

#140 Corrections In Ink with Keri Blakinger

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SPEAKERS

Michelle Glogovac, Keri Blakinger

M Michelle Glogovac 00:01

You're listening to the mind simplified life podcast and this is episode number 140. Welcome to the my simplified life podcast, a place where you will learn that your past and even your present. Don't define your future. Regardless of what stage of life you're in, I want you to feel inspired and encouraged to pursue your dreams, simplify your life and start taking action today. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac, and I'm excited to share my stories and life lessons with you will taking you on my own journey. This is my simplified life. Hey friends, welcome back to another episode. I'm your host, Michelle Glogovac. Today, my guest is award winning journalist Carrie Blake injure no care. Carrie is not someone who just came out of college and decided she wanted to write about the prison system. She actually has first hand experience after being arrested over 10 years ago, on a drug charge. Kerry's new book corrections and ink launched last week, and it details her journey through the prison system. Now what I love about this book, and reading what really happens in the prison system is because I am someone who doesn't have any kind of experience with that I've never been to a jail, I've never been to prison. I don't know what goes on behind those bars, and carries book details, the inhumane parts of it, the fact that their basic needs and necessities of life are not even met the scary parts of you know, knowing that your cell is going to be searched. And you don't know when it's going to be for how long it's going to be or what they're even looking for, if something at all. She shares what it's like to interact with others in the system to be coming off of drugs to what happens when you need medical care. And it's not something that's just simply given to you. So I love talking to Carrie about why certain things happen, what we can do about it to make changes, and why people deserve second chances. What that means not only for the person, but for the public safety of the rest of us and how it can actually benefit us if we're giving these second chances to others. So listen in as Carrie and I chat about her experience her book, and what we can do. Hi, Carrie, Hey, I am thrilled to be talking to you. I am so grateful that you not only answered my my DM my tweets, but you sent the book and now you're taking the time to chat with me. So thank you for being here. Can you take a moment and introduce yourself to everybody? Yeah, sure.

K Keri Blakinger 03:05

Um Kerry Blake injure and she an investigative reporter who covers prisons. But before I

I'm Kerry Blake Injure, and I'm an investigative reporter who covers prisons. But before I covered prisons, I was in prison. And I have a book about how I went from, you know, from growing up as competitive figure skater to ending up in prison, and then getting out and becoming a reporter who covers prisons, an award winning one.

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Michelle Glogovac 03:29

Not just a reporter, I know award winning reporter. Can you take everybody a little bit on the journey of how you went from competitive figure skating, and when I read your schedule of how often you practiced it's, it baffles me as you were just a child child. But then you and I don't know if the right word would be fell into but discovered drugs. And that's ultimately what landed you in prison?

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Keri Blakinger 03:59

Yeah, sure. So I mean, I like you said I was a figure skater from a young age. I got into skating around, I guess, eight ish, maybe. Which is actually late for skating, you know, a lot of people that I that I grown up around, had gotten into skating at like 234. But you know, I got in a little late, and I got into pair skating, which is where the guy throws you around, and you know, it looks all dangerous and shit. And it is a sort of all consuming sport at the top levels. So by high school, I was leaving school every day around 10 or 11 in the morning, driving, you know, or somebody would drive me an hour and a half to the rink train. I would train all day and leave to come home at like, you know, five or six and was doing a lot of my homework in the car, doing a lot of my classes by independent study. And you know, figure skating was my whole life. It was my whole All identity was, you know, what I envisioned for my present and my entire future. And you know that like when that fell apart, that that's when I ended up getting into drugs. We can, I was, like I said it was a pair skater. And we've competed at Nationals twice. And after the second year, my partner decided to sort of branch out and find another partner. And because there's so many more women than men in skating, he could very easily do that. And he found a partner very quickly, and I did not. And at 17, this seemed like the end of my my life, the end of my world, I sort of describe it as like, it's as if you got, you know, divorced and fired from your job at the same time, but also fired from every job forever. Because that's how it felt, it seemed like, you know, my career was over. Because, of course, the other thing about skating that I'm sure most people might be aware of is that you have a very short lifespan of your career. And I remember growing up hearing people, you know, in their early 20s, being referred to as old ladies. And I was 17. So like, I was very cognizant that I was reaching, you know, an expiration date. And after my skating career fell apart, I was pretty distraught. And, you know, my parents suggested that maybe I should try to go to Harvard summer school, that this would be the thing that would sort of set me on a different path. And, you know, I didn't know how, let me snap out of it, because I was clearly pretty depressed at that point. And instead of snapping out of it, it actually meant that this was the first time that I had sort of no adult supervision, I'd had a very regimented life. And I went from, you know, having a regimented successful life to being very depressed and being at a point where I was sort of starting to fall apart and suddenly could do whatever I wanted. And I ended up, you know, I ended up diving sort of headfirst into drugs. This was not like, it wasn't like I, you know, smoked pot, and then that was some gateway drug to, you know, eventually ended up at harder drugs, I was in a very self destructive place, and I went sort of almost immediately to hard drugs, including heroin was, yeah, you know, what I ended up doing off and on for the next nine years. And that's how I ended up in prison. It's an

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Michelle Glogovac 07:30

incredible story. And it's, it was heartbreaking to read, because it wasn't just the drugs you ended up, you know, I don't know, turning tricks on the streets. Is that the proper term?

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Keri Blakinger 07:41

Totally. I mean, that's, that's what we call it, then. I don't know if that's considered generally an acceptable term now, but that's certainly what we call it then. After, you know, after things fell apart, and I started doing drugs that summer, I ended up spending most of my senior year of high school living on the streets, and you know, doing sex work. And I mean, you know, a lot of lot of bad shit happens when you are 17 doing heroin and living on the streets.

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Michelle Glogovac 08:10

Yeah, I can't imagine anything good would come out of it. But, you know, even, right, I mean, not not to laugh, but, you know, it sounds, it's sad, it truly is just simply sad. And you go through this, living this life and shooting up and, you know, doing drugs and, you know, meeting dealers and how to dealer as a boyfriend, and then you ended up being caught with his stash ultimately.

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Keri Blakinger 08:41

Yeah, I was, you know, this was in 2010, during what should have, by that point, been my senior year of college, I had sort of bumbled my way through many semesters of school, while you know, using drugs, and, you know, sometimes taking time off to, you know, I don't know, to do more drugs, and then managing to Bumble my way through semesters here and there. And then in 2010, I got arrested. I was at that point, you know, using heavily and, you know, selling a lot to support my habit. And also, you know, the person I was dating had been selling on a, I think a much higher level and had connections that I didn't so we ended up you know, with, we had a lot of drugs around and J I got arrested. You know, he'd asked me to carry the entire stash from one point to another, and I got stopped by cop on the way.

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Michelle Glogovac 09:40

And then you take us in the book all through what that was like to be arrested to be in jail, to detox from it, and then what your journey was like in the prison system, and I was saying this before we started recording that this is completely new territory for me. I haven't even seen oranges, the new blacks. So like I really came at it with fresh eyes of I have no experience as to what it would be like to be a woman in the prison system. And I know that we have issues that need reforming, but you put it, so descriptively of what we need, what goes on. And it's really it beyond sad. It should make people mad to know that we're dehumanizing human beings, who, you know, yes, you've done something wrong. You're serving your time. But you deserve to have the basic necessities of life, and that just isn't

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Keri Blakinger 10:39

happening. Yeah, you know, I think that I think that there's it's twofold here. I think on the one hand, I think that a lot of people don't really understand what conditions are actually like in a lot of jails and prisons. And I think that when they hear these things, there's a certain segment of people who just don't care, because it's very easy to just sort of be like, well, you know, don't do a crime. If you can't do the time. I hear about a lot. And, you know, I don't think I think that people who say that are still failing to actually grasp what's going on. Because the thing is, when you treat people in particularly dehumanizing ways, in ways that can, you know, be damaging, that can add more trauma that can reinforce the idea that they are not a person who shouldn't be valued, the unresolved, as you come out with a person who is, you know, less real, who was not rehabilitated, you know, they are more likely to be unable to adjust in society afterwards, you know, they're more likely to be more dangerous. And just from a public safety perspective alone, we should all have a vested interest in making sure that prisoners are treated humanely enough that they at the very least do not get worse in jail and prison.

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Michelle Glogovac 12:01

I love the way you put that. Because, you know, reading in the book that the guards would just turn off the water, just because oh, well, she can drink from the toilet, because my dog does, so she can't do. That's just like, if that doesn't make you stop, then I don't know, what would, you know, the fact that you don't have feminine hygiene products, you know, to whatever necessity you need them, and you have to stockpile them or, you know, do whatever you have to do. Those are basic things that you don't get in prison, the fact that guards are doing whatever they may want, in some cases, you know, the the stat that you have in the book of 1% of the sexual assaults that guards do are the ones that get reported. That blew me away. Like that's insane.

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Keri Blakinger 12:53

I think that the number was actually that it was 1% of I think it was less than 1% of us guards that, you know, there's good evidence that they've committed some kind of crime are actually prosecuted and convicted. Which is, which is, which says a lot, because I think that very often, when things happen in a jail or prison, you know, maybe someone will be most commonly I think if there is discipline, it is most commonly that someone is just asked to resign or sort of forced to resign. And sometimes there's actually, you know, prison disciplinary action. But it's not particularly common for officers who commit crimes behind bars to actually get prosecuted and convicted. You know, and I mean, there's a lot of reasons for that. I think, obviously, part of it is simply that people in prison are not valued at when they are crime victims in the same way. But, you know, I think also that there are some of the same barriers to prosecuting these kinds of crimes that there are to even understanding what goes on in prison. You know, again, it's just so hard to have evidence of what goes on in a lot of prisons, there aren't functional cameras in a lot of places. Any witnesses you get are often going to be people who were already convicted of felonies. And, you know, juries are often not super interested in believing people, especially people that have a, you know, a past of their own. So I think that it's sort of the same dynamic insert in terms of an willingness to believe people, and a lack of documentation about what happens.

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Michelle Glogovac 14:35

And then the random searches that, that you always have to be on guard for these things to just simply happen. And it can be for no reason at all, like the one guard who searched the gals cell for hours on end, and then just said April Fool's, like,

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Keri Blakinger 14:51

yeah,

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Michelle Glogovac 14:52

it's a true mindfuck.

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Keri Blakinger 14:54

Yeah, and I think and that's, I think, is such a good example of the sort of subtle cruelty that can happen in prison. And there's clearly no consequences for because it's not like committing a crime. But as you said in that example, if this was, you know, one of my close friends at the time who became one of my prison girlfriends, she maybe this was like three weeks before April Fool's Day, I think, you know, they would do typically one cell search per shift. And that was expected and they they picked her, but they didn't do the sort of cursory like five or 10 minute search in they put her on the cell, rip through everything, read every single piece of mail and did this for hours. This is something you know, can always theoretically happen in prison. And you sort of always have to be prepared that you know, anything you write down any letter, any journal entry could be used against you and nothing is actually private. But in this case, it was particularly frightening because when the search goes on that long, you know, you're being targeted for something like there's some belief you did something, and the officer doing the search led her to believe that. And we were in a in a program unit, which means that we were all in a drug program. And if you've got kicked out, you know, you were going to stay in prison longer, like you were probably going to lose your release date. So there were high stakes to it at that point. And she sat out her outside herself crying for hours. And then finally at the end, he was like, April Fool's. And it was like three weeks before, April Fool's Day. And I think that, you know, there's a lot of people that might hear that and be like, Okay, well, that's like, you know, harmless prank. I mean, that's kind of a dick move. But you know, it's a harmless prank in this prison. But I think when you consider that this sort of thing can happen just sort of all the time, constantly, the entire time that you're in prison, that you can be devalued and dehumanized, day after day for years, you know, it adds up, and that can have negative consequences, like it can leave people worse off than when they came in.

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Michelle Glogovac 16:58

And do you think I've heard that, you know, like, prison guards are basically one step up above the inmates like, and that's why some of this happens, you know, I think is a human being myself, and this isn't how I would ever treat somebody, you know, what is it about that position

that makes them think that think that they that, you know, this continues to happen? And, you know, is it that prisons are privatized? And for profit, is it that you just can't find people who believe in other people to be humans to take these kinds of jobs? You know, do you think there's any rhyme or reason as to why this happens, and continues to happen?

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Keri Blakinger 17:38

Well, so first of all, actually, I want to seize on the thing you said about private prisons. And this is something that people say a lot that, you know, the problem is, is prison privatization. But in fact, the vast majority of prisons in this country are not private. And none of the prisons I was in were private, which I think is kind of amazing to some people, because we all understand, like, why the profit motive could make private prisons particularly appalling. But the things that happen in regular state run prisons are also quite bad, and often just as bad. But in terms of sort of why people who are encouraged officer positions, what why this sort of happens so much with these instances of abuse. I mean, I think that first of all, this is not all officers, you know, I now as a reporter, I deal with a lot of officers who are appalled by things that they see their co workers doing. I mean, I deal with a lot of people who start the job thinking that they're going to be helpful, and they're going to, you know, be able to treat people humanely and help them get a second chance and sort of rehabilitate, and then many of them quit, when they realize that's just sort of not what the system is really set up for. So I do want to recognize that staff like that exist, you know, there, there are many of them, and, you know, well, and you haven't hear from any of them that leak things to me. And even

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Michelle Glogovac 19:04

the officer Lee that, you know, ended up being a friend and ultimately a boyfriend, but he was always so kind to you as well. So you saw the evidence that there were good people still there.

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Keri Blakinger 19:17

Yeah. But in terms of why there is why there's this sort of recurrent thread of officers doing these sorts of things. I mean, I think that part of this is cultural, in prison cultures, you know, they're so used to not having any meaningful oversight and knowing that, you know, it's often their word versus an inmate. And, you know, a lot of prisons are, you know, a lot of prisons are short staffed, and I think that sort of adds to it because it creates this additional pressure. But, you know, I think in some cases, this job also can really attract people that are doing it for the wrong reasons.

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Michelle Glogovac 20:01

So let's go past prison, you get out, and you make good, you make really good, you graduate, you get a job, you work for the Daily News, you end up with the Houston Chronicle. And, you know, how did this, you obviously made a decision while in prison that this was not going to be the life that you are going to leave going forward? So what made that kind of change? And then, you know, gave you that oomph to do what you're doing today?

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Keri Blakinger 20:37

I mean, I think there was sort of a few inflection points for that. Um, you know, I think that, I think that one of them was when I was in the county jail still, and the guy that I was dating, and actually, you know, very briefly married. And this is to be clear, not the not the guard that you mentioned, this was the guy that I was dating prior to getting locked up. You know, he was still he was still using, and he was still coming in hi to visits. And I remember, there was one time in particular, where he came in and had what was pretty clearly trough marks on his arm. And he claimed that he had fallen into a pot plant, and the pot plant had stabbed him only on his vein somehow. And, you know, there was a whole series of sort of lies like that. But that was one of the most egregious ones. And I remember thinking, like, I just, I don't want to be that person anymore. I don't want to be like that. I'm sitting here sober, watching him tell all the sorts of ridiculous lies that I had been telling people for years. And I was just like, I don't, I don't want to do that anymore. I don't want to be that person. You know, and when, after that, he continued to, you know, refuse to be honest about it. And also, you know, to refuse to actually stay off drugs. I, you know, eventually divorced him, which is why I say was a shortlist marriage. But that was an inflection point, for me in terms of realizing how serious I was about wanting to move in a different direction. I think I already had a sense at that point that I wanted to stay off drugs. But that was really a moment when I was like, wow, yeah, I this is, you know, this is real, you know.

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Michelle Glogovac 22:31

And then you went on to finish college at Cornell. That's a big deal. You're all along, you're very smart, intelligent, individual. It's very obvious. You know, you did this throughout school, before the drugs, even while on drugs, you still manage to go to school, and write amazing essays and impress professors. That was always there in you all along. It was, you know, getting rid of the drugs that really allowed you to propel even more into who you are today, you had all of the tools already inside of you. And you know, it was just these, these, this push that needed to go forward. And so it brings us to today where, you know, you're helping inmates, you know, get things like dentures and things that these are simple. You know, why wouldn't you be able to have teeth?

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Keri Blakinger 23:31

Yeah, but I actually do want to jump back to one thing you said, though, because I think it's so important for people, when they see a success story, I think it's so important to explain why not everyone is a success story. Because it's not just that I had, you know, more determination or, you know, more skill as a writer. I mean, so much of this has to do with opportunity and privilege. And I think it's really important to make sure that people think about that, you know, I think that it's a lot easier to come back from a felony when you are, you know, when you are white when you are, you know, when you when you have a Cornell degree when you have the the sort of, you know, the sort of class and race privilege that can make it just a lot easier to be accepted when you're reintegrating into society after a felony.

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Michelle Glogovac 24:22

Absolutely. And, you know, as we were saying before it to me, it's all about second chances. And I believe if you want a second chance, if you're going to try for a second chance, then you deserve that second chance. So as someone who's outside who has no experience with any of this at all, you know, how can we help make that difference? How can we help people get that second chance? You know, out you get to talk to inmates and prisoners and and are discovering what it is that they need and you're writing about it in order to make a difference. So what can someone like myself do or a listener? Do, you know outside of just being cognizant of what's truly going on?

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Keri Blakinger 25:07

Well, you know, I think that I think that it's important when individuals are in or are interacting with people who have felonies who have, you know, been in jail, we've been in prison, I think it's important to keep in mind that, you know, if someone is out, that means they did their time, like they completed their punishment, and there is, you know, it's just the sort of extrajudicial punishments that can last for years afterwards, are such a barrier to reentry. And I mean, you know, it's been more than 10 years since my arrest, and I still have a hell of a time finding an apartment, because of felonies, you know, nonviolent drug felony that is more than a decade old, and it is still incredibly difficult to find a place to rent. You know, I've been really fortunate on the job front. But there are many fields in which this would have been a really insurmountable barrier. And I think that it's really important to understand that it's, you know, when we're talking about giving people second chances, like, these are people who have already paid their dues and done their time. And piling on these sorts of additional punishments on an individual level, you know, does not does not help public safety. Yeah.

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Michelle Glogovac 26:35

So, you know, I think that we all have to look at it with an open mind. And remember that we're all human beings in the end, you know, we all make mistakes. And when we learn from them, those of us who are, you know, we need to just be accepting of you did your, your mistake, you've owned up to it, and you want to do better, and we need to help you be able to do better.

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Keri Blakinger 27:01

Yeah, and I keep I know, I keep harping on this from a public safety angle, but I just think that's the one, the one thing that everyone can agree on at a bare minimum about prisons, you know, some people don't support the idea of, you know, a second chance, or they're just, you know, not forgiving humans in general. And, you know, some people are of the opinion that, you know, we just shouldn't spend any money on on people who've committed crimes. I mean, there's all sorts of varieties of, you know, callousness. But I do think the one thing that it sort of can always come back to and that everyone can agree on is that at a minimum, this entire process should improve public safety. And it currently doesn't, it doesn't when you treat people like shit on the inside, and it doesn't, when you make it harder for them to reintegrate afterwards. Absolutely.

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Michelle Glogovac 27:52

I completely agree. And I'm so grateful that you're doing the work that you're doing. And that your book corrections and ink is out for everyone to read, it will be out by the time this releases. And it's just, it's an amazing book to be able to read what is actually going on. So I appreciate that, though, the one gallon prison tells you to write this down, because someday you're gonna create a book out of it. Here it is. So thank you for that.

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Keri Blakinger 28:22

And yeah, you know what, also speaking of, of her and speaking of, you know, people in prison, one thing I've been trying to do with this as is, I feel like some of the people who would benefit most from this book would be most interested in this book are people in prison. So, you know, I, I will have on obviously, I've tweeted this link out, and I think put it in the show notes. But I'm really trying to crowdfund getting copies of the book to prisoners. Because that's one demographic, it's obviously really important to me and portlet books has agreed to do a thing where you can, you know, preorder a copy that will be earmarked to be sent to a prisoner. So I'm really hoping to be able to share a story that people can see themselves in with the people who need it the most.

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Michelle Glogovac 29:10

I love that it's inspirational and aspirational, because, you know, somebody might need to just read your story and know Oh, I can do it, too. If Gary did it, then you know, there's hope for me. And I know that that's in the book as well, that there were women that you went back to and they said that so absolutely. And the link will go out everywhere as well. Excellent. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for your time for coming on and sharing of yourself and your story. Carrie, thanks for having me. Well, friends, I can't encourage you enough to go read corrections in ink. I cried at the end. It's a wonderful read. She she's truly found her calling in journalism, that's for sure. But it's also eye opening. And I think that the only way that we We can make our world a better place that we can create positive change is in knowing what others are going through in opening our own eyes as to what goes on that we're not familiar with getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. I encourage you should go by the book to go to the crowdfund link and let a prisoner read the book as well, because they deserve to be inspired to know that there is life after prison, and that if they want the second chance, they deserve to get it. And there is hope for what their future can look like. This week, I want you to go and learn something new about a topic that you don't know anything about, that you haven't experienced, so that you can empathize just a little bit more with someone else that isn't in your current circle that may never be in your circle or, you know, in your world, but so that you can understand what others in this world are going through. I think that's the only way that we're going to see a better world for our future for our children, for ourselves. Because after all, it's only in knowing what someone else is going through, that we can actually empathize with them and sympathize with them, and hope to do better going forward.