

## The Art of Gratitude

By Jamie L. Novick

Through my Career and Life Coaching network, I was asked to work with a group of 12 women over a six-week period on interviewing skills, resume writing, and job search strategies. These were not your everyday women. These were extraordinary women. These women lived in a "half-way" facility for individuals who had finished serving time in jail for drug related felonies or had just completed drug rehabilitation programs. The stay at this facility was a minimum of eight months.

The team of coaches talked via conference call prior to our first meeting with the women. We were made aware of the do's and don'ts of working with these women at this type of facility. The rules were presented to us in a very calm fashion - do not bring food, water, or blunt objects. Do not share your last name and where you live. When you bring in supplies for this meeting, you must bring them in a box. You must count the number of pens and pencils before and after class. Paper clips, glue, and scissors are forbidden. Lock your purse in your car. Dress professionally but not too "fancy."

I thought to myself, these are the rules- they are there for a reason - follow them. I remember getting ready for the first class which would be held weekly in the evenings in a "bad" part of town. I remember wearing my wedding band only. I felt my engagement ring would be too much for this first meeting. I chose my outfit wisely; conservative top with a sweater and a skirt with flats. Not too much skin. Very understated.

Directions in hand, I drive to my "unsafe" destination. During the drive I think to myself, I took karate in college. I exercise daily. Hey I do Yoga - I have a mean downward dog. I can handle this. I can.

As I pull up to the facility that looks like a combination of a post office and a church, with the eyes of a hawk, I find a "safe" well-lit parking space for my shiny black jeep. They all must be watching I thought, waiting to prey on the yuppie. I proceed to take my last sip of water, hide my purse, clutch my keys and begin my journey.

I remembered our team leader saying that this facility has two sides, one for men and one for women. I peer at two doors with no one in sight. I choose the door on the right. Big mistake. I enter the door, take two steps and am surrounded by men. In my mind I was being eaten alive. In reality, it was the men's side I walked into and not the women's. I briskly, with no smile, turn around and head for the other door. I deducted that must be the women's side.

As I entered the women's facility, I was struck by the neat décor, the stainless of the walls, the screaming Jesus music. I turn and see a very normal woman politely ask me who I was and what I was there for. I explained in a soft voice, "I am one of the coaches teaching tonight's life skills class." The women replied ok, sign here, wear this badge, go down the hall to your left. I remember the smell of the cigarettes on her breath mixed with the smell of peppermint gum. I guess they were allowed to keep one vice.

I walked down the hall at half a pace, with wide eyes, gripping my car key. I rounded the corner to find 12 women sitting around a big table filling out their names on self adhesive name tags. The other coaches had arrived as well. I felt out of place and out of sorts. Were they staring at me? What were they thinking? What did they do to get here? They all looked tired. They all wore a mish mash of plaid tops and jeans. They all looked very somber. I began to think to myself, I am going to get my ass kicked. They are going to have to call 911. Why? Was it because they looked like ex-druggies and felons or was it because I was judgmental, critical and not open to the possibility of change?

We proceed to do an ice-breaker exercise. Each person had to tell us what cartoon superhero or famous woman they thought of themselves as. This was hard. I did not know. Cinderella was not a superhero. Cat woman may be too sexist. I know, I will be the mom in the movie "The Incredibles" who can stretch herself all over the place. Perfect I thought - it will represent how flexible I am. In retrospect, I should have been Cinderella's mother or some other villain. More to come on that.

The ladies are somewhat shocked by our request to identify them with a superhero. In front of my eyes, they begin to help each other figure it out.

Natasha says to Sheila, "Sheila you are so great at cheering everyone up, I think you should be Tinker Bell!" Sheila smiles and writes down Tinker Bell. Amber then says to Crystal, " I think you should be Electra, you are so strong and smart." These were not the superheroes I was expecting.

So, Tinker Bell and Electra are joined by Cinderella and Oprah and we are all cracking up and smiling. From this exercise we jump right into brainstorming about what transferable skills each of the ladies has. The discussion starts with Marsha saying, "Does dealing drugs count as being good at math"—our team leader defers and says why not choose something that you can speak to in a job interview. Monica states, "I have been in jail for the past three years so I have no skills." I think to myself that cannot be true, not the jail part, but the not having skills. I quietly ask Monica, "What things did you do? Did you have a job when you were there?" She replies, "Well, I was in charge of the canteen each day. I helped set the prices with the supervisor for the shampoos, cigarettes, and gum. I also kept track of the money and worked the register." I reply, "So this shows me that you are good with numbers, customer service, and work as a team player." She looks at me and says, " I also counted the inventory each night",,, great, I reply, we can add "has experience with inventory management to your list of skills."

The flood gates open. The ladies begin shouting out things they did in jail, in rehab, when they were not incarcerated. The list of all the skills each one has used grows and grows. The room is alive with confidence. The evening ends on the dot an hour and half later minus the five minute smoke break for the ladies. They all thank us and state that they look forward to next week. Wow was I naïve in my thinking. These were incredible women. These were talented women. This was so much fun! I am jazzed for the weeks that follow.

Over the next four weeks relationships build, stories are told. I find out that Gwen decided to deal drugs at ten years old. It was better pay and easier than working at MacDonald's. Sheila had worked as a real estate agent prior to going to rehab. She worked for a builder and was one of the top agents in her area. Donna worked as a 911 operator. Lisa worked for an architectural firm designing landscapes. All of these women were successful, they just turned the wrong corner. I would hear them say, "Then I started getting high" or "weekends of partying turned into weeks."

They had forgotten the good in themselves. The bad that they had done, the mistakes that they had made overshadowed the amazing things they were capable of doing. I was awestruck by how honest they all were. I was amazed that they had a very busy and set daily schedule and that they were taking this class for fun. In between sleeping in a room with a roommate with set sleeping, eating, showering, church, chores, counseling, time they had daily breathalyzers, check-in meetings with their therapists, they were given no more than one hour a day to themselves. I would go home to my nice house in the suburbs to my husband and our dogs, curl up in our 300 count sheets and thank them all for being in my life.

The common thing that held these ladies back from dreaming of the possibilities when they are released from their mandatory eight-month programs was, "Who will hire a felon?" The coaching team would unanimously say, "Your options are somewhat limited but there are many reputable "felon-friendly" employers." They would reply, "How do I explain that I was in jail and or rehab three times in the past five years on a job application?" We would reply, "You don't." When speaking to potential employers you state, "yes, I have been convicted of a felony and you will explain if needed." You should reinforce the idea that you are aware of your mistakes, you have paid for them, and you want to move forward with your lives. "Really?" they would say, "really" we would reply.

When working on how to fill out a job application, the other trend that came up a lot was, "I do not know what this means or I do not know how to spell this or I do not remember where I was from 1999-2002." They were so honest about their past. They were very open to us about what they did not understand and very frank about what scared them.

The month flew by. Each and every meeting the group was more alive with ideas and questions. The support between the ladies was amazing. Some of them carried "recovery journals" with them. This journal was actually a binder with all of the paperwork from classes they had taken during their stay at this facility. I regularly noticed on the front of these binders were pictures. Tons of pictures. I would ask, "Are those your brothers and sisters?" More often than not, in this room of 12 women with the average age being 24 years old, they would say, no these are my 4 kids. Of the 12

ladies, all but two had children. One of the ladies had her sixth child four months ago while she was in jail. She will be living in this facility for the next eight months. Where was the baby I thought? She read my mind, "My mom takes care of my six kids, I get to see them for an hour once a week." I think to myself, newly pregnant with a little one growing inside of me, how could you be away from your baby! How could you do drugs when you were pregnant!

It is not my place to judge. I am with these women to share with them tips and ideas on how to write a resume, look and interview for a job. I am also here to help show them how amazing they are. They all are. They all have overcome adversity, dealt with addiction. Some were products of broken homes. Abused, molested. Some just made poor choices. I learned all this through spending time with them. It made me realize how jaded I can be. It made me realize how grateful I am. It made me realize that I had to keep doing more to help others.

For our last class we were allowed to bring in cupcakes and ice cream. This was our time to celebrate these ladies. These amazing, talented, hard working ladies. As we wrapped up our last session words were flying, "Thank you for believing in me", "Thank you for not thinking I was dumb", "Thank you for showing me that I can interview and get a job when I get out of here." And then --- a hug from each and every one of them. This experience was a perfect example of women helping and supporting women. This was true and real with no judgment, no worries, nothing but humans appreciating others. They did the work. We were just there to facilitate the process.

I am grateful for these women. I am grateful for my life. I am grateful that I realized how judgmental I can be. What are you grateful for?

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