

## Incorrigibles / Rediscovering Wayward Girls

This story begins with a box... a \$5 box bought at a yard sale in Hudson, New York, by a local a thrift shop owner, who shared it with me.

The box contained documents from the *1920s* and *30s* - personal photos and letters, news clippings, medical records, intake forms, and parole paperwork. The peculiar thing was that the contents *all* pertained to *girls*.

Girls as young as 12 and as old as 16 -- who had been incarcerated at the *New York State Training School for Girls*, an institution that today we would call a *youth prison*.

For the 70 years the Training School was open, as many as 15,000 girls did time there, 600 girls at a time, often staying for two or more years.

As I pieced together clues from the documents in the box, stories about individual girls revealed themselves. *Anna Murphy, Lila Thomas, Sarah Greco, Jewell Ward, Dazzle* -- were charged with things like: having their morals corrupted, improper guardianship, being ungovernable, wayward...and incorrigible”.

I thought I knew what incorrigible meant, but I reexamined the term. Was it that these girls were “unable to be reformed or corrected”?<sup>1</sup> Or was this just a code word for girls from immigrant families with few resources and maybe a lot of chaos; girls who had minds of their own.

In 1910, Training School manager Annie Allen wrote: “Our chief task and aim with delinquent girls is to protect them from the natural consequences of being girls.”<sup>2</sup>

What this translated into was some schooling, some vocational training--some solitary confinement.

Reading through intake records, I saw that many girls were sexually or physically abused. Why had *they* been sent away and not their *abusers*? These girls were living proof of transgressions by people in authority. Living evidence that had to be silenced... punished... hidden.

In my research, I found that one of these incorrigible girls was *the* Ella Fitzgerald.<sup>3</sup> Her offence? “Ungovernable and will not obey the just and lawful commands of her mother - adjudged delinquent”.

Ella was sent to the Training School because she was running away from her aunt and an abusive uncle.

The stories held in the box reach beyond the dust of history to talk to us today. I saw all of us in them. I saw our grandmothers in them. I saw my daughters in them. I saw myself.

As an artist, I've been doing work around mass incarceration for 20 years. There was

something about this box that deeply moved me -- so I created an installation and a visual book. I also put up a website to share these stories.

And then people wrote to me... wanting to know about *their mothers, sisters* or *aunts* who had been incarcerated at this “training school.”<sup>4</sup>

A man named Thomas reached out to me *wanting to know* if I had a picture of his mother. She had been there too and he had never known her.

Others wrote to tell me *they* had been there and wanted to tell *their* stories.

Liz's story started when her grandmother died. That event sent her family into a downward spiral. When she was 8 years old, she was taken by the Catholic Guardian Society, separated from her six siblings, and sent all by herself to an abusive foster home. By the age of 12 Liz was at the Training School. I spoke with *Sharon* who said “I would run away a lot because my friends wanted to go to parties” and for that her mother had Sharon sent away. *Lilly* told me that to this day she doesn't know what her “offense” was.

Speaking from experience, teenage girls:

- Shoplift
- Run away
- Fight
- Take drugs and drink
- Test their family's cultural or religious norms
- and 'do what they want to do'

Might these be developmentally appropriate rites of passage? And if the girls are white or of a higher social class, aren't their rebellions often handled without involving the courts?

Is the same true for the poor, the disadvantaged, girls of color?

Girls were then *and still are*:

Punished and controlled. When what they need are opportunities to take charge of their own lives, assistance for their families, medical care and safe places to be and grow.

Girls were *and still are* running away from:

Physical Abuse  
Sexual abuse  
and Family chaos...<sup>5</sup>

The crime of being incorrigible sounds so antiquated, but it is still with us - as a box to be checked on intake forms. In the current DSM<sup>6</sup> -- the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders -- we now have oppositional defiant disorder. Its symptoms include: “loss of temper, argumentative, and defiant.”

Many courts continue to see the sexual behavior of teenage girls as a disorder, especially in

relation to LGBTQ and gender non-conforming identities.

Today, in the US, there are about 70,000 youth held in residential placement, about 10,000 of whom are girls.<sup>7</sup> The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline,<sup>8</sup> a recent report from Georgetown Law School, states that 70% of young women in the juvenile justice system *have experienced trauma*. And invariably when girls are incarcerated they are re-traumatized and are at risk of further abuse.

There is good news...

This year New York City set an ambitious goal to end girls' incarceration and has set up a Task Force to bring this into being.<sup>9</sup> I hope that the rest of the country will soon follow suit.

40 years after the last "incorrigible" girl left the Training School I brought girls -- some of whom were living in a group home -- together for a 'girl-power' workshop in Hudson.<sup>110</sup>

After hearing the stories of girls from the Training School, and the experiences of those before them, the girls reframed words, used *then and now*, to define young women:

Not Wild, they said, Free.

Not Unruly... Proud

Not Defiant... Strong

Not Wayward... A Survivor

Not Delinquent... Courageous

Not Disobedient... Determined

Incorrigible? Yes, and proud *of it*.

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Annie W. "How to Save Girls Who Have Fallen." In *The Survey*, 691. Vol. 24. 1910. <http://picture-projects.com/Ebooks/howtosavegirls/>

<sup>2</sup> "Incorrigible." In Merriam-Webster. 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/incorrigible>.

<sup>3</sup> Bernstein, Nina. "Ward of the State; The Gap in Ella Fitzgerald's Life." *The New York Times*, June 23, 1996. <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/06/23/weekinreview/ward-of-the-state-the-gap-in-ella-fitzgerald-s-life.html>.

<sup>4</sup> "Oral History Archive." *Incorrigibles*. Last modified 2015. <http://incorrigibles.org/category/oral-history-archive/>.

"New York State Training School for Girls, 1904 – 1975." *Prison Public Memory Project*. Last modified July 13, 2011. <http://prisonpublicmemory.us/york-state-training-school-girls/>.

"Contact Us." *Incorrigibles*. Last modified 2016. <http://incorrigibles.org/contact-us/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sherman, Francine T., and Annie Balck. *Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls*. 2015.

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[http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gender\\_Injustice\\_Report.pdf](http://www.nationalcrittenton.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Gender_Injustice_Report.pdf).

- <sup>6</sup> American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed. Washington, DC, 2013.
- <sup>7</sup> On any given day, over 54,000 juvenile offenders are not living in their homes but are held in residential placement (e.g., juvenile detention facilities, corrections facilities, group homes or shelters).
- “Key Facts: Youth in the Justice System.” Campaign for Youth Justice. Last modified June 2016.  
<https://www.campaignforyouthjustice.org/images/factsheets/KeyYouthCrimeFactsJune72016final.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Saar, Malika Saada, Rebecca Epstein, Lindsay Rosenthal, and Yasmin Vafa. *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls’ Story*. Washington, DC: Georgetown Law, 2015.  
[https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/2015\\_COP\\_sexual-abuse\\_layout\\_web-1.pdf](https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2015/02/2015_COP_sexual-abuse_layout_web-1.pdf).
- <sup>9</sup> “Ending Girls’ Incarceration Is Goal of New Task Force in New York City.” Vera Institute of Justice. Last modified February 2, 2017. <https://www.vera.org/newsroom/press-releases/ending-girls-incarceration-is-goal-of-new-task-force-in-new-york-city>.
- <sup>10</sup> “Hudson Opera House, Incurrigibles: A Sociodrama.” Incurrigibles. Last modified 2016.  
<http://incurrigibles.org/theater-workshop-performance/>.