

**FAMM**

Families for Justice Reform

# PENNSYLVANIANS FOR PROBATION REFORM PROBATION STORIES

**Jamey Williams: Smithmill, Clearfield County***Date probation sentence received: 2009; length of probation sentence: 5 years*

Jamey was 29 when she was convicted of conspiracy to manufacture and distribute cocaine, and the arrest made her determined to turn her life around. A single mom, Jamey wanted a better life for herself and her young son, James, only seven years old when her sentence began. But the terms of her probation seemed designed to thwart her and her family life, from small but stressful roadblocks to larger issues of financial security and medical needs. “I couldn’t take James to see the doctor he needed to see because it was out of the county. I’m a single mom, and it was really tough money-wise, especially having to pay the monthly ‘supervision fee.’ I passed both the drug and alcohol and mental health evaluations, but still the court ordered me to have mental health treatment. Another roadblock: No providers would take my insurance, or they weren’t taking new patients. And I was told that if I didn’t figure out a way to go, I was going straight to jail.” Jamey never did go to jail, but the hypervigilance she had to maintain while on probation took an emotional and financial toll on her and James, now 17.

**Amasa Miller: Holland, Bucks County***Date probation sentence received: Amasa is on a 16-year parole sentence now; he will begin probation in 13 years, when he is 50; length of probation sentence: 10 years*

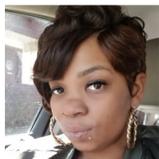
Amasa served nine years of his mandatory minimum sentence of nine to 25 years for a low-level drug offense. On many counts, he’s lucky: When he got out, he had a job waiting for him, a place to live, and family support. But also waiting for him? Sixteen years of parole, followed by 10 years of probation, plus a \$50,000 fine. Every month, he must make a \$50 payment toward that fine — and a \$30 service charge. If he doesn’t make the payment, he will be sent to jail. The state also automatically takes any state tax refund owed him. Amasa is employed, disciplined, driven, and works very hard to stay as far away from trouble as he can. Being on probation for decades more makes it impossible for him to truly put his old life behind him.

**Terri Minor-Spencer: Pittsburgh, Allegheny County***Date probation sentence received: 2009; length of probation sentence: 5 years*

Throughout her probation, Terri could not shake the sense that every step of the sentence was a trap into which she’d fall. “Being on probation was one of the most degrading, humiliating, and bullying experiences I have ever been through. One day after I’d just started a new job, my probation officer came in unannounced with her badge front and center, handcuffs in her hand, holding a plastic cup, demanding a urine test. I immediately panicked, even knowing I’d done nothing wrong. It was horrible, and of course the urine test was clean!” Terri worked hard to never violate the terms of probation, and in the end, she proved everyone wrong and succeeded. “It felt like the probation system wanted me to fail. But I did the opposite of fail — in spite of the system. I’m a mental health and drug therapist, I founded a local nonprofit, and I was elected to my local government. And, the City of Pittsburgh declared Oct. 7 ‘Terri Minor Day for Volunteerism’! That probation officer couldn’t have been more wrong about me.”



# PENNSYLVANIANS FOR PROBATION REFORM PROBATION STORIES



## **Geneia Rice: Harrisburg, Dauphin County**

*Date probation sentence received: 2012; length of probation sentence: 10 years*

As Geneia sees it, her probation — 10 years, longer than most states ever impose — has been a mixed bag. “The pros: I haven’t had police contact for the past seven years,” she explains. “The cons: I still have to meet with my probation supervisor once a month. I have been at the county office 84 times. Sometimes I wait hours before being seen, making me late to work. I’ve been denied jobs for still being on probation even though my record is from seven years ago! I have three children all under the age of five. So it is already a hassle for me to provide sufficiently for them. And I have over \$9,000 left in fines.

“Granted, I did commit a crime at 19 years old. But I am not that lost soul/little girl anymore. I am a mother, employee, and daughter; that has proven how I have become a productive citizen in society. I’ve never missed a meeting with my supervisor. I completed all of my therapy in 2013. I have completed all but 40 hours of my 150 hours of community service. I work a full-time job and part-time job on top of taking care of my three children.” Still, Geneia must remain under probation supervision until 2022.



## **Taili Thompson: Pittsburgh, Allegheny County**

*Date probation sentence received: 2004; length of probation sentence: 3 years*

Taili’s experience in the criminal justice system spurred him into a life of activism and community-building. He’s worked with several non-profit organizations, including the ACLU, and served as a violence prevention coordinator for Allegheny County. But his three-year probation sentence — required after serving three years in prison for firearm possession and heroin distribution — put several stumbling blocks in his path to serving his community after prison. “My confidence really took a hit during this time,” he says. “I was working hard in the community and was becoming more politically involved, but when I had opportunities to travel to D.C. and other places for events, I just threw in the towel and didn’t go because of all the hoops I would have to jump through to get permission from my probation officer to travel.” The fines and fees required under his probation were also daunting. “The whole probation process for returning citizens is so limiting for earning capacity,” he says.