Movements Against Mass Incarceration Lab & Oral History Archival Project

Oral History Interview with

Debbie Kilroy

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Debbie Kilroy conducted by Michelle Daniel Jones on April 4, 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: Debbie Kilroy	Location: New York, NY
Interviewer: Michelle Daniel Jones	Date: April 4, 2024

Q: And I'm beginning the interview with Debbie, this is for the Women Transcending Oral History Project and Movements Against Mass Incarceration Oral History Project. So really quick, we are blown away—I'm going to read this on record—we are blown away with the work that formerly incarcerated women have been doing since coming homeand we'd like to capture the consciousness, motivations, connections that they may have started during incarceration. We hope to collect and lift up these stories of organizing while incarcerated among other women and across the bars with community partners and activists and show how that flowed into their work once they came home.

So I'm going to spend about ten minutes talking about your early life. First of all, thank you for agreeing to sit with me. I appreciate it so much. So, I'd like to start by asking you about where you grew up, and what was going on historically at the time?

Kilroy: I grew up in Magingen, so that's the Aboriginal name for Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. So I grew up there. My family was quite poor, and the area that we lived in were other families like ourselves that were very poor, but also a lot of Aboriginal families who were also very poor, so had grown up alongside other Aboriginal children and been with Aboriginal children, girls, women, adults throughout my life. Which we've all moved through every system you could possibly imagine because of the poverty that we're living in.

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

Kilroy: I have a memory, but it's only a memory because one of the Aboriginal women reminded me of it before she passed away. I was about five years older than her, and she lived around the corner. And so, because I was older I'd look after the younger kids. And she had a cold and she reminded me how I gave her this really warm bath—she was a young Aboriginal girl—and then rubbed her with Vicks, you got Vicks VapoRub? All over her. And then put winter pajamas on her and wrapped her up to go to bed. So it's, [*laughs*] yes. And she still remembered that, into her forties. A piece of kindness, yes. Of us kids growing up and looking after her when she was sick, when she was little. She was about five years old, so that's nice.

Q: That's a powerful story. You're already demonstrating a community of care. So what did you like about where you grew up in Brisbane?

Kilroy: What did I like about it? I suppose when you ask me that question, I think, I didn't have much choice where I grew up, so I grew up. But I think what I liked about it at that time is, there was no electronics, right? So I'm talking about the '60s here. And we were on the street, we lived in a dead end street and we lived right beside a cemetery. So that was our playground. So we would go down to the cemetery every day and play hide and seek, ride our pushbikes, and you'd be out when the sun come up and you'd be home when the sun came down pretty much. And yes, we were just running around on the streets and in the cemetery, having fun and playing games.

Q: It sounds like real safety.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: So what were some of the challenges about growing up where you grew up?

Kilroy: I think poverty is always a challenge, even though you don't know that you're growing up in poverty, but you're definitely growing up learning, very acutely, probably more instinctively, that you don't have things or you don't have the privilege that others do. For those of us that lived in that area, that dead end street and near the cemetery, we all went to the private school, because in them days the Catholics would allow us, children who were poor, from poor families to go to the Catholic school for free. You didn't have to pay. So that was their form of charity for the poor. So we all went to the private school up the road. So we learned very quickly that some had privileges and rights and we didn't because of money.

Q: That makes a lot of sense. That makes a lot of sense. So, what do you feel is important for us to know, or for the viewers to know, about your early life to understand you as an organizer and the work you do?

Kilroy: I think I've always been that child—well, I know I was always that child to ask the question, Why, why, why, why? To drive the adults insane. But I was really curious about why they would say to do one thing and then tell us to do, or tell me to do, totally opposite in the next mouthful. It never made sense. Adults didn't make sense to me a lot. Particularly adults in power, because they would just make shit up, right? One day will be different to the next day, or whatever [*laughs*]. I remember, when I first went into the kids prison as a thirteen-year-old, the cops come up the back stairs to say, "You need to come with us. You're coming with us." And I'm in my school uniform. And because I used to wag, like truant fromschool, they called the police. So the police come, and they say I had to go with them. It's like, Yous make no sense. You tell me to go to school, I'm dressed in my uniform to go to school. Now I'm not allowed to school, I've got to go with you. So, things like that would really do my head in. Those in power would tell you to do one thing, and then the next

minute they'd tell you to do the total opposite. So I would always be that child to ask the question, Why? And keep resisting and pushing back always.

Q: Wow. I love that. Were there any people in those early years in your life who influenced you in your work in the community later on? Is there any individual or individuals that you would lift up and say, I wanted to be like them?

Kilroy: I grew up in a time where we didn't even have television. I think we had a television in the house in 1967 or 1968. But it was a black and white TV, and really, we didn't watch it that much because we'd be out playing all the time. And school was school, basically, where you're learning to read and write, and not much else. So we really didn't know what was happening anywhere else in the world. Children now, like my grandchildren grow up and know everything. They know that the police are dangerous, systemically and structurally, where that would never have been discussed with us as children when we grew up.

So, there wasn't any sort of individual person that I would think of. There was just all of us together, that stood together, that grew up together, and like I said, went through those systems of incarceration, like the children's prison and then the adult prison, together. And so, we had each other. At different times, we would stand on each other's shoulders. Whoever needed to be supported and who didn't need to be supported at the time, we could support each other. So it was more that community of protection that we built for each other.

Q: Oh, I love that. I love that. So, when you were growing up, did you have a sense of what you wanted to be when you were a kid? Who did you want to be when you grew up?

Kilroy: We didn't even have that because we were always told we'd be nothing. 'Cause you're poor, you'll be nothing. You'll have nothing. You won't—you'll get a job, like work in the

shoe factory or some sort of labor, form of employment, that you'll never be anything else. Like we were definitely told we could never be doctors or lawyers. And so, that's one of the reasons why I did a law degree and am a lawyer now, as well as other things. Because it's like, Yes, I can do exactly what yous can do and I can do it better. But when we were kids, we were told that we won't be anything other than, you're poor so you just work as your mother does, which is down the biscuit factory, making biscuits in the line of packing.

Q: The packing floor, yes.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: Wow. Can you talk about your educational journey? You've mentioned that you became a lawyer ultimately. Can you talk about that trajectory of your educational journey?

Kilroy: Yes, that became a form of resistance to do that and to take power back for me. Because the people that had power in my life and that abused that power were the people that actually—and part of those structures that actually ensured that I was criminalized and imprisoned. So I actually, in my mind, like the last time I went to prison—because I was looking at life imprisonment—I figured that when I go back to prison I'm going to do my education.

I was in and out a lot. So, Australia's system's a bit different than here, like in the US. In the US, you'll get big lengthy sentences. You can get life imprisonment and, yes, you can get ten years or whatever, but not the sentences that women here get. Like ten years is a small sentence, like ten years at home would be a long sentence, right? But as a kid I was in and out, so I was actually firstly incarcerated for truanting school, that's what I went in for.

Q: How old were you?

Kilroy: Thirteen. Because that's when the cops come. Like I said, that's where they were taking me, to put me into the prison to do an assessment. So, a psychiatrist was supposed to do an assessment. I was supposed to be there for four weeks. They convinced my parents to sign me away because they thought it was best because they weren't educated. And they took notice of the professionals who were the social workers to say, "This is the best thing for Debbie to go in there and be assessed. And then we can work out why she's truanting from school and running away from home." Probably because the school wasn't engaging me, I'd say. That's absolutely what it was about. And that they were so racist and all their decisions were not just. It was a school run by nuns, so that thrust of religion, which I've always resisted.

All those forms of oppression, I was pushing back. I can articulate it now, but not so much—like an example of how I fought back, I was in grade one, there was this massive big oak tree in the schoolyard, like huge tree, that all the boys were climbing up. And so, I climb up it at lunchtime and I got pulled down by the nuns. And the nuns wear their full outfits with their veils and everything. And I get six of the best, the leather strap with the cuts, for climbing the tree because only boys are allowed to climb the trees, right?

So after they'd done that, I pulled her veil off her head and she ran screaming. So that was like, you want to punish me, I'm going to punish you, because I know you're not supposed to be seen without the veil on. Even as a five, six year old child, I knew that, how to push back on those with the power to actually get them to crumble. But they would come back even harder, obviously, because they were adults, where I'm a small child.

Q: So you went into this program for four weeks, and they did an assessment.

Kilroy: No, they didn't.

Q: Oh, they didn't?

Kilroy: No, that's the thing Mum says today [*laughs*], "She still hasn't got that assessment." And my father died when I was in there. Because after the four weeks, they decided that I wasn't allowed to go home. It wasn't an appropriate place for me to go. So they put me in this girl's halfway house. And so it was all of us girls locked in a house in the community. But we'd just break out and then we'd be on the streets, living on the streets. I wasn't allowed to go home, back to my parents. Yes. Yes, I know the system is wild.

Q: And so did you ultimately graduate high school?

Kilroy: No. Never did high school. When I was in and out of the children's prison, I was supposed to be going to school, but I was pretty well locked up in solitary the whole time because the matron—that was called the matron back in them days, that ran the children's prison—was in charge. And she didn't like me because I'm asking her the questions all the time and pushing back. So I would resist. Whenever the cops were taking me there, I would physically resist. Quite violently, and so they would actually literally have to drag me, physically drag me out of the police van into the kids prison.

There was an old orderly that worked there, and because he was respectful, so they knew that I respected him, so whenever they knew I was coming back into the prison, they would get him in on duty, and he'd get in the back of the police divvy van and say, "Come on, Debbie. Let's get out," I'd be like, [*rolls eyes*] "Ugh. Fuck. Okay." I would do it for him, not for—[*laughs*].

Q: So you went back and forth, back and forth to this until eighteen?

Kilroy: Seventeen, you were an adult when you were seventeen then, yes. They only just changed the laws not too long ago, which we've been fighting since then to make adults eighteen, not seventeen. And what they did, the police held charges over to when I was seventeen, and then arrested me because then I'm an adult. So then I end up in the adult system. And the first time I went into the adult system, it was like a dormitory style prison then, the old prisons. And my grandmother came, she had a glass jar of fifty cent pieces. Do you have fifty cent pieces?

Q: Yes.

Kilroy: And bailed me out with the fifty cent pieces of her jar that she saved these fifty cent pieces probably for most of her life. And so it got me out. And then I was in and out of there. And then eventually the last time that I got arrested, those charges were mandatory life charges if I went down for—

Q: So seventeen to—?

Kilroy: Last time I went in was, I think it was, [*counts fingers*] '71, '81, so 81. What's that? Twenty-eight. When I was twenty-eight.

Q: Twenty-eight.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: So, pull back up to the helicopter of your experiences, from where you've come from and now where you are. What are three words that you would use to describe the woman you are now?

Kilroy: Honest. Trustworthy. I was going to say brutal, but that sounds really violent, but not in that sense. Like, I run straight. I call a spade a shovel. I won't stand back. So, very much grounded in who I am and what I actually want, and what I'm fighting for and we're fighting for, which is to end the incarceration of women and girls. And so anybody that knows me knows that I don't falter at all in regards to that.

Q: Awesome.

[INTERRUPTION]

And so, we come up out of the helicopter and now we're going to go back into the prison.

Kilroy: The adult prison?

Q: Yes. What do you think is important for people to know about your experiences inside those prisons, about those conditions of confinement, what do you think people need to know?

Kilroy: I think what people need to know about when I was in prison and those conditions are the same conditions for women today. It's not about me. It's about all of us. As we say, Nothing about us without us. And even though it's over thirty years since I was released, it doesn't matter because it's the same today. And that's the whole argument, right? Like it's fifty years this year since I was that thirteen-year-old child. And in the kids' prison system, nothing's changed. Yes, they've built flashier prisons, and yes, they use flashy language and

they window dress and market their models and have all this legislation and policies that sound really nice. But at the end of the day, a prison's a prison's a prison. We call it many things for children, reformatories, detentions, hospitals, whatever. But it's actually a prison, and children are treated the same as I was treated fifty years ago. And nothing's changed, other than its net widened and there's more children and predominantly more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children because the mass incarceration of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people in our country is huge because of the violent colonization of white fellows coming to that country to steal land and still haven't given land back today.

Q: Wow. So, for you, what was life like during your incarceration? You had talked about the one gentleman that you trusted and you felt like this was a decent human being, I will follow his lead. But can you go more into the description of what your actual day-to-day life was like?

Kilroy: Sure. That man was in the children's prison, not the adult prison.

Q: Okay, got it.

Kilroy: So the last time I went to prison, when I was looking at life imprisonment, my husband—who's still my husband now—was a well known, famous football player, rugby league player. So he had a high profile. So when I went back into prison then, they thought that I was this white, blonde—well, I am a white, blonde woman—but who's full of privilege and money because I got this high profile, Black husband. And far from the truth. He was raised in an orphanage, and I was raised through the prison system [*laughs*], so we were both institutionalised.

And, the screws—prison officers, we call them screws at home—tried to put the weights on me when I went in there, treating me really badly, thinking that they're going to punish me. But all the women that were in there is the women I knew, who I was in juvie with, right? In the kids prison. So really it was going back to what I already know. It was just like stepping back onto the bike and riding the bike again. So it wasn't anything that shocked me. Other than, at the time when I was arrested, like in '88, and found out that the charges that I'd been charged with constitute life imprisonment. That was like, Holy shit, [*laughs*] okay, need to make a plan here, do something. And so one of the plans there really was to get an education. And I went up to the education officer when I first come back into the prison and he goes, "What's your rush? You're gonna be here for a long time go away." So he was very discouraged.

But in October '89, when I went into prison then, for those charges, in early January, one of my close friends, who was sitting right next to me here, was stabbed to death. And we were both grabbed from behind, and she was murdered. So that actually launched a whole [*unclear*] activism in the prison. First, of course, it was about violence and payback. Because being in prison, prisons seed violence. You can taste it. It's the taste in your mouth every day. It doesn't mean that it happens every day, but you can feel it, you can smell it, you can taste it. But when, and her name was Debbie too, was murdered, prison rules are that there has to be payback. And so payback was planned and everything, but there was one prison officer that actually stopped that happening.

So what had happened was, no one really knew women were in prison, right? This happened in 1990. No one really knew that there's a big men's prison and at the back was a women's prison. Nobody in the community really knew that there were women in prison, even though there was only about a hundred of us then, and that was overcrowded.

That when the murder happened it became international news, that a woman inside prison had murdered another woman inside prison. And so all these, what we call do-gooders—I don't know if you know what that means, like white women who want to do good and come in and protect us and tell us what we need to do because we're the deficit, like really they're the deficit, just saying.

But, trying to tell us what to do. So they set up this meeting in the chapel—because the chapel was where everyone met all the time, because there wasn't much space in the prison—to have mediation between us and Storm, who murdered my mate, and her mates. It's like, Sure, let's go. You know what's going to happen. You've been there. We knew what was going to happen. And these white women outside, do-gooders coming in, think they're going to negotiate mediation. It's only if this old screw said, What are yous doing? I was coming here to have mediation. He'd be fucked his arget [*phonetic*]. 'Cause we were all armed, right? It's like [*laughs*] he said, "Fuck off," and sent us on our way. But if he wasn't there, that old screw that worked in the prisons for thirty years, and didn't know what was going on, there probably would have been a bloodbath in that chapel. Yes.

But anyway, there was a bit more community coming into the prison at that time and talking to us. And then it's sort of when we all realised that we all come, a lot of Aboriginal women, poverty, the white women, and the Aboriginal women, and then through the children's prison system and then now in the adult system. So, there was forums and that, that happened. The prison opened up a bit. After the murder, all the management got the sack and new people came in. So there was people working then that were interested in education and were interested in activities and were interested in doing something. And so education was huge and the education officer that came, she was great. She had all of us doing something, no matter what it was, at whatever level. It was literacy and numeracy, because a lot of women

couldn't read and write, even. And still to this day, can't read and write. The education system has failed them. Yes. Through to women, I didn't even do school. I didn't finish high school. But, I did some—what we call TAFE. I don't know what that's called here. It's like—

Q: TAFE testing? High school testing?

Kilroy: No, they're TAFE colleges. It's like a college between high school and university. So you can do—

Q: Oh, so vocational.

Kilroy: Yes. We did a number of those courses in the prison. And then, because the education officer said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to be a social worker like those social workers that convinced my parents to sign me away, to lock me up in prison in the first instance." And she's like, "I don't think you're going to get in." And I wasn't allowed out of the prison, obviously, so she went and advocated for me at the university. And they didn't want someone coming out of the prison. Because that, from that murder as well, there was a window of reform as well that opened up a bit and allowed us to do things in the community. Anyway, she argued, flipped their handbook and the values for social work and read them back to the Dean—well, the Deputy Dean it was—and he went, "Okay, she can come."

So the first day I went to university was with prison officers. And the first lecture, the lecturer was saying—because there was about three hundred social work students, just starting. And the lecturer said the first subject was about basically going and experiencing social work. Go to a court, DV shelter, like all these things, right? And I'm thinking, Man, I've experienced all them things except old woman bedridden. And I might get there, I might not, I don't know. So

I'm thinking, This is a waste of my time. So I go down and see her after, with the screws [*laughs*]. And I go, "Hi, I'm—"

"Yes, I know who you are." Okay, anyway, I said, "Look, I've experienced all these things that you've told everyone to go out and experience except old women bedridden, and maybe I'll get there, maybe I won't." And she said, "Don't worry, I'll just give you the credit points." So my life was worth five credit points at university. [*Laughter*]

Q: Oh my gosh. Okay. Oh, wow. Okay. So you're inside, there's this moment of reform. What issues became the most important and pressing for you while you were incarcerated? What was the most pressing issue?

Kilroy: It was about the systemic issues. It's about the mass incarceration of Aboriginal women and Torres Strait Islander women. About how all of us had been targeted because of poverty, and absolutely because of racism. Not in my life, but definitely in their life I could see that. And you can see it right in front of your eyes. That's why I still today am shocked when white women come out who are being supported and are studying at university and go, "Oh, I never knew there's a problem about Aboriginal women in prison." It's like, What, do you walk around with your fucking eyes closed or something? Seriously. [*Laughter*] Do you know what I mean? Can you not see in front of you, white woman? So, bigger issues for me, the smaller things were important for life to be comfortable, but other women were doing that advocacy. For me it was about the broader and the bigger issues. And, also, education, I felt, is really important because education gives us choices in life. The less education you have, the less choices you may have in society.

Q: That's right.

Kilroy: But education is very important. And if you've been told like I was, and like every other woman in prison then and every other woman in prison now, that you'll never be anything. You are bad. You're no good. You're a criminal, you're an offender, whatever that deficit language is, we believe that we swallow that hole. I was told as a kid in the kid's prison that I'm bad, no good and will make nothing. So I went, Okay, I swallow that script. Alright, I'll show you how bad I can get. That's what you play out. Children's behaviour is our language. And we pipeline that into the adult system because of then the trajectory of criminalisation and imprisonment.

Q: Yes. Yes. That's it. That's good. I can give you a break here, because we're going to go into the next section talking about how you work to create change from the inside.

[INTERRUPTION]

So yes, let's go inside. More inside to work to create change. So what change did you become a part of working to create inside, from the inside, starting from that moment? Was this during the small window of reform, or—?

Kilroy: Yes, because of the murder. So it shifted the focus on the women's prison, so then there was a spotlight on that. And so then, what "corrections" did was set up these committees of all of us women into different areas of interest. So whether it was sport, food, health, medical, visits, like every area. Women could be involved in those committees. And there'd be like a cavena, a chair of each. There was a street kids committee, which I was the chair of, because we were all street kids that would end up in there. And so you know, we used to fundraise. We used to have big fundraisers in the prison where people would come in for an evening and we'd auction off things that were donated and that money would go to

local charities to support children who were getting expelled from school and criminalized like all of us. So we wanted that to stop.

But we would meet with the general manager of the prison once a month about different things in prison to get sorted. But they were more internally based, about what the general manager had power to do, about changing things. But what it did for me was taught me to think around corners, every corner that they were going to come up with to say no, to get another argument about the no. And because a lot of the times their decisions weren't rational. Like for example, in the prison that was there then—it's bulldozed now—had this massive wall around the prison. And it was like a cream color, white, creamish color. And we were advocating, women wanted to have their own clothes. So you could have any color t-shirt except black. And we're like, "Why can't you have black?" And he'd be like, "If anyone tries to climb the wall or to escape, we won't see you." And I look out the window, I go, "The wall's actually white cream. If I'm gonna escape, I'm not wearing a black shirt, mate." And he's like, " Good point. So yes, we're allowing black shirts." You go away and think, That's a minute thing, but it's just about challenging them on how they think. To come up with a response, but also the argument that their decision doesn't make any sense. So I learnt very quickly about thinking how they thought, and then how I could move that. And so I call that thinking around corners.

Q: So what was the goal of the Street Kids Committee, other than doing fundraising for the community?

Kilroy: Yes, but it was also to actually support them so that they didn't get criminalized, end up going through the courts and ended up in the children's prison like we all had. That's what

we didn't want to have. So it was a way to move them away from being criminalized, away from the police.

But we know that the racial capitalist world that we live in is built in a way to ensure that racism is driven and will capture and criminalize and imprison. In our country, predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, here, African American people, right? And it's a way that the genocide and colonization of our country continues to thrive through those policies and laws that the state would argue, as well as government departments, that that's actually not so. But it is so, because we see the outcomes of more policing, funding the police more, propping them up, funding any carceral mechanism and using carceral logics all the time to address any type of social issue.

Q: So you saw yourself in solidarity with Aboriginal kids because all the groups had this fundamental experience of severe poverty and growing up on the streets, right? Did you see or observe particular issues that the Aboriginal folks faced that wasn't being addressed behind the wall?

Kilroy: Oh, always. The racism was fundamental. So we'd be always challenging the racism, and that Aboriginal women were targeted in very racist ways, and calling it out as white women.

Q: Give me one example.

Kilroy: There was an older Aboriginal woman that lived in the area that we lived, in the unit, that was quite unwell. So she would be coughing all night because she had chest issues and she would just be told to shut the fuck up by the prison officers, where we're saying, "Get a

nurse. We need a doctor now. Get a doctor." Eventually she died, and it's like, so you need to actually move on this.

So yes. So things like that. I think the one of the biggest turning points of me where I thought, Fuck this, I am so done with this system, was where one of the women was pregnant and everyone was screaming out to get support cause she was in pain. And she went to the toilet when the lockdown break over lunch and miscarriaged. And so the baby, the fetus, was in the toilet. And the prison officers took the fetus out of the toilet and snapped it in half and put it in a plastic bag. Eventually get the ambulance after they've cleaned up the crime scene with the blood and throw her baby between her legs to take her to the hospital. For me that was it. I'm done. I'm done. So done with this shit. The cover up of that, and the treatment of that woman and other women [*shows emotion*].

So I can move through the murder of my friend, where I was done in relation to copping the institutional racism and violence of the day in, day out. But after the murder, it's like, No, no more. And then when that happened to that woman, it was like, Yes, I'm so done. And—

Q: How did you deal with that? What was your response to that?

Kilroy: We were fighting with the system all the time about better medical, but it was too late. We're already screaming out. They know that there needs to be better medical. So you're banging your head against a concrete wall over and over again and no one's listening.

And so that's why it was important for me at the end of the day, like I said, I walk my talk. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. So when I was released to go to the halfway house, I said to the women, "I'll be back." And the screws said, "Yes, in handcuffs." It's like, "No, I ain't coming back in handcuffs. Fuck you. You ain't putting me in handcuffs anymore. I'm

coming back to get yous." And it's only that general manager, that new one after the murder was still there, that, yes, he allowed me to come back in. And that's how Sisters Inside started. The organization with the Lifers and Long Termers group and the Street Kids group.

Because that's what I was part of. And those women become Sisters Inside management members who still are now a number of outside because I've fought over the years to get them parole. One served twenty-three years on a life sentence. So it was about advocating for them to be released and then as well as many other things that we do at Sisters Inside.

Q: Were you incarcerated when you read the Kathy Boudin article?

Kilroy: No, I was out.

Q: You was out. Okay, so let me back up, because you went right into Sisters on the Inside, which is great. So you left [*crosstalk*] and you came back to bring in programming to help other women get out and to provide some community support for them. How did you get back in? What strategy did you deploy to get back into the program?

Kilroy: I just went and met with the general manager and said that, "I want to come back with some other women in the community to work with the committees to continue the work going so we can actually support women on release." And he was open to that at that time. And so from that, we used to meet monthly. Our committee, like you have a board meeting outside, we used to have our board meetings inside and still do. So there's still women in prison that are part of our legal constitution, the framework of our organization. To be part of our management committee of all decisions made. So there's a group of women in prison and a group of us out of prison. And we had to argue more recently—what we've just won and had the law changed—for formerly incarcerated people to be allowed to be on management

committees or boards. And so now we have the first formerly incarcerated Aboriginal woman as the president of Sisters Inside. A couple of years ago we got the laws changed and so she was like a—[*crosstalk*].

Q: Because an Aboriginal woman could not be a board chair?

Kilroy: Any woman. Any woman. No woman. No woman. No person, sorry, with a criminal history, could be on a board.

Q: Could be on a board. Wow.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: It was the Street Kids Committee, the Long Termers Committee, and there was a third committee.

Kilroy: Oh, Long Termers and Lifers. They were together. Yes.

Q: That's amazing. Do you feel like your relationship with the general manager was good when you left? What was the strategy? You went in and you said, "I want to come in with some programming." How did that—?

Kilroy: Because we've been doing so much work inside, and because it was that window of reform, so we could get leave of absence, it's called in the law. So I could go out to university and study. I could go down to that organization called Centre Ed—Centre Education, it was called—where children were expelled from schools and being criminalized and ending up in the children's prison. A prison officer used to drive me down there every Friday to volunteer and would pick me up in the afternoon. And then I ended up getting a job when I was in

prison because we had work release that I could work there five days a week as a youth worker. So yes, and eventually when I got parole, I was employed there full time. And so that was then the employment.

Q: That's the connective tissue.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: Okay. You were able to leave the facility and actually get involved in the community. And it provided you a nice through line to the work that you would do when you got out.

Kilroy: Yes, and so then I come back to see the general manager when I was out and said, "Okay, we want to start working with the women in here, to support them on release." And, and they were fine with that period of time.

But I've always had a long term relationships with people who work in the systems. We're not friends or anything like that, my friends are my friends, but these are people that you have to work with day in day out to move and change and they get challenged. Some of them are quite fearful of me, I don't know why. Like someone told me high up one time that some of the corrections workers would run and hide in the broom cupboard when I come into the office to have meetings. I'm thinking, Are you serious? Come on. It gets a bit ridiculous, right? [*Laughs*]

Just because I'm agreeing to disagree with you and having a robust conversation doesn't mean anything else is going to happen to you. But people are weird that work in these jobs. And because I call them out too. Because I'm calling out the reality of what's happening for women in prison, as all of us do at Sisters Inside, and we have a national network of

incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women and girls. And I'm on the advisory committee of the international network, so I work close with the national council here in the US. And there's nearly twenty countries that are on our international network now, formerly incarcerated women.

We're talking loud and clear with the power of all of us who are in prison and who are formerly incarcerated. But in the context of our values and the direction, which is about ending the incarceration of women and girls.

At home at the moment, and it's happening everywhere, this whole "lived experience", right? And I go quote, unquote, because I can't stand the "lived experience" label because you can have a lived experience of anything. So I do say to people, "Of what?" When they say, "I've got a lived experience." Yes, of what? Like, I'm living my experience now. Of what? And they go, "Incarceration." So, "Okay, so what are you doing with that?" It's like, "Oh, I'm sitting on a board about—" I said, "Well, yes, but are you being held accountable by the women in prison or other formerly incarcerated?" No. So then, I don't actually want you to do that when you're running a reformist agenda. Come with us as abolitionists or actually get out of our road or we're going to run you over. And we've even been writing articles and calling out these "lived experience" women who are running a reform agenda and labelling themselves as abolitionists. It's no, I don't care that you've been in prison and have an experience. What I care about is that you're supporting the net widening and ensuring the caging of other women and girls. And I ain't going to cop that. That's the reality. Don't care how much time you've done. Or I don't care if you haven't done any time. You run a reform agenda, then you're going to get taken down. Because no more women, no more girls, no more. We're done with caging.

Q: I love that.

So obviously this work is political for you. When did you understand, or at what moment did you experience this powerful political awakening that you hold? That you just spoke so powerfully about.

Kilroy: I think, yes, it was one of my very good friends, my sister's sister, who came and connected the dots for us. So, when I think about it, we didn't have a name for abolition, but we were doing the work, right? And we didn't have the language, moreso. And because all the language that's used around prisons is reformist language. And language is so powerful and can be so violent as well. Like calling us offenders is offensive and all that language. But, we decided to have international conferences. So our first conference was back in 2020? Yes, so twenty-four years ago. We just had our tenth one last year because we had a break with COVID, et cetera. Anyway, and we're talking about who should we invite?

And someone said invite Angela Davis. And I'm like, "Who's Angela Davis?" Because, Angela's not on our radar at home. And so I looked up and they go, "She would never come here." I said, "Why not? She'd been in prison, I'll just email her." She'd been in prison, I've been in prison, come on over.

And she did. She said, "Out of these hundreds and hundreds of emails, there's this one here." That she got from me and went, and she looked at our values because we wrote our values and our values still stand today. And they're definitely language from 1999. But they're still—

Q: Say your values.

Kilroy: They're our values as an organization. And, we're just in the process of changing the words that were used back in 1999 for all of us in prison to now. But keeping our original values and then have an addendum to bring it up to speed because we were using different language. And some of it was reformist language back then, right? Because it's so long ago. But anyway, Angela did come. And then Angela spoke about abolition and it's like all these light bulbs like ding, ding, ding. Like connect, connect, connect. And Angela, it was so funny, she told the story of a number of years ago how, Yes, her and Gina came. They didn't realize what they were coming to, but here was this white woman, blonde woman with a black pickup truck. They're thinking, Oh my God, what have we got ourselves into? And when she said all that, it's like, Oh yes, it sounds like Texas or something [*laughs*]. But Angela is a very close friend of mine and we've been doing work forever since then, but she connected the dots for us and gave us the language. It was like, Aha.

Q: Yes. So, what was the impact of the change that you and other women work to create? What do you see as your impact of creating Sisters Inside today?

Kilroy: I think there's a lot of impacts, and I suppose it's on all different levels. So I suppose the way that I describe Sisters Inside now is, we started out of prison. But there's really four arms of Sisters Inside now, so there's services and programs. So we're in every women's prison and girls prison nearly every day of the week, supporting women and girls in there. We are in the watch houses.

Q: What is that?

Kilroy: So you know when you get first arrested by police, there's cells at the police station.

Q: Oh.

Kilroy: So we call them watch houses, yes. And then we're in the courts, and then in the prisons, and then on release. So anywhere someone's criminalized and imprisoned, and we're using decarceration strategies to have them released at the earliest times. So that's all the services and programs. We do a lot of law reform and advocacy. And a lot of agitation through abolitionist framework and to end the incarceration of women and girls. So very much engaged in policies and laws that are being made and right submissions and speak out, do a lot of media, all those types of things. Speak at universities, basically anything that fits into any form of advocacy and law reform. And then, we do a lot of community education and training. So in the frameworks that we've developed ourselves over the years that we know that actually work with criminalized and imprisoned women and girls. And then the fourth arm is a law firm.

After I did my social work degree, I did a law degree. And that was another challenge. People are saying to me, "You're not going to get admitted. What are you going to do?" And I said, "That's another argument at the end of the day, isn't it?" They say they want to send us to prison. And they're saying they're sending us to prison to be rehabilitated, which I don't believe in rehabilitation. Because they don't do anything for us in prison. That's about making us hyper responsible, individually responsible for the state's failure by saying we haven't been rehabilitated, that's why we go back in. But anyway, but I've used it back at the courts. Oh, tell me when I'm rehabilitated then. What have I got to do? I've got a social work degree, I've got a law degree. What have you got to do?

Anyway, I got admitted. So that was back in 2007. So I have a law firm, my own law firm, that's attached to Sisters Inside. It has to be a separate entity. So we do predominantly criminal defense work. So we're representing the women and girls and other children and men. We do a lot of legal aid work, predominantly legal aid work. We do coronial inquests,

so if someone dies in custody in our jurisdiction, they must have an inquest. So I represent a lot of families of Aboriginal women who have died in custody, and other women. As well as disappeared Aboriginal women, represent families where Aboriginal women have been disappeared. And I do mental health review tribunals, so people who are under the Mental Health Act, represent them. And work in the family policing system, so where the children are taken, which children are taken when mom goes to prison. So they're the areas, predominantly, that we work in the law firm.

Q: So you talked about the need to work around the corners and understand the logic of these, of the people who hold these systems up so that you can find that powerful workaround. Looking around the corners. What was the phrase?

Kilroy: Yes, going around the corners.

Q: Going around the corners. Has the system retaliated against you at all? And if so, what has been the cost?

Kilroy: Oh, they retaliate all the time. One big example, we made a human rights complaint against the government, lodged on the seventeenth of June, 2014.

But it was all about the systemic issues, right? And human rights breaches. And as soon as we lodged that, I was called to Parliament House by the Government and the Minister of Prisons and the DG—the Director General, like the highest person in the bureaucracy I'm not sure what it's called here—and was told that Sisters Inside is banned and I'm personally banned from all prisons because of the complaint. Because the prison union members were going off. And they were threatening to strike. I said, "Let them strike." I said, "Why don't you let them strike?" Actually, prisons run better when there's no screws in there. Can I just

tell you, when they go and strike, everybody steps up and makes sure everyone's fed and looked after and cared for when the prison officers aren't there.

Anyway, but they sided with the powerful prison union and so we were banned. But because we had contracts, government contracts, to provide services—so our country is different. Like here, there's a lot of philanthropists in the US that fund a lot of work. Philanthropy is not a big thing in our country. Governments fund NGOs to do the work. We had contracts that they had to honor. So they had to let our staff in there to provide the services to continue for the women, but I was personally banned. I look back at it now and think, because they wanted to break my back and break the women's back and that and break the connection between Sisters Inside, and myself, with the women inside. Because we have a lot of credibility with the women. Because they know that we are with them. And because the prison system hates us just as much as they hate the women, so they know that we stand with them no matter what. And that includes against other NGOs, because NGOs are working alongside the system, and doing the work, the carceral work against women. And we won't do that.

Q: So what skills and strategies did you or others need to develop to navigate that ban?

Kilroy: Staff were allowed back in, so we could still communicate that way, but we could use phones, letters, like writing. So that's why we stayed in contact. 'Cause I was banned for—I think I was allowed back in 2018, 2019. So yes, it was about five years. When I look back, it allowed me to finish my law degree a lot quicker. Because I wasn't in the prison. But it also allowed—we really then amped up all our support for women coming out of prison more and the girls, more focused in regards to that, and also in the watch house.

More presence. And we've built that, and so we've got, there's about fifty staff at Sisters Inside across the state. So it's actually, you know. People go, "Wow, that's awesome," I go, "No it's not," because it's a reflection of how many women are in prison now, and that they can fund a small amount, which is fifty staff to do work, but it's really an indicator of how many women are in prison.

Q: Because there used to be a hundred women when you were in.

Kilroy: That's right. Now there's nearly a thousand in our jurisdiction, yes.

Q: As you are this leader, and you had to take this moment, you were banned, and Sisters Inside was banned, but the government had to let folks back in to do their work, and you were allowed back in five years later. Sort of a blessing in the conflict was that you were able to complete your law degree. Would you consider that a defeating moment, or would you consider that a setback, or challenge in that? Or would you describe some other incident as a major setback with Sisters Inside?

Kilroy: I didn't see it as a setback. People did because of the lockout, but we use the media a lot. It's hard to hit the prison system and get it to feel the hit. When I say that, I'm imagining the concrete walls wavering when you hit it like that, because usually you bang, bang, bang your head against the wall and there's no movement, it won't move. That hit the system and it buckled, because the union came out fighting. Like we knew, Ha, gotcha, underbelly, there it is. You know that you are breaching human rights and they know they are systemically, so they react. And their reaction is to ban us. And that's why I'm saying, don't do what the union says, because no individual was named. This is about systemic issues. Fix up the system, in the sense, right? The systemic issues. And they don't want to do that. They ban instead. So we use that as traction.

And it was really interesting because not long after that, the right wing government got in and then they started defunding us. Mid contracts, You're out, you're out, you're out. And it's really interesting because a lot of those, their supporters contacted us and said, "We did not vote for them to actually defund Sisters Inside because you do such brilliant work." See, anything we do, we go over and above with all the work that we do for women and girls. Everybody knows that, no matter what your political persuasion is. They can't falter us on that because they know that we're there for the women and girls. So when the right wing government gets in, we know that they're going to attack us and take money off us, and try to defund us. But what we've done is built the organization where we have our own net. We own. Everything you see when you come to Sisters Inside, we own it. We've bought buildings that we own. So if the government, at the end of the day, took all our money, we would still have a lot of assets that we could sell and still be okay in that sense, in the interim. And then focus. We'd have to refocus on what we do and how we do it, which would absolutely be the agitation.

Q: So Sisters Inside started in what year?

Kilroy: '92.

Q: '92, and we are in 2024.

That's a long trajectory for an organization. Creating this idea behind the wall, what would you lift up as a triumphant moment for Sisters Inside?

Kilroy: One moment? [*Laughs*]

Q: Yes. Try it. The most. The lift. The highest. I don't know. Or just one that you love.

Kilroy: I think what I love the most and is the thing that gets me out of bed every day and do what I do, I'm lucky to have the passion that I have and that the institution, the system hasn't killed my soul like it has to so many women. And so that actually inspires others. So when other women say, and contact me if they're in prison, "I want to do law," or, "I want to do this," or, "I'm going to do that," or, "I just want to get home to my kids and be a good mother," whatever it is, "And that's because of you, of Sisters Inside and the support." That's all it is. There's not some big thing. We could have tens of millions of dollars of funding. That's actually not a highlight to me. The highlight is about women and girls not being criminalized in the first instance because of the work that we do. And if they are, we get them out as quick as we can and keep them out so they're not actually sent back. They're the biggest things.

The piece of the puzzle that's missing that we've been advocating for a long time is, we want to set up a women and girls center. And I have thought about this for many years. And I think about these—they call me the ideas woman, right? [*Laughs*] I come up with all these ideas all the time. When I say that at Sisters, they're like, "Oh Jesus, now what?" And it's like—

Q: Is this like your idea of your legacy work?

Kilroy: Just, I've got a way to get them [*claps hands*] now. [*Laughs*] It's like another idea, another idea.

And the piece for me is about what it is—because we're in the watch houses. So the cops have already arrested them. So we can work with the woman in the watch house, and the courts, the judge, and the prosecutors, and the defense lawyers to get them out, to get them housing, whatever it is so they don't end up in the prison system, right? It's a step before. How do we stop the police arresting? And the only way I could figure to do this out is

actually with the police, which does my head in, but it's like, Okay if that's the only way we can do it. So I developed this model when I was traveling a lot to New York and back and having conversations with Cheryl and Kathy and others. And so I went and presented this model, this women and girls center model. It's funny because it was here actually when I left in March, 2020. I left here and got home and it was when COVID first happened and I was one of those first ones that had COVID. But anyway—

Q: I remember, I remember you, you came—I had my exhibition on the second floor of the library.

Kilroy: Yes, you did. That's right.

Q: You remember.

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: Yay. I do remember you coming, yes.

Kilroy: But the Women and Girls Centre, so I presented to all the heads of the departments, treasury organisers. Because the Deputy Premier, who is also the Treasurer, was the Member of Parliament for the area that Sisters Inside's offices are, so I know her very well. And she was a migrant woman, left politics, she was great and really supported us. And she's a personal friend to me, has been of mine for some time.

But anyway, so I presented it to everyone and the cops are at the table as well. And the model is basically where you pick up Mary down at the park because she's homeless. Instead of charging her with these street type of survival offences and putting her in the watch house and prison, bring her to us directly, don't charge her. Anyway, they're like, "We can't support a

gendered only." I said, "Yes you can." And I give them the reasons why you can, and they came on side, right? So they were all signed off on it. I got a call here when I was in New York on the Thursday that I was leaving from Treasury saying that they're signing off on the funding, you'll have the funding. And I went, "I'm just in New York, I'm back on the weekend, can we do it next week?" "Yes, not a problem. The Treasurer's happy to do it next week."

I land back like that Sunday morning, or Saturday morning, and I'm getting all these text messages about COVID. And Times Square here was like a ghost town and I've landed and I've had symptoms, but they're symptoms like when you fly international flights, right? But it said, "Do you have symptoms?" Yes. "Have you been overseas?" Yes, on the tarmac from New York. "And have you been in contact with anyone who's been positive?" And the opposition right-winger, Prime Minister, was two seats in front of me on the way over, and he tested positive, so it was like, Yes, go to the hospital. So me and my kids go to the hospital, directly from the airport. And I'm ringing my husband and then saying, "We're not coming, we're going to the hospital." And go to the hospital, and they go, "Oh, no, we'll test on Monday, not today." It's like, I ain't going home, giving this to—I've got my husband at home who's Aboriginal, my children, my grandchildren are all Aboriginal. And Nettie [*phonetic*] was going home, and her father lives in a remote Aboriginal community, he's there. So we're like, "No, we're not going home." So we went to a different hospital. They tested us. And we had to be isolated, so they let us stay. We had a house over in [*unclear*] Island in an Aboriginal community that my husband predominantly lives at. So we went there cause he was on the mainland. And yes, we were all positive. Yes.

And then at the same time, the deputy premier basically had a throat slit from politics. They came after and she got ousted. So we didn't get funded for the Women and Girls Centre. So

we've still been advocating for that because COVID took over everything as well. So I'm back advocating now more recently. They're keen to fund that, so that women and girls aren't charged in the first instance that the cops bring them to us. They stay with us. We deal with the social issues and they don't get arrested.

Q: Amazing. Amazing. So we talked a little bit about, you built solidarity among women across, racial background, across class, because you shared experiences of poverty and growing up in the streets. How does gender and issues facing women distinguish your organizing work?

Kilroy: We're the only organization in the country that works alongside criminalized in prison women and girls. The only. The only one. Other organizations will have programs here and there, but they predominantly could be those big religious organizations that get money, they tender.

See, women and girls in prison now are a sexy thing for government to fund. Everyone wants to fund them. No one gave a shit about us before, but now we're actually worth money, right? Because government's got to fund. So they fund all these other organizations now. Some that have never even been in the prison, and they're the ones that they operate in the prison alongside the prison system. They're just an extension of the state, they're an extension of the prison system. So they'll call parole, or they'll call the police on the women. We've never done that. We have never called the police on a woman, never called parole, never, ever. And we're working every day with parole boards, in courts, doing Supreme Court bail applications, representing women and their criminal matters, fighting that they're not incarcerated. Doing all the work, everything that has to be done. Sexual assault, anti-violence

work, to decarceration work, mental health, drugs, whatever it is, housing, and never ever have we ever called the cops.

Q: So did you ever find that you had any tensions of building solidarity and collaborating with other women?

Kilroy: Other women in prison?

Q: Other women in prison or other women in Sisters Inside?

Kilroy: No, never had a problem ever building relationships and solidarity with women in prison. Ever. Never, ever. Women will come up to me when I'm in the prison and they go, "Oh Debbie, we want to tell you something," And I go, "Hey, I'm Debbie. What's your name?" Find out who you are. And they go, "No, I know you are. I want to tell you everything." I said, "No. Let's not fuck up this relationship. Let's actually start from scratch. I don't know you and you don't know me. You know about me, but let's have a conversation because I don't want you to trust me straight off the bat because I don't want to let you down." So, I need us to talk about what it is we need to talk about instead of you going, "I know you, I trust you, therefore I get all this information to do something with." And we get there, that's not a problem. But for me, the importance is about the relationship because it's about the relationship forever after. It's not about, I'm just here to run a six week program for you. So the women that are the women that support me and hold me together who have been formerly incarcerated, those lifers, that have spent fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years in prison, they're the ones that actually I ring or they ring me and they're on the management committee outside now and the women inside that actually give me the information that I need to go and do it.

So if there's an issue—more recently, when you asked that I thought of this, staff came out and said, "Oh, one of the women in there said that," I forget what the gossip was—prisons are great for gossip—but anyway, I said, "Who said that, I'll go and see them." So I just went directly and called up the two women that apparently had gossip that wasn't true about Sisters. And that's okay. But they didn't come up when I called them. Anyway, the lifers are going, "Don't fucking worry about it. They're just traveling gossip." No, I want to talk to them. I want to know what the hell's going on. Anyway, when I'm about to leave, the screws are saying it's lockdown and we had to leave the prison, I saw one of them and I went, "Hey," let's call her Mary, "You wanted to see me. You had something you wanted." "Oh, yes. yes. Do you do family law?" I said, "No, I don't," I said, "but you got something to say, gossip. What you got to fucking say? Let's get it out." And, she's like, "No, Debbie, that wasn't me that was someone—" I said, "Oh, so you're going to throw someone else in it?" But it's like, "Look, I'm going to tell you. What you're saying is actually not accurate. This is the reality." And she's like, "Oh, okay, okay, okay."

So, it's about nipping any type of conflict in the bud, because people stir up shit in prison. You know that, right? We all know that. The prison officers stir up. They did that to get Debbie killed, started the conflict. And so, I don't play those games. We've got to deal with conflict, head on. You've got an issue with me? That's okay. I don't have a problem with that, but let's talk about it and resolve it. You can still not like me at the day. I don't care, but let's resolve it and move on, or let's resolve it and understand each other a bit more so we can build a relationship and work together because you're not my enemy. I'm not your enemy. The state, the prison system is the enemy, okay? So let's focus our energy on that and not on ripping each other apart.

Q: I love that. You've mentioned Kathy, you've mentioned Cheryl, and you've mentioned Angela Davis as some people who inspired you, challenged you, opened your eyes in new ways.

In 1998 you read Kathy's article about parenting from a distance and you brought this into the prison. Can you talk about, first of all, like how did you get the article? How did you come across it? And then what did it mean to you to see someone creating like that from the inside?

Kilroy: Yes, that was great. A mate of mine gave me—it was like in a journal, it was one of the articles in a journal. Because everything's book based then, we had nothing electronic. So it's like, [*holds up hand*], Oh my God, this is it. This is what we're doing, this is what they're doing. Like, Oh my God, I've got to go find out who Kathy is.

And yes, and took it to the women inside. And particularly because most of us were mothers, primary caregivers of our children. And so out of that, there was a lot of parenting programs that came out of that. That the women and we supported inside to run.

But also, like my son, who's here with me now—he's now thirty-seven, but he was little then—wrote a series of children's books for other children whose mums are in prison. And we're just in the process of getting them re-illustrated now. Because they were illustrated back in the '90s. So, they're definitely '90s [*laughs*]. We've got this great Aboriginal designer, he's redesigning—because my son's Aboriginal, my children are Aboriginal, but anyway, so they're written in that way, and so they're getting redesigned by an Aboriginal artist at the moment, which is great, to be re-launched. But it was great, and it was great then when Angela came, meeting Angela, and so Angela's a great artist. I went to school with Kathy, and that's where I met Kathy, because Angela got Kathy to come to Angela's place when I was at Angela's place, and that's how we all met.

Q: Oh, wow. Okay. Were there other programs that women built that you feel reflected some of the work that you wanted to do? Were there other sources of inspiration for Sisters Inside?

Kilroy: Yes, a lot of the work that was done—especially by the lifers and long termers that was in the Boggo Road [*phonetic*] Prison—was about education, because there was someone to support that. Which allowed us to build the library, have a really great library.

And one of the lifers who's went to prison two days before me. So our journey has travelled for all those years, thirty something years and I fought—she ended up doing twenty-three years—fought for her to get out. And so she's amazing. She has a degree in all these—different degrees—in politics and many other different things that she did in prison. But she loves books, and so she ran the library and had this fantastic catalogue system and we just had all these amazing books. But the libraries have been one of those targets by the prison system to gut because that's where women get information. Information's power, and they don't like it.

Q: Did you have a mentor? Do you have a mentor?

Kilroy: I think my mentor is depending on what's happening for me in a sense, or what's happening around me. I have lots of formerly incarcerated women, like I said, those that I grew up with and been in prison with that are still involved as sisters, or even if they're not.

I have Cheryl. I have Andrea from the National Council. I have Angela, I have Gina, I have Erica Miners, I have Andrea Ritchie, I have Beth Ritchie, they're all at the conference this last year. I've got Kim Pate in Canada. There's many women around the world. And depending where we are at what time, but we always find a way to come together. We used to always be together every year. COVID obviously put a cap on that, but now we're back again. We had

Sisters' big International Conference at the end of last year, where they were all at, and it was fantastic.

Q: So who do you currently mentor?

Kilroy: I probably mentor mostly the long termers and lifers in the prison, who are on our committee. And also, all the formerly incarcerated staff and Aboriginal women that are employed at Sisters Inside. I mentor and support them to lift them up to take over the organization. Because we talk about succession. I don't think—I'm not going anywhere in the sense of what I'm doing, but I do need to hand over day-to-day, the driving of the organization. So I've mentored a number of young Aboriginal women who are now in their thirties, hitting forties, that can take the reins and run, which is going to be fantastic. And Tia, who was in prison, is now the president. So I would like Sisters Inside to eventually be run by all Aboriginal women.

Q: So how has this inside and outside organizing changed you as a woman?

Kilroy: I don't know, it's been a journey of lots of ups and downs, and a lot of the times I don't really think about myself in that sense. Because, like you said, when you get attacked by the state or others that come after you, they use what we do against us. And, that can actually dismantle organizations very quickly. We've been lucky that because we're a values based, driven organization, that everybody works within those values, that we haven't.

And more so because of the relationships. So, the relationships they have with the women inside, women outside, formerly incarcerated, but also those that haven't been formerly incarcerated that are on management committee or staff members, those relationships. So those relationships are ones that will be forever after. So myself and other women my age,

when we're in prison together, are raising our grandbabies together, so that they don't end up in the system. And, that's what's growing me to know.

And my kids will go, "Oh my God, so your grandkids, you never say no to them about anything. We weren't allowed anything." It's like, "Oh, get over yourselves, you adults. Go and have some therapy, seriously," [*laughs*] "just deal with it." But it's the funny because the kids come to all the protests. They're very aware about the prison industrial complex, about abolition. We've got all the children's books about, give the police stations to the grandmas, and writing books and talking to them about it.

And it's so funny because one of the little ones who's just turned seven, she's known for a long time that police are not our friend. Because we've growed her up to know that. And she can articulate that. She can even articulate class. A lot of adults can't articulate class. They have a police officer in the school, and she goes, "That police officer, Nana, smiled at me." I went, "Oh, yes." She said, "Should I smile back?" I said, "Well, is she all right?" "Yes, she's alright. She's a police officer." I said, "Yes, I get that, but you can smile back," I said, "but it's all the police together, alright? That they will stop you because you're Black. Because of the racism, right? That's the problem. So we've got to protect you. You've got to protect yourself." And, it was so funny because her mum was telling her that because we were going away up North Queensland. Where they're going to build a children's prison. And we got a campaign, End toxic prisons, and blow up the pipeline.

So we're spending a lot of time up in that community in Cairns, North Queensland, speaking to the Aboriginal community, bringing them together to oppose the prison. And she's relating this to Pipey—my granddaughter—that's where we going, and they go, "[*Gasps*] put children in prison?" It's like, "Yes, but we're going up there to stop that." It's like, "How do you stop

it?" I say, "Nana's going up there to stop—" "[*Gasps*] oh, Nana." [*Laughs*] and then she started talking about the police again to her mother. And so, her mother's saying to her, "So if you get stopped by the police, you've got to tell them your name, and where you live, and your date of birth, like how old are you. And then you ring Nana." She's, "[*Gasps*] is Nana the boss of the police?" [*Laughs*] her mother thought, I cannot explain that right now. No, she's not. So then she's telling all the other grandkids when they all went away—because my daughter takes them all away, like about six of them, for three days every school holidays to give their mothers a break and does fun things. And she's in the back of the car saying, "Our Nana is the boss of the police." It's like, Oh, fuck, I'm not the boss of the police. But they have this analysis, right? They know, they understand. And that's what, from where I've been to where I'm now, they are our future.

Q: So what do you want your legacy to be when you pass on from this earth? Of course, you're still creating, you're still doing, but at this moment in your life now?

Kilroy: I always say to people, I go back to racial capitalism and people want things and that people value things, property, over people. I don't. I value people over property. And I've always said that. Things get taken from our organization when someone's desperate. A staff member might get upset. It's like, no, that says something's going on for her. We need to talk to her about what's going on. That's how we address this because I value her more than what she's taken. I can replace your makeup or whatever it is, or a couple hundred bucks or whatever, but I can't replace her.

And I always think about that if I'm on my—like go back to that lecture, that first lecture, old woman bedridden. So if I'm an old woman bedridden, I want my family and friends around me. I don't want to be sitting there thinking, Damn, I could have bought another car or

something. Because it means nothing. What means is the relationships and the love and the care that I have for them and they have for me. And that's what carries on.

Q: So what's next for you? What are you thinking about doing next?

Kilroy: Oh, sometimes I just want to—maybe I shouldn't say this—strap on a bomb and blow the place up. But no, joking. [*Laughter*] Because, you know. It is like banging your head against a brick wall getting nowhere. It gets bigger and bigger. Oh, don't worry, I spent three hours locked up down in LA.

Q: I've been working really hard to be quiet during this interview, but she has been cracking me up. Okay, let me ask the question again. Okay, I've just got to get it out. Because you know when you've been holding your breath, you've been laughing inside your mouth. It's like you've just got to breathe.

Okay. So what's next for you?

Kilroy: I think I'm doing what's next.

Q: Which is?

Kilroy: Every day I get up and every day I'm here for women in prison and girls in prison and formerly incarcerated women and girls. And to end the incarceration of women and girls. That's what I'm doing and that's what I will always be doing. I won't be doing anything much else. And you know what? So much fits into that. Every system, every structure, whether it's education, health, whatever. The racism and the poverty is alive and thriving, and there's many people making money off our backs, and that's got to stop. Until we can actually dismantle that society and rebuild a different society, only then we will value each other.

But every day I work on valuing other people, no matter who crosses my path, whether I agree or disagree with them. You're still a person. I separate behavior from people and see it as two separate things.

Q: I hear that as being maybe one of the major takeaways for your time of organizing with women in prison and today. I hear you saying, "I value people. I value these women, these lives, these children over things and propping up the system." What else would you say is the few major takeaways, if someone watches this and goes, "Crap, I needed to hear that, that way from you."

Kilroy: I think one of the biggest things is about, look around you. Who do you have around you? Who's supporting you? Who are you supporting? And are those relationships honest and real? Something that prisons have taught me from a very young age, and growing up in poverty with other children, is that we always had each other's back. I find now in society, people don't have each other's back.

People are too busy tearing each other down where we need to build people up. Because when we build others up, we get built up as well. And so one of the things that I look for is the deepest, darkest holes where people are in that prison industrial complex. Because if we can raise those people up, everything floats up.

And white women like myself float higher because of racism, but until we deal with that. At the moment, in the system we're seeing at home, like I said, the mass incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls moreso and those numbers are going through the roof. But, Aboriginal trans women, they're kept in the deepest, darkest, the bowels of a men's prison, where the violence that's being facilitated by prison officers against them—whether it's physical violence or rape—is like mind blowing. And no one is listening

to that, no one cares about that. But we do care about that. So one of the things that we've been doing now for the last few years is we're working in the men's prison with trans women, and they're predominantly Aboriginal trans women.

Q: Wow. That was my last question because I made sure that we were covering everything as we went through.

Kilroy: There's so much.

Q: It's so much, right? And I feel like I've grabbed everything and it was a lot. But I want to make sure that you have the last word and if you feel like there's anything else that you have not said that you want to make sure that you say, I'll give you the floor.

Kilroy: [*Laughs*] Sure. I don't know, it's 2 o'clock in the morning at home. What does my brain say needs to happen right now? I think we've covered so much ground. It's hard to cover a lifetime of criminalization, imprisonment and activism, seriously. I'm sixty-three years old, so it's a long time, right?

But I think, what I love is the work that you're doing, that everyone's doing here, that Cheryl's doing, Kathy's legacy. I love the work that's happening in all different pockets around the world and that we're supporting, particularly with the international network of formerly incarcerated women and girls.

And, just how different starting points we're all at as formerly incarcerated women. But women who are just struggling to have food in prison because it's not provided, to our country where I live, which is a rich country, we don't have to worry about that. So we're more advanced in regards to abolishing the prison industrial complex when women here are

just struggling to find money to feed women and children in prison. But it's how we here, even formerly incarcerated, can support those women here, to even send them some money.

So recently we were in Bogota for the first face-to-face international meeting last year, and we went to the prison. And it was interesting, one of the prison officers approached us, because we met with a group of women in the hall, like the library, and spoke to them. And Claudia from Colombia was in that prison for nine and a half years, and she's been going back working in the prison. And we've been we're supporting her, and she's part of the international network. But a prison officer pulled us aside, and there was an old elderly Colombian woman there who had a brain tumor and but can have medication so it doesn't grow any further but can't afford it. So we gave them hundreds of dollars to pay for the medication for a year to keep her alive because we can do that. I have the resources now, and other women like Andrea, like we have the resource—Andrea James of the National Council—have the resource to say take our money because we don't need it, we need to keep her alive. So things like that.

So we're all on different parts of the journey and that's okay. But as long as we are still back here for those at the beginning of the journey and not going further, that we come back and keep bringing people forward with us and do it again, and again, and again.

Q: I love that. Oh my God. Yes. I never missed council. I found that when I came out of prison, I'm five years out—and we're good, we're at a good natural stop. I went to council and I found, Here's a group of people who are fighting on this stuff with that I'm going through. And I felt like I finally felt like I wasn't alone in Evangelical conservative Republican, Indiana where I am. So yes, and I want to come to this international conference, I want to be in community. I really appreciate this, your sharing—

Kilroy: Big protest in Washington.

Q: I'm coming.

Kilroy: I am too.

Q: Oh, great. I'll see you there. I'm coming, representing Constructing Our Future. Okay, I'll be looking for you.

Kilroy: Yes, you too. It'll be great.

Q: You finished your checkbox—

Kilroy: Yes.

Q: —on how you identify yourself. And you are on your own groove if you want to go to the bathroom or anything. I just really appreciate it. Can I give you a hug?

Kilroy: Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]