

# JUSTICE-INVOLVED VOTER GUIDE

★HOUSTON JUSTICE

## VOTING IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

How you can vote if you've been involved with the justice system, past or present.

## ELECTED OFFICIALS

Learn the basics of how who you vote for effects your daily life.

## TAKING ACTION

WHEN TO VOTE THIS  
ELECTION SEASON



## STORIES OF HOPE AND SUCCESS

Life, struggle, and the impact of civic engagement. Stories from Houston's own.



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# EDITOR'S NOTE

2017 was the beginning of Project Orange, a groundbreaking program empowering eligible incarcerated individuals to exercise their democratic right to vote. To date, we've registered over 5,000 eligible voters. Through education and advocacy, we navigate the complexities of voting from jail, ensuring that being detained doesn't mean being disenfranchised.

As this is a big election year, we're intensifying our efforts to help justice-involved individuals meet the ballot. This voter guide is championing the voices of this often-overlooked population. This election season you can help us uphold democratic principles and foster civic responsibility that extend well beyond jail walls.

*Durrell Douglas*

**Houston Justice + Project Orange Founder**



**"IT ALL BEGINS WITH AN IDEA. PROJECT ORANGE WAS MY IDEA, AND NOW, IT'S A REALITY BRINGING DEMOCRACY TO MORE PEOPLE THAN BEFORE. WE CAN CHANGE THE WORLD. TOGETHER."**





# THE TEXAS JUSTICE-INVOLVED VOTER GUIDE



This guide is designed to help individuals who have been involved with the justice system understand their voting rights in Texas.

Whether you've been previously

incarcerated, on probation, or on parole, this guide will provide you with the information you need to participate in the democratic process.

**VOTE 2024**

## STORIES OF HOPE AND SUCCESS



One's journey through the justice system can be fraught with life altering challenges, but for some, it serves as a catalyst for serious change and personal growth. In this article, we explore the inspiring stories of five Houstonians whose experience with the justice system has profoundly altered the course of their lives. These narratives serve as a testament to the power of someone using hard won lessons for the betterment of themselves and their communities.

# SHANNETTE PRINCE

**ENTREPRENEUR SHANNETTE PRINCE KNOWS THE PAIN OF HAVING SEVERAL BROTHERS IN PRISON**  
MOTHER OF 2 BLACK BOYS AIMS TO PREVENT HER SONS FROM INTERACTING WITH THE CARCERAL SYSTEM

BY CINDY GEORGE

Shannette Prince was growing up in California when the beating of Black motorist Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department officers became a seemingly never-ending loop on her television.

Twenty years later, she was living in Central Florida with two young sons. The oldest was mature enough to understand the biggest local story of 2012: The shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a Black teen.

And by 2020, having returned to her hometown of Houston, that older son was looking ahead to his senior year at historically Black Jack Yates High School when an alumnus - George Floyd - was killed by the knee-on-neck asphyxiation delivered by a white Minneapolis police officer.

These Black males killed by law enforcement or civilian patrol, as was the case with 17-year-old Martin, coincided with Prince's other connection with the carceral system: Several of her brothers have spent time in prison.

These stark realities have made her an exceedingly watchful mother of two Black sons - one on his way to college and the other in middle school.



"It's disheartening for me as an adult to have grown up with that as a kid and now my children are growing up with the same thing," said Prince, 39. "That's the fear of wanting to avoid all police contact in general."

As an entrepreneur, she is focused on connecting African Americans and the Motherland.

Prince is the founder and proprietor of Africa On My Back, which sells backpacks and other items in colorful prints. Based in Houston, she supports small businesses in Ghana through the sale of handcrafted products including backpacks, tote bags and yoga mat bags. A portion of sales helps underwrite the "Brilliant Black Boy" travel initiative that takes African American males to the Continent.

Both of her sons have traveled with her to West Africa. She knows the joy of exposing them to the freedom to travel the world and the pain of supporting loved ones confined to penitentiaries.

"Between her father's offspring and her mother's children, Prince counts more than a dozen siblings. "On my dad's side, there are four boys and three have gone to prison and on my mom's side, there are two boys and one has gone," she said.

An older brother served 20 years. A brother she grew up with in the same house was released in May 2021 after a 12-year bid.

"Around the time I started working full time, my baby brother would write and ask periodically if I could put money on his books. I had a little change, so sure," she said. "But, after a while, I couldn't. I had two boys and their needs."

Her experience having brothers who got into trouble greatly influences how she raises her Black sons.

"My parenting is about the consequences if they don't make the right decisions and how it has happened in our family. I am deathly afraid," she said. "The appearance of you doing something can land you in jail and now you have to clear your name."



# "MY SIBLINGS HAVE GOTTEN OUT AND HIT THE GROUND RUNNING – FROM MANAGING CLUBS, PUBLIC SPEAKING AND MANAGING RAP ARTISTS TO DOING CLOTHING LINES AND LANDSCAPING BUSINESSES," SHE SAID. "THEY MADE A WAY."

Prince finds herself especially on high alert with her older son.

"No one wants to see their son or daughter go off to prison," she said. "You can't talk to them when you want to talk to them or visit them when you want to visit them."

The effects of having a record even influences the happiest of times.

"One of my brothers wanted to make his first son a junior and the little boy's mother was like 'no, we can't do that because your name is in the system.' They decided against that," Prince said.

She's hoping that 2020 as a "year of reckoning" for social justice issues including police brutality, bail reform and marijuana decriminalization continues to build momentum to positively impact communities of color.

On a brighter note, her family's entrepreneurial spirit has provided ready-made resilience for relatives restarting their lives once released. As a business person, she followed in the footsteps of her paternal grandparents and her cousin James Prince, the Houston hip-hop mogul and CEO of Rap-A-Lot Records.

Many returning citizens who face multiple challenges in finding work upon release glean inspiration from the Prince family.

"My siblings have gotten out and hit the ground running – from managing clubs, public speaking and managing rap artists to doing clothing lines and landscaping businesses," Shannette Prince said. "They made a way."

Cindy George is a freelance writer and editor in Houston.



**Learn More**

Visit [www.africaonmyback.com](http://www.africaonmyback.com) for more information about Africa On My Back's products and the "Brilliant Black Boy" travel program.

# TERRANCE KOONTZ

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZER TERRANCE KOONTZ TALKS ABOUT THE VALUE OF POSITIVITY IN OVERCOMING CHALLENGES THE “ARTIST” CREATIVELY COMBINES ART AND ACTIVISM TO INSPIRE OTHERS

BY CINDY GEORGE

In every aspect of his life, community organizer Terrance “TK” Koontz applies creativity and a positive outlook to achieve something greater than the sum of his efforts.

He avoided negative circumstances growing up on Houston’s south side to set an example for his younger sister. When his son came along, he felt another burst of indescribable responsibility. And when he faced criminal charges after a traffic stop, he redirected his life to serve as a cautionary tale.

Today, the 37-year-old husband and father is the statewide training coordinator for the Texas Organizing Project, an organization known as TOP that works in Black and Latino communities on housing, immigration, criminal justice reform and education.

As an “artist” – a portmanteau combining his work as an artist and activist – Koontz adds a twist to projects that uplift people by encouraging them to learn from his missteps.

“I think that organizing is an art, so I am able to channel a lot of creative energy through TOP,” he said.

Koontz spent his early childhood in Sunnyside, where his parents originate, then lived in the



Fondren area of Southwest Houston before moving to Missouri City and graduating from Willowridge High School in the Fort Bend Independent School District. His father struggled with drug dependency, so he and a younger sister were raised mostly by their mother.

Growing up, he aspired to become a preacher and maybe an artist “or a combination of the two. I’ve always loved hip hop and poetry,” he said. “I was fortunate. I didn’t really find myself involved in street activity, however I did get engaged in negative behavior – a lot of alcohol consumption and making some poor decisions here and there. Overall, I really was trying my best to figure out a way to change some of the things I saw coming up.”

After high school, he worked multiple jobs in retail and spent a few years at Texas Southern University trying to find his academic footing.

“I felt myself going down a path toward service, so I started working at residential treatment centers and volunteering with kids,” he said.

In late 2010, his life took an unfortunate turn.

“With the build-up of a lot of negative emotions and the inability to know how to communicate and process my feelings, I was drinking a lot. One night, I went on a little tour around the city. I went to a bar in Third Ward and a bar in Midtown. I was just driving around drinking,” Koontz said. “As I was driving to get to my apartment on South Post Oak, I was going through Bellaire. I was doing about 102 miles per hour. I was really, really drunk. At some point, the Bellaire police were behind me and I didn’t know it. As I was exiting to get off to make a U-turn, my car hit a patch of water and I hydroplaned out of control and my car stalled out. I thought I was going to die. I started my vehicle and that’s when I saw the police lights.”

He was charged with driving while intoxicated, a misdemeanor. The officer’s discretion in determining that Koontz was intentional in not stopping also resulted in a felony evading arrest charge.

“I didn’t hit anybody. I didn’t fight. I didn’t have any drug paraphernalia. I didn’t have any alcohol. I didn’t resist. I didn’t do anything, to me, that would lead them to believe I was evading arrest from the beginning,” he said.

The experience was sobering far beyond emerging from intoxication and a yearlong license suspension.





“When I was in the tank in Harris County, I had a conversation with God – a prayer – and I said if God let me out, I was going to make something out of my life and do something that was bigger than me.”

This was his first entanglement with the criminal justice system and, now, he faced a felony.

“I didn’t want to take the chance of losing the case against the State of Texas,” Koontz said. “I didn’t trust them to see me as an individual and give me the benefit of the doubt to give me probation or a second chance. I didn’t have faith in the system, so I chose to take the convictions so that I wouldn’t have to gamble with potentially going to jail for a year or two.”

That felony on his record would have immediate and far-reaching consequences.

“I lost both of my jobs. I had to sell both of my vehicles. I had to use my income tax refund to pay for court fees. I paid about \$10,000 in court fees. My attorney was \$4,000,” he recalled. “I had to move back in with my mom. I had to sublease my apartment just to keep from getting an eviction. The very next day after I got arrested, there was an article in the Bellaire newspaper with my name and information and I hadn’t even been convicted! I had to fight to dig myself out. Being convicted of a felony put me on the other side of the table where I could see the long-term effects of a negative interaction with the criminal legal system.”

The circumstances also ended his relationship with his girlfriend, who was pregnant at the time with his son.

“I still had my faith in God,” he said. “I started to volunteer as a way to get out of the house.”

The decision to serve led to his first opportunity to work as a community organizer and a glimpse into his future.

“There are people in far worse situations dealing with the system. There are people who are behind bars who should not be behind bars. They should never have been arrested,” he said. “The police should not be harassing people in Black and Latino neighborhoods. We need to put an end to white supremacy and racism in America. I think that’s the root cause for a lot of outcomes for people of color.”

Soon, Koontz began working on political campaigns. When those seasonal opportunities weren’t available, he took day jobs and resumed work at residential treatment centers.

“I would like to encourage every person reading this story to go vote. If they are not registered to vote, they need to get registered to vote and go vote,” he said. “Get as informed on the candidates and where they stand on issues and vote for the candidates whose platforms align with your values. I want to let every person that has been incarcerated but is no longer on parole or probation know that they can go vote.”

While working as a youth minister at South Union Missionary Baptist Church, Koontz met educator and actress LaKeisha Randle.

“She stuck with me when I didn’t have anything – when I was living with my mother and I didn’t have a car. I didn’t really have a decent paying job,” he said. “She took a chance on me. She saw the potential in me. When I was in a position to do right, I did right because I love her and appreciate her.”

They married two years ago.

Over the last decade, Koontz also has filled out his professional resume. He’s on his third stint with TOP. For about eight months, he worked on the community engagement team for Harris County Commissioner Rodney Ellis – also a son of Sunnyside and a decades-long advocate for criminal justice reform in Texas and nationwide.

Koontz also remains an evangelist for hope as a spoken word artist and hip hop lyricist who spreads the good news on a number of platforms including YouTube and community events. One venue is The Sausage and Boudin Shack at 3610 Reed Road, now known as The Shack, which is owned by his wife’s parents, Daryl and Shannon Randle. He coordinates patio events and pop-ups for the restaurant.

He’s also looking ahead. Koontz wants to revive an organization he founded in 2010 called Community Alive, which was birthed after his arrest to create positive programming in low-income areas.

“I would encourage people to not give up on themselves,” he said. “I evolved and matured. ... I’ve had a second chance and various things worked in my favor so I could reset my life.”

Additionally, Koontz considers his “artivism” a way to inspire his 10-year-old.

“I want to leave a legacy for my son so he can have a dad he can be proud of,” he said. “I’m trying to teach him how to be a strong Black man.”

Cindy George is a freelance writer and editor in Houston.



**“I WAS GOING TO MAKE SOMETHING OUT MY LIFE AND DO SOMETHING THAT WAS BIGGER THAN ME.”**  
**“I’VE HAD A SECOND CHANCE AND VARIOUS THINGS WORKED IN MY FAVOR SO I COULD RESET MY LIFE.”**

## LEARN MORE

To learn more about the “artivism” of Terrance Koontz, visit his YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMtK1bzzoaM> and watch the video for his single “Inner G”



# NISSI HAMILTON



## AS A SEX TRAFFICKING SURVIVOR, NISSI HAMILTON HAS FOUND HER VOICE AND RECLAIMED HER FAMILY THE WARRIOR ACTIVIST HELPS OTHERS BREAK GENERATIONAL CYCLES OF DYSFUNCTION AND SILENCE

BY CINDY GEORGE

Status and freedom can change in an instant.

That’s what happened to Nissi Hamilton in 2013 when she switched from Harris County detention officer to Harris County inmate.

“I went to jail at my job,” she said.

At the time, Hamilton had been employed by the Harris County Sheriff’s Office for six years. She was aiming for a promotion when child abuse allegations were lodged by a former husband. Hamilton maintains her innocence in the case.

She was arrested and spent six days “at work,” she quips until colleagues raised money for her bail.

“The inmates treated me better than some of my co-workers. They were very understanding. I was protected so nobody would jump on me,” Hamilton said.

“That was God’s way of showing me favor. Those women took care of me. You remember that part in ‘The Color Purple’ when Ms. Sophia saw Ms. Celie? I too knew there was a God.”

To avoid a potential sentence of several years in prison, Hamilton pleaded guilty to a felony child abuse charge. She received deferred adjudication with two years of community supervision.

That meant her career in law enforcement was over, so she ... wait for it ... became a comedienne!

Hamilton began performing as “Nissi Lamark: The Princess of Comedy” in 2014 and also has spent time working as a paralegal since 2016, she said.

Now 33, Hamilton describes herself as a survivor, leader, activist and human trafficking expert.

She is CEO of A Survivor’s Voice of Victory, an outreach effort that provides emergency resources to women who have been trafficked. She was one of the experts who spoke during an hourlong news conference in April with Tony Buzbee, the Houston attorney who has filed multiple lawsuits on behalf of women who allege sexual misconduct by Houston Texans quarterback Deshaun Watson.

Hamilton also runs Safe Space Training, a business through which she teaches parents their rights and how to fight Child Protective Services (CPS) cases.

Her relatives probably could have benefited from services decades ago when Hamilton was growing up. To summarize her childhood in Houston as a ball of confusion is a vastly inadequate description.

Hamilton says her challenges began as a newborn when her mother left her at the hospital.

## "IT RAN IN MY FAMILY UNTIL IT RAN INTO ME"

Her grandparents took her home to their apartment in Acres Homes where her grandfather was the complex's handyman. Addiction prevented her mother from taking care of Hamilton and her father wasn't in the picture.

Though she was good at math, she had learning difficulties in elementary school. She was in third grade before teachers realized that she couldn't read and she then received special help.

At 11, Hamilton says she was raped by a neighbor. She ended up in a group home before spending several years in foster care. By high school, she returned to the care of her grandmother, who was living in Greenspoint by that time and seriously ill with breast cancer. After her death, Hamilton became functionally homeless. When she couldn't couch surf or otherwise find a place to stay, she slept behind a Wal-Mart.

Hamilton was 15 and in the ninth grade when she became pregnant with her first child. Her son was born when she was in the 10th grade – the same year she dropped out of Aldine High School.

She continued to struggle with homelessness until she ran into a friend who had turned 18 and allowed Hamilton to use her ID to get hired as an exotic dancer. The friend's boyfriend agreed to babysit while she worked.

"Her boyfriend did watch the baby, but one day I got to the house to get my baby and this dude tells me he's not going to give me my newborn baby unless I pay him \$200 a day," Hamilton said. "I get stuck having to pay this dude \$200 a day or I couldn't see my son."

This was her first brush with systematic exploitation.

"He was going to the club bragging about how much money he was making off of me. Another pimp overhears him and starts talking to me about how he can help me. I believed him and ended up leaving with him thinking that life would be better for me," Hamilton said. "He got me in the car one day, took me to a hotel, told me what room to go into and he said: 'Don't come back out unless you have my money.' That's when sex trafficking started for me. I was 16. My baby was barely 1 year old."

Hamilton got pregnant by another trafficker with her second child at 16.

By 18, Hamilton was living an unbelievable whirlwind. In addition to forced assignments by a pimp and dancing at the club overnight, she was in beauty school and worked weekends at an adult store in Greenspoint Mall.

"When I would go to the store, I would pass by the recruiting office for the Navy. The recruiter was the one who told me that I was being trafficked. He said if I ever needed some help that he would help me – but all I knew was selling ass," she said.

Shortly after, her pimp beat her up at the strip club.

"It was so bad that it pissed me off. When I went to work that weekend, I walked by the recruiting station and the recruiter saw my face. He was like, 'Yo — you alright?' and I was like, no, but I'm ready to do this. I had two kids to take care of."

Hamilton joined the U.S. Navy in 2006. That was a turning point to a better life that would continue to elude her for another decade.

She is transparent about her ups and downs. After the Navy came the police academy. The job in law enforcement. The allegations. A week in jail. A felony on her record.

She's had multiple contacts with CPS and lost custody of her children for seven years.

Today, she's the mother of six – four boys and two girls – and stepmother of a bonus son. She's married to her fifth husband.







**"HE GOT ME IN THE CAR ONE DAY, TOOK ME TO A HOTEL, TOLD ME WHAT ROOM TO GO INTO AND HE SAID: 'DON'T COME BACK OUT UNLESS YOU HAVE MY MONEY.' THAT'S WHEN SEX TRAFFICKING STARTED FOR ME. I WAS 16. MY BABY WAS BARELY 1 YEAR OLD."**

In 2015, Hamilton began thinking about how to transfer her experiences into service to others and founded A Survivor's Voice of Victory. She also wanted to save parents the grief she experienced in losing custody of her children, which inspired Safe Space Training.

"Know your rights," she said. "Do not ever let your children talk to CPS or the police without legal counsel present. I trusted these systems because I worked in these systems. I didn't know my son needed an attorney, that my daughter needed an attorney or I that I needed an attorney."

Today, her calendar abounds with speaking engagements where she shares those insights.

"Before, you couldn't get me to open my mouth because I was trained to not say anything. I was trained by my abusers to stay quiet," Hamilton said. "Now, you can't get me to shut up."

She likens being trafficked to becoming "a puppet and a slave" but says she has healed her mind, body and spirit from those experiences.

"There are two things that make slavery what it is: Force and fear. That's what I grew up in," she said. "I am not scared to talk about it."

Hamilton is determined to destroy generational dysfunction that manifested in her family as addiction, child abuse, absentee parenting and her own challenges with motherhood.

"My mother was a victim of familial trafficking. She held that in. She used crack cocaine to escape. She showed me what not to do," Hamilton said. "The Bible tells you to honor your mother and your father. I honor her. I honor my father and I've only known him for one year."

Hamilton accepts responsibility for her life and believes that's what makes her a leader who can break the chains of negativity for future generations.

"It ran in my family until it ran into me," she said.

*Cindy George is a freelance writer and editor in Houston.*

## Learn More

For more information about A Survivor's Voice of Victory, search the hashtag [#asurvivorsvoiceofvictory](#) on Instagram and Facebook.

Also, visit [www.safespacestraining.net](http://www.safespacestraining.net) for more details about Safe Space Training.

# KORETTA BROWN

## KORETTA BROWN AIMS TO MAKE MEANINGFUL CHANGE IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM ALLIANCE FOR A NEW JUSTICE SYSTEM PRESIDENT DRAWS MOTIVATION FROM HER PRISON EXPERIENCE

BY CINDY GEORGE



Staying busy and having purpose can save a life at any stage of development.

It's a universal truth that could have set Koretta Brown, president of the Houston-based Alliance For A New Justice System, on a different path in the dawn of her adulthood.

She graduated from high school depressed, frustrated and aimless.

Raised in the South Park/Crestmont area once called the "dead end" on Houston's south side, she attended Worthing High School's Career Academy for three years.

An incident in which a coach struck her along with bullying by teammates and limits to her advancement in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), a high school development program sponsored by the U.S. Armed Forces, influenced her decision to transfer to Sterling High School in her neighborhood, she said.

But Sterling didn't provide crowning moments for her high school career in track or JROTC because "something inside me just turned off," Brown said. She quit both. A school fight in the spring of her senior year resulted in a misdemeanor assault charge.

Though she signed up at a U.S. Army recruiting office, Brown "lost motivation" for military service and wasn't interested in going to college at that time.

After graduating in June 1998, "I just decided to do nothing but hang out and be young," she said.

By December, Brown was pregnant. She picked up a felony charge of aggravated robbery with a deadly weapon after she and a co-defendant were caught carjacking. That school fight resurfaced as evidence for a prosecutor to contend that she was a violent person.

Brown was sentenced to eight years in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. After an unsuccessful appeal, she surrendered in July 2000. Her daughter was just 1.

"By the time I turned 20, I was in TDCJ and I stayed until I was 26."

Her intake cellmate gave her advice about how to make her time easier.

"She was talking about education and work – all the good things you could do. I really started planning to make myself better. Once I hit the unit, my mindset was already made up," Brown said. She learned about what to do to statistically reduce her probability of recidivism.

"I was going to do everything on that list to not re-offend," she said. "My first job was in the laundry. I found out that if you loaded the washer machine or the dryer, you would have to go a class and the on-the-job training would end up becoming a certificate from the Windham School District." (The district exclusively serves incarcerated students in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.)

One of her bunkies told Brown about how to earn a janitorial certificate by learning how to maintain all kinds of floors from carpeting to tile.

"Once I graduated from there, I found out I could go to college. It was a part of Central Texas College. I got my associate's degree and became a trustee. I was working for the warden," said Brown, who spent her last year and half closer to home in a minimum-security prison in Dickinson where she also served as a trustee.

Upon release, Brown wasn't immediately successful in securing work. One of her mother's real estate clients gave her a minimum-wage job at Sodexo working in floor care at Ben Taub Hospital. Colleagues hired through a temp agency earned twice as much, but she couldn't get in the door that way.





“Had I not had that facility care certificate, I wouldn’t have been able to get that opportunity,” she said. “I could show that I could operate the machines.”

The job didn’t last long, but Brown did meet her first husband there. They left to work as a team doing hot shot driving. Tragically, he died at age 33 from a diabetic coma three months after their wedding.

That’s when Brown, now also mother to a son, began juggling fast food jobs and getting promoted – but the titles didn’t pay bills.

“No matter how well I would perform, when it came time to talk about pay and benefits, things would go sour,” she said. “You just have people who take advantage of other people’s circumstances. People know it’s hard for people with felony backgrounds to get jobs.”

Brown then decided to continue her education. She enrolled at Texas Southern University while working two fast food jobs, raising her son and dealing with the loss of her husband. During that time, she remarried and faced domestic violence issues.

“It was just a lot,” she said. “I was always trying to hold myself together.”

During her senior year at TSU, Brown focused on school. Having registered to vote in 2008 almost immediately after completing parole, she decided to also volunteer in the political arena.

After becoming a volunteer deputy registrar, she started registering people to vote on campus, became a precinct chair, built a relationship with the Harris County chapter of the Texas Coalition of Black Democrats and worked on campaigns. She also began to cast a vision about her future.

Brown co-founded the Alliance in the summer of 2019 and graduated from TSU that December with a bachelor’s degree in marketing.

From 2019 through May 2021, she worked with the Texas Organizing Project.

Looking back, she wishes she would have followed through with that Army enlistment two decades earlier.

“That’s one of those decisions that I absolutely regret. I look at all of my friends who graduated from Worthing and from Sterling who ended up going into the military and how well they did. I believe going to the military would have absolutely kept me from making the poor decisions to hurt people that I made out of pure boredom and not thinking about the consequences or doing other people harm,” she said. “Far too often, kids are graduating from high school and don’t have a clear plan. They end up just living life and having fun and not focusing on the consequences that come from making poor choices. In the military, you have to go into boot camp to prepare you for discipline and structure. Maybe some young folks who are wilding out would not be if they were in a structured environment like that.”

Brown found the parameters to develop a purpose-filled life in prison. “You have 24 hours of every day of the week. You have nothing but time. Try to find some books to read. Try to have positive discussions about what your future will look like. If you can, have some books sent to you to help you heal yourself. Think about what you’ll do once you’re released to not commit another crime,” she advises. “If you’re in the county and about to go to time, start planning your life right now. Stay encouraged and get registered to vote while you’re inside the county and turn in the mail-in ballot. Use this moment as an opportunity to quiet the noise and focus on how to make yourself better. And pray for a better day and a better opportunity We need you.”

In a less-than-ideal environment, Brown reckoned with adverse childhood experiences that led to depression and anxiety – including escalating bullying after she was bitten by a dog in the face during elementary school. She received mental health treatment at that time for the effects of the attack and its myriad consequences. Brown also positively reflects on her upbringing in a household with a father who recently retired from Dow Chemical after 40 years and a mother who was an entrepreneur. She is grateful that her parents assumed full responsibility for her daughter while she was away.

Today, Brown is working full-time with the Alliance. During the 2021 Texas legislative session, the organization pushed House Bill 2077 – sponsored by Fort Bend County State Rep. Ron Reynolds – which would have required a pretrial risk assessment before the determination of bail. The bill was reported out of the House Criminal Jurisprudence committee, but died on the calendar.

“The reason we wanted to have a public safety risk assessment is what happened to me and a whole lot of people,” she said. “There should have been something available to determine a truly violent person from a person just making a dumb decision.”

The Alliance agenda for the rest of 2021 includes working in six rural counties to increase the number of people registered to vote.

Asked whether Brown feels proud about her accomplishments, she hesitates, then offers this self-assessment:

“I have to do something that impacts systemic change to feel proud, but what I do feel is encouraged, motivated and secure,” she said. “I feel I have proven myself and that’s why I feel I am ready to start this second journey of my life – and the Alliance leads the way.”

Cindy George is a freelance writer and editor in Houston.



**“YOU HAVE 24 HOURS OF EVERY DAY OF THE WEEK. YOU HAVE NOTHING BUT TIME. TRY TO FIND SOME BOOKS TO READ. TRY TO HAVE POSITIVE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT WHAT YOUR FUTURE WILL LOOK LIKE.”**

**LEARN MORE**

For more information about Alliance For A New Justice System, visit [www.texansforjustice.com](http://www.texansforjustice.com) and look for the Alliance on social media.



# ROSHAWN C. EVANS

**ROSHAWN C. EVANS HAS FLIPPED THE SCRIPT ON HIS EXPERIENCE WITH THE CRIMINAL SYSTEM**  
THE CO-FOUNDER OF PURE JUSTICE NOW CHANNELS HIS ENERGY INTO ACTIVISM AND WRITING

BY CINDY GEORGE

For much of his childhood as a latchkey kid, the world was just on the other side of the door.

Today, RoShawn C. Evans is fighting to live beyond a different sort of barrier — the defining line that separates him from a free world outside of felony conviction and sex offender registration.

“You cannot get a diamond without pressure,” he said. “Some of the best have to go through the worst.”

Evans, 39, is the co-founder and organizing director of Pure Justice, a Houston-based grassroots advocacy organization working on policy and other reforms that improve the lives of individuals and families touched by the criminal system.

Raised in Flint, Michigan in the decades before the water crisis, the city of his youth suffered from declining fortunes and increasing crime while consistently landing atop rankings of the nation’s worst places to live.

Evans, the happy-to-lucky young boy, eventually felt he “had to be hard” to survive. Raised by a young mother who was juggling work and school, he “went to the streets” to find his way, he said.

While crashing at a friend’s house, Evans had an encounter that would change his life. Older friends home from college during winter break in December 1999 decided to party at the residence and asked him to call some girls. Evans, 17 at the time and still in high school, complied.

He contacted a teen that was a little more than a year younger than him. His crew picked her up and took her back to the house where people were hanging out.

At one point, she went upstairs to the room where her friend had been staying. He followed. Evans said they attempted to have sex, but his body wouldn’t cooperate. He insists they never had intercourse.

The girl went upstairs later with another young man, Evans said, and the same group who picked her up rode together again to take her back home.

“As a naïve kid, I’m not thinking this is about to get me in trouble,” Evans recalled. “The next morning, my homeboy says the police came looking for me for kidnapping. I thought he was playing.”

A few weeks later, one of his wrestling coaches who was also a police officer asked: “What have you gotten yourself into?” Evans explained his side of the story. The coach advised him to turn himself in the next morning and recount what they had discussed in a written statement. Evans said he submitted a meticulous account that went on for 16 pages.

“I told them everything,” he said. “We were kids being kids doing what adults do ... but we never had sex.”

The age of consent is 16 in Michigan and 17-year-olds are charged as adults in criminal cases – a practice set to end in October 2021.

Evans took a plea bargain in the case.

“When I signed that deal, I didn’t know how that would impact me. I didn’t realize how that would follow me for the rest of my life,” he said.



**"MANY OF US END OF CONFORMING BECAUSE THEY TELL US WHERE WE CAN'T WORK, WHAT THEY'RE NOT GOING TO PAY, WHERE WE CAN'T LIVE AND WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT DO. I AM NOT LETTING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM DEFINE ME; I AM DEFINING MYSELF."**

He expected the sex offender registration requirement in Michigan to expire after 10 years.

Along the way, Evans violated his probation with a weapons charge and a failure to register, which upgraded his case to a felony, he said.

"I should have been done when I was 27 if I could have made it," he said. "I couldn't stay out of jail."

When he moved to Houston and transferred his registration to Texas, he was converted to lifetime status – which he continues to fight.

Evans, now father to a teen daughter, often struggled with employment. Either recruiters were interested in hiring him until they saw the results of a background check or he lost opportunities when he volunteered the information.

In the last few years, he decided to redirect his life on his own terms through advocacy and writing.

Pure Justice started as a blog in 2015.

"Now we've got a whole organization, members, supporters, volunteers, a building," he said.

Pure Justice utilizes organizing, engagement, education and research to push policy reforms. Programs include "know your rights" workshops, case review clinics and outreach to the incarcerated through book drives and pen pal services.



"The only way we're going to change the bias toward people with criminal records is to come together and fight the system and fix what's broken," Evans said.

In 2017, he published an autobiography.

"Stolen Identity talks about how the judicial system defines us as individuals with criminal records," Evans said. "Many of us end of conforming because they tell us where we can't work, what they're not going to pay, where we can't live and what we can and cannot do. I am not letting the criminal justice system define me; I am defining myself."

The book's cover features a composite illustration of Evans in a hoodie blended with an image of the interior of a penitentiary. In large letters at the bottom, there is a 7-digit number – his identity in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, where he spent a few months on a registration violation.

"That photo is me faded out replaced with the prison system as a metaphor for Stolen Identity," he said.

Evans continues to work on freedom from the sex offender registry for himself and others.

"My life is good. I literally go to sleep every single night and wake up every single morning with joy," he said. "At the same time, I know that I wear an invisible chain that weighs me down and that nobody can see but me."

Cindy George is a freelance writer and editor in Houston.

**LEARN MORE**

For more information about Pure Justice, visit [purejustice.org](http://purejustice.org) and follow @PureJustice\_HTX on Instagram and Twitter.

# VOTING RIGHTS IN TEXAS FOR JUSTICE- INVOLVED INDIVIDUALS

## Who Can Register To Vote?

In Texas, you can register to vote if:

- You have completed your sentence, including any term of incarceration, parole, supervision, or period of probation
- You are not currently on felony probation or parole
- You have not been declared mentally incapacitated by a court of law

## Who Cannot Register To Vote

You cannot register to vote if:

- You are currently serving a felony sentence, including probation or parole
- You have been convicted of a felony and have not completed your sentence



## Voting While in Jail

- If you are in jail but not convicted (awaiting trial or serving time for a misdemeanor), you can vote using an absentee ballot
- To vote absentee from jail:
  - Request an absentee ballot application from the jail administration or a family member
  - Complete and mail the application to your county election office
  - Once you receive your ballot, complete it and mail it back before the deadline



# UNDERSTANDING THE ROLES OF ELECTED OFFICIALS



## Federal Level



### President and Vice President

Role: Executive branch leaders, set national policy priorities  
Justice System Impact: Appoint federal judges, including Supreme Court justices; can propose criminal justice reform legislation



### U.S. Senators (2 per state)

Role: Pass federal laws, confirm presidential appointees  
Justice System Impact: Vote on federal criminal justice legislation, confirm federal judges



### U.S. Representatives

Role: Pass federal laws, represent local districts  
Justice System Impact: Propose and vote on federal criminal justice legislation

## State Level

### Texas State Senators

Role: Pass state laws, approve state budget  
Justice System Impact: Create and modify state criminal laws, fund state prisons and rehabilitation programs



### Texas State Representatives

Role: Pass state laws, propose budget items  
Justice System Impact: Propose and vote on state criminal justice legislation, influence funding for justice programs



# HOW THESE OFFICIALS IMPACT THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

**Prison Funding:** Both state and federal officials influence budgets for prisons, rehabilitation programs, and re-entry services

**Judicial Appointments:** The President and Senators play a crucial role in appointing federal judges who interpret laws



**Sentencing Laws:** State and federal legislators create laws that determine sentencing guidelines

**Voting Rights:** State officials have the power to change laws regarding voting rights for justice-involved individuals

**Criminal Justice Reform:** All levels of government can propose and implement reforms to the justice system

## Take Action

- Check your voter registration status at [votetexas.gov](http://votetexas.gov)
- Register to vote if eligible
- Stay informed about candidates' positions on criminal justice issues
- Encourage others in your community to get involved and vote

# REMEMBER, YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

BY PARTICIPATING IN THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS, YOU CAN HELP SHAPE THE FUTURE OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM IN TEXAS AND BEYOND.

