in Maine, walk. So I would say gather three or four sisters and just say, "Hey, we're going to change this because it's intolerable. It's small. No one's really going to—it's not a security issue. It's not a big ask. It's a small ask." And figure out why you need that changed. And then also a very important piece is, what does that mean for staff? Is it easier on them if you change that? You want to be mindful if it's going to cause

staff more trouble, how are you going to overcome that barrier? So just be mindful about the outcome, not just for yourself, but the outcome on staff in the system.

Q: Perfect. Perfect. So I have, we're going to move into dignity and racial solidarity networks, and then we'll end with post incarceration organizing, and that will cover the arc of our last half hour. But I want to take a break to potty, and if you want more coffee, or drink some water.

Small: Yes, thank you. How was that—

[INTERRUPTION]

—brutal time.

Q: So, talk to me about what education was like inside, in the facility you were at in Maine, and then what your group did to meet that challenge.

Small: So we had no formal education, aside from women obtaining their GED. And informally, we tutored one another and got women through to that phase of their education. The only other thing that was offered were some state programs, and a lot of that was based on classes of crime and things that you need that were mandatory by the court.

Q: So substance use programming, things like that.

Small: Yes, things like that. And for instance, if you had a class of crime as sex offender, they had a program that you had to go through in order to move through the system into a lower custody level. And they only had a program for men and not one for the women. So women with that class of crime were essentially stuck in the maximum security facility for women in

Maine, in Wyndham. And we finally pushed that through, but what it was is they just handed over the men's program, which wasn't a good fit. Again, that was just an indication that women didn't matter.

And when we were thinking about postsecondary education, we began talking about that, our longtimers group, and asking for college classes. And there were a few classes that would come in from local organizations, but they weren't accredited classes. So that was great because it kept us occupied and gave us some intellectual activities to do and think about. And then we started advocating for post secondary education. And we were told, "There's no such—"

Q: How did you do that?

Small: Okay, at the time, there was a director for education that had an office in the same facility that I was in. He eventually went to the central office for the Department of Corrections. But while he was there, he and I had some conversations. And I was told repeatedly, there's no such thing as postsecondary education. That's not going to happen. We don't have the capacity. And I'm like, Just because there isn't one now, doesn't mean there can't be. And unfortunately, incarceration is very isolating. So I had no idea there was college education elsewhere going on. How would I—any woman know that, for instance? If she's doing that battle and it's already won and there's a model out there, she's not going to know what that is. And we were facing the same issue. And we kept pushing and kept going, told no, there wasn't any such program, nor could there be. And at the point of time when I was thinking about, Why don't I just ask some community members to reach out to some local colleges and see if we can get some help that way.

One of my fellow longtimers, I was out in the day room, I remember this, it was a pivotal moment for me. She handed me the Bangor Daily News, and she said, "Turn to page," whatever it was. I opened it up, and there was men at the Maine State Prison getting their college degrees, with their picture in their cap and gown. And my hair was on fire. It is one thing to tell me no, it is another to outright lie about what is happening. And we went back with a vengeance and, "This is intolerable. Men have been getting educated and you're saying no to the women. How can you possibly justify that?"

And so the tactic there was, Listen, I'm going to send out a thousand letters and I'm going to let everybody know. Including the local newspapers, and my attorney, and the ACLU, and everybody else who I can think of, that you are refusing to educate women. While there's already a model in place. We're not asking you to invent anything, we're asking you to widen it. I finished my time at the women's prison and transferred to the pre-release, still fighting this battle. Shortly after I got to the pre-release, I took my very first college class. At the time, it was only offered to women at the pre-release minimum custody and not the maximum, medium custody facility for women, even though the men in maximum prison had college.

It took a while to open that up. That just opened up maybe eighteen months ago, so essentially what happened here is after I was released and started doing more research, I wrote a blog for Jobs for the Future about gender inequities in prison education programs. And so based on DOC's own records, the men started a college education program in 1996. The first woman took her college course in 2017. It's a twenty-one year difference. I remember being so incredibly angry. There were men who had entered the system at the same time I did, who were completing their master's degree. I was taking my first college class, and I was angry. I got my associate's degree and my bachelor's degree. And then I applied for grad school. I'm the first woman in Maine from the PEP program to apply to grad school.

And I'll be getting my master's degree next month. And I did all that in four years because I had some catching up to do. And so now we're creating pathways for other women to continue.

Q: Wow. You really gave a great synopsis of how gender was working and how issues facing women really distinguishes your work. I really appreciate that. Can you talk a little bit about how your work inside navigated and addressed issues of racism, colonialism, transphobia, homophobia, the right of dignity.

Small: Yes. In our state, the women's facility absorbs everyone. And that can be a transgendered male, a transgendered female, it doesn't matter. So we're all in one community. It is a fairly small prison, seventy-eight beds. Right now there's eighty-six people there. And so it's usually crowded. It's small and it's crowded. So, for us, we had to question our own assumptions. Because your sister sitting next to you is literally sitting next to you and sometimes is going to be there for decades. So we have to get along. We are forced into crossing racial boundaries and sexual orientation boundaries.

And all of those other things because we are compressed in a small space. And frankly all we have is each other on a day-to-day basis. And I know that created such a richer and broader experience for me. As I mentioned in my childhood, I grew up in a white neighborhood. Yes, I was poor. But the biggest difference was in socioeconomic status. And then I went to prison and all walks of life. And I was into embracing everybody who had a ten year sentence up is welcome to come. We talked about those issues openly, in some of our longtimer meetings. And some of that is very challenging for women, especially with trauma backgrounds because you just don't know what they have lived through. And that can be very challenging. So not saying it was all a bed of roses. It was a lot of friction. Sometimes physical fights. And

we had our ugly moments, but we all came through. And, there are many women who were in that longtimers group who are still incarcerated today who I communicate with.

Q: So thank you for that. Cause you're lifting up some of the tensions around collaborating with other women coming from different backgrounds and lifestyles and racial and ethnic identities. How did you address the tensions? Like you said, there was some fights, and there was some disagreements, naturally. You put five women in a room, there was gonna be some disagreements, but how did you navigate it? You were a leader obviously in the group, so how did bring people—how did you build consensus? How did you navigate it?

Small: Sometimes that was a—it helps to have those conversations. One-on-one, and sometimes that's in a bathroom stall. Where it's the only place that you can have any privacy. It's really hard to do that work in groups, but it's also very helpful to have a witness. So, trying to find that balance. Usually if there was conflict, women would meet, and it wouldn't necessarily be me. If someone had a better relationship, you meet one on one with the women in question, that are having challenges, and say, "Will you come to the table? Will you come to the picnic table and just have a conversation?" That's all we're looking for, right? To diffuse the friction.

And it's the same thing on the outside today, that I might not agree with everyone, but it doesn't matter. Our end goal is generally the same, and we all have different pathways of how we're gonna get there, but our power is our ability to find common ground, right? And use that collective energy to force change. And it was the same way inside as outside. And you might not like me, but I don't care. What do we have in common? That's what I care about. And trying to bring that to the forefront, to show women that, You know what? You can put your angst aside for yourself and the greater good and ultimately your family.

Q: Thank you for that. And that exactly lifts up what we were trying to get at there. That's a skill. The constraint of the carceral system requires folks to develop those kind of powerful navigating skills to find common ground. Everybody doesn't know how to do that. There's something about the pressure cooker of the carceral experience that helps you develop skills that maybe you would not have developed and utilize in the same way.

So let's talk a little bit about networks and peers. You're inside, you've got this long termer group organizing. Were there people or a person who challenged you, pushed you, opened your eyes to new ways of thinking, helped you learn new skills? Is there a peer there that you'd like to lift up or a group of peers that you'd like to lift up?

Small: Yes, I'm going to call out one, Jessica. She and I, for a while there, probably the first two years, was the foundation of the longtimer Support Group. And she pushed me and I pushed her. I would write a proposal, she would edit it, and vice versa. And we would sit together and get our scrap paper and draw charts and graphs and figure out where we needed to plug the holes in this particular proposal or that ask. How we were going to do that. We did have access to one computer in the day room, so we'd quietly type up these proposals, and then we'd circulate it, and women could handwrite notes, Please look at this, or, Change that, or whatever the case may be. And we sort of use our underground [communication] to send that information around, and finalize our proposal, so we knew that every woman's voice was heard in that proposal. She sat next to me in that first commissioner's meeting. And we rehearsed together what I was going to say. And she had all the backup paperwork. And so as I was speaking, she would just quietly hand or point something out to me in our notes that I had to remember to say. She was awesome. Yes.

Q: Were there other programs that maybe you heard through the grapevine that other that women were doing around the country or in another state that inspired you while you were inside?

Small: Yes. I have one very memorable experience. A meeting was called because the National Council for Currently and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls were coming in. No idea what that was. None. I went to that meeting. So did several.

Q: [*Coughs*] choking on my own saliva.

Small: Yes, I went to that meeting, so did several other women and staff members as well. And that's where I met Andrea James. And I was blown away. I had no idea what was going on out there in the world. As I said, we were incredibly isolated. And even in the community partnerships that we were forming, we even had some legislators come in every once in a while.

Shout out to Rachel Talbot Ross for that, to rock the vote because we can vote as incarcerated people in the state of Maine, not a lot of people know that, but that is an awesome privilege for us that we kept. Anyway, Andrea, just I stood up in the middle of that meeting and I just said, literally, I said, "I can't wait any longer." I said, "I've been doing this work for so long. And I felt so isolated, like we were alone pushing against the tide." And I said, "This is just an overwhelming relief and sisterhood. Sign me up." So after this meeting, I went around and I signed up every woman I possibly could. I sent her a spreadsheet with all the names and our sentences and when we were getting out and [*laughs*] just sent her the whole thing. And, I'm so proud to say I still have that connection, her and I today. We're doing a forum on the state of women's incarceration here in Maine. Andrea's gonna be a part of that, so are her people, so it's been a great relationship inside and out.

Q: Perfect. Let's think about the person or persons that you would describe as a mentor to you. If that's Andrea, that's great, but if it isn't, I'd like for you to give us a little background of when and where did you meet this person, or persons, and how did you connect to them?

Small: I would say two women in particular. I was at the pre-release, and I was in my second semester of school. And there was a course coming up at Colby College. And I signed up and you had to interview to get into this class. I went into my little space and these two gorgeous women came walking through the door with this incredible energy, and I'm like, Wow, I want to be them.

One was Catherine Besteman and Erica King. And they blew me away. And they were drawing out of me, What do you want to get out of this class? What's important to you? To have somebody actually, after all that time, care about what I think and feel, and desired to do and become, was just phenomenal. And I've worked on, with Catherine now, part of the Colby College Justice Think Tank where we wrote policy proposals and we interviewed legislators and district attorneys and all kinds of stakeholders to write these policy papers that are published now. And, she and I worked on the Freedom and Captivity Project which was writing curriculum that now we've trained inside facilitators. Currently incarcerated men and women teach these classes to outside community members. And with Erica, I'm part of the Opportunity Scholars. I'm a lead there, which is under the Center for Effective Public Policy, and that is drawing more people—men and women—into education and beyond, and what can we do with our education to effect change.

Q: Perfect. What I would ask for you to do is, say their names again, and the roles. Who they were.

Small: Catherine Besteman was, and still is, a professor at Colby College. Yes. And Erica King, is a senior director at Center for Effective Public Policy.

Q: We are so good on our time. Yes, you did give me how you connected to them. They came in and taught a class. [*Unclear*] I didn't know if you had a question. I'm sorry. So we're in our last section. And we're going to talk a little bit about post incarceration organizing and some questions about legacy. How did you bring your experiences of organizing with the long termers group inside to your life outside? And here if you want you can talk about Reentry Sisters and the development of that.

Small: Yes. Thank you. Thank you. Yes, I would say that, that education moment of seeing that newspaper was pivotal to me because I finally understood that the system wasn't broken, that it's working exactly how it is supposed to. It is supposed to dehumanize and devalue and discriminate. And I know a lot of women who—and I was thinking that same path too. Once I get out of this system, I'm never looking back. And that changed me fundamentally. That, no, I'm not doing that. I'm carrying this to the outside world. And so in order for me to do that, it was one week before my release.

And I just, I was reflecting on the hundreds of women that I met, and sadly, the great many who I will never see again, and the ones who had come back three, four, five times, like something is really wrong here. So I thought, I'm going to create this network of support, and it's called Reentry Sisters. And right when I got out, I set up a Facebook page, a place for us to connect. It's for system impacted women only. So it's a brave space and a safe space. We have women posting resources on there. We've had a woman say, "Hey, my car broke down. I need to get to the grocery store. I'm in such-and-such a town looking for a ride." And everything in between. So it is a place for women to gather. and support one another, where

we post job opportunities, and those types of things. And right now, I have a board, a wonderful board, Erica King and Catherine Besteman are part of that board, along with Katrina Hoop, and Mackenzie Kelly. And we have a home in Portland, Maine, and it has eleven bedrooms and five bathrooms.

It's owned by Maine Health and we've negotiated to lease that for a dollar a year. And so we need to raise some funds to bring it up to code, and the idea is for it to be an educational transition home for women who are leaving so that they have a place and Wi-Fi and computers and whatever they need to complete their degrees. Because right now in Maine in transition, there's a ninety percent dropout rate, which shouldn't be questioned if you're trying to find a roof over your head, if you're food insecure, if you don't have a job when you leave. And ninety-nine percent of the women don't have any of those things. How can you possibly stay in school? So we're trying to resolve that issue. Yes.

Q: We love it. Love it. So, what lessons have you learned from community organizing inside? Taking this, is this pivotal moment of education that's really shaped the afterlife of incarceration for you. What lessons have you learned from doing this work with Reentry Sisters?

Small: I've learned that nobody really cares about incarcerated women. I've learned that there's tremendous amount of misconception about who these women are, and men for that matter, too. I've learned that your average citizen has no idea how much money, how much of their taxpayer dollars are spent, and how they are spent in this carceral system. I've also learned that the carceral system isn't just the prison industrial complex. To me, America is a carceral system. We criminalize poverty. We have people, homeless people being arrested. And it's changed my entire mindset about structure and capitalism and systems and how they

impact people. And that has been just a tremendous growth for me. And trying to find ways to communicate what is really happening and the changes that need to be made and why they need to be made.

Q: I really appreciate that. And I can talk to you once we're off film, but that is exactly what drives, Boots on the ground, what could I do? What challenges and obstacles have you faced in building Reentry Sisters, growing it, and then if you have it, how does gender and race and, and other identity, ethnicity, factor into those, affect those challenges?

Small: Yes. Lots of challenges. Funding obviously is an issue. And our next board meeting is particularly about fundraising. I've been working on getting us nonprofit status for a while now. That's also a challenge. It's very costly. It's very time consuming. And that was a giant learning curve for me. I would say one of the things that I wasn't quite sure if this was the right path. So when I got out and I set that up and instantly there were like sixty women in the group. And now there's 180 across the state, just outside women who we've gotten to know. And I have a monthly Reentry Sisters meeting with the women inside via Zoom. And just understanding that there's a need out there and trying to fill that.

I would say challenging for me personally is dealing with my own reentry, trying to get this organization off the ground, trying to finish my degree, family obligations. There's a lot going on. And I will say another personal note that why this work is so important, is I'm having a hard time finding a job with benefits. I'm super grateful to have a part time job with the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, which supports me in bringing the gender justice work to advocacy, inside Maine's prisons and outside.

But, I got a job at the University of Southern Maine. I earned that on my merits. I was open and honest on my background check. I went one step further and I emailed HR and I said,

"Hey, you should be aware of, I've checked this box, I wrote this, this is why I did it. What is the process and how would you like me to proceed?" So the next thing I get back is a work contract. I pass my background check. I get that from my new boss, the chair of the department, and HR. I go to work. I'm thrilled. I have great benefits, they're going to pay for my PhD, is one of them. Eight days after work, I get told I'm on administrative leave. I can't figure out why. Then the dean writes me and says, "You're going to meet with me in HR." I'm like, Okay, what is going on? I've only been here a week, how have I possibly offended anyone? [*Laughs*] So I get to that meeting, and they are questioning my background check. I said, "You have all the information. I gave it to you. And not only that, I wrote and told you I gave it to you." Just complete transparency. No issues. Two days later, I get fired over the phone because of my justice history. It's rough out there. It's really a challenge. So my challenge is to continue to build while I'm fighting for my own survival at the same time.

Q: So we have so much in common, and I'll, we have so much in common.

[INTERRUPTION]

How has the organizing work you've done inside and outside changed you?

Small: Oh, wow. I would say, how hasn't it changed me? I am a completely different person. Early on in my life, I never even gave prison a thought. It never even occurred to me to think about systems and how they impacted people, where I fit in the larger scheme. As I said, not a lot of diversity where I grew up. And as I got older, also not a lot of diversity. So I was fairly isolated and sheltered, and the system woke me up. And, it showed me, it lifted the veil in what was really happening in this country, and set a fire under me for change.

Q: And so, how has it affected your sense of yourself as a leader?

Small: I found myself as a leader. I didn't even know I could be a leader before this. [*Laughs*] as you were talking earlier about this compressed nature of being inside a prison, it either crushes you or you rise above it. And it really pushed me to be the best version of myself.

Q: Yes. How does that impact your idea of community?

Small: Yes. I had a pretty small circle. And I'd say I carried that, when I was first incarcerated, and I kept my circle small. As I said, I really didn't know what was going on. I didn't understand the culture. And so I had three or four people that I would open up to, that I felt I could trust. And then over the years, I expanded that circle to encompass anybody who was willing to speak to me. Anybody who I could listen to. And I'm doing that, I carry that outside now, which is so critically important that we have as many voices at the table as possible. And that's whether I carried them inside, or they can come personally. Really broadened my community.

Q: So you've talked about several things that really impacted your sense of community as a leader in organizing, in prison and out. Would there be a couple things that we could lift up high as a few key takeaways, from your lived experience and the work that you're doing now, that you really feel that someone needs to understand that this is the top key takeaways to make real change in prisons and outside?

Small: All right. I'm going to say, one thing that weighs on me heavily is the next generation of women that come in and the women that you leave behind. So many women walk out and they've had it, and I understand that. My concern was that, when I left, what was going to happen to this advocacy work? Would it just fade away? And I didn't completely understand that enough as a leader to make sure that I passed that baton actively. I tried, but I really didn't have the skill set. I wasn't quite sure how or what I was doing. And part of that is that

the women themselves are so beaten down. It's so critically important to understand that and to lift one another up. And so, my proudest moment was talking to my dear sister who's on the inside, Darlene George, who's a Black woman. And we were on Zoom the other day, and she said to me, "Linda, I finally understood." She said, "You were doing all this pushing and shoving and everything that you could do, and you looked behind you and there was nobody there." And she said, "It's taken me years—" [*shows emotion*] "—to step into my leadership, but thanks to you," she's done that, and we're there to support one another. I encourage her to move forward and fight that battle while she's on the inside, and I'm doing it on the outside. And so, that's so critically important.

Q: What do you hope your legacy will be? As you look at your life, and you turn around and you look back and reflect, what do you want your legacy to be?

Small: Oh, I want it to be empowering women, and empowering them to make the changes so that no other woman goes in the system again. To finish the work of diverting women from the system in the first place, pulling women out of the system, and educating one another and lifting one another up. I want barriers broken down. I see this movement, sometimes, we have this long thread, abolitionists on one end, reformists on the other, and because we hear all the stories that reformists don't get it, they just want to pass legislation that perpetuates a system, abolitionists are radicals, they want to open up the prison doors and let all the criminals out without alternatives and everything in between, right?

I'm trying to live in that non-reformist reform space, and I want to draw as many people collectively in that space, as many women as I can and empower them to carry on with this change, and get educated, and lift each other up and stop cutting each other down because it

doesn't really matter. We're all heading in the same direction. I don't care how you get there, what your path is to get there. Get in where you fit in. That's my model.

Q: Last question. You're in the process of remodeling a house for formerly incarcerated women to come and be supported with wraparound services. And you're doing your education, working on your doctorate. Last question, what's next for you? You, as an individual, Linda.

Small: Yes, I have two strong desires. I lost everything when I became incarcerated. I lost home, family members, financial security. All of it. I would like a house of my own. And I would like to secure income and benefits doing the work that is so necessary, important work that I do now. Those are my two things. Simple things. Financial security through my own hard work and a place of my own.

Q: Thank you so much, Linda.

Small: Thank you.

Q: So, so much. I appreciate your work so, so much. We are at a wrap. That was our last question.

Small: Thank you.

Q: But so while we're breaking down, there's a survey there that's asking some specific questions like a post questionnaire.

Small: Sure.

Q: If you can answer that after you become unplugged there, that would be really great. I just really appreciate your spirit and the way, the careful way in which you built consensus behind the wall. And I hope I take that out. She was very careful about the way she built the long termers group.

[END OF INTERVIEW]