

It was very hot in the high desert on the day I unexpectedly got kicked out of my foster care home. I had celebrated my 18th birthday just a few weeks prior, and my caregiver had finally received her last paycheck from the State of California. Once she received her last payment, I was no longer a source of revenue and thus, no longer wanted me in the home. I had spent nearly a decade in the foster care system, taken away by Child Protective Services at the age of eight from my drug addicted mother and an abusive step-father.

I was homeless for a year and a half following my “emancipation” from the California foster care system, and survived on less than \$20 a week by “couch surfing” between a few friends’ homes. I aged out with no form of ID and no birth certificate and worked very hard to obtain what for other young adults were routine. Amongst all the chaos and instability, I also fought to stay in school. I moved often and soon found myself working two jobs, pregnant, and about to attend my third community college. I knew that hard work and education were the keys to achieving my life goals, and I remained determined and motivated to provide a better life for my son and myself.

My son was born in January 2009, with my future husband standing by my side. A few hours after his birth, we watched the inauguration of our first African American President. I felt hopeful, because for the first time in my life, my family was intact and my educational dreams alive. Two years later, I would transfer to a UC.

As an undergraduate, I hit the ground running by starting an academic resource for transfer students and immediately got involved in the University Honors program and prepared to write a thesis. I graduated with high honors, demonstrating that despite a rough start in higher education, I am capable of succeeding as a student. My academic records show a steady upward trend with my best marks received in my last two undergraduate years where I skillfully managed demanding research projects, working, and raising my son.

I focused my research on existing policing policies in underserved communities, an interest that resulted in two senior honors theses. One was a cross-sectional study on the university's transfer students' on-time graduation and levels of school engagement. The other applied Rawlsian theory to our current criminal justice system. The purpose of this pairing was to illustrate the horror of mass incarceration from a political theory standpoint grounded in an advocacy agenda. My research focused on the language permitting unjust profiling or sanctioning and I discovered many references to the stop-and-frisk policy that rose from the *Terry v. Ohio (1968)* ruling. Police were allowed to stop and search someone they *suspected* of being involved in criminal activity, and who “looked” dangerous. This was, a far more liberal stance than was previously allowed, and one which most definitely violates a person's fourth amendment right to not be searched arbitrarily, on “suspicion” of being involved in criminal activity.¹ This ruling allowed for the creation of automatic targets based on the color of one's skin and a person's residential neighborhood—something Justice Douglas warned about in his dissent. I argued that our current system is not fair, and would not survive if law makers stood behind the “Veil of Ignorance” with the risk of ending up in a less-than-privileged social standing.

As a JD/PhD student, I hope to expand this research and work with communities hit hardest by these policies. I want to learn more about the way we codify and define culpability of drug-related crimes and explore theoretical approaches to change. I hope to be able to assist clients at the ninth circuit appellate level in habeas, and civil rights cases. My future goals include work as an attorney, and then moving into legal academia—all in the spirit of advocating for those in need.

¹ Alexander, Michelle. 2013. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press.