

Susan's Story

I have been in and out of the California Prison System for most of my adult life. In between my sentences I had two beautiful and intelligent children. Sometimes when I look at them and see how well they do at school, I wonder how in the world they came from me.

Over and over I tried to kick my drug habit. And over and over I would let myself and my children down by relapsing. It always happened the same way. I'd stop showing up for work, then I wouldn't report to my probation officer. Next thing I'd quit going to family gatherings. But the worst was when I would cancel my visits with my children with some lame excuse about why I couldn't show up. The real reason was that if I was with my kids, I couldn't get high. Taking care of my children became the last thing on my mind when I was high. As much as I truly loved them, the drugs didn't leave room for anything else.

So, back to prison I would go. A place I knew all too well. Old friends would greet me with a cigarette and I would catch up on prison gossip about all the home girls. Soon the drugs would wear off and the first thing I start thinking about is my children. Reality hits and I can't believe that I've let them down again. Now all I want is to hold them in my arms. Sitting in my cell, tears run down my face. I wonder who my children are with and what they are doing. Other women are getting mail and pictures from their loved ones, but nothing comes for me. I know why. Too many promises broken over and over.

Then one day I get a letter from my thirteen-year-old daughter. And this is what it says:

Hello Mom,

How are you doing? I got your letter today and I just needed to let you know a few things. No one stops me from writing to you. I haven't written to you in so long because I can't stand to repeat things I've written to you in the past so many times before. Mom, you always say that you're not going

back to prison and that you will never use drugs again. You know, Mom, I just feel so let down. I'm starting to think that you actually like prison because you keep going back. Is it because there you have no responsibilities? No one to take care of? Is it so that you don't have to deal with your problems or the mess you have made on the outside?

I think that you turn to drugs with the thought that they will solve your problems. Have drugs solved your problems so far? Mom, when are you going to realize that real life is not about drugs and prison? It is about doing your part as our mother. Next week I am going to graduate from junior high and you've chosen to sit in jail instead of on the bleachers like everybody else's mother.

Sometimes I feel like I don't even have a mother that I can turn to with my problems, happiness, or pain because you are always running back to prison. My brother and I are so hurt and disappointed. All we ever wanted was to have our mother here with us like the rest of the kids. Why do you keep doing this to us? Do you think we'll just wait for you forever and let you into our lives anytime you want so you can let us down again?

Mom, I'll never stop loving you, but this is getting old. And so are my brother and me. So the next time you think you have it hard, think again. Because me and my brother are motherless.

After I read that letter, it changed me forever. I sat down and wrote my children a long letter apologizing for what I had done to them. I explained that my problems had nothing to do with them even though they were the one who paid the biggest price. I got involved in a twelve-step program that helped me deal with my addictions and now I am in recovery. I realized that I had to stop feeling sorry for myself and take responsibility for what my life had become. Even though I am making changes, I feel like I can't promise them anything. I have broken my word too many times. I have to show them with actions. It's a long road, but I'm going to keep walking until I find my way. I just thank God that they were willing to give me another chance. Despite all of the disappointment I have caused them, I think they can see the love I have for them. A love that drugs could cover up but never destroy.