Prisons and Justice?

Shackled During Labor
Now Fighting for Change

Kimberly Mays

“I am not a worthless piece of trash, but rather a valuable asset to people, families, the community—and the world. I hope that my story will help to alleviate the disgraceful practice of shackling women during labor, which in turn will help alleviate the negative behaviors of prison guards and hospital staff toward women who give birth while incarcerated.” — Kimberly Mays

When I was in prison, I applied for the baby program. All the pregnant moms got accepted into the baby program except for the two African American moms, and I was one of them.

It’s difficult when you’re pregnant to see these other mothers living with and playing with their children, and knowing this would be a great opportunity for you to be in a safe place with your child, to give a good shot at turning your life around and keeping your child. It was very hard to know that since you weren’t approved for the program, you wouldn’t be bringing your child back with you.

So, I went into labor. This was my 9th kid. I was a high-risk pregnancy, and I go through labor really fast. It took forever for the nurse to come and see me and then for the ambulance to come. They shackled me in the ambulance. I was in so much pain. I was making a lot of noise. There were two male guards in the ambulance.

It was a long drive to the hospital. When we finally arrived, I was crying, “Help me. Give me something for the pain.” As soon as I walked in the door, they were asking me all these questions. I was trying to answer, but I was shouting, “Please, can you give me something? I’m in so much pain.”

The nurse was so rude. I never did get any medicine for the pain. I was lying on the gurney and screaming in pain, and the nurse said, “Shut up. You can’t be loud in here.” She was getting angrier and angrier. Then she took both her hands, criss-crossed them, and covered my mouth and nose. She leaned in on me with all her body weight and said, “You need to shut up.”

They put me in the room. When the doctor came in, he treated me more humanely, but the rest of the staff was so angry with me. I kept thinking, “What did I do? I’m not even a murderer. I’m in for a drug possession.”

During the whole labor, I was either shackled or handcuffed. What for? I was in full-blown labor. I wasn’t going anywhere.

I don’t really remember giving birth to my son. To this day, I try to remember the birth, but I
can’t. I was so demoralized and so demeaned that I just blocked the whole experience out.

I do remember after the birth, I had to ask to have the handcuffs taken off so I could go to the bathroom. If the guard went on break, I couldn’t go to the bathroom. I had to stay in the bed.

Holding my baby and knowing I had to leave him there was really hard. And no one told me where he was going or what would happen to him. I came back to the unit. I was in the baby unit for a whole month. I had to see all these other women engaged with their children, and mine wasn’t there. I had to ask them to please take me off that unit.

They didn’t bring my baby to see me for three or four months. When I got out, I had an opportunity to try to get him back, but I just didn’t have the right support or the bonding. Because of the trauma of that experience, it was hard for me to bond with him. It was hard for me to engage with him and take that role as a parent with him.

I did a lot of programming and I was really determined to turn it around, so I do have him in my life today, thank God. And we’re pretty bonded. But there’s still a different relationship I have with him than I have with my other kids. It’s different—a little alienated.

Years later after that experience, I got connected with the people working on changing the laws in Washington. We wanted legislators to stop allowing women to be shackled during labor and delivery. They asked me to share my story so the legislators could hear what women go through. As I wrote down my story, I got outraged. It all came back to me. The memories came flooding in. I realized that maybe there is something I could do to make sure other women don’t have to go through what I went through.

We won overwhelmingly. [See side box.] I’ve started looking back at my experiences and seeing how all the systems are connected—such as the

**Victory for Pregnant Prisoners**

Thanks to women like Kimberly Mays, reproductive justice advocates in Washington have won a huge victory against the practice of shackling pregnant incarcerated women. On March 23, 2010, the Governor signed into law HB 2747 which bans the use of restraints on female inmates in labor or post-partum recovery, making Washington only the 7th state in the nation to pass anti-shackling legislation.

*Source:* <reporepro.lsrj.org/2010/06/14/shackled-during-labor-medieval-practice-modern-policy%E2%80%94prisoners-access-to-reproductive-healthcare/>

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Department of Corrections and Child Welfare. We are currently working towards helping parents who are incarcerated and who are also trying to fight a dependency and addiction. We want to make sure they have a voice in planning the “permanency” of their own children. We definitely want to look at the women who are incarcerated and pregnant, and make sure that they get the pre-natal care they need and can have a dignified labor and delivery.

My passion is to help families and children to be together in a safe and nurturing way.

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*Kimberly Mays is the Program Manager at Parents for Parents in King County, WA. This piece was transcribed and adapted from a video of Kimberly Mays, which can be found at: <nationinside.org/campaign/birthing-behind-bars/storybank/kimberlys-story-pregnancy-birth-in-washington-state/>*