

Opinion: I was one of 'those' people before addiction struck

I am a pretty quintessential middle-class American woman. My ancestry is Danish and English— maybe some Scottish somewhere. I'm just enough of a WASP to have some ancestors who fought in the Revolution. But I certainly didn't feel superior to the blue-collar Italian and Irish kids in the lower-middle-class neighborhood where I grew up — in fact, I would have laughed at the notion that, merely as white people, any of us were privileged. I reserved that term for the rich kids living in big houses across town. In my book, privilege meant you had a lot more than my family had.

We weren't exactly poor though, and I was taught to have compassion for those less fortunate than me. But it was mostly an abstract idea, a slightly sterile empathy felt from a distance that rarely had to be put to the test. And those I pitied didn't really include criminals or drug addicts. I was raised with the same belief still held by most white people in this country; that the criminal justice system is by-and-large fair, and if you're in jail, it's probably because you deserve to be. I knew that people of color were somewhat more skeptical about the system's fairness, but didn't ask too many questions as to why. That would have involved imagining their experience at a much-deeper level, and probably questioning the received beliefs I thought of as objectively true. Only when my personal reality was shattered did I realize all of my assumptions were built on quicksand.

Oct. 24, 2012 is when everything changed. That was the day my son went to prison. As one of the new friends I made in line waiting to visit him later told me: "Honey, that's the day you became black."

As I witnessed the machinery of the criminal justice system chew up my son, she saw that I was getting a crash course in the experience most black people in this country were all too familiar with. My friend's entire family had been colliding with the criminal justice system their whole lives — or rather, the system had been colliding with them. I was simply in more shock about what was happening to my son because, for most of my life, prison had only been something that happened to other people. Those people.

Suddenly I was one of those people, and I began to realize what a mean and meaningless distinction that had always been. I had long had the tools to imagine their experience. I had been a mother for 27 years, after all, and the mother of an opioid addict for over two years. I had known the fear and anxiety of wondering if the next phone call would be "that" phone call; now I knew the ironic mixture of rage and relief that he was finally "safe" in the most dangerous of places.

The relief was short-lived; the rage remained. It's hard to be grateful for a brutal detox marked by collect calls so wrenching that I almost hoped he'd find heroin inside. That is a terrible thought for a mother of a drug addict to have — but every mother I met had it also.

The National Incarceration Association was born of this emotional solidarity. And no issue unites us more than our anger and frustration at a system which has become so obsessed with retribution that rehabilitation is an afterthought, if a thought at all. This is not only bad policy, it's the classic definition of insanity. We've been trying to punish our way out of addiction for decades now, and expecting different results. How much suffering do we have to collectively endure before we try something else?

After several years of becoming all too intimate with the workings for the Georgia correctional system, I can unequivocally state that things can be done very differently. Our mania for incarceration may be crazy, but it has offered up an extraordinary opportunity. Hundreds of thousands of drug addicts are

living in controlled environments that can be reconfigured to transform their lives instead of destroy them.

It is true that, in the short-run, it costs more money to rehabilitate prisoners than to merely warehouse them. But in the long-run, the costs to society and the taxpayer are repaid many times over. Don't take my word for it. Every single Western European country has much-lower rates of incarceration with far less crime. Rehabilitation works.

There are hundreds of solutions being proposed and tried – I hope you join us in pursuing some of them. But all of the fixes start with a willingness to imagine the experience of people you may not think you have anything in common with. And ultimately, it means embracing the idea that absolutely no one is irredeemable.

Kate Boccia is founder of The National Incarceration Association. Her son Daniel is set for release next year.