

Jessica “Drew” Umberger

First I would like to thank you all for allowing me this time to speak in this space. My name is Drew Umberger. I am a mother and proudly working at Policing Alternatives and Diversion Initiative, also known as PAD, in Atlanta, GA. In 2017 and 18, I was pregnant while serving a five-year sentence starting my sentence at Helms facility and what they call the medical facility for the Georgia Department of Corrections. Those nine months pregnant in prison, and everything that followed, was the worst experience of my entire life.

At Helms, they treated us like animals. Several babies were born on the only hallway I saw for nine months. I remember women screaming for help and praying out loud for medical attention. All of us were scared, stressed, and vulnerable. I remember a woman in the room next me screamed, “help, I’m having a baby.” The nurse on duty shouted “shut up, you will see a doctor in the morning. The woman ended up giving birth on the bathroom floor. Sometimes, people got lucky, and the doctor would get there just in time to catch the baby. I remember praying God please don’t let that be me.

The officers played mean tricks by announcing at 4:00 AM, Wake up! You’ve got breakfast from Waffle House! We would rush down the same hallway only to find there wasn’t any Waffle House. They’d laugh at our confusion and disappointment. They also didn’t properly feed us at all. Our food consisted of watered down greens and soy patties which left us very hungry. This food tasted awful, and the cheese bread given to us was so bad I still can’t get the taste out of my mouth.

I was most scared the morning I was to give birth. I was told by prison staff that because I had a c-section 18 years prior it was Ga Dept. of Corrections policy that I had to have another one. Even though I told them I wanted to have a vaginal birth, they told me it was not allowed. It is my strong belief that the prison staff wanted me to have a c-section to fit my birth into their hospital transport schedule. God had other plans. I ended up with pre-eclampsia and had to be rushed to a hospital. This is where my trauma turned for the worse. I was dropped off with officers I did not know at the hospital and was in a surgery room surrounded by doctors that have never examined me and nurses I never met. When I explained to the doctor that I was told I had to have a c-section but that I wanted a natural birth, the doctor said it sounded like “coercion” to him.

My beautiful Jordyn was born August 15, 2018. I had only two short hours to hold and look at my baby. This would be the last time I would see her for a few years. We were then separated, she was taken to the Neonatal Unit and I was taken to a dark basement. In the basement, I was transferred from the rolling bed to a stationary bed. I had to be helped by a couple of nurses as I could not feel my legs. I remember the nurse asking the male Sergeant to step out so she could clean me up, and he replied, “I can’t do that “. She looked me in the eyes and quietly said “I’m sorry” and proceeded to clean my private areas while the male sergeant watched. The next few days I remember random men looking every hour into the small window of the locked door. I remember seeing feet of people walking by my “cage” window and thinking, “if people only knew what was happening down here, what would they say? Would they even care?”

I was being transported to Lee Arrendale State Prison three days after giving birth. I asked if I could see my baby and tell her goodbye, but the transporting officers told me it would be in my best interest not to say goodbye. They wouldn't even provide an update on how she was doing. Once I arrived at Lee Arrendale I was placed in the infirmary and in a room with a woman who had MRSA. This made me very uneasy as I had a large open wound in my abdomen. I asked for cleaning products and was given a thumb nail sized amount of bleach in a pill cup. I was not given my property and therefore could not shower properly. I had been wearing the same underwear from the day I gave birth and did not have a change of underwear. When I would ask for pads, I was given one, maybe two if I was lucky.

I must have complained too much about the room being unsanitary because I was told to grab my bedding, and then I was taken to lockdown, where I was left for three weeks. I was put in solitary when my baby was only five days old.

In solitary confinement, I had no medical support, the staples in my stomach from the C-section had not dissolved, and there was no air conditioner. Hot, laying there, in August, trying to heal, my C-section wound became infected. I didn't know how I was going to make it. I didn't think I would make it out of there. No one ever checked on my mental health postpartum and my six-week checkup consisted of a doctor asking, "how are you?" When I said "fine," he said, "ok good." When I was finally sent back to the general population, I spent a couple weeks in a cell where I had to sleep on the floor because I physically could not climb into the top bunk.

After I got out, it felt like my kids were doing time too. The housing search was extremely difficult due to my criminal record. I had to buy a house and get them out of the foster care system. That was my mission: get a home and get my children back. I achieved my mission, but it feels like my kids were punished along with me. They never had been roller skating, never learned how to ride a bike, or swim. They tell me they'd sit in a room all day in foster care. No opportunities, no activities. Nobody took them to the movies. It doesn't need to be like this.