**How We Write**

**Jwells interviews Jessica**

**JWells**: Hi. My name is JWells. I'm here with Jessica, she's here to tell us how she wrote when she was mothering from behind bars.

**Jessica:** Hi.

**JWells:** Okay Jessica, thank you so much for doing this. Can you tell us about the type of writing you engaged in when you were incarcerated?

**Jessica**: I guess there were two types. The first type would be your traditional letters. I wrote letters to my father and those are more of the spiritual nature. I kind of went through a spiritual evolvement in prison...or spiritual birth I guess you could even say. And my dad kind of guided me through that. And we did that a lot through writing. Phone calls in prison can be kind of hard to hear and understand, and then they cost a fortune. When you do it, and there’s also all this noise and background stuff. So when you do it when you write, you can do it at your own pace and go back and review that again. You know you can’t just pick up your phone, and call, and say, “what did you say about that again?” So the writing allows you to kind of reflect again.

I also wrote with my children and in doing so… I’ve shown you a some of those little examples. They weren't earth-shattering or monumental letters in any shape or form, but I think letters are a nice reminder that I'm thinking about you. Sometimes you don't know that someone is thinking about you, and the letter is just a nice way...you know it doesn't have to be a big long thing. I think kind of what I lost. In letter writing people think they have to write this whole page, and my kids even told me that later. They were like well we thought we had to sit down and write this whole page, and I was like no [laughs]. I think it’s sometimes just letting let somebody know that we are thinking about them.

But then the other thing that I did is that I did some writing on my own. Just self reflection things. I wrote a piece that I call J.A.I.L., and to me that stood for Jesus Appears In Love. That was my spiritual resurrection from meth. So writing to me was very important in terms of communication and letting my loved ones know I was thinking about them, but then also just kind of dealing with what was going on with me in my head.

**JWells**: The piece that you just mentioned titled J.A.I.L., how long was it?

**Jessica**: Umm, in total it was about 12 pages. Again, this was one of those things my dad and I…like I would write, he would type it up for me and then send it back. Then I would write some more and he would type some more and send it back. So together we put it together.

**JWells:** That’s awesome. And so I know with some of the letters towards the end from your sons they were via email, so were the letters with your dad via email to or were they handwritten letters?

**Jessica**: My dad and I did mostly handwritten letters. I’m trying to think to...he sent me a lot of books too, so that's a different kind of writing. Writing became my lifeline in jail, whether it be something that I was reading on other people's writing or something I was doing. So I just kind of had that thought that was…my dad sent me a lot of spiritual books. I guess kind of once the email became an option, I just kind of emailed with people, but my dad would still write me because it was fun to get mail. It gives you something to look forward to, there's not a lot to look forward to in jail. You got commissary and then you got mail [laughs]. That's about it. I always had mail coming in, that was nice.

**JWells**: With the spiritual books your dad sent you, did you use those to respond to with your, did you also use those books as a way to maybe improve your writing or mimic their writing style?

**Jessica**: No, I wouldn’t say that because I don’t know that I was even consciously trying to write things. It was just trying to get things down. I would say that the influence that it had was in terms of the evolution of my spirituality, and then my writing has kind of reflected that sort of thing. I kind of talked to my dad a lot about what was happening to me in jail. The piece that I end up writing that was for some prison writing competition kind of did some tailspin backwards. And I truly believe that God has a plan for everything and it didn’t end up making it into the competition, and it was because Officer Hardee was thinking that my dad was sending it, and I was thinking that he was sending it, and so it never really got sent. But it ends up being neither here nor there. It is something that I take back every now and then and read to the ladies in jail. And it’s funny, it’s still circulating in the Caldwell County Jail. People will be like “you wrote that?” and I’m like, “yeah, that’s me” [laughs]. And that's fine, that's more than enough for me. But that's kind of how it all started, because there’s this competition and I'm like maybe I'll see what I can do with that.

**JWells**: You are so humble about. When I first met you, you didn’t tell me about the competition, you only told me about the letters. Tell me more about this competition.

**Jessica**: It was a competition for people who are in jail. And I don't even really remember it because it never even happened, so you know. I think it was like you know $100 or $500 prize, something like that and it was going to be published in some something or another. I'll get you a copy of it so you can read it and stuff. So yeah so I kind of started writing it that for that, but then it was kind of like a thought process too of how did I…you know there's a part in there too where I talk about I'm a little girl from Kansas Topeka Kansas born and raised having every advantage that a middle-class, white, woman could have. How am I sitting and in the Caldwell County Jail on a federal drug conspiracy charge. Huh? And it was kind of like just working through all of that, where are some of these decisions in my life that I made. Stuff like pride and ego, things like that, that I saw reflected in some of that stuff. And I’m like ooh...yeah. And there’s still some of that stuff I think about and ponder back to, to work on and keep me on a different path.

**JWells**: When you say you still work on it, do you still work on it through writing or do you have a different way?

**Jessica**: I pray and meditate every single day. Umm I read my Bible every single day, and I have for over 4 years. Umm, so it's just stuff like that. I kind of thought about writing here and there and people always tell me that I should, but life gets busy. So yeah maybe someday when life isn't as busy and I can do it a little bit more diligently [laughs].

**JWells**: From what you can remember, were there any requirements such as page length or topic for the particular writing competition?

**Jessica**: I don't, I don't really remember the details but I know it was like some prison magazine something or other and it was going to be published in there and then there was parameters around you had to be incarcerated around the last 12 months and that sort of thing. So you could either be incarcerated or had been in the last 12 months. It couldn't be something years from now sort of thing. I think it was also a big part of just seeing where people's mind frames were about prison, but I don't remember anything specific other than that.

**JWells**: Do you remember how many people entered?

**Jessica**: As far as I know, I was the only one who was going to. There is another girl that was going to, but she started writing and then she just stopped. So as far as I know, I'm the only one. And I know that officer Hardee pulled me out of the tank and let me actually type on the computer to get this thing done. And so that's why I thought he was mailing it, he thought I was mailing it, and it just turned out, so he was like well you know.

**JWells**: He's like a big supporter of everything. He does a lot of programs, but especially for writing because he encouraged another woman to compose a manuscript and he shared it with me. It was really awesome.

**Jessica**: Yeah anything that you can do to better yourself, he's trying to. I tell the ladies all the time because I still go back into the jail for church and AA services ,and I tell them like you're in the Ritz-Carlton of jails, because if you want to better yourself that opportunity is available to you here to do that through the programs that officer Hardee has started. And he does it all through commissary money, every last bit of it. There is no taxpayer money going into one of his programs. He has the GED program, he gots an aquaponics Farm. It’s all built. It needs to be staffed a little better to get it up and running, but it is built. He also has AA Services, Church, he has a library. I mean they are not like extravagant programs, but they are available to you. I think he now has psych services coming in there. So lots and lots of things...if you want that help, it’s available to you.

**JWells**: When you first started this strategy of reflection and working through just figuring out how you got there through writing, was it suggested to you in jail that you should write or is it just something that you had the time to do?

**Jessica**: Yeah yeah you got a little bit of time on your hands in jail [laughs]. So yeah, but yeah it was through that and like I said the prison writing thing really got my tail feathers lit so to speak on the one I did because there was a time crunch on it. So we had a couple of months, but I started writing slowly and I said I'll see where this goes and then I sent to my dad and I said what do you think? I’d write a few pages and he would be like, “this is really great kiddo.” So then he would type something. So I said if you could type it for me because my handwriting is a disaster and I've been scratching things out, so if you type it up I can reread it and start editing from there and making changes. So that's what he did. Sometimes I will call him if they were little. And I'd write some more and send that.

**JWells**: I believe it was in the 18th century, but a father and a daughter exchanged letters and at the time girls weren’t allowed to go to formal schools, so the father taught her how to write and perfect her writing through letters. She would write him and he would edit the letters and check for punctuation, and send it back to her so she can learn all of the grammar rules. Then he would also give her lessons or talk to her about how to behave herself and things like that through letters.

**Jessica**: That’s crazy. I can’t imagine not being able to be educated.

**JWells**: You know and college there's the standard way of English are the standard dialect so you do have to write with proper grammar and punctuation in order to get a better grade in the class, but that may not be how they want to express themselves.

**Jessica**: And I think that's where the fine line is. If I was trying to write a book sure, and you were my editor...because he does have that level he does have a Ph.D, he has written a dissertation, he actually writes things, and is probably going to get something published at some point in time, he's working on a kids book and things like that. So I get it, but that's not what I want. No! I was like I'm in jail I have control over nothing. But this is mine, back off. [Laughs]

**JWells**: You said he has a Ph.D, is it in writing or is it a different field?

**Jessica**: My mom was an English major. I said funner once in my whole entire life, I said, “this is funner, what!” [laughs]. I finally got that it was supposed to be more fun. I was like ok. She was an English major and my dad is a psychologist.

**JWells**: From what you said about your consistent correspondence with him I was wondering if that's how it was when growing up, did they place emphasis on writing when you were growing up?

**Jessica**: The biggest influence I can remember is the “thank you” letters. I always had to write a “thank you” letter. And it stunk! and I was like oh gosh I have to write five of them [laughs]. But you know it was a big thing. I can remember, I always kind of liked writing in terms of writing what's up spinning around in my brain and I can get it down, and revise it, and edit it, and make it sound very important as opposed to sounding stupid when I said it. I can make it make much more sense, you know. I always had school paperwork and that sort of stuff. But my mom always wanted me to read more. Both of my parents were like avid readers. I finally have come into it. I l enjoy reading, but it tortured me from childhood to 30. It was in jail that I really started reading because it was only so much TV watching a person could take all day everyday.

**JWells**: Sounds like your exchanges with your dad were very fruitful and robust, so let's talk about the letters with your boys [laughs].

**Jessica**: Now we’ll go to the opposite end of the spectrum [laughs]. Again, those [the letters] were like literally just to let them [her two sons] know that I was thinking about them. You know, I would try this thing...I think it was when I got out of prison and I went to live in Minnesota for a year and one of the bigger things that we did...I can't remember if I was still in the halfway house or I was at my dad's house, but it became very important to me the characteristics of a good man. And so every week I would have a word that I would think was a good character, a word describing a good characteristic of a good man. And so at the beginning of the week they would have to write down what they thought what that meant and I think they might have had to use that in a sentence, or how it applies to them.

I can probably find that again too, but I forgot about this little bit too. So then they had to use it [the characteristic] in a sentence and then they had to type it all up and email it to me. And so they had to do something on Monday, Wednesday, and by Friday. We talked about it on Sunday. They would call me and we would talk about it. And then they would have to use the dictionary definition, say what do you think it is how does that apply to you, do you think you have that character yet? That's what it was. And then what is the dictionary definition. So for the whole week there were supposed to think about that word. And so I added to it and stuff like that. And it was like you know... I can't even think of any…lIke honesty, and truthfulness, and faithfulness and stuff like that, and just like characteristics that you would think of in a good man. And I would add to the list as a word will pop into my mind and stuff like that. And of course they would be kicking and screaming, “we don't want to do it, we don't have the time.” And then we would talk about how much time it actually involved, you know. They were more important and then like anything else it became routine. This is what we do.

**JWells**: How old were they at the time?

**Jessica**: Trying to think here. I went to jail in 2013, I was released in 2014, I moved back here in 2015. So somewhere between 2014 and 2015, this was four years ago, so they were 10 and 12... Yeah 10 and 12.

**JWells**: And before you guys started this activity, at home did they engage in a lot of writing in their free time or was it something that they just did when they had to for school?

**Jessica**: Oh, had to for school! [Laughs]. I can remember my kid telling me--this is Max, my younger one--that he liked writing me, but he hated writing to me because he thought he had to write a whole page. But he wanted to write to me just to say something. Same thing, same sort of thing in terms of just letting me know that he was thinking about me and that he loved me. And he liked getting letters from, but he hated getting letters because if he got a letter from me that meant he he had to write back, and he had to write a whole page. And their writing was huge, trying to take up a whole page, and it was just like for words. And I was like, “ahhh.” So just silly things like that.

**JWells**: I noticed from the email examples you showed me on the refrigerator that, I think it’s Max who has all the Xs and Os at the end, and he does have a lot of white space between each sentence.

**Jessica**: Yeah. It’s space, space, space, next sentence, then space, space, space. [laughs].

**JWells**: They said that they thought the letters had to be long, did they also think that they had to write in proper grammar too?

**Jessica**: Heck if I know. [laughs]. I can’t believe that they thought they had to do all that. So yeah, I have no idea what was going through their minds. But he told me that later. I thought that was funny that he thought it had to be that long.

**JWells**: So they sent handwritten letters before too right? And then when they got to switch over to email did they write more frequently?

**Jessica**: Oh no. They thought that was almost even worse because they never checked their email. And I'm like wow that's so simple. And they were like, “but I never log into my email.” And I said you can tell it to save, it’s not this complicated. But they’ll spend 20 minutes trying to figure out how to order a video game or something else. [Laughs].

**JWells**: Was your writing to them more than a page?

**Jessica**: No… No it was just more like I love you and I'm thinking about you, hope you had a good day at school, and write me back when you get a chance, let me know what's going on, love you, Mom. Simple stuff. I had nothing to report. I mean nothing was happening every single day, so it's just like little things you know. And I remember kind of when I was getting into my Bible and stuff like that, and getting little bible verses and I would kind of write out something like Proverbs or something that I thought might would apply. Then I remember when I got out we had a conversation about indudaronomy. There's this thing about what to do with your stubborn son. You take him to the city gates and you stone them to death. [Laughs]. I looked at them and they both looked at me [laughs]. And I was like there's just some things we don't do any more, luckily for you two.

**JWells**: Did you ever send your boys like hand-drawn pictures, or cards,or anything?

Jessica: No. A lot of people do artwork and stuff. That was never a big thing for me. [I’m] trying to think of if I did anything. I might have had somebody draw them something once and maybe sent that. But no.

**JWells**: I like that your writing is really different... You're writing to your boys is really different from what we see in the media, or in movies, or what we hear about because you're very transparent when you say it doesn't need to be a whole page, I just need you to remember that I love you and that I’m checking in on you, and that writing no matter how short still has a big impact.

**Jessica**: I agree, and there was a lady when I was in prison who didn't call her family, didn't want her family to come visit her. She was like when I do my time, I do my time. This was not her first time, but umm when I do my time, I gotta to do my time. And I thought that was one of the most selfish things I've ever heard in my entire life, because it's not you doing your time it's your entire family. They may not be in the jail, but they're doing time. You have affected their lives by removing yourself as their mother. That’s huge to a kid. So to be like you're doing your time and they need to live their life, I thought that was a real a-hole move to put it mildly. You know, I just thought that was ridiculous.To each their own I guess, but not to each their own at the expense of your children.

**JWells**: That's really interesting to hear from your perspective because when I was younger I had an uncle like. He would go in and out of prison and he would say, he would literally say “I need to do my time by myself.” And when I was younger, I thought it was that he just doesn't want us to spend our money on him. When I got older, not being able to have contact with him did take effect on us. His son was too young to read or write at the time, I imagine...I think my grandfather and my father got to visit him once And then after that he said, “I'm in here it is all on me.”

**Jessica**: And it is hard. It was the hardest thing in the world to have your family come spend the day with you and leave. Like in prison they can spend the day, but in jail it is only 30 minutes. And half the time we didn’t have anything to talk about. I mean have you tried to sit down and talk to an to an eight and a ten year old for 30 minutes? It’s like uhhh, just kill me now. It's torture you know, but it's like my only 30 minutes that I got. And their dad would bring them every other week, because he had another kid. So when he had him, he didn't want to bring his other son to jail. So it would be when he just had the two of them, which would have been my weekend anyway but he had them all the time now. So he would bring them out to Lockhart, which was no small feat, I mean that’s a good hour drive for 30 minutes. So you know that was hard. And seeing…especially like in prison you can spend all day together, and go outside, you can play board games you can watch movies and it's just way different in federal prison. But to see your family leave…I’m mean it just...when they left at the end of the day that was hard, but then they will come back the next day because they can come all day Saturday and Sunday.

My dad flew down from Minnesota and brought the boys and that was the first time that we hugged. So they were there all day Saturday and Sunday, and then Sunday was really hard because they weren't coming back Monday. And you know, I got to sit back down and do some more time, you know. So it's horrible, it's hard, you know. But tough. [Laughs]. Tough. It's hard on them, and they need to see their mom, and they want to hug their mom. And it's hard for them to leave, I'm sure. They cried, I cried but tough.Tough on you that it is hard. So that’s you know. As much as they would come and their dad could bring them, I’m like let’s do it.

**JWells**: I like what you said about it’s hard to talk to an 8-year-old for thirty minutes. I think that’s something else that’s realistic about your letters as well, it reflects that there isn't much to say. And I know that you said this yourself, you're honest, that you do have a lot of time on your hands when you're in jail. But even though you may have...there's a lot of distance and phone calls are expensive, but there is still not that much to talk about. And so I'm always interested in what the letters actually say, if they are actually more than a page is there really a conversation that's happening or is it more reflection taking place on a page, especially with children because they may not be interested in writing back.

**Jessica**: I think it’s mostly just saying, “Hey. I hope you had a good day, and I hope you learned something new and fun in school. And not a lot is changing around here. Everything is okay. I love you a whole big bunch, and miss you more than I can say.” I mean just things like that, you just let them know that you love them. It's not you know like “oh dear so-and-so, as I reflect upon the day.” [Laughs]. It's not like in the movies where you sit down to write a letter…it's like this thing. It’s none of that. It’s just at the end I write, “I love you,” real big, and “I miss you.” And maybe a big beating heart looking thing, something like that to make it fill up the page. [Laughs]. We always have to write a page, you know.

**JWells**: Were you ever directive with your children? Did you tell them, maybe if their father conveyed they weren't behaving or their homework wasn't being done, did you ever write them to tell them to get their act together?

**Jessica**: Oh yeah! I don't know if it was in the writing so much. I think that would be the reminders and you need to keep your grades up would probably be in some of them. But absolutely. I thought that it was hilarious that they thought that I had any sort of input while I was in jail, but I was there mom. So I was like you know, I would say your dad told me that you got a C on a mid-something and that's not acceptable. And you know if you can't get it up to a B then you're going to be grounded or this that and the other. And they’re like, “Ok.” and “I’m sorry.” And I would laugh, like I could do anything. But I was always their Mom. And I think that between writing and calling, and having a consistent presence in their life that I was their mom. So when my kids talk about have I ever not been there, the answer is no. I have always been there. Was there a period when I was physically removed from their lives? Yes, but I was still there. And writing was a part of that. And I think that they will feel it [absence] less because they would get a letter mid-week, and then I'll always call them on Sunday. And so it was kind of this consistent back-and-forth thing. So again, there's not a whole heck of a lot of stuff to talk about, but it's just that presence. And since you can't physically be there, you have to figure out how to make that presence be there. If you want to be in their lives, which I definitely wanted to do that.

**JWells**: I wanted to ask you more directly, how do you feel writing helped you fulfill your role as a mother while you were in jail?

**Jessica**: I think it did. It’s funny because, my kids, we even have conversations now where we talk about being there and they say, “yeah, you have never not been there.” And I feel like yeah well there's a big chunk of time in your life that I wasn't there. But they are like, “you were always there, you wrote, us you called us, or…” So I think that's how it had an impact in terms of being a mom. Again, it wasn't like these huge letters that had catastrophic meaning, and stuff like that. But it was just, “I’m thinking about you,” and I think that they can always have those and that's kind of what I wanted, to tell them I loved them and why I loved them. But then that way they can have them to pull them out if they wanted to. I don’t know if they ever did or not, they're boys they may have just lost them or threw them away. [Laughs].

But you know, just the fact that they can have a minute to know that I was thinking about them. And I can remember, and this is another reason that I wrote them, but I can remember being a kid and getting mail and thinking that it was awwwwesome. I would say to my mom, “you get mail everyday.” And she was like, “they’re just bills.” But all I wanted to get was get mail. Maybe your grandma would send you a card or something, I was so excited and think, “ohhh, I got mail. So I don't know if it was that big of a deal to them, but it sure was to me. So I thought well maybe that would be fun, something I could do to help brighten their day. And every now and then they'll get mail here and they'll still get excited, so I think that probably felt good to them at least.

**JWells**: And even with email. When email became popular, it was really exciting to get emails. But now those junk emails annoy us. [Laughs].

**Jessica**: Yeah, it’s like getting all those mailers in your mailbox.

**JWells**: Why did you choose to put those two specific responses [email responses from her boys] on the refrigerator?

**Jessica**: I think those were two of the funniest ones.The one that you’re talking about where the kid is talking about, “I started taking Omega 3s. Not the pills, the little chewables.” [Laughs]. I mean he is just searching for stuff to tell me. I just wanted to remember them at that time period. Most of jail was bad, but there were times that were good. And emails like that were funny, such as their type of frame of mind at that point in time of my life. The other kid, I think this was like right before they actually coming to visit, and I think it says they were really excited and they don't if they can wait twelve days or something like that. And this is when we were about to be able to touch each other. And it had been like eleven months since I had touched my kids. So were about ready to be able to hug.

**JWells**: I like when Henry says, “I love you oh so much.” Or it starts with, “This is Henry. I love you oh so much.” [Laughs].

**Jessica**: Yeah exactly. Like okay, the email says it's Henry. [Laughs].

**JWells**: I like that he identifies himself.

**Jessica**: [Laughs]. Oh, so it's Henry. Great!

**JWells**: Other than your father and your two sons, did you write a letter to anyone else?

**Jessica**: My cousin Kim wrote me pretty religiously and that became...especially when I got to prison. It started kind of when I got to jail, but when I got to prison I was getting letters from her like every other day almost and it was just kind of encouraging things. Same sort of thing, what she was doing in her life, work, what was going on. And it was just a card, so you know the bottom half of the card she would write in there, and that sort of thing. And she recently had a battle with tongue cancer and is recovering from that, and has some radiation coming up. And I called her, and we talked for a little bit, and then I started thinking that she was no less busy than I am right now and did that. So it's now my turn. So I just wrote her a card the other day, and I have another one going. And I'm keeping track of the Bible verses that I'm putting in there. I’m kind of putting Bible verses on the top half of the card, and on the bottom half of the card I'm putting some words of encouragement sort of a thing. And I'm going to try and get those out to her every third to fourth day.

**JWells**: That's awesome that this writing has gone full circle.

**Jessica**: I was like yep it's my turn. It came to me during the morning prayer, like a bolt of lightning.

**JWells**: I'm sure she'll really appreciate that. You said that she wrote more when you were in prison, was it just...do you think it was because of the transfer that she felt you needed more encouragement while you were in prison, or do you think it was just a coincidence.

**Jessica**: I don’t know if that’s just when family started finding out. I don’t know when everyone started finding out. I have no concept of anything that was going on other than inside of those four walls that was my tank, for you know, 294 days. But, I mean you just have no idea. You feel like the whole world has just forgotten that you exist. it's very lonely and stuff. I know I got a couple letters...I don't know if she wrote me…I don’t know that they knew. Like I don't know at what point my dad told them. I don't know if it was immediate, I just, I don't know, I never really asked her that, so I’m not a hundred percent certain on that. People slowly started to find out and I will get a letter randomly from someone, and I would go, “oh gosh they know” and I was like “uggghhh.” But it was never a bad thing. But it was always...I would see who it was from and I was like, “oh nuts, they know.” It would be like somebody that my mom knew, and they knew me from my childhood and I was like “ohh.” And then I would open it up, and I would be crying by the end of the letter. It's was just we love you and everything was just unbelievably supportive. You think you would open up a letter and it was going to be, “How could you do this,” you know. Because that's kind of how you feel, at least I did, like, “how could I have done this,” you know. But that's not what any of it was.

**JWells**: It’s interesting because you said that you liked getting mail when you were in jail. You had something to look forward to, but then there were certain letters that you weren't sure if you could look forward to opening.

**Jessica**: Exactly. Like my dad and my children. Like those were, you know. But like some family friend from my childhood that I hadn’t heard from in probably a few years, but I've known them my whole life sort of thing. I’m like, “ohhh, they know that I'm in here.” Because I mean… I’m so embarrassed that I had done this, and that I had become addicted to meth. And I’m like how did I do this. How could this happen?I didn’t even want to tell my dad that this was happening until it was too late and too deep. And I didn't want to tell my kids.

I thought I was going to be there for a couple weeks. So I would call the kids and just pretend like I was out to dinner with a friend or something like that. Their dad would pick it up and give them the phone after it did the whole, “this is a call from the jail and the whole blah blah blah” sort of thing. Less than two weeks I think, I knew I was going to be there for a minute. But it was like less than 2 weeks I was like, I think it's better that the kids understand that I can't be there, rather than I'm choosing to not be there with them. I think I need to tell them. I think their dad needs to sit down and have this conversation with them. So we talked about it, their dad and I, we talked about it and I said I want you to tell them I’m in jail, I don't want you tell him why. I want them to understand that at their age that I did not kill anybody and that I did not rob a bank. Because I think at that age, that's why kids think you go to jail. There’s not a lot of gray areas.

So he told them and I called them that night. We [her and her sons’ dad] talked about it and we talked about when he would do it the next day. So I called that night... I called that night and we talked to them and they never asked me why. They never did. And then I told them when I can sit down and hold them, we would have a conversation as to why. And when I got to prison we had visitation that wasn't through the glass or over the phone sort of thing so they could sit down and we talked about it. And I said to my kids, I will never touch drugs again. My oldest at the time, Henry, looked at me in the eye and said, “do you promise?” I looked him in the eye and I said, “yes.” So that was all the rehab or anything else I needed there. I was like I could never do this to them again. It was like everyone kind of forgave me and stuff like that, and allowed me to get through this and was there for me. To put my family through that again, I couldn’t do that. Not an option. Just straight up not an option.

**JWells**: Were you ever concerned with writing letters to your cousin, or your sons, or your dad, that because like letters may be read by someone else like a correctional officer, or like their father, or anything, did that influence what you wrote in your letters?

**Jessica**: Not really. I know they're all being read, but yeah, no. I don't remember ever really. No. The only thing that I can remember is like in the beginning when I went to church I was like this should look good to the judge. It’s why I went for the first time. I did not go to church for the right reasons whatsoever. I was like it’s got to look good you know, and stuff like that. I think I knew probably in the back of my mind somewhere that whoever was reading...I didn't know who was reading it, I know that the officers were but that they probably had to see some kind of change in me. Just in who I was and what I was writing with my dad and so on and so forth. So what they see here isn’t just complete BS. It’s sort of a thing that’s going on with everybody; it’s with my kids, it’s with my dad. You can't just kind of make stuff up you know and try to pull one over and so on and so forth, you know. But the first time I went to church was to get out of the tank and I was like, “ooo this is going to be somewhere different, cool, I’ll go.” Just got to look good for the judge you know I'm sure they tell them that we do these things, I'm sure they tell them everything that we do in here. I was like I’ll do that. Then something happened. Then I started going for real. [Laughs]. God will get you there one way or another. He doesn’t care why. But he’ll get you there.

**JWells**: You mentioned earlier that when you were writing with your father and the piece that you worked on titled J.A.I.L was a reflection and it helped you work through some things, I read a lot of scholars say that for women, specifically in prison or in jail, writing can be liberating and empowering do you feel like that was your experience as well?

**Jessica**: Yeah, I think absolutely. Again, I told you my dad would make suggestions and I was like nope, this is mine [laughs]. You know, there's not a lot you have control over in jail. I mean what I ordered on commissary, but I didn't have that much to choose from, you know that I could do and basically what I wrote. You know, when I ate, was when they decided. What I ate, was what they decided. When I could go out to rec, was when they decided. On the flipside of that, and what I kind of tried to embrace with jail was that. That I have no control over anything. And to try to turn things over to God, and to step away from the hustle and bustle of life, because as soon as I get out it’s going to start again. So as much as I was going crazy with nothingness, I tried to start embracing it and start flipping it.

And I joke now that I would love to check into jail for the weekend, and I don't know if that's really the way that it works. [Laughs]. I'm not coming in because I've done something to get me in, but I’m just like can I just check in for the weekend so that I could check out and check out a life for the weekend. Because there's no phones there's no nothing, all the stuff that you kind of miss while you're in there it's kind of nice also to get away from when you’re in there. And I knew as soon as I got out, it was going to start again. And I have a friend who is still in jail and we email not real regularly because everything is jail is difficult, there's as whole login process, and it’s cumbersome, and I just don't remember. So I mean.

**JWells**: Now you sound like your sons. [Laughs].

Jessica: I know it's terrible. It's not that hard, but it is cumbersome. So it’s like, “aww yeah, I'll do it later.” And then I just put it off. But she'll email me, and I'm like, “oh nuts!” And then I’m like I gotta email her back. So I’ll get back in there and I’ll email her. And it'll be on my phone, but it’s too hard to type on my phone and I’ll forget by the time I get home when I’m in front of a computer sort of a thing. So yeah, she’s in there. And I’m like I know it sucks and you’re ready to get home, and you have a daughter and all these other things, but just try to enjoy it enjoy. Enjoy having the time. She's doing the drug rehab program, it’s called RDAP. I’m like just try to work through that without having any of the hustle and bustle of life to interfere with that, just do you so to speak while you can because as soon as you’re out, you’re out and life doesn’t wait for you. You gotta get back on it.

Yeah, somewhere tucked away I have some letters from my cousin. I came across it the other day, but I don’t know... I find some stuff and then I just stick it somewhere safe. But I did. There are somethings from prison that I have saved. I still have my Bible. I have some things that people wrote in my Bible. Somebody's mother had sent her a card that said “To his daughter here on earth,” or something and it was just a cute little thing. So I have that tucked in there sort of a thing. But there are notes that I have in my Bible of things that were happening that I wanted to remember. So I have things like that to reflect back on. I don’t go back there a lot. Not for bad reasons, it’s just, it’s just not where I am anymore. And I think if you dwell too much in the past or the future we’re not living now, and I think that’s what we are supposed to do.

**JWells**: I agree with that. Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of how you wrote or how you are writing now? I know you mentioned that you are writing your cousin and you write sometimes to your friend in jail [laughs].

**Jessica**: Yeah. I’m not a very good friend [laughs]. I’ve sent her stuff and send her money, stuff like that. I try. It's just it’s hard. it's hard to stay connected with other people through writing. But I think it is nice and in terms of taking the time. My kids are like, “why do you write…” like when I started this thing with my cousin because she’s in recovery sort of thing from the cancer, they’re like, “it’s just so dumb. Why don’t you just email? Email is free and it doesn’t take...” And I said that’s kind of the whole point of it. Is that it cost you a little bit of money, it takes you a little time and effort to go get the card or whatever that you're going to write on, and you have to sit down and you have to write it. You don't just open up your computer, and pop on your email, and send it. Does that mean something? Sure.

My kids... They love getting presents, not at all. They almost dislike getting presents because they know there’s a “thank you” card they have to write attached to the end of it. And they don't get to send thank you emails or text messages. They have to write a card and tell them thank you for it and so on and so forth. And they hate it, but my mom instilled that in me, and my grandmother instilled it in her, and I hope instill in them, and them to their children and stuff like that. Because it is. It's taking that minute to do something that isn't a part of our normal everyday activity to let somebody know that you are thinking about them and that you care about them. And what they did, and especially in a “thank you,” that what they did meant enough for me to sit down and do this.

**JWells**: Do you think along those lines whether it be just in society or while incarcerated that seeing handwriting has more value than seeing email?

**Jessica**: Oh yeah. And they say even like, I can't remember what job it was, it was some sort of sales job or something like that, but there has been studies done, that say all the junkmail you get that you just sort of flip through and you can tell that it’s all junk mail, but that if you handwrite the address they'll stop and I'll look at it. And you have a better chance of them opening it and stuff like that, as opposed to you if you just do a typed sort of thing. So yeah, absolutely.

**JWells**: We talked about this in our first meeting, your sons say that email is free but in jail or in federal prison it is not free, right?

**Jessica**: No. It's like $0.05 a minute, I think is what it was.

**JWells**: When you’re reading it right?

**Jessica**: Or typing it. As soon as you open your email account the clock starts ticking and it's $0.05 a minute. So you read real quick, hit print. If it’s a long one you hit print. You know you gotta walk over six buildings or whatever to, the library because things would print out there. Yeah, prison was a whole nother ball wax. You have to print out labels, you couldn't just handwrite. You have to go in and type in the person's information and it will print out a label in the library. So you would have to send it over to the library, then you have to go to the library get in line for the label maker thing, print out your labels. And that’s the only way they would send them out. That’s crazy. [Laughs].

**JWells**: That’s a lot.

**Jessica**: So yes, everything is a pain in the butt. Nothing is ever simple. Then you have to buy stamps and stuff like that out of your commissary. So yeah it was a feat. And now to check email you have an account, then you have to log into your account, and then it gives you that criptive thing so you have to type what the cryptive thing says. And then once you get in there it says read your email, and then you gotta get into the email, and it’s just on and on. It's nothing that that cumbersome, but like especially when I see that I’ve gotten an email from her it’s on my phone. And then I have to log into everything it's too small, and then you hit the wrong thing, and then it shoots you over here, and then you gotta close it out, and then you have to start the whole thing over, and I'm like, “are you freaking kidding me!” And like I said when I get home I forget about it on my computer, I start watching TV or whatever. I'm like, “oh nuts.” So I just try to take care of it on my phone.

**JWells**: And that’s one of the reasons why I want to continue looking at how mothers write letters because I'm learning more and more about how I guess prisons think this is supposed to be more accommodating or making things more accessible, but they're moving towards more technology so like the emails and and they want video visitation, but that’s not really accommodating for people in prison.

**Jessica**: I mean the email is nice because it is instantaneous, you know. So if someone needs to tell you something, they can tell you. Because you can't call anyone in prison you know. I don't even really think email is instantaneous, I think it takes a day. Like my dad will be like, “yeah, I emailed you that yesterday.” And I’m like, “Ohh I haven't gotten it yet.” Because again, they read everything. So it's got to come in and it’s got to get processed. What they send out has to...so I don't know the exact time frame on things, I just know it from when I talk to my dad like yeah I haven't gotten that email yet. But I mean it was a lot faster. It was within 24 hours, as opposed to a letter which would take a couple of days. But I would say email was probably even twelve hours or something. It didn’t take too terrible long, so it’s a much faster way of trying to...or I need you to call me, if you needed to get in touch with somebody.

JWells: That’s really interesting to hear. Do you have anything else you want to say?

Jessica: No. This was fun. It’s good to go back every now and then, you know. [Laughs].

JWells: Awesome. Jessica, thank you again for sharing with us how you wrote when you were incarcerated.