



INSTITUTE ON WOMEN  
& CRIMINAL JUSTICE

# **Women's Voices:**

## **Advocacy by Criminal Justice- Involved Women**

March 2009



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## **ABOUT WPA**

The Women's Prison Association is a service and advocacy organization committed to helping women with criminal justice histories realize new possibilities for themselves and their families. Our programs make it possible for women to obtain work, housing, and health care; to rebuild their families; and to participate fully in civic life. Through the Institute on Women & Criminal Justice, WPA brings new perspectives to public debates on women and criminal justice.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **GENERAL NOTE**

This report represents the most up-to-date information available to us at the time of publication. If you would like to provide updated or corrected information for future versions of this report, please send an e-mail to [institute@wpaonline.org](mailto:institute@wpaonline.org).

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## Foreword

*“People used to see me and hear me in one way, but now people see me and hear me in different way.” -- Women’s Advocacy Project Member*

### **Introduction**

This moment in our nation’s history is a fitting time to learn from the advocacy efforts of women who have experienced incarceration. More women are incarcerated in the United States now than ever before, and much needs to change. And, there is a window that seems to have opened with the nation’s election of a community organizer as President of the United States. People-powered reform movements are surging with new optimism and energy. In between these two seemingly disparate points lies the work of women, both incarcerated and formerly so, who are rolling up their sleeves, using their voices, and working to reduce our nation’s reliance on incarceration. This report highlights the efforts of eleven such groups in seven states.

Founded in 1844, the Women’s Prison Association (WPA) is the nation’s oldest and largest non-profit engaged in social services and advocacy with criminal justice-involved women, their families and communities. In 2003, WPA created the Women’s Advocacy Project to help formerly incarcerated women to prepare themselves to participate in policy debates about reentry, sentencing, child welfare, and myriad other issues that directly affect their lives. Our experience with this work has been instructive and inspiring. This publication emerged from our desire to chronicle similar efforts across the country.

The work we highlight occurs in prisons and jails, in urban and rural communities, at drug treatment programs and in statehouses. Women taking on systems change address issues including conditions of confinement, housing and employment discrimination, sentencing policy, self esteem, and motherhood. They speak to the media, before college students, and women serving time; some are full-time advocates and others unpaid volunteers.

The program profiles in this report were drawn from questionnaires and phone interviews with groups from across the country. Our goals in publishing their stories are to document the extraordinary work that is being done, to provide new ideas for advocacy, and to suggest new ways of taking on reform of the criminal justice system and other related systems.

### **WPA’s Path From Service to Advocacy**

Though WPA is and has always been primarily a provider of direct social services for women, our work with our clients made three phenomena very clear to us. First, we knew that some aspects of how women experienced public systems were all but invisible to those who designed and managed those systems. Even the most well-intentioned and conscientious public systems officials cannot know all of the snags and barriers that a woman using that system faces in her daily experience. Through their direct experience with navigating parole, public housing, the child welfare system and other bureaucracies, the women who come to WPA for services have a unique perspective on what is working, and what is not.

Second, we observed that the voices of women with criminal justice involvement were absent from the policy processes governing the public systems that so intimately affected their lives. When formerly incarcerated people were involved in these discussions, they most often were men. Further, there seemed to be an expectation that when directly-affected women *did* participate in these discussions, that their only role was to tell their personal stories – not to offer policy solutions. We knew that women could play a more productive role – one that would honor the depth of their experiences and their unique insights.

Finally, we felt a tremendous desire among our clients to give something back to their communities and help other women. They wanted to better understand their own experiences and to use their wisdom to improve things for the women who would come after them. They were eager to move from a feeling of powerlessness to a position of power in the decisions that so directly affected their lives and the lives of their family and community members. They wished to be full partners in civic life by fostering positive change. As one woman advocate described it, she is driven to do this work “not because I owe my community – I served my time – but because I *love* my community.”

### **Common Threads and Challenges**

Each program in this report is its own expression of the phenomena we experienced at WPA. They are elevating lived experiences of women; they are adding women’s voices to debate where they were once lacking; and, they are providing a way for women to change their communities.

Though the groups profiled differ in many ways, there are several common threads:

- **Naming solutions, not just problems:** Women involved in these advocacy groups are actively articulating solutions to the problems they see in their communities. In doing so they are redefining the role of formerly incarcerated women in the policymaking process.
- **Bridging the inside and outside communities:** Many of the groups profiled are working both within prisons and in outside communities. By bridging these two worlds, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women can learn from each other and inform each other’s advocacy.
- **Speaking out:** Influencing public opinion through public speaking and media appearances is a central goal of most of the groups in this report. By offering media training, public speaking training, and workshops on personal storytelling, these groups are equipping women to use their voices effectively in the public sphere.
- **Supporting new leaders:** All of the programs profiled in this report are committed to developing the leadership skills in their incarcerated and formerly incarcerated participants, and they take on this commitment in different ways. Some groups were founded and are run by formerly incarcerated women; others incorporate opportunities participants to teach, facilitate, and organize.
- **Multiple roads to change:** Rallies, lobby days, empowerment workshops, closed-door meetings with public officials, open-door public hearings – the groups profiled in this report use many tactics to achieve their goals. None rely solely on one avenue for bringing about reform.

Along with their many successes, advocacy groups experience significant challenges. Some of these challenges are specific to the circumstances of past or present criminal justice involvement, while others are common among organizing initiatives:

- **Stress of reentry:** For most women returning to life in the community after doing time in jail or prison, the demands of finding employment and housing, reconnecting with family, maintaining health, and adjusting to outside life are sources of significant stress. From time to time, dealing with the major and mundane aspects of everyday life must take a front seat to advocacy work.
- **Institutional barriers to policy careers:** Many women experience a “glass ceiling” when they seek to transition from volunteer advocacy work to paid advocacy work. While the road to career advancement in social service is relatively transparent (entry-level positions, certifications, professional trainings), the path is not as clear for those who want to pursue policy careers. Largely as a result of long-entrenched structural inequalities, expensive colleges, unpaid summer internships, and a robust Rolodex are still the implicit prerequisites for many policy jobs, making them out of reach for many formerly incarcerated women.
- **Funding:** In a tough economic climate, funding for advocacy work becomes scarce. Most of the organizations profiled here could use more – and more stable – funding. More revenue would them to expand their staff capacity, increase the number of women they reach, and the enhance supports they are able to provide to emerging leaders. More funding could also enable groups to invest in evaluating the impact of their work, so that they, and we, can better learn from their successes.

The leadership and expert knowledge of women who’ve experienced incarceration should be a cornerstone of any effort to reform how our society responds to women who come in contact with the criminal justice system. It is our hope that these portraits of courageous advocacy will inspire a greater commitment of resources and attention to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women pursuing social change.

For more information about the programs profiled in the following pages, contact information is provided at the end of this report. For more information about the work of the Women’s Prison Association, visit us online at [www.wpaonline.org](http://www.wpaonline.org).

## **Alabama Women's Resource Network/Long-Timers Montgomery, AL**

The **Alabama Women's Resource Network** (AWRN) is a coalition of incarcerated women, social justice organizations, community service providers, and advocates working together to change the way the state of Alabama responds to the problems women face. AWRN grew out of the organizing efforts of women serving long sentences (the "long-timers") at Tutwiler Prison for Women as they engaged in a class action lawsuit around the conditions of their confinement.

In 2002 a federal judge ruled against the Alabama Department of Corrections (ADOC) in the class action suit. As a result, the ADOC transferred 300 women to a private prison in Louisiana to mitigate over-crowding. When the women found themselves separated from their families and support systems by hundreds of miles, they began to organize once again. In 2003, with support from the Southern Center for Human Rights, the women founded the **Long-Timers** to advocate for criminal justice reform from the inside.

While the women were being held in Louisiana, non-incarcerated AWRN members made the 300 mile trip every five weeks to hold advocacy meetings inside. By the end of 2007 the ADOC had transferred nearly all the displaced women to the newly retrofitted Montgomery Women's Facility. With the women back in Alabama AWRN is able to hold meetings more frequently. AWRN communicates with women at Tutwiler through letters since they do not have clearance to hold meetings there.

The Long-Timers and AWRN focus their advocacy efforts primarily on institutional reforms. In 2006, the Long-Timers worked from the inside to introduce state legislation to create a *Commission on Women and Girls in the Criminal Justice System*. The legislation passed. They have also organized campaigns around access to parole, access to work release and reform of the classification guidelines. From the inside, women write letters to prison administrators and legislators and at times are interviewed by the press. On the outside, AWRN brings the work of the Long-Timers into the public sphere and builds support for their causes.

Recruitment for the Long-Timers is done solely by word of mouth. Women who are active with the Long-Timers express feelings of empowerment and a sense of purpose during their idle days. The women's significant accomplishments, and the response letters they've received from elected officials and prison administrators, make the women feel their work is worthwhile and that they are affecting change.

## **Women's Re-Entry Network** ***Tucson, Arizona***

Started in 2006, the **Women's Re-Entry Network** (WREN) was born out of the University of Arizona's Inside Out Project, a community action project addressing the barriers faced by women upon release from prison and jail. WREN is the only organization in the state of Arizona that is run entirely by formerly incarcerated women that addresses the needs of women with criminal justice involvement.

As a fledgling organization, WREN has no stable funding and is completely volunteer run. WREN has approximately 20 members of whom 10 are very active. The organization's speakers' bureau consists of three members who are trained to speak with the media and at universities and churches.

The organization's primary activity is teaching a six-week life-skills class at Pima County Jail. WREN has a good relationship with the jail administration and is popular with the women who are housed there. The class benefits not only the women who are at the jail but also serves as leadership training for the WREN facilitators. The women work together to build the curriculum and every decision is made by consensus. For the women of WREN, going back to the jail to teach is a very empowering and emotional experience. After teaching in the jail, WREN women often comment that they see themselves and their former lives in the women they've met inside.

In addition to providing jail-based services, WREN is a part of several coalitions throughout Arizona that work on range of different policy issues. With the Arizona Coalition to Restore Rights, WREN is active in the movement to restore voting rights to people with felony convictions. As a part of the Arizona Children of Incarcerated Parents Taskforce they are working on the Children's Bill of Rights. In collaboration with the student government at Pima Community College and the Social Services Club they are creating educational materials about the barriers people with criminal records face when trying to earn certain occupational certificates. In addition, by joining with the American Friends Service Committee, they were able to stop the construction of a prison in Pima County.

Being a part of WREN means a great deal to its members. For many women, joining WREN was the first time their past criminal justice involvement lead to something positive.



## **A New Way of Life Reentry Project Los Angeles, CA**

Since it started over 10 years ago, **A New Way of Life Reentry Project** has advocated for women with criminal justice involvement. In the beginning, the organization provided one-on-one advocacy, usually in the form of legal advocacy, for women in need. Over the years the organization evolved and expanded their advocacy work in order to address the institutional barriers that keep women from being successful after leaving incarceration.

Women active with A New Way of Life organize public events and educational meetings and testify at public hearings. They are involved in grassroots media projects and have traveled to Sacramento, the state capitol, to do legislative advocacy. Annually, A New Way of Life holds an intensive leadership training retreat for 20 women and a three-day media training for all of their members.

An average of 35 women a year participates in A New Way of Life advocacy activities and currently there are three women working as interns. Workshops are given on political education and the women are taken to rallies, protests and any other events that give them an opportunity to become politically engaged.

A New Way of Life conducts outreach to recruit new members at sober-living homes and through a network of other programs that serve women. Women also get involved in the program by speaking with current members at public events and through word-of-mouth.

A New Way of Life has seen success in their advocacy campaigns and in bringing the issues of currently and formerly incarcerated women to the public. Locally, they played a significant role in the “Ban the Box” campaign, which removed the check-box on job applications for city jobs that asked about criminal history. A New Way of Life members also worked in coalition to defeat a prison expansion proposal and to advocate for more resources for community corrections.

Women involved with A New Way of Life have said the program raises their self-confidence. They also report gaining a greater knowledge and understanding of how government systems work and a new political dimension on their own personal experiences.

## **The Center for Young Women's Development San Francisco, CA**

The **Center for Young Women's Development** is home to several advocacy-oriented programs that work to improve the lives of young women in the San Francisco area who are either involved in the criminal justice system or at risk of becoming involved.

**Sisters Rising** is a nine-month program where young women from the ages of 16 to 24 learn job skills along with political advocacy skills. The program accommodates up to 17 young women each cycle: 15 active participants and two slots reserved for young women exiting the juvenile justice system. Run similarly to an internship, the young women are paid an hourly rate and work four hours a day, four days a week. To support the young women's further career and educational development there is a part-time college counselor on staff to help in the navigation of college and financial aid applications.

Each year as a part of their political advocacy work the young women identify an issue and start a campaign around it. Past campaigns included a Mother and Child Bill of Rights in which the young women addressed policies and procedures for visiting and maintaining relationships, created a community resource guide, provided street law training and conducted street outreach and community health education.

The young women receive training on public speaking through the organization's **TES (Through the Eyes of a Sister) Training Institute**. Participants have lectured at UC Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of San Francisco on issues relevant to young women and juvenile justice.

**The Girls Detention Advocacy Project** supports incarcerated and formerly incarcerated young women by teaching them to become their own best advocates. Workshops using the *Lift Us Up, Don't Lock Us Down* curriculum are held at the juvenile detention center each week in three-month reoccurring cycles. The workshops focus on self-care, self-advocacy, political education and cultural history. Young women with long-sentences or who are re-incarcerated are encouraged to be mentors and to teach the curriculum along with program staff.

## **Visible Voices, Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers Chicago, IL**

**Chicago Legal Advocacy for Incarcerated Mothers** (CLAIM) was established in 1985 to address the gap in legal aid and advocacy for women with criminal justice involvement. In 1992, CLAIM actively started hiring formerly incarcerated women and fully integrated them into their advocacy activities.

**Visible Voices**, the central force behind CLAIM's advocacy work, is a peer support and advocacy program run entirely by women with a history of criminal justice involvement. Women are mainly recruited to join Visible Voices by word of mouth. A project coordinator makes visits to the local jail and state prison to recruit women who are preparing for discharge. Visible Voices has a speakers' bureau whose members are trained in media and public speaking.

The women of Visible Voices participate in a wide-range of advocacy activities. Every year they organize a rally on Mother's Day as a part of the national *Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis* campaign. They have participated in the production of several films by BeyondMedia Education including, "Turning a Corner," "Voice in Time," and the award winning "What We Leave Behind." Visible Voices members testify at legislative hearings and were instrumental in making Illinois the first state to ban shackling of pregnant women during childbirth. Currently, Visible Voices is working to document incidents of violence toward women at the hands of police officers and correctional staff.

Visible Voices also collaborates with other groups that do not focus primarily on the criminal justice system, such as immigrants' rights and fair housing organizations. Participating in these coalitions benefits Visible Voices members by making them feel connected to a greater cause. As a result, other organizations are introduced to the issues women with criminal justice involvement face are then able to include those issues in their work.

By analyzing current policies and their impact, Visible Voices members learn to identify alternative solutions to social problems. They start to question the status quo and recognize that change is possible and they have a role to play. After getting feedback from events, Visible Voices members are often pleasantly surprised to learn they have significantly influenced the way people think about women and criminal justice.

## **Power Inside Baltimore, MD**

**Power Inside** has been providing services to women inside and outside the Baltimore jail since 2001. With funding from Baltimore Homeless Services they do street outreach with women who cycle in and out of jail and homelessness. They also hold walk-in hours at their community office and work within the detention center. Women who were formerly incarcerated and who are currently incarcerated play a leadership role in facilitating groups inside the detention center.

Power Inside has played an instrumental role in improving the conditions of confinement at the Baltimore women's jail. They have been involved with lawsuits, published reports and had letters of women who are detained published in the newspaper. Power Inside also helped the city of Baltimore start a jail release program.

Power Inside members formed 'Keeping it Real' a group for young adult women in detention that provides leadership training, conflict resolution skills, and training in peer mentorship and facilitation. 'Keeping it Real' puts on assemblies in the detention center in efforts to build relationships and understanding between the different types of women who are housed there.

In the outside community, Power Inside focuses on harm reduction and crisis level services. They have teamed up with a syringe exchange program to provide street outreach to prostitutes and to educate women about their treatment options. Power Inside draws upon their experiences to urge for more funding for treatment-on-demand programs.

Women who are active with Power Inside learn to identify what needs to change in the community and to then advocate for that change. Women also participate in focus groups, do legislative lobbying, and in speak at different events around the city and state. Power Inside firmly believes that women should be compensated for their time and requests honoraria for members whenever they speak publicly.

From being active with Power Inside, women realize they are the experts on a variety of issues and are qualified to represent their communities. In the future Power Inside would like to take on community-based participatory research to empower women perform self-directed studies of their own communities.

## **ReConnect, Correctional Association of New York New York, NY**

ReConnect, started in 2003, provides adult women with a history of incarceration an opportunity to gain information and skills on advocacy, leadership, problem-solving skills and collective action to change the criminal justice system. To date, close to 100 women have successfully completed the program.

The ReConnect program consists of two 3-month cycles per-year. The program accepts 12-15 women per cycle. Interested women must complete an application and be interviewed before being selected to participate in the program. Participants receive a stipend at the end of the cycle for their successful completion of the program.

ReConnect participants and alumnae take part in a wide range of advocacy activities, including serving as mentors and leaders with the ReConnect program and the Coalition for Women Prisoners, community outreach on issues affecting women in prison and jail, public hearings on prison/jail conditions, and public speaking about the impact of trauma and substance abuse and incarceration. A number of graduates work as reentry specialists with transitional service agencies that help women find supportive services upon release from incarceration.

Women who participate in ReConnect gain expanded knowledge about their rights and a strengthened ability to effectively advocate for themselves, their children, their families and their communities. Through effective engagement in personal and collective advocacy, ReConnect members experience increased feelings of empowerment, personal accomplishment and community.

## **Women of Substance, JusticeWorks Community Brooklyn, NY**

**JusticeWorks Community** was founded in 1992 to bring attention to the struggle and needs of incarcerated mothers. In 1995 Justice Works launched *Mothers in Prison, Children in Crisis*, a national grassroots campaign to push for alternative to incarceration for women. This campaign now has chapters in 21 cities across the country.

With the release of the documentary 'Women of Substance' in 1995, Justice Works formed an advocacy group of the same name. **Women of Substance** uses the documentary to open up discussions around the experiences women have with substance abuse and the criminal justice system. During these presentations formerly incarcerated women make the case, by telling their personal stories, for more family residential drug-treatment programs.

In addition to the documentary presentations, Women of Substance also has a speakers' bureau that trains women to speak with the media, at conferences and other events. Approximately 14 women are actively involved in Women of Substance. Women of Substance meets about twice a year as a full group. Women are recruited to participate in Women of Substance by word of mouth, at the presentations the women give and through ReConnect, another New York City advocacy program for women with criminal justice involvement.

Since drug treatment programs often incorporate therapy groups and other types of talk therapy, many women are already comfortable telling their stories when they become Women of Substance members. A part of the Women of Substance curriculum is to train women on how to shape their personal stories and use them to enter the public debate on issues that impact them and their children.

Women come to Women of Substance at different stages in their lives. Often they struggle with low self-esteem or low self-worth. Women have expressed that being involved with Women of Substance has increased their self-confidence and self-esteem and given them new skills. Being a part of the public debate lets women know that their opinions matter, they do not have to be ashamed of their past, and they deserve respect.

## **Women On the Rise Telling HerStory (WORTH) New York, NY**

Started in 2004, Women on the Rise Telling HerStory (WORTH) is an association of formerly incarcerated and incarcerated women who have been empowered by their own experiences. Through mentoring and mutual support, leadership and telling their stories, WORTH transforms the lives of women directly affected by incarceration and changes public perception and policy.

WORTH holds monthly meeting that are open to any women with a history of criminal justice involvement. The organization does not ask for any commitments from women who want to participate; it is up to each individual woman to determine when her membership starts and ends. On average there are 5 -8 women active in WORTH. Over 50 women have participated with WORTH since its founding. Members are recruited through word-of-mouth and many women get involved with WORTH after graduating the ReConnect Program.

Members of WORTH speak and advocate nationally. The speakers' bureau travels to conferences across the country to speak about broader criminal justice issues such as mass incarceration and racial disparities in arrests and convictions.

WORTH collaborates with other organizations and currently does not take on campaigns of their own. Primarily, collaboration work is done with the Coalition for Women Prisoners, which is a part of the Correctional Association of New York's Women in Prison Project. WORTH members are encouraged to take on leadership roles in the different committees of the Coalition.

## **Women's Advocacy Project, Women's Prison Association New York, NY**

The Women's Prison Association founded the Women's Advocacy Project (WAP) in 2003 with the goal of developing a group of leaders equipped to craft solutions to the problems facing incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women. Guided by a year-long advocacy and leadership curriculum, the women in WAP work together to write and present policy recommendations on issues of importance to them. The women share their recommendations with policymakers, community members, and the media, and work with other community groups on a range of policy matters.

WAP members are a diverse group of women who have had direct experience with the criminal justice system and other public systems such as child welfare, homelessness, and public assistance. WAP includes women who are college students, social service professionals, and dedicated advocates. WAP admits new members once a year through an application process guided by current and former members of the program. The primary criteria are that a woman has a history of criminal justice involvement, that she has a desire to do advocacy work, and that she be able to make a year-long commitment to the program.

The WAP group meets twice a month for a year. The four first months of the program provide an introduction to political theory, the structure of government, and modes of making change. The group then learns about the history of women's incarceration in the United States from the post-slavery era through today. Building upon this foundation, and guided by their own passion and knowledge, about halfway through the year the women choose a policy issue on which to focus. Past issues have included discharge planning from prison and jail, family reunification during reentry, justice reinvestment, and access to education. For the remainder of the year, the women engage in a collaborative strategy development and writing process to craft policy recommendations on the issue they have chosen. After graduating from the program, the women meet with policy officials to share their recommendations. Throughout their year with WAP, the women are supported in their participation in policy events and coalitions working on related issues in the community.

The group has seen many of their 2003 recommendations regarding discharge planning addressed by recent reforms in State and City policy. In 2006, following a recommendation made by WAP members, the women's jail at Rikers Island opened a family law resource section in the law library so that women incarcerated there can access vital information about their family court cases. In 2009, WAP women are poised to make a significant contribution to a major coalition effort to restore access to state and federal education funding for people incarcerated and those with past convictions.

Between 12 to 18 women participate in WAP in any given cycle. In 2008, WPA started the WAP Alumnae Council to provide advanced training and facilitate ongoing learning among graduates of WAP. To date, the group has received training in speaking to the media, non-profit fundraising, networking, and voter rights and education. Members of the Alumnae Council also teach WAP classes, speak publicly and on panels, and appear in the media expressing their views on policy issues.

By providing education on substantive issues, training in advocacy skills and opportunities for participation in the policymaking process, the Women's Advocacy Project equips women with past criminal justice involvement to make an impact on policy formation – in housing, health care, child services, employment, reentry, and other areas of importance in their lives.



## **Women Evolving *Plainfield, VT***

Women Evolving, an advocacy organization whose members are primarily formerly incarcerated women, started nine years ago at time when women, without their own jail, were housed in a corner of the men's jail. Although Women Evolving is not sponsored by the Department of Corrections, the idea to start the program came from a concerned DOC staff member who felt it was time for women's needs to be better addressed. Women Evolving is completely volunteer-run with no paid staff members.

Women Evolving has an average of 30 members at any give time. The majority of members are recruited through peer networks. To develop leadership skills all members are encouraged to facilitate meetings and to plan group activities. Past projects and campaigns are evaluated collectively with all members encouraged to participate.

Women Evolving primarily uses legislative advocacy as a method to create change. They organize panels of formerly incarcerated women to address state legislators with the message that those who have been through the criminal system have knowledge that is important and voices that should be heard.

In addition to legislative advocacy, Women Evolving works to educate the public about the issues that impact women with criminal justice involvement, their families and communities. Organization members have presented at conferences to address the connections between domestic violence and criminal justice involvement. They have organized their own events featuring leading experts in gender-responsive work with women. Women Evolving also has an informal speakers bureau for responding to requests for media interviews.

The women frequently talk about finding their voice by being active with Women Evolving. They express feeling less isolated and being respected, often for the first time in their lives. In addition to emotional transformations, the women learn how government operates and they gain the skills and capacity to speak publicly about their lives and experiences.

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