

Megan Wilson:

Hi, I am Megan Wilson and I am with the Carceral State Project. And I am here with-

Debra Wright:

I'm Debra Wright, also known as Debbie. And I am with Nation Outside and doing an interview with Megan today.

Megan Wilson:

Today is April 23rd, 2021. And we are conducting this interview over Zoom from Ann Arbor and Jackson, Michigan. So Debbie, where and when were you born?

Debra Wright:

So I was born on March 22nd, 1955 in Rangeley, actually in Farmington, Maine. Rangeley was so small we did not have a hospital. I was one of three children at that time, but three more would come very quickly. So I had, the oldest of our siblings was a boy and the rest were girls. We lived in Maine in a really small cabin that my grandfather had built. My mom and my dad met when she was a nurse and he was in the hospital, I think he had a positive TB test or something. I never really got all of the skinny on that. But my mom, when I was about three, came back to Ann Arbor, she had come here to nursing school at U of M. And when I was about three, she came back to find a job. So she was here and my dad with five kids was in Maine.

Debra Wright:

And then we moved here to Ann Arbor when I was about four. And the one memory that I have of that trip is that my mom took me to the store with her, just me. And that was the only time when I was young that I remember doing anything alone with my mother without other siblings around. And I felt really special. And it was kind of nice. So we moved here to Ann Arbor when I was four years old, and my dad really developed an alcohol use disorder. He drank a lot, mom worked. And so he was sort of always home with us. It was a bit chaotic for me and a little disturbing. I had some sort of sense about my dad's drinking when I was very young, that there was something very dangerous there, and it scared me.

Debra Wright:

I think the other kids all thought that he was funny and they'd get down on the floor and play around with him. And I was not like that at all. So there were a couple of instances when I was young that I wanted to leave because my mom would sometimes leave us alone with my dad when he was drinking and when he would get abusive to her, she would sort of leave the house. And I remember one day, this is etched in my memory, like in stone. I was crying. I knew she was leaving and I didn't want to be there with him. Everybody else was having a good time and laughing and joking. And I was standing at the door crying while she was leaving. Like, "Mommy, mommy, take me with you." And I know it must've been super hard for her, but she said, "Debbie, I can't, I can't." And she left me at the door crying.

Debra Wright:

And I will never forget that. I mean, it made an impression on me and I was scared and I had to fend for myself is what I felt like. There were a couple of times when she took a couple of us girls and there was one time when we snuck around to the backyard and sat under a tree until all the lights went out in the house and then we waited 20 minutes and all went in and went to bed. I guess, I always sensed in my

father, his anger. There was domestic violence and he would sometimes hit my mom. And there was one incident where I feel like I was almost killed by him. I'm not sure how close I came, but my mom... My sister, Diane and I, she's the one that's just older than me had found some matches. And so we were sitting in our closet at night lighting matches and watching them burn. And we were trying to burn the house down, but they were pretty.

Debra Wright:

So my mom found them and gave them to my dad and we had to get in line for our spankings. And Diane took hers like a champ and I did not. So my dad had to drag me over to him. He put me over his knee and spanked me really hard and I was screaming and crying. And then I walked by my mom to walk upstairs and I said, something like, "I hate you." And my dad raced after me, grabbed me by my neck and held me up on a wall. And he basically said, "You will not talk to your mother like that." And my mom was standing there and eventually she's like, "What are you... Put her down, you're going to kill her." And he put me down and then he took his belt off and whipped me with the metal end of the belt. And I had huge welts all over my body and my face was all red from crying. And they let me change my shirt and sent me to school and no one said a word.

Debra Wright:

And that's kind of how it was back in those days. And it was traumatizing for me, very traumatizing. The other incident that I think that was super traumatizing for me was a birthday party. I think it was about eight years old. And I rarely had people over to the house because there was just so much chaos. So I was excited. It was my first birthday party at home. And I got home and I went downstairs and there was decorations on the way down. And I was like, "Yay, this is so cool." And then I got downstairs and my dad was sitting down there drunk and he's like, "Oh, here's the birthday girl." And all I had to do was hear his voice to know that he'd been drinking. And it was just, I went to my mom crying. I was like, "Mom, can you make him go upstairs, he's going to embarrass me."

Debra Wright:

Oh, I think he eventually he went up, but I just never enjoyed the party. And I don't think I ever had friends over again while he was alive. I don't think I had them much over before. So those were two incidents that I recall from when my father, before he passed away. And when I was 11, he died. My mom was out at a church function and we were all home alone with him. And he went upstairs, when he came down, he couldn't talk, he said, "David get me some aspirin." And then he kind of was mumbling and moaning and David called the police and the police came, but they wouldn't take him to the hospital because there was no adults in the house. So he laid there for what seemed like an eternity before an ambulance came. I think they finally got ahold of my mom and somebody from the church came over.

Debra Wright:

Somebody from the church came over that night and gave me a half of a Valium. And that was my first experience with drugs. They play a big part in my life. And then I woke up the next morning and I could hear talking downstairs and I just knew that he had passed away. Yeah, that was a big impact on my life because my father had been my primary caretaker. Mom worked, she would go to work in the afternoon when we'd get home. And so I didn't really know her. And then I'd also had some resentments with her for sort of leaving me there in those kinds of things. So then she waltzed in and wanted to parent me and I was having none of that. I was having none of that. I had the attitude like, "Excuse me, who are you again, remind me?"

Debra Wright:

So I was immediately a rebel. I had problems. I had a lot of anger. My mother was not a big communicator. She was not a person who sat down and talked a lot. I mean, she had six kids and I understand it now, but at the time I was like, "Well, she doesn't even care. She's not even talking to me." She just wanted us to do what we had to do. And I was not going to do that. So by the age of 12, I just had so much anger in me that she took me to see a psychiatrist. She started out, and my mom has a horrible sense of direction. And I knew we were headed towards Chicago. And I knew that the psychiatrist was outside Detroit, and I did not say a word.

Debra Wright:

Finally, she caught on and we didn't go that day, but a couple of weeks later we went. I don't remember who it was, but he wrote me a prescription and he said... (silence).

Debra Wright:

He used contingency management. And by this time, I'm already using drugs and alcohol. And we pretty much made a joke of his program, which I think he didn't appreciate. And he, "I'll give you a quarter if you clean your room." I mean, I was way past that. So we spent a lot of time joking about Dr. Stewart and really made fun of his program. And many years later, I remember there was an article in the paper talking about how some of the families he worked with early on were too far gone. And I was like, "That's me. That was me." So I remained angry and at age 13 there was an incident with my mom where we were in the kitchen and we were arguing and I saw a knife and I picked it up. I wasn't going to stab her. I just was trying to make a point.

Debra Wright:

And my brother jumped on top of me, took the knife away and I ran out the door. And I went up to the park by our school and I remember sitting on the swing set and I was just going back and forth and going back and putting my head back and everything was upside down. And I thought, "This is what my life is. Everything's just sort of turned upside down." And then the police pulled up. And so this is my first, aside from seeing my father taken away by the police a couple of times, this is my first interaction with the police. And they pull up and they said, "Are you Debra Wright?" And I was like, "No, but I saw her go that way." And they were like, "Come with us young lady." I mean, they weren't buying it. And they took me to the U of M, back behind the hospital where there used to be a place called children's psychiatric hospital.

Debra Wright:

And I was like, "Why are you taking me here? There's some kind of a mistake. I don't have any psychiatric problems." And they took me inside and a woman named Sally met me and she was really pretty and had long hair and was just really bubbly, which really sort of offended me. And she took me upstairs. And then my mom came in and I begged and cried and begged. And I was like, "Mom, I can't stay here. Mom, this isn't going to be good for me. I don't want to stay here." And I was sort of pleading and crying. And my mom had packed a suitcase and there I was in a children's psychiatric hospital. And yeah, it was quite an adjustment. So I went to my room and cried and slept through the afternoon. And I was there for most of the summer.

Debra Wright:

I think the hardest part of being there was that my family took their first vacation while I was there. And they went without me and they sent me a card which was even worse. It's like, don't write to me if you're going to go on vacation. So I got out and things went from bad to worse. I started using more drugs more often. I got involved with some older kids I was hanging out with. And by age 14, I was hanging out with some older kids, one of them had a car. And so, We kind of did everything together, ran around together, me and Nancy and Becky. And so we just decided one night that we were going to go to California in Ann's car, which there was a leak in the exhaust system, which I didn't really know what that meant at the time, but we found out by the time we got to like, I don't know, Illinois.

Debra Wright:

We got out and our eyes were all bloodshot. And then we had a flat tire and Ann was writing bad checks to pay for things. And we ended up ditching the car and hitchhiking the rest of the way to California. Now, this was around the time when John Norman Collins was around, and he was a serial killer in Ann Arbor who was killing girls with long brown hair and pierced ears. And it was quite a scary thing. And actually, we left for California the day after John Norman Collins got back from California. And we ended up in the same place where he had killed a girl out there. So that's coming pretty close to a serial killer. Anyway, we went out to California and we hung out there. We were in Los Angeles initially, and we stayed with these hippies. We were all hippies back then. But one of us got raped, one of the first nights we were there.

Debra Wright:

So we left LA and we hitchhiked up to Big Sur, and we were hanging out in the woods and having a great time until... We were there, probably gone a couple of weeks and the police saw us one day just hanging out on a bench and stopped us and took us in. They ended up taking us up to San Francisco and putting us in a juvenile home. And they flew us all back to Michigan eventually. And everybody else's parents were at the airport and the police were there waiting for me. And I went to juvenile detention. And I went in and out of juvenile detention a lot after that. I had trouble adjusting. I'm sure I had some kind of an adjustment disorder as a child. And I always did well when I was in there and I went to school and I got good grades and I was okay while I was in there, but I would get out and start using drugs. And it just went bad, always got bad.

Debra Wright:

When I got out that time, I think I got out and went to, at that point, I got out and went to a foster home. Just the nicest people, the Englisch's, Clifford Englisch. He was a professor, I think at Eastern and his wife and they had a young daughter. And they just didn't know what they were getting into. I think I was their first foster child. And I was trying to use. I was using, I was hanging out with my friends. And I did some heroin the night before, and I came home late and I was at a concert or something, and I remember Cliff calling me into the living room the next day and checking my arms. And he asked me if I'd been using. And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, we can't keep you here. We just can't have you here if you're doing this." And so, I ended up going back to juvie, and ended up at age 15...

Debra Wright:

I mean, I went in and out a lot. I don't remember all of the times that I went in, but at age 15, I ended up in a girls' school in Toledo. So this was a longer term placement. And they said, "If you go here and you do well, we'll get you home in a year." Well, I went there and I got A pluses in all my classes and I buckled down and did a lot of good stuff. And I remember writing to my mom. It was in the winter and I

didn't have any boots. And I was like, "Mom, can you get me some boots. Send me some boots." And so she sent me a pair, not the boots that I would have chosen. So the first day that I wore them, I put them on, I went out and we had to walk out of one building, down some stairs, across the courtyard, to another building, to go to the school there.

Debra Wright:

And there was a little snow and icy and it was in the winter. And I walked down the stairs and both of the heels broke off of the boots. And my schoolmates were all laughing hilariously. And all I said is, "My mom's so damn cheap." And went and I took the boots off and put my shoes back on, but it's funny when I look back on it now. So I did well there. I excelled in school. When the summer came, I worked two different jobs. I worked at a school for kids with developmental disabilities and I loved it. I mean, I just loved working with the kids. It really made me feel like there was a lot of things that I didn't know about out in the world and that I didn't have it off as bad of as maybe I thought I did. So I think it gave me some gratitude.

Debra Wright:

I then worked, the other job that I worked at was for the YMCA. And there was some racial strife there at the school. And so, there were three college kids that had been hired and they asked me if I wanted to join them to go do this investigation about what was going there. And so we went out there. It was a really wonderful experience. I think that really gave me a good view about racial inequity in the world at a very young age. So I was, I think, 15 or 16 at the time. And we went in, we interviewed the students about what was going on and the teachers and the administrators. And then we wrote a report about what we thought should happen and people in the community. And so it was really a good, it was a good way to end my stay there.

Debra Wright:

It really set a tone for me about racial inequity and the injustice in it all, not just at that school, but in our country. It was so easy for me to say see all that. So that was really the last thing that I did while I was at school there. The first thing that I did when I got there though was, they had let me out to pack for a day. And so I went home and I was trying to find some drugs to take with me. And I couldn't really find anything good. So somebody gave me a couple of pills. They told me there were Thorazine, but later on in life, I kind of looked it up and I don't think it was, they were some capsules of something.

Debra Wright:

So my first night there at Luella Cummings in Toledo, I took these capsules and crushed them up and soaked them and I spent hours trying to get enough of this into a syringe to do. And then when I got ready to go to bed, I crawled in bed, I got a syringe and I shot it and I just went out. And when I woke up in the morning, my therapist was sitting at the bed. It was about 10 o'clock. And they thought I was depressed. And I remember I pushed myself up on the bed and I hit the needle that was still in the bed with me. And I was like, "Ooh." And she's like, "What's wrong?" And I'm like, "Oh, nothing, I'm fine." She said, "I know that you're depressed because you're here. And we just want you to get up and things will get better."

Debra Wright:

And so, I just, from day one sort of discounted them. I'm like, "Why would you think that this is depression? This is clearly some drug-induced coma that I'm in." But anyway, I managed to pick up and

move on and make that a fairly good experience. So at the end of the summer I went home and I started talking to my mom and like, "When am I going to get registered for school here? And I'm ready to come home." And my mom got this look on her face and she said, "Debbie, I just can't have you come home right now." And I was like, "What?" I just couldn't believe it. I was livid. I'm sure I called her every name in the book. I ran out the door and slammed the door and went up to the Diag. I couldn't believe that she was going to make me stay there for the rest of my high school experience.

Debra Wright:

So once again, I'm just angry and I'm sitting up on the Diag, and this guy comes up and he sits down. He's like, "Hey, you want to talk?" And I'm like, "No, not really. I'm mad." And he said, "Well, what are you mad about?" And I didn't tell him right away, but eventually I said, "Me and my mom we're fighting." And that she wanted me to go back to this program in Toledo, and I didn't want to go. And he's like, "Oh man, that's rough." And I had tried to get ahold of my friends and I couldn't get them. And so I ended up going and sleeping at his, he had a room here. I just slept on his couch. And the next day he said, "Do you want to go to New York with me?" And I was like, "New York City?" I'm like, "Sure."

Debra Wright:

I mean, 16 years old. I didn't have a clue. So a couple of days later, we got on a bus and went to New York. I had no idea what to expect until I got there. And then, he didn't have his own place. We were staying with these other people and we had dinner with them. And then after dinner, Michelle, I'll call her Michelle went into her room and she was getting ready to go out somewhere. I thought that maybe they were going out, but when she came out of the room, she had a very short skirt, lots of makeup, her hair was all done. And she came and gave her guy a kiss and she's like, "Okay, I'll be back later." And it was pretty clear that she was going out to prostitute.

Debra Wright:

So the guy that I went with talked to me about it, and I was like, "I don't want to do that." And he's like, "I understand, but I don't know how we're going to get by unless you do." So the first night that I went out, I mean, I finally realized, "I can do this." So I went out with Michelle and she was schooling me on what to do and what not to do. And I call them hooker how to's. So, "Don't do this, don't do that. Leave your clothes by the door. There's a guy in a red car. Don't go with him because he's scary." And I didn't even get with... The first night that I was out there, one guy picked me up and took me to a hotel. And he was like, "What are you doing out here? This is dangerous out here. You are too young to be out here. How old are you?" And I was like, "I'm 18." I was 16. But he knew, and he tried to steer me in the right direction. He didn't have sex with me.

Debra Wright:

He gave me his business card and he said, "Let me help you. Keep this." And as soon as he dropped me back off, the police picked me up. So I went to jail that first night. And I went back a few more times while I was there. And I was there probably about six months. And then I was of age, I was 17. I was like, "They can't send me back to that school now." And so then I came back to Ann Arbor. I mean, when I was there in New York, I drank a lot. I did a lot of cocaine. I didn't really get into heroin there. But as soon as I got back, I immediately started, I moved back in with my mom and I started getting high again. And within six months, the guys I was hanging around with had guns and we did an armed robbery. I stuck up. I mean, I had a gun on me and we did a lot of robberies. And we robbed some college students and that's what I got arrested for.

Debra Wright:

And so at age 17, I was charged with armed robbery, facing life in prison. And the prosecutor wanted me to get life in prison. I mean, he was pushing for the, get life in prison. And this was the first time that I had actually, I mean, I'd been in jail in New York, but it was overnight. And I knew it would be just a short little blip, but it was something I was accustomed to because I'd been in juvenile and I'd been used to that. So at age 17, I found out that I was pregnant when I was in jail. I had been seeing a guy. And I was scared. I was a little kid. I mean, I didn't have any kind of skills at all, but the judge, God bless him, gave me probation. He broke down the armed robbery charge, gave me five years probation.

Debra Wright:

I ended up having the baby and I tried to parent her, but I didn't have what it took. I did not have the emotional stability or wherewithal or I didn't have any parenting skills. And I was a little traumatized, little, 18 year old. And I ended up giving her up for adoption. And the agency that I worked with said that they would give, get pictures of her and keep me updated about her. And that made me feel a lot better. That wasn't true because when I went back, they said, "I never told you that," which just made me angrier. But I continued to use and ended up in prison at age 20 for the first time. I went because some guys that I were hanging out with, we were just trying to get some money. And they were breaking into houses and I was driving the car and the police were following them, or following us.

Debra Wright:

And so I ended up going to jail and going to prison for the first time. I got out on bail, but I kept using, because I didn't know anything else. I didn't know anything else. And I think the heroin just covered up the trauma and the pain, the emotional pain that I hadn't dealt with. So it was a good fit in many ways, except it kept taking me to jail. It took me many, many years to learn, if you use drugs, you commit crimes, you go to jail. My addiction would not let me learn that. So I got out on bail, but I didn't get sentenced. And when I was sentenced, everybody was on vacation. This kind of served a theme in my life.

Debra Wright:

And I went, I used, I was using lots of heroin. I had a big habit at the time. And I had talked with my attorney and they were gonna give me methadone in the jail. So I felt better about that. But the day that I went to court and got sentenced, they took me to prison that same day, which is unheard of. I mean, they have to process paperwork and do all this other stuff. I think they just didn't want to deal with my habits. So I went to prison in withdrawal basically. And that was scary. That was very frightening. I went to the Detroit House of Correction, which is a very old facility. And I was high when I got there. I mean, I was still high from that morning. And I remember the woman that was fingerprinting me, she said, "Dang, what do you got there? You got any more of that?" And I was like, "If you let me out of here, I'll go get you some."

Debra Wright:

But I went through withdrawal and it was very, very difficult. They gave you a pot to take in your room in case you had to urinate at night or defecate, and it's just a black pot. And I was like, "Oh my God, I'm not using that pot." I mean, it was horrible. It was horrible. And I was up there, I think for a few weeks, because I was pretty sick. And then they sent me to [Share 00:32:52] House, which was one of the units on the ground that was a treatment center. So I was there for probably about eight months, I think. The program, I think it helped me get a little bit of insight into myself, but not a lot. So I had some insight,

but not a great amount. And I left there... I mean, I think that being in prison that time was really hard. I always felt different. I felt like there was something wrong with me. Something that separated me from other people. I didn't feel like I was the same as other people. I always felt different.

Debra Wright:

And I think during that time, I felt very isolated, even being in a unit that was supposed to be helping me, I don't think that I got much help there. So when I got out of prison that time I went to Grand Rapids. At that point they screened you and said, "Hey, we have this place where you can go and there's room for you if you want to go." So I don't think I saw the Parole Board that time. Not that I, I don't remember. I've only seen the Parole Board, I think once, even though I'd been in prison four times. So I went to Grand Rapids. I was like, "Okay, I'll give it a try."

Debra Wright:

So I'm in this halfway house. There's just been a bunch of chaos when I arrived there. So one of the women that was there was having sex with the director who was drinking and she was drinking and pretty soon I was drinking. And so we got caught drinking. And I went to jail. I had only been out like a week. And I sat in jail for a while and I was like, "I don't want to do this. I don't want this to be my life." So I ended up going back and making it through the halfway house. And I drank a lot when I got on parole. So I worked at a hotel. There is nine, it was the [Pamela 00:35:44] Hotel. There's nine bars in there. So it's a different bar every night of the week. And I did not only drink there, I drank a lot of other places.

Debra Wright:

So I did a lot of drinking while I was there. I ended up coming back to Ann Arbor too on the weekends, just because I never really made a lot of friends in Grand Rapids. And ended up, starting to use again. And then, I ended up moving back here. And I met a guy, I think I met him in Dearborn. And he lived in Detroit. He was using, I was using, we kind of hooked up and then I just ended up getting another case. So to make money at this point, and I was quite the criminal. When I start talking about my criminal behavior, I was like, "I've done a lot of criminal acts." I don't feel like a criminal, but I've done a lot. I've committed a lot of crime. So at that point, I learned about this, actually, being incarcerated, you learn a lot about how to do other crimes.

Debra Wright:

So when I was in New York in jail, I heard about this and I was like, "Let me see if I can do this." So I would go into bars at the airport or at hotels. And usually, if you go into a bar and you're sitting alone, a guy will often ask to buy you a drink. So the first time that I did it, I got about, I don't know, \$1,600. This guy was just flashing hundred dollar bills. And he was like, "Hey, can I buy you a drink?" And I was like, "Sure." And, "What's your name?" "Oh, my name..." And I'm just totally fleecing him. "My name's Nancy and I just dropped my best friend off and she's flying to California and I decided to have a drink before I went home." And then start talking to him and then I got him back to his room and I was like, "Why don't you take a shower first and then I'll shower." And then while he was going to shower, I took his wallet and ran out and got my car and left.

Debra Wright:

And yeah, he had a lot of money on him. So I went to Florida to hung out for a while. And I did this a number of times. I was doing other things also, but I did it at Weber's in Ann Arbor. And the gentleman, I

guess, was a movie producer or something. I don't know who he was. Something, somebody from California. And he called the police and they tracked me down. And I got a case for that. Another instance when I did that, the guy caught me once and beat me pretty severely. And he did not call the police, but that was pretty scary. So I went back to prison in 1979 for that incident at Weber's and did two to five years. I got two to five years. And that was really, really a hard sentence.

Debra Wright:

At that time, the prisons were so overcrowded that they were housing people in the county jails. So they sent us to, I think it was in Kalamazoo County. It was in one of the county jails. So I'm pretty sure it was Kalamazoo. And we never went outside. I mean, for months, I never saw the light of day. And you're in this small cell with maybe, I don't know, five or six other women. And it was just, it was very, very difficult. Very little communication with your family. I didn't get any visits. So it was very, very hard to get through that. So when I had an opportunity to leave, of course, I was like, "Yes, let me go. I'll go anywhere." And they sent me to White Lake in Oakland County, which is, it was like a halfway house.

Debra Wright:

So I get out there and called my family. And my sister, God bless her. God bless her soul. Was bringing me some clothes and got arrested and the van got impounded along with my clothes. All I had on was a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. And they were wanting me to go find work and I didn't have any clothes. And it didn't take long before I was singing the addicts national anthem, "Fuck it." And I left. I went back to my mom's and I ended up in Florida. I just moved to Florida. So I was on, technically on escape from prison. And I just moved down there. And I thought I would be good, but it turns out no. I didn't get in any trouble and I didn't really use any drugs. And I came back to my senses quite a bit.

Debra Wright:

I was living with an old friend of our family's for a while, and then I left there and I ended up meeting an attorney, of course, he did not know that I was on escape from prison. I did not tell him that. But I moved in with him and I spent quite a few months living with him, but I was restless. I wanted to do something with my life. And I knew that I couldn't do it while I was on escape from prison. I couldn't work because I knew that they could track me down. I wasn't going to go to school. So I ended up coming back to Michigan and turning myself in. And I went back to prison. I mean, I was in Oakland County Jail for quite a while, getting sentenced for the escape. And then I went back to prison and did two and a half years. That was the longest time that I ever did.

Debra Wright:

That was hard. It was always hard for me to be in prison. I felt isolated. I saw so many people in there that just didn't belong in there. I mean, I spent a lot of that time when I was in there for that two and a half years, smoking weed and doing drugs and trying to block out the fact that I was in prison, but it was a very hard time because I didn't feel like I had any support. I didn't feel like my... I mean, my family came and saw me once in a while, but I basically just was there existing. I was in school. I mean, I went to school there. I took classes on criminal justice and I remember writing, I wrote a paper about a woman who was doing three years for stealing a \$7 scarf or something like that. And I just thought, "Why are we doing this? How does this help anybody?"

Debra Wright:

I mean, I knew that I had a drug problem and that was the root of my issue was that I had a substance use disorder. And they kept locking me up and not doing any... They would just lock you up. They don't... (silence).

Debra Wright:

... reading. I devoured every book in the library. I went to school and I always said, "I'm not coming back here again." I said that every time I left prison. "I'm going to do better. I don't want this to be my life." But for some reason, I always went back to using drugs. And I think it was just the trauma, the untreated trauma that I had that kept rearing its ugly head. And the more I used, the more trauma I collected and the more it seemed to make sense to blot it out. So that was really hard, that two and a half years. During that time, I would get up early, usually in the morning and shower and get ready and get ready for my day.

Debra Wright:

And one morning I got up, and I was usually the first one in the shower. I was living in one of the modular units there. And so there's sort of a long... It's like a mobile home, but it's big, and there was beds stacked next to each other. And so, I was on a long haul, way at the end. And I got up and got in the shower and I knew something was wrong. I was really dizzy. And I was like, "I got to get out of here." So I just had stooped down. I went to stand up and I passed out. I hit that cement so hard that it woke people up. And so people came running in there. The guard didn't come in, the corrections officer didn't come in, but my bunkie came in. She said, "Oh my God."

Debra Wright:

And it's really scary being sick in prison, having something wrong. So they took me up to their clinic and they looked me over and looked at my eyes and, "How are you feeling now?" And then sent me back to the unit and said, "You can rest today." That was basically my treatment. They never figured out why I passed out, what was going on. And I was always glad that it was nothing really more severe. So I got out that time and really tried to do the right thing. I went back to school. I tried not to use. I think I was using some. I got my associate's degree. I was glad to do that. I think that I actually, that was the time where I transferred. I was in school when I got out and I actually transferred one class to the college. All of this was still my dirty little secret though. The fact that I had a drug problem and the fact that I'd been in prison, I didn't tell anybody about it.

Debra Wright:

I relapsed at some point during this time. I got on methadone. At one point I got sepsis. I just remember having a fever of 105.4. And I went to the emergency room and I didn't want to tell them that I was using heroin. So I didn't, and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. They sent me home on some oral antibiotics and then my fever went up and it eventually reached like 105.4. And I went back the next day and they admitted me. I'm just thinking, I was lucky to survive that. A lot of people die from sepsis. So I was struggling off and on during that time. And then in 1987, or 1986, I met a guy, we kind of hooked up, not the healthiest relationship, but none of mine were. But in 1987 I had my son.

Debra Wright:

So he was born exactly six months from me, September 22nd and March 22nd. And we spent, there's a lot of jokes in our family about that, how we're sort, exact opposites. So I was thrilled when I had him and I thought that that was going to help me, motivate me to stop using. And yeah, it didn't. It didn't. I

relapsed and used while I had him with me. I would take him down to Detroit with me and hang out with him. And I was selling heroin and cocaine and stealing to try to support my habit. And I got retail fraud in 1990 and ended up, they sent me to treatment. At the time that I went in, I was on methadone. And I was not functioning at a very high level at the time. So I knew that I had to be in a treatment program by the time I got sentenced and I kept putting it off and putting it off and putting it off.

Debra Wright:

And then, the week before I had to go to get sentenced, I was calling treatment programs to try and get in. And I did get in one on the East Side of Detroit, Hope, Unity And Growth. And I went in, but I was on methadone up until the day before I went in. And I was on a fairly high dose. So the whole time that I was there, I was withdrawing from methadone. I didn't tell them. I mean, they knew I was sick and I didn't sleep for six weeks. I think it was maybe 15 minutes here or there, but it was really a difficult withdrawal. And then I went to a halfway house down there and relapsed a couple of days later. So I used again for about a year, and then in 1991, cut another case and went back to prison. And that was probably the hardest time I've ever done because I had a child and I was separated from him. And that was very traumatic.

Debra Wright:

I only was there for about five months, but it was probably the hardest time I've ever done. There was an incident where a friend of mine was in prison too. And she was bunking right across the hall from me. And one day the corrections officer came in, I just heard this horrible gut wrenching scream. And the corrections officer had come in and told her that her son, her 13-year-old son had died. I think he was 11 at the time, from huffing. And the CO came and told her and I went over to her room, and she was just crying. And I can't even describe it. And so the CO, usually you can't go in anybody else's room when you're in prison, But the CO let me sit in there with her and I just held her and let her cry. And she was screaming and talking about her son and it's something I'll never forget.

Debra Wright:

And there's a lot of that in there. I mean, a lot of people that are incarcerated, lose loved ones and it's very difficult. So when I got out that time... So that was the last time that I was in prison. And I was really determined when I got out to do the right thing, to not use, to walk that straight narrow. But I didn't. I got a job and my first paycheck, I was going in a store to cash it, and I saw somebody that's like, "Hey, Debbie." And that's all it took. I was out using, and then I ended up, because I was on a tether at the time. So I moved the dope man into my house to have easy access. I thought that was the smart thing to do, which turns out not so much. And so I was on a Tether and they were dropping me, getting urine every week and I would use for four days and then not use for three days. And it was just insanity.

Debra Wright:

So after a few months of that, I asked him to leave and I was like, "I got to get it together. I can't do this." And I started going to meetings and I just realized that I didn't want to do this to my son. I didn't want him to grow up like this. I wanted him to have a chance. And I felt like he could. And then I got clean. I got a job working with formerly incarcerated people. We did preemployment training with them and I just did a lot of the clerical stuff there. After I'd been out for a couple of years, I wanted to go back to school and I was looking at getting a bachelor's degree because I had my undergraduate, or I had an associates degree. And the woman that was working with me at Options Center said, "You should apply to U of M, they have a non-baccalaureate program there. You'd be great for that."

Debra Wright:

And I was like, "I can't get into U of M. I mean..." She's like, "Yes, you can." So I applied for it and sure enough, I got in. I think it was based kind of on my writing skills. So it is one skill that I have, I think it's from all the reading I did when I was incarcerated. All those years. So I got into U of M. By the time I'd got in there, I had a couple of years clean. I mean, I really, I went to meetings. I really worked at just not using. It's okay to not use. And yeah, I got into U of M I made it through there. I graduated and that was wonderful. I felt good. It made me feel like a sense of accomplishment. And I hadn't had that for a long time.

Debra Wright:

When I got out, the first job that I had was administering a housing program in Detroit, a six county area, including Detroit for people with HIV and there but for the grace of God. I loved it. I loved the work. I fed and nourished my soul and I really enjoyed it. And after five years, I moved to another job where I worked with a lawyer and we did HIV law in the State of Michigan. Well, she did the law and I did the social work. And I just loved it. But the first year that I was there, I went to a conference, and that conference really changed my life. It was a conference about the War on Drugs and how and what a miserable failure it was. And I remember sitting there in the conference and one of the state supreme court justices was there, and he said, "This isn't a war, This is a war on drug users."

Debra Wright:

And I thought, "Boy, that's so true." And I really felt like that gave me some freedom in some ways. I really, at that time, I met my mentor, Kevin Zeese at that conference. He was living in Washington at the time and he was the lawyer for the National Normal. And I ended up in a one of the breakout sessions with him and I said that I would need some mentoring, but I was willing to step up and start some advocacy work here in Michigan. And so we started the Drug Policy Forum of Michigan and really started doing, it was just the fire that burned in my soul, doing criminal justice reform, doing drug policy reform. I started doing advocacy at that time for people who were incarcerated. So through my work with the attorney, I met a guy who was doing life under the 650-lifer law in Michigan. A 650-lifer law was a law meant to really catch the big fish in Michigan, the big dealers. The ones that are moving a lot of product.

Debra Wright:

And that wasn't the case with him. They use the conspiracy laws really to, and a lot of bys that are a gram here and are a gram there to get up to the 650 gram law and then convicted him under the 650-lifer law. So again, just the injustice in our criminal justice system. And to hear his story, I mean, his story was just so compelling. He didn't have a chance as a kid. He had to just one of these really compelling horrendous childhoods. And so I befriended him and we wrote and talked and he is just amazing. He wrote his own computation. I went and testified when he got out at his commutation hearing. And he did finally get out after 17 and a half years. And he's amazing. He's doing really wonderful things in Michigan.

Debra Wright:

So that work really changed me and really moved me and really helped me become an advocate. Then in 2003, I was still working with the law firm and I got into a relationship with somebody who was not really healthy. And I saw that after we'd already moved in together and he was controlling and I was clean. I was still clean and still working with the law firm. And in 2004 he assaulted me. He saw an email from a guy that, I call him my editor. He's helped me edit my book. And the guy just went nuts. I mean,

he choked me with my hoodie and threw me across the room a couple times. And it was very hard. It was very hard. I've been through that in my previous life, but never sober. No, never in recovery. Never when there weren't drugs in my system. It shook me.

Debra Wright:

I went to the hospital, they called the police. I did file charges and he was convicted of aggravated domestic violence. And he ended up, I think going back to prison for other stuff. But that derailed me and within a month, I was using again. I relapsed. The lawyer that I worked with was moving anyways. So the job was ending and I just started using again. So I now started collecting misdemeanors, where I had... I have been convicted of a lot of felonies. I just got a lot of paraphernalia and substance use. And in 2005, I got another retail fraud. I mean, it was hard. I was homeless for part of that time. I'd lost my place. I'd stored my stuff, lost my place. And yeah, it was a hard time. I had a son and he saw way too much.

Debra Wright:

And then I ended up getting a retail fraud. I remember when the judge sentenced me, he said, "I rarely sentence somebody with a master's degree and you should probably be running a treatment program, but right now I'm going to send you to one." So I went through treatment. It didn't really stick. I ended up going back. And then I got a job finally. I was really trying to do the right thing. I had a lot of people rooting for me and trying to support me. And in 2006, [inaudible 01:03:25], I got a job and it was at a company's, an international company that sold water or testing equipment, like pH meters and Dio meters. And I was still using, and I overdosed there on fentanyl in the bathroom one day. And it was a Friday afternoon and I knew that I had some drugs, that there was something wrong with them, but I didn't really know what it was. And I went in the bathroom and shot it. And they came in and found me, just passed out.

Debra Wright:

They called the ambulance, and I remember coming to, and the EMTs were there and they were like, "What did you use? What did you use?" And I could see they had the door propped open and I could see the district manager standing in the hallway and my pants were down to my knees. And I was just like, "Oh my god, the embarrassment." And so I said, "Insulin. I just got diagnosed with diabetes." You know what I mean? It was just so full of crap. And they're like, "That's not insulin." And I was like, "Yes, it was." And they tested my blood sugar. I would not give up the lie. And then they got me in an ambulance and I just remember crying all the way to the hospital.

Debra Wright:

And that was the last time that I used. I haven't used since then. So that was in 2006, November 3rd. And I'm glad that I don't use anymore. I'm glad that I've been able to get away from that. So I worked for that, continued to work for that company until, I'd had about two years, and that was in 2008, I started working for a treatment center and I opened up an engagement center in Ypsilanti called Home of New Vision Engagement Center. So it was a new program and it was a safe, sober place where people could come. You had to have used to come there. And it was a great program for me. I loved it. And I worked there for many years.

Debra Wright:

In 2014, I was working on overdose prevention stuff. I'd done a flyer and we'd done little overdose prevention cards, and I was getting ready to do a training on overdose prevention for professionals. How to talk to your clients about it. So the meeting was scheduled for the following week. It was, I think in May. And we had just come out of a meeting that morning. We were going to do a run through in the afternoon. And as I walked out of the meeting, my mom called and told me that my sister was dead. And I don't remember much of how I reacted, except that I think I just said no really loudly. And I know that a couple of people came into my office and it was really hard. And I kind of knew right away. I mean, I didn't know exactly what had happened until I got out.

Debra Wright:

So I was living in Ann Arbor, Ypsi at the time. And I had to go tell my son. And we drove out to Jackson and it turns out that it was an overdose. And that was really hard, really difficult to deal with, really hard to incorporate into my work. It changed the family, her daughter was pregnant at the time. It's just like it, just a punch in the gut. And I think because I'd been doing overdose training and working on overdoses so much there, that it was just hard. And she'd been doing really good. My son had just seen her a few days before. And she got with a guy and he was using heroin and she didn't usually use it, but I think what happened is she went out and got drunk and then came home and used some heroin and just didn't survive it. So that was really hard. That was difficult. But it also, I think the good that came out of that is that the next year I was in Washington on Capitol Hill advocating for better legislation for treatment and overdose prevention.

Debra Wright:

And so it's really turned me into a better advocate, but I would give it all back if Judy could just come back. And I'm not alone, there's a ton of people that have lost loved ones. The last year, the overdose rate during this worldwide pandemic has just gotten so high that it's frightening. And I've learned that we all have our... Everybody gets their pain in life. We all have joy. We all have pain and learning to get through it And to know that I'm not alone. There's a lot of people in this country who have lost people to overdose. And so, in many ways I feel like I've spent my life and I will probably spend the rest of my life advocating for change in many ways, better substance use policies, way less incarceration. I mean, we just lock up so many people, it just does not make sense what we're doing.

Debra Wright:

The racial inequities in our system just make me crazy. I mean, it's just so unfair. And having spent a lot of time in Detroit and in the Black community, I've seen it. You see it firsthand. I mean, I haven't experienced it, being Black, but I feel like I've been around it so much that I have a good sense of what it's like. And it's horrible. I mean, it's just to me, an extension of Jim Crow. It's just a way to keep people down. And the drug problem and the drug war has really fed the incarceration. It's just fueled this mass incarceration. And we have to find a way to stop this. It doesn't make sense what we're doing. We rely on incarceration for so many things, and it doesn't work. You're just taking people out of society and not helping them.

Debra Wright:

You don't get any help in there. You don't get any treatment in there. Not the kind of treatment that you need. You might get a four-week program, but substance use disorders are a lifelong disease. So for me, I guess that's what I want to spend the rest of my life doing is trying to bring these issues to light. That's why I wanted to do this interview. That's the fire that burns in my belly is why do we have to rely on

these? I mean, you look at the killing of George Floyd and the recent conviction of Derek Chauvin, which I applauded, but this is not justice. I mean, that's maybe a little bit of accountability, but we have to make some radical change in this country. We can't keep going down this road that we're on. It's expensive. Incarceration is expensive. It doesn't make sense.

Debra Wright:

And we could do a better job by looking to other countries and seeing what other countries are doing. And not rely so much on sending people to little cells. It doesn't help anybody. I mean, do we need a prison system? Yes. But we needed about maybe 100th of the size that it is right now, maybe even less than that, serial killers maybe. But if we're putting all this money in on the back-end and we need to put it in on the front-end. We need to support families. We need to raise people out of poverty. We need to put money into the inner cities. We need to put it in on the front-end. We need to do prevention work, not prison. So it's something that I care deeply about.

Debra Wright:

So I worked at Home of New Vision for about 11 years. And now I work, I've been, the last couple of years, I've worked at Catholic Charities. I manage their substance use program in a couple of locations. And I love doing this work. I know I've lived a life that's different than a lot of people. And I've had the opportunity to see things from different angles and different angles that a lot of people have. And I'm grateful to have that perspective today. Today, I feel whole. I don't feel like I have to keep this a secret. It's where I went in my life. I've written a book, it's not published yet. I keep saying, "I'm going to get it published this year." So maybe this is the year, but the tentative name of it is Alabaster Inferno, My Journey Through The Hell of Addiction. So we'll see. We'll see. We'll see if maybe this is the year.

Megan Wilson:

Maybe it is. So I am thoroughly impressed that you took yourself from the beginning to the end without any help from me. But I do have a couple of, big picture reflection type questions I'd like to ask you at this point.

Debra Wright:

Sure.

Megan Wilson:

So a couple of these, you've touched on them throughout your story, but I'll start with, how did your experience of the conditions of confinement change over the years with all the various places you were locked up in?

Debra Wright:

Well, conditions of confinement, they were horrible. I mean, they were horrible all the way through. The first time that I was incarcerated, I was at the Detroit House of Correction. And literally it was a scary building. I don't even remember there being lights in the stairwells. I don't know if that's just my... It was a long time ago. So that might just be my twisted perception, but the thing with incarceration is that, and it's not just the incarceration. The incarceration is never easy because you're removed from the people that you love, from having free will, from being told what to do and when to do it. And it really

compresses, it tries to compress you into a number. My number was 1-4-2-0-3-5. I will never forget that number. Because that's how they refer to you in there. "Hey, Wright."

Debra Wright:

Conditions of confinement we're never good. You're always under someone else's control, and depending on if they like you or not, they might be nice to you and then they might not. It was always difficult. And it's not just the confinement, it's then when you get out, it's facing life with felony convictions. We just passed Clean Slate legislation in Michigan. I'm so happy to see this enacted because it's not just being in prison, it's like, this stuff follows me for the rest of my life no matter where I go, people can do a search and find out all of this stuff. So when I go apply for jobs, this is always an issue. If I want a passport, if I want to go to Canada, they don't want me in Canada. And so, it's hard to find housing. It's hard to get jobs. I mean, it's difficult. It's not like it's just being in prison. It follows you for the rest of your life.

Debra Wright:

And so, it's taken me years to feel like I've gotten that burden off of me. So the confinement, it's always hard. I mean, you are relegated to eating the food that they want you to eat, and that was hard. Their food is horrible. I mean, I became a vegetarian at one point because I was so afraid of the meat in there. I didn't know what it was. So it was hard. It was always difficult. Emotionally, it was difficult for me. I think that saving grace for me when I was doing time, was books, books and school. If I didn't have that, I don't think I would have made it through with my, half of my brain intact.

Megan Wilson:

Thanks. Another question, you talked about this a bit, but how did your perceptions of the system change over time?

Debra Wright:

That's a good question. So initially I thought there was something wrong with me. "What's wrong with me? Why do I keep ending up here? How did I get here again? Why am I locked up again?" And I eventually started thinking, "There's something wrong with this system. I don't belong in prison. I need some help. I need some treatment. I have a substance use disorder. I'm not a bad person." Have I done some bad things? Yes. But I'm not a bad person. I don't have any ill will in my heart. I just have a bad disease that takes me to these places. And so my perception changed immensely over the years. How does it help to incarcerate somebody who has a disease, I mean, help? Yes. Maybe secure treatment centers. I mean, there has to be something in between because just incarceration does not really help. It never helped me.

Debra Wright:

I mean, a lot of people use during their incarceration. So my perception of the system definitely changed. And I just think that we way over-incarcerate, way, it's just become such an issue. I did a panel quite a few years ago with a judge, I think he's from Texas, who said, "We should use our prison system for people we're scared of, not people that we're frustrated with or angry at." I think that a lot of people get frustrated with people like me who are cycling in and out of the system and people cycle in and out a lot more than I did too. But my kind of story like, "Why can't you just do the right thing?" "Well, I have a substance use disorder. I need treatment. I don't need prison." I think for me, it was more of a burden

that I carried around for many years because of the fact that it follows you wherever you go. So yeah, we need to make some change.

Megan Wilson:

It sounds a little bit, and forgive me if I'm putting words in your mouth. But it sounds a little bit like seeing other people the same way that you saw yourself and seeing how many people got trapped in the system might've been part of the switch from something is wrong with me to something is wrong with the system.

Debra Wright:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I agree. Yes, I definitely agree with that. And being at that conference and hearing that judge say, "This is not a war on drugs. This is a war on drug users." And during the course of my advocacy, learning and seeing this, it's all come to light now. And so many people are caught up and then so many Black and Hispanic people. And it's just become a way to keep people down. So I think we just need to make change. I feel the rumblings and I feel like so many people see this change now. And one of the things that I'm involved with now is Nation Outside. So in Michigan we're, formerly incarcerated people that are getting together to really make change, like Clean Slate and making communities that thrive so that people can have a chance when they get out.

Debra Wright:

I mean, if you get out of prison and you can't find a job and you can't find housing, what do people expect you to do? It's not going to be good, whatever it is. So there's wonderful things that are happening now. Jackson, Michigan, just passed a Fair Chance Housing Ordinance. Ann Arbor just passed past one. So it's their tools to give people a chance. You should be able to find a place to live. People need places to live. They need employment. And so, working to enact policies like Clean Slate where if you do well, these things can fall off your record are, I hope going to be very helpful to somebody.

Megan Wilson:

Yeah. This question maybe is too large because so much of your life has been focused on this, but we'll try anyway and see how it goes. How did your incarceration affect your perspective on the world?

Debra Wright:

Well, that's a really good question. When I was that kid, 13-year-old girl on that swing in the park, with my head upside down and thinking, life is topsy-turvy. I always felt angry at the world when I was younger and then I feel like I turned a lot of that anger inward and never really dealt with the trauma. I think I always felt like the world was a dangerous place in some ways, but there was a lot of fun to be had along the way. And now I look at the world as, I guess in the same way, and some... So it's changed in a lot of ways and in a lot of ways it hasn't.

Debra Wright:

I think one of the wonderful things that I have today is I have a really good support system and a lot of friends. And I do have joy in my life. I have a good relationship with my son and my family, parts of my family. And life is good most of the time for me, but it's not good for a lot of people. And so I guess I work to make change so that everybody can have life that's good. Because I could sit back and say, "My life is good," but I want everybody's life to be good. I don't know if that answered that big question but-

Megan Wilson:

I don't either. But thank you. Is there anything else that you would like people to know about incarceration in the US? And you can think about the general public, or researchers, or policy makers, whatever makes sense to you.

Debra Wright:

I just think we do way too much of it. I just think that we need to look to other countries who do this better than we do. We're not a country that does that often. We think we know it all, and this is the way we do it, and we've always done it this way. But I think that there are other countries that are doing things that work much better than what we're doing. So the over-incarceration, there's the total injustice and over-policing our neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods are just overpoliced and that's where a lot of this starts. And it's not just incarceration, it's the whole system. The whole system, the prosecutions. So from A to Z. I think the whole system needs to be looked at and changed.

Debra Wright:

And change comes slowly. Change comes slowly. And I think it's hard sometimes to wait for that change, but I think that if you see something that's wrong with the system, to be a part of changing it is something that's very good. It's something that's going to help a lot of people.

Megan Wilson:

All right. Debbie, thank you for sharing your story with me.

Debra Wright:

Thank you, Megan. It was nice. Thank you.