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TRUTH IN LOVE

Margaret's Story and the Price of Redemption

By Diane Chido, Antonio Howard,
and Parris Baker
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Editor's note: This article was written in first person by its three authors, in order by section: Diane Chido, Antonio Howard, and Parris Baker.

'I am the matriarch of my family and a great-grandmother. I feel the strong connection of seven generations of my family and understand the importance of the evolution and overcoming the struggles in my own life that can help support the future progression of many more generations of my family. I am determined to make sure they make it through.'

Those are the words of my friend, Margaret. We worked together for eight months, meeting weekly, to prepare her pardon application to Pennsylvania's Board of Pardons. The Pardon Project provides training for volunteers interested in helping people with criminal records reclaim their lives. I volunteered for this role and was trained by Antonio Howard, who runs the program sponsored by Gannon University. To learn how it works, I joined one of his meetings in January with a pardon client who I felt was likely to achieve her goal. I told Antonio that I got involved because I wanted a chance to get to know people whose lives were utterly different from mine so that I could better understand what people go through who did not grow up with my privileges. I said I wanted a more challenging case than the one he offered me.

Antonio chuckled and, like someone who knew the punchline to an inside joke few understood, said, “Oh, if it’s a challenge you want, I’ve got one for you.” And in February 2024, standing in her office at Blasco Memorial Library, Antonio introduced me to Margaret. Although I wasn’t sure what to expect, I wasn’t expecting Margaret: a petite Black woman with fabulously decorated nails who loves pinks and tries amazing new hairstyles “on the regular.” Margaret works as a peer navigator for the Mental Health Association of NWPA. She uses a walker because both of her hips were broken due to past domestic violence. I learned that Margaret had begun her pardon journey three years earlier but quit in frustration several times.

Antonio taught me that pardons are less about pardons and more about the people who need them. The most important part of the coaching process is to be a supportive friend to our clients. Although the paperwork would be a challenge in the pardon application process, our clients rely on us to help sort that out. I liked Margaret immediately. She was transparent about her past transgressions and recovery journey. Margaret speaks regularly to community and church groups about her experience, strength, and hope with the intent of helping others see that it is never too late to change your life.

At first, Margaret seemed intimidated by “the professor” who had come to meet her. I told her I was there to hold her hand through this pardon process. To express a sense of empathy, I shared the horrors of my first marriage and that without the emotional and financial support of my family, I may have ended up in circumstances similar to hers. We held hands, cried, and became friends. I love Margaret! Although I am her pardon coach, Margaret has given me far more than I have given her. I have learned more about life, the truth about balanced and restorative justice, and the crushing burden of the systematic oppression of poverty from Margaret than from any classes or research.

The first step after becoming a team was to obtain the criminal complaint, sworn statement of probable cause, criminal information/indictment, final plea or verdict, sentencing order, and proof of payment (fines, costs, restitution, and supervision fees) from the two Pennsylvania counties where Margaret committed her crimes. Fortunately for us, Antonio had already obtained the case files for Margaret’s convictions — all 25 of them — intending to be summarized on a form that seems developed to accommodate one or two criminal convictions at a time.



Margaret with Diane Chido

Margaret's first conviction occurred 44 years ago, in 1980, in Allegheny County. She worked in a factory office in Pittsburgh to support herself and her young daughter at the time. Not able to make ends meet, Margaret applied for public assistance. Soon after becoming a welfare recipient, she was convicted of fraud for making false statements about her income. Margaret insists it was not her intention to commit fraud but that the forms for reporting income were so confusing. Consequently, Margaret lost her job. And as everything else around her fell apart, she found her escape through drugs and alcohol.

The second step involved listing the case number, offense date, and exact charges for each conviction. Unfortunately, it's not as straightforward as it seems. Many of Margaret's charges were dropped or combined with other cases. Initially, Margaret told me she was ashamed to admit she used an alias for several cases.

The third step involved her writing a paragraph to describe, in detail, each incident and her involvement, where she was, what she did, and how she was caught. In Margaret's case, the circumstances were all the same. As she looked at her offenses in total, Margaret realized how much she had been moved through the system like an object on a conveyor belt. She never received effective legal counsel and pleaded guilty to nearly every offense with which she was charged. Margaret's admitted culpability often increased the magnitude of her sentences because they were also parole violations. In her hazy recollection, in almost every case she signed her name to documents pleading guilty just to get out of the courtroom.

Margaret also mentioned the many times she had been sent for addiction counseling or to live-in facilities in lieu of jail. She recognized that none of it stuck with her because she just wasn't ready to accept the help. After a retail theft conviction in Erie in 2007, Margaret was again sent for counseling, and as she described, something just "clicked." She knew she did not want to stay on this path and finally began to listen to the messages her counselor and her God were sending her. In our meeting, Margaret kept repeating, "What a waste. What a sad waste," as she lamented all the time she lost and wished she would have spent improving herself or being at home with her family.

In one of our sessions, Margaret and I spent four painful hours in her office attempting to accurately and authentically wordsmith each case. Though I knew it was necessary, I felt like a sadistic serial abuser, forcing Margaret to relive the trauma of her life, describing the hustle on the streets, doing whatever she had to do to survive the next day or get to the next high. She said more than once:

I was an addict, I did it to make money for drugs,
or food, or a warm place to go. It was 40 years ago,
and I was in a drugged haze most of the time.
What do they want me to say?!

This was one of the hardest things I have ever done, and I felt like the cruelest person alive putting Margaret through this ordeal. I shared her tears through each experience. I was almost surprised that Margaret agreed to see me the following week, but she persevered.

The next step was for me to compile and organize all the case information and the statements that Margaret had made about each of her cases. The application was a hardcopy PDF that required you to handwrite or type the information. Antonio, however, turned the pages into dynamic Adobe forms so I could provide the information electronically and copy and paste. That helped to streamline the process except when the Adobe coding did not work. We spent several weeks reformatting the forms so that the font and point size was readable, and the forms worked properly. Whenever I advised Margaret of these technical delays, she would nearly break my heart with her mild response, "I know you are busy, Professor." I desperately needed Margaret to understand that the delays were out of my control.

Lastly, there's a personal statement requiring:

- a summary of how her life or circumstances have changed since her last arrest.
- reasons she seeks clemency.

- reasons she is a suitable candidate for consideration.
- information she feels supports her request.

Although the personal statement is the last form in the application, we completed it first. Writing it confirmed for Margaret why going through this arduous process was worth it. She felt immense pride in the purposeful and positive person she had become. Some of the remarkable changes in Margaret's life include earning an associate's degree in social work and becoming a change agent by dedicating her life to helping others manage the trauma in their lives. I cannot imagine a person more worthy of a pardon than Margaret. She has completely changed her life to one of service to her community. Incredibly, Margaret serves as a poll worker during each election cycle because she fervently believes in safeguarding the democratic process.

In his letter of support for Margaret's pardon, former Erie County Library Executive Director Blane Dessy wrote:

The Peer Navigator program has been successful and continues to be so because of the efforts of Margaret. While Margaret has an office where she can speak confidentially with individuals, she is often seen walking through the library looking for opportunities to meet people and to begin conversations with them about any needs they may have. Margaret is also excellent at being able to de-escalate any situation that may arise due to misunderstanding or agitation. She has been effective, dependable, and respected by library staff and the public. She has truly made a difference in how the library operates and how successful it is in meeting the needs of all community members.

After many weeks of frustration trying to understand her records on my own, Antonio met with me for five hours in a coffee shop on June 14, 2024. Antonio has an office at Gannon University, serving as the volunteer coordinator of the project outside of his primary job during the weekdays and a community muralist (his business is called Murals By Antonio Howard). But this happened to be Flag Day, so he was available to collaborate with me. Gannon was closed that day, and inexplicably, we could not get into his office. So, we relocated to a nearby coffee shop and carefully reviewed all of Margaret's court records so I could understand how they fit together and how to present them in her application.

During that process, Antonio identified two cases that were considered non-convictions and needed to be expunged. Therefore, we were unable to include them in the pardon request, as they should be removed from her record by the court. However, expungements were beyond the scope of our meeting that day, and there are other options available to Margaret, including seeking assistance through legal aid. However, to qualify, Margaret will have to show financial need,

which means another complicated application with associated documents and if they eventually agree to help her, *each* case request will cost \$250 in court fees.

Through this process, I learned about the exploitation and perversion of court fees and fines. Fees and fines were not used solely to cover the court's costs of processing cases. In Ferguson, Missouri after the upheaval caused by Michael Brown's fatal shooting by police in 2014, "the U.S. Department of Justice found that Ferguson was using its court system to generate revenue, largely on the backs of poor and black people."^[i] In Margaret's case, for one charge of retail theft in Allegheny County, she was accused of taking six packages of socks worth \$30.90. Margaret was assessed fees, fines, and restitution that totaled an astounding \$1,813.00, *more than 58 times* the value of the socks.

Recognizing that budgetary reliance on these fees to fund the Pennsylvania judiciary's budget grew from \$28 million, or 7%, in 2016-17, to \$85 million, or 19%, in 2022-23, a member of the Pennsylvania General Assembly introduced House Resolution 416 to the Judiciary Committee on May 3, 2024, to study the general appropriations of the judicial branch with goals that include:

- Analyzing the effect of court dependence on fines and fees on different population groups as measured by socioeconomic status.
- Examining and analyzing whether and how cost shifting across various levels of government incentivizes the trend toward reliance on fees and fines for revenue.
- Identifying and quantifying the various costs associated with the collateral consequences imposed on individuals, their families and communities who cannot afford to pay the fines or fees.^[ii]

The resolution was tabled in the Judiciary Committee on Sept. 25, 2024.^[iii] Thus, there will be no vote in committee nor will the resolution find its way to the full House any time soon.

Although Margaret has paid her fines and court fees in Erie County, she has not paid all of her outstanding dues to Allegheny County, which date back to 1980. The total amount owed to Allegheny County is thousands of dollars. At one time, Allegheny County forgave long-time outstanding fees and fines, but not any longer.

Today, half of Margaret's cases are with a collection agency, which adds a 25% penalty fee to every dollar collected. This questionable fee will put an additional \$4,000 burden on Margaret's debt, which is already prohibitive. The one thing Margaret has never had is excess money or discretionary funds. Working in jobs that pay minimum wages provides no pathway out of her financial and legal dilemma. Around and around Margaret rides on this cruel institutional carousel.

I had planned to petition Allegheny Court to return these fees to the court to remove the collection fees. However, just determining which of her cases are in collections took a persistent paralegal friend three hours on the telephone with an official from that court to pore over her records to determine which cases need to be included in the petition. More than 20 individual petitions will need to be filed to request the court to allow Margaret to be put on a payment plan of \$25 a month to show the Board of Pardons that she has a consistent record of payment. And each filing comes with a fee. That cost alone may be insurmountable, but Margaret will not get her pardon without showing this record of payment.

On the day Margaret signed the final pardon application, Dr. Parris Baker and I went to her office to photograph that triumphal moment. Dr. Baker was learning to be a pardon coach and had shadowed some of our meetings. Margaret hugged us and was laughing and crying. She was pleased and relieved we had gotten to this point. It was an exhilarating moment in the process, but there was more frustration to come.



The final pardon application was 218 pages long. All that remained was to scan the completed application for our file and mail the hard copy to the Pardons Board. However, after spending two hours scanning documents, I discovered the file was too large to email a copy to my Gannon Microsoft account. I went to Gannon's IT office and asked whether the scan was still saved in the scanner and if there was another place with more

storage that I could send it to. They looked into it and after a couple of days and several conversations with their service provider, informed me that the scan was not saved, and I would have to begin again.

I went to Gannon's printing office and asked if their super-industrial scanner could manage the job. It could not. The folks in that office were kind enough to request an upgrade to their scanner to enable scanning the entire application to a flash drive. It took several weeks for the upgrade to take place but in the end, it was a perfect solution, and they even did it for me. Grateful as I am for all this assistance, the bottom line is that after all the effort we put into the process, after all the pain of recalling her experience, and after the excitement of signing the final application, Margaret had to continue waiting.

Finally, with the flash drive in my possession and the hard copy document in hand, I went to the post office to mail it. The entire package weighed 3 pounds. I sent it Oct. 17, 2024, and sent a photo of the package with the mailing label to Margaret. Two weeks later, on Oct. 24, I received an email from the Board of Pardons Secretary that the application had been received. Now the long waiting begins anew.

First, the Board of Pardons will assign an agent to interview Margaret. Afterwards, the Board of Pardons will review the application and conduct a merit review to determine if the applicant should be granted a hearing. The process could end there or be recommended for a hearing at which Margaret will present her case and answer questions from any one of the five members of the board. Members of the PA Board of Pardons are the lieutenant governor, the attorney general, and three members appointed by the governor.

Then, the Board of Pardons votes on whether to recommend the case to the governor of Pennsylvania. Again, the process can stop here. Finally, Gov. Josh Shapiro will make the final decision whether to grant clemency. The governor can't grant clemency without a favorable recommendation from the Board of Pardons, but he isn't bound by their recommendation. If all goes well, Margaret could get her pardon in three years from the day we applied.

Today, Margaret is free and working and perfecting her skills as grandmother and great-grandmother. She remains hopeful, through much prayer, that her damaged mother-daughter relationship can be restored.



At this point in her life, Margaret doesn't need to be granted a pardon. The accumulated court fees associated with completing the pardon process will cause

additional strain on her already tenuous financial stability. So, why did Margaret spend the better part of one year and suffer through the emotional pain to complete her pardon application? In her words:

I like who I have become and believe life is a precious gift. A pardon will allow my opportunities in this new life to expand. My record has limited these opportunities and reduced my ability to fulfill these possibilities. Clemency would enable me to help more people understand that their lives are also precious gifts and that with just a little help, they too can live them to the fullest.

A pardon application is ordinarily framed as a request for forgiveness of a person's crime(s). However, people like Margaret rarely forgive themselves. Instead, they relive the guilt of their social crimes in ways best managed by the kind of mission-driven work Margaret does: warning others against following in her footsteps and beckoning those who did that they must turn back. The consequences of a criminal record are proportionate to the ways society is willing to discriminate against people because of it long after their sentence is served, and their financial costs have been paid. So, what a pardon offers people like Margaret isn't forgiveness, but rather a reprieve that extends her reach and the potential impact she can make in our community.

I've known Margaret for six years as a friend and former colleague. Since the first time I met her, Margaret has never missed an opportunity to tell me how proud she is of me. In 2021, Margaret and I began this journey toward completing her pardon application together. Four-and-a-half years later, it's filed. I'm proud of you, Margaret. And no matter what the Pennsylvania Board of Pardon decides, as members of this community, we have already decided to pardon you. Be well.

'I Thank God for My Desperation'

What can we learn from Margaret's story? If you, the reader, are not careful, you may place this essay in the "Here's another sad story about a disadvantaged, down-on-her-luck Black woman" file. An alternate emotional abyss to be avoided is "feeling pity" or "feeling guilt and shame" once you are reminded that we have a judicial system so corrupt and insidious that, like "street-hustling loan sharks" makes it nearly impossible for individuals to completely pay their debts to society. Margaret does not need nor want our prejudice or our pity. And please be hypervigilant to not allow the arrogance of privilege to suggest, "I am so glad that's not me" or "that could never happen to me!" What happens to the least of us happens to all of us and for most Americans, we are less than 90 days away from economic ruin, utter despair, and desperation.

I remember one of my first encounters with Margaret, who affectionately is referred to as “Queeny.” I had seen her many times at my voting station, where she is an ever-present poll worker. We always shared pleasantries and small talk. When Margaret found out I was the Social Work Program Director at Gannon University, she shared her aspirations of returning to school to earn a BA in social work. I offered my encouragement and help to her once she enrolled in one of the three available social work programs in Erie County: Gannon University, Mercyhurst University, or PennWest Edinboro.

However, I was forever changed on the day I heard her offer this testimony to friends and strangers: “I am grateful, and I want to thank God for my desperation,” she said. “It was the gift of desperation that forced me to get honest with myself.” The power of that phrase, “thank God for my desperation” did not come from the meaning inherent in each word. The power and impact of the phrase were expressed in the way Margaret delivered those words, speaking from a secret place where there is no escape or hiding from the truth. I listened intently to Margaret describe her desperation; how she reflected on the events that brought to her point of desperation: (1) a body riddled with the pains of her past and bore the damages of repeated abuse and the consequences of “living life on life’s terms.” (2) how she learned to accept full responsibility for each decision that has so adversely affected her life and her family, and (3) how her submission to God helped to humble herself enough to admit, “I am powerless over my disease” and the courage to commit to change.

Margaret was not bitter or sad when she spontaneously delivered those revelations. In fact, as she spoke with labored speech, clearly in some pain, Margaret was beaming with a peace that most folks would not understand. I believe this type of peace can only be found in the sanctuary and solitude of honest self-reflection and self-examination. The more Margaret shared the more “desperate” I became, listening attentively for the answer to my nagging question: “Why was she so grateful?”

As a college professor, I tell my students, “Learning is not just a collection of shared facts. Learning is best found in the struggle to know. Keep struggling to understand the ‘why’ because in the struggle, you’re learning!” It was in my struggle to understand Queeny’s gratitude that I found the answer to my question. For me it was found in 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10. In that moment it all made sense:

Three separate times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, ‘My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.’ So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (*New Living Translation*)

Margaret had found a way to reframe her hurts, fears, her disappointments, and the messiness of her life, “to make it make sense!” She was now using her pain as the foundation to build her transformed life. Margaret had turned desperation into hope and hope offered her a new way to live, to grow, to glorify God, and to honor her family.

I encourage each reader to consider Margaret’s story as a “teachable moment.” Though her lived experiences might be different, in our shared humanity, we have all experienced excruciating hurt and pain, faced overwhelming adversity and struggle, seemingly never-ending loneliness and despair, and at times, have lived in the dark shadow of hopelessness and desperation.

I am deeply indebted to Margaret for the life lessons found in the gift of her desperation. What did I learn in these teachable moments?

If you ain’t changing, you’re choosing! And if you’re choosing, quit complaining.

The Serenity Prayer seems so appropriate. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Editor’s note: Essays by Jefferson scholars are the products of their own research and views.

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Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.

My name is Antonio Howard (Peggy's son); I am an autodidactic artist. At the young age of 15, I was incarcerated and sentenced to life in prison, where I served 26 ½ years. While in prison, I educated myself through instructional books on the concepts and processes of visual art.



Released in 2018, I now live as a valued member of the community committed to serving others and creating connection points through art that sparks meaningful dialog. I am the 2019 recipient of Erie Arts & Culture's Emerging Artist Fellowship. I am also a 2021 Teaching Artist through Erie Arts & Culture /

Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. Since 2020, I have participated in the creation of multiple murals throughout Erie County, including one honoring 93-year-old veteran, educator, and civic leader - Luther Manus.

I am the author of three self-published books. I participate as a guest speaker and presenter, focusing on topics related to the criminal legal system and equitable reform.

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