

“I wonder, for the first time, if the police really do exist to protect everyone”

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 Latest in a series of posts on the Arts in Bethlehem 

Kimberly Schwartz is a student studying Sociology & Anthropology at Moravian College. She is passionate about criminal justice reform, equal rights, feminism, and climate change. This piece was originally written for a course at Moravian titled Writing as Activism, taught by Dr. Joyce Hinnefeld, in which students are encouraged to consider topics such as mass incarceration, migration, and how to change the world through writing.

What I Know, Right Now, About Incarceration in The United States:

A History of Learning Through Experiences and Exposure

I am 12 years old, and my aunt Edith is telling me the story of how she was arrested for smuggling drugs from Jamaica into the United States. She explains that her husband at the time was a citizen of Jamaica who helped run an illegal marijuana smuggling operation and that, as his white and American wife, her job was to discreetly move packages across the border. She tells me that she spent a significant amount of time incarcerated in a women's federal prison, but she does not go into detail about her experiences there, only telling me that she met a lot of good people. The detached manner of speaking she adopts while recounting some of her experience tells me not to ask any further questions. Several years later, when I arrive home from school high, my aunt returns the

favor with a knowing look. She asks me no questions and leaves me to scavenge for snacks in the pantry before my father comes home.

I now know from my Crime, Law, and Justice course that the majority of convicted inmates in federal prisons and jails are inside because of drug charges (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020).

I am 13 years old and attending the neighboring high school's Friday night football game with my twin sister and our friend Caitlin. We meet up with a few older guys and walk over to the neighboring Burger King after the game for some food. While there, a group of white kids begin picking on one of our friends, Trevor, who happens to be the only black kid in the group. The incident results in a tussle, and someone claims another group is on their way with guns. We immediately leave the scene and wait for our ride home, with Trevor accompanying us. We are all on edge, believing there is a group of people with guns on their way. As we huddle together in the emptying parking lot, a police officer slows to a stop in front of us. He gets out of his vehicle and begins to question Trevor. He asks him what he is doing with three young (white) girls and who we are waiting for. We chime in, informing the police officer that we are waiting for Caitlin's mother to pick us up and that Trevor is merely waiting with us because we heard there were people with guns in the area. The police officer smirks, turns back to Trevor, and asks if he needs to check him for weapons. We look at the officer in confusion, and Trevor stares straight ahead defiantly, uttering a "no sir," his voice barely above a whisper. At this moment, our ride pulls up, and Caitlin's mother asks the officer what the problem is. He tells her that he was simply checking up on us and wishes us all a good night. Caitlin's mother asks Trevor if he is okay and offers him a ride home. We spend the entire car ride home in silence, and I wonder, for the first time, if the police really do exist to protect everyone.

first part in a series . . .

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