

# getting RESULTS

Long Island  
Community  
Foundation

A DIVISION OF  
THE NEW YORK COMMUNITY TRUST

# on Long Island

“I have come to understand that we all need to hear the words of these women; they are our mothers, sisters, wives, and friends. The women who raise us, love us, and support us deserve no less.”

— Jonathan Scherr,  
director of Suffolk Jail DWI Facility.



Incarcerated women read from their memoirs in the Herstory Writers Workshop.

## Starting a New Chapter: Women Inmates Use Writing Workshop to Heal

“**B**eing molested was as normal as changing my underwear, but it was the most frightening, shameful part of my life,” writes Suffolk County Prison inmate Cherlene in the memoir she wrote in the **Herstory Writers Workshop**. She continued, “I am so tired of playing hide and seek, hearing footsteps coming closer and closer. I yell, ‘Stop! Leave me alone! You’re hurting me!’ He would say. ‘Shut the hell up.’ And so I learned to cry without making a sound.”

With eight in ten women in prison reporting being abused as children, this is tragically where many of their stories start. A lack of education is also a common problem: more than half of women entering prison don't have a high school diploma or GED. The Herstory Writers Workshop has helped women on both fronts—providing them with an outlet to develop their voices while also helping to improve their reading and writing skills.

Each year, 150 women enroll in one of three weekly workshops where they write and share personal memoirs, often reflecting on the violence, poverty, addiction, and other obstacles that have ensnared them. With grants totaling **\$60,000**, the Long Island Community Foundation has supported Herstory Writers Workshop since 2007, helping to expand the memoir-writing program for women incarcerated in the Riverhead and Yaphank prisons.

The impact of the program on the inmates, the guards, and other prison staff has been tremendous. “Everything I write sets me freer with every page. I want to be truly free, 'cause this cross I carry is too heavy. I'm done dying everyday... I want to take my disappointments and turn them into a success story,” offered Addie, another Herstory writer. “I want my words to inspire someone else who has lost a child after loving them, to be able to move on without turning to negative influences. I want to touch young kids so they never touch heroin.”

In an otherwise dehumanizing prison system, this therapeutic project has helped women face their demons and start new chapters in their lives. As a result, only three percent of women who have worked with Herstory have returned to prison, compared with the 22 to 24 percent general recidivism rate for female inmates in Suffolk County. “While Herstory is not a direct ticket to a new life, those of us who have worked deeply with this process can attest to its power in shedding shame, self-hate, and memories that haunt and destroy our best intentions,” said

Linda Coleman, who helps lead the workshops and edit *Voices – Memoirs from Herstory Inside Prison*.

The publication of this collection has helped guards, wardens, and other prisoners gain a better understanding of these women and has transformed the attitudes of those who guard them. “At first it was uncomfortable to listen to these women share their lives, fears, and needs,” said Jonathan Scherr, director of Suffolk Jail DWI Facility. “But I have come to understand that we all need to hear the words of these women; they are our mothers, sisters, wives, and friends. The women who raise us, love us, and support us deserve no less.”

As the mind-set of prison officials changed, so did the rules and policies that regulate the lives of incarcerated women. While busing inmates from one prison to another had only previously been permitted for medical emergencies, Suffolk County began busing members of the Yaphank writing group to the Riverhead facility for a shared Herstory reading. Mr. Scherr continued, “Many of our women come from a dark place and Herstory allows them to shed some light on their true beauty.”

---

## Excerpts from memoirs written in Herstory workshops

**“I thought if a man beats you, he loves you. This is what I'd learned. I even used to do bad things on purpose just to test out this crazy sick love.” — *Cherlene***

**“It's so easy to drop back into addiction lane. No matter where my addiction took me...hotels, motels, next door, living room, bedroom, on the block or in the bushes—all the way to nowhere and everywhere.” — *Joy***

**“I had never been able recognize the story I read [in Herstory] and my life as one and the same. I've spent more time running from my life than actually trying to have one, and I just want to thank Linda [Coleman] and Lonnie [Mathis] so much for giving me the chance to be free of my past and start a brand new chapter in my book.” — *Cara***