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MINUS 25 Betty Tyson

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Taunja Isaac's MFA Thesis

Abstract

Betty Tyson was convicted of murder in May 1973 in Rochester, NY. She was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. Her trial was hasty and the jury of peers she faced was all white. The evidence against her was tainted yet she was still found guilty. I was 9 years old when I first heard this story. When I decided to pursue my Master in Fine Art, I remembered this story and wanted to use my journalism instincts that I developed during my undergraduate degree at SUNY Brockport. I approached my thesis committee for approval to pursue this story for my MFA thesis film.

The struggle I endured during this journey was stressful at times but enlightening all the time. I discovered "me" inside the filmmaking process. Additionally I discovered that student film crews are not dependable and that I had to discover my own niche in the filmmaking community.

During my research a lot of things came to light, even the unexpected, which filled this journey with adventurous and educational endeavors. Even Betty was a little complicated at times. She came through for me when I thought all was lost. Former Mayor William Johnson also came through as a primary source and a strong mentor to push me forward when I thought about giving up.

My biggest dilemma was how to tell the story. The answer was to let Betty tell it and do not drown my film with the re-enactments I had planned and had filmed. When I thought my film was finished, it was too long. I did not want to part with some of my hard work. I learned to let go and I remembered to not underestimate the audience's intelligence, somebody is going to get it. Taking out the obvious things and redundant statements, I discovered a way to let all of the participants tell the story as they supported Betty's story. The film was received well and informed a new generation who had never heard of Betty Tyson.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	p. 2
Preface.....	p. 4
The Reality of the Idea.....	p. 5
The Woman.....	p. 6
How My Background Helped me Connect With Betty.....	p. 11
Pre-Production.....	p. 13
The Actual Crew.....	p. 17
Production.....	p. 17
Third Shoot.....	p. 19
Post-Production.....	p. 24
Screening.....	p. 25
Conclusion.....	p. 27
Research material.....	p. 29
 Appendix	
Thesis Proposal.....	p. 30
Timeline.....	p. 35
Budget.....	p. 36

Preface

In life we all have made mistakes and bad choices, both big and small at one time or another. Some of us have been wrongly accused and suffered the large or small consequences, for our own or someone else's choices. Most of the time, some of us walk around wishing we would have, could have, and should have taken another route in life. Where we thought we were supposed to be is not where we are today. Is our destiny our choice? Betty Tyson is a surviving character to the inevitable situation of being falsely accused of murder in 1973. The police physically beat Betty Tyson until she confessed to the murder she did not commit.

I have heard too many stories about this kind situation before. I was nine years old when Betty Tyson was arrested for murder, 25 years old when I met her, and 34 years old when she was released. I wanted to hear the full story from Betty herself, instead of what I was hearing on the streets. Since I was studying film at RIT and fulfilled a BS degree in Broadcast Journalism from Sunny Brockport, I felt I was prepared to pursue Betty's story. I was curious about what happened to Betty, and I knew other people were wondering where she had ended up, in life. I wanted Betty Tyson's version of her own story. Betty's personal story had a different angle that needed to be revealed and documented, because every story can be seen in different light or perspective.

The Reality of the Idea

Considering the idea and bringing it to reality was easy at first. I had contacted Ms. Tyson. I explained to her what I wanted to do and why I wanted to do it. I wanted to get her story out to let people know that this kind of injustice still continues in our nation. Here are a few relevant examples:

- Trayvon Martin's murder case in Florida, in 2012 was not new and it definitely will not be the last case that indicates racial injustice.
- In 1944, George Junius Stinney Jr. was executed by electric chair at the age of 14 for raping and killing two white girls. The authorities had no evidence against Stinney.
- In 1973, Betty Tyson was convicted and sentenced to 25 years to life on a false statement from a witness who was coerced by Detective William Mahoney.
- During the summer of 2014 in New York City, a medical examiner determined Eric Garner was killed in a chokehold by a police officer. Future events will tell what the justice system will do about this case.

I wanted to do something to take a look at our justice system, and Ms. Tyson's case was the perfect example, and it was local.

The Woman

Betty Tyson is one of the most enduring personages I've ever met. My heart really goes out to her. She has had to deal with so much disappointment, danger, heartache, and abuse. Born to a stern, loving, single mother, Betty grew up in a home of small financial means, going to bed with little to nothing to eat most nights. She grew up with eight siblings all struggling to survive very poor conditions.

Betty had very little self-esteem growing up and even into her late 20s because all she had ever heard all her life was how ugly she was. Schoolmates and others she came across in her life called her many appalling names. Her mother would often call her a "bald headed black bitch." Growing up was very challenging. She resorted to stealing to feed her siblings, because they did not have the money to eat. Betty dropped out of school, but then she had to go to a reform school. Betty turned to "trick turning" because she was tired of living the struggle and wanted to have money to buy necessities. After getting into prostitution, she started heroin, all by the time she was 24 years old. The people she chose to associate with encouraged her to live this new lifestyle. These deploring circumstances led Betty into a world of misfortune and turned into a series of unfortunate events.

In May 1973, a white Philadelphia businessman named Timothy Haworth was murdered. His body was found in an alley in an area known for drugs and prostitution. He had been choked with his own tie and bludgeoned to death with a brick. Police did not know who did this heinous crime nor did they have any evidence to prove who killed this man. The police wanted to close the case because Haworth was a white prominent salesman from Philadelphia, doing business with Eastman Kodak in Rochester. Police

started creating their own evidence and witnesses to testify against those whom the police said committed the crime. Betty Tyson and John Duval were both arraigned for this crime. John was a known transvestite prostitute and Betty was a known prostitute that had a car. At the scene tire tracks were found and that didn't look good for Betty. In an interview done by LaVerne McQuiller Williams in 2004, Betty stated that she was forced to sign a confession that was typed up by the officer in charge, William Mahoney. She was beaten for twelve hours before she finally signed the confession document. "I was handcuffed to two arms of a chair and beaten by the police. They kicked me, punched me, and yanked my hair. Every time they would stop beating me the detective would say, 'Sign it, you black bitch.' 11 years later, McQuiller asked Betty "Why would you confess to taking part in a murder if you were innocent?" Betty thought she could sign the confession and be able to say in court what happened to her prior to signing the confession, but it did not go as she had planned. The police supposedly had discovered witnesses that saw Betty with Timothy Haworth, making it even harder for her to try and save herself.

Betty was convicted of Haworth's murder and served 25 years to life in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in the town of Bedford Hills, New York. When she was convicted in court she could not believe her ears. She was in shock and let out a shriek that was blood curdling. She had a hard time believing that the justice system was so corrupt and racist. Everyone on the jury was white, the judge was white, and so was Betty's attorney. In her mind she could see why she didn't have a chance: She was a drug addict, a prostitute, and had a history of crime on her record. But all her offences non-violence related. This mattered not to the justice system. She was a black woman

with a criminal background and those sentencing her were white people, who were in control, and in power of the court. They could have cared less about her.

An all-encompassing fear shot through Betty. She was not ready for 25 years away from her family, away from her mother, and away from freedom. As soon as Betty was incarcerated she started thinking of ways to kill herself. She couldn't imagine life for 25 years in prison. She tried to kill herself three times by overdosing on pills she received from prison inmates, but each time she woke back up to her living nightmare.

For the first five or six years Betty remained in disbelief. But she also believed that every year that passed she was going to be released and that someone would come forward and save her. That didn't happen until the end of her sentence.

While in prison Betty had a lot of time to think. She thought about her life, injustice, and the various problems that the women inmates encountered while at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

Some of these problems included rape from inmates in the facility and from those posing as authority figures. Betty thought about the few things and items that were given to the inmates, including feminine hygiene items. When the inmates ran out of these items they were given tampons the officers bought in the jail. They would dangle the option of sex in exchange for those necessary items, especially to women inmates who had no family or friends helping or visiting. It was still considered rape in every aspect. But some of those women did what they had to do to survive with their limited freedom in prison.

Another conflict Betty thought about was injustice. In one case, how a little 13-year-old girl got locked up with 16, 17, and 18 year olds in a correctional institution? The

little girl's boyfriend at the time was pimping her out and during the process she harmed one of the men and ended up in a correctional facility. It didn't make sense. She was a child. She spoke like a child and played like a child. She was in a place with people much older than her that took advantage of her because she was so young and child-like in her mind.

Betty also concerned herself with the health system in the jail. Women were complaining about urinary infections and stomach problems, but they were not given any medical attention. It was just about useless unless you had Aids, cancer, or were dying. Betty explained that she believed they had quack doctors coming into the prison. Several times she had seen doctors who did not have their licenses. Not having the proper health care was a big concern of hers.

When Betty was 36 years old, she was given a hysterectomy because she had fibroid tumors that were increasing. At first, she asked for a second medical opinion, but she got the opinion from a friend of the doctor who treated her at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Later, it was discovered that Betty did not need the surgery and she lost the ability to ever have children. After this surgery Betty was in tremendous pain, and whenever she asked for a nurse she got nothing. When nurses finally came to move her to a different room it was a fiasco. Betty saw a dead man being taken out of the room she was about to be put in. They were not going to clean the room and the nurse then said, "This is your room. Alright get in the bed." Betty said to her, "Get in this bed? You just pulled a body out of here. Oh hell no! Call the facility. I'm signing myself out of here." The nurse then had the gall to ask her, "Why?" Betty proceeded to say, "You think I'm going to sleep? Look at that dust bunny under there. "The blood? I'm not gunna sleep

in here.” Then she signed herself out of their care. What an awful experience. Can you imagine something like that happening to you? It was a weird nightmare for Betty.

With all the craziness in the prison Betty was still able to find herself. She came to understand who she was, what she liked to do, what inspired her, and how to help people. She first started finding herself when she took photography. She was amazed with the power of creativity and beauty in the pictures she took. In 1979, Betty knew completely who she was. She found this out through helping others. Helping those around her was a big turning point in her life, because for most of her adult life all she thought about was herself, where she was going to get her next high and who was going to help her get paid. Helping others gave her a new high she had never felt before. It made her feel good about herself and happy for those she was able to help. Betty became a respected woman in Bedford. She was a counselor for those that needed help, a mother for those who seemed lost and needed attention, and a friend to those who needed one. Betty was becoming something to people that she never had, and it was important to her to help those who were suffering as she did.

Betty’s story stirred in me an interest and peeked my curiosity; I knew this story had to be told by Betty herself. During my research I discovered so many slanted news headlines and views about Betty it was horrendous. All of those articles depicted Betty as a heroin addicted prostitute. She was never talked about in a good light. This is the reason why my original title for the film was *The Woman - Betty Tyson*, it had a regal tone to it and it was not degrading. I wanted people to know that there is more to Betty than a negative connotation and an unforgettable past. She should be recognized and remembered for her efforts to become a better person, and for her dedication to helping

those around her. We are all imperfect, but we can change our own lives and that is what Betty accomplished.

How I Connected with Betty

I consider myself a special individual with an everlasting spirit who is looking for an outlet to help individuals in my own community with my films. I want to be a voice of the unspeakable truths that no one else dares to address. I wanted to explore Betty Tyson's life because there are parallel struggles in my own life as a non-traditional student who has overcome some of the most horrific experiences life has to offer.

My mother migrated north from Alabama early in 1964 with me in her womb during the race riots and the burden of Jim Crow laws. I was born in Syracuse, New York, while my father finished a tour with the U.S. Marine Corps in Okinawa, Japan. I experienced struggles at an early age. My mother was living with an aunt until my father arrived home from the military. Things were good for a while until I could see my father tussle with his demons from possible PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), plus he was an alcoholic. This combination of PTSD and alcohol made for interesting sounds to interpret at night as a child. It was tough, remembering my mother sobbing because Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. I remember watching our black & white television newscast showing his body draped off a cheap hotel balcony. This had a sobering effect in the home we tried to have in the northern states of America. Segregation and housing was just one of the struggles still going on during this growing up process. Having been trapped in the bathroom of 1320 Madison Street with a couple of huge rats is a childhood memory never to be forgotten. I will not go into the details of the adolescent adventures of a child whose biggest fear was rats, but I was brave enough to try anything else

involving physical dares from the neighborhood children. Those experiences are a film script in the making for the future.

The four adults who were closest to me all worked at Kodak at some point or another. Mom, stepfather, neighbor Mr. Ervin Lassiter and his wife Lillie were devoted to this iconic corporation. My neighbor, “Big Erv,” as we called him believed in my potential, so he borrowed a 35mm still camera from the employee cage at Kodak for me to use in class. A high school photography class enlightened me to the magic of film. I captured images of the family dog, as he stood bravely, modeling for my photo projects. Then I moved on to a dinosaur 8mm film camera my mom had and then to the T-Rex of a VHS camcorder that marked me as the one crazy enough to carry this thing all day to weddings, family holidays, and any other events. I even tried some clay stop motion in high school. I created a snake devouring a rat. It was pretty good. My teacher, Mr. May critiqued it stating that I could have extended the frames for each shot to slow down the action a little. Learning from this experience I moved on to other adventures. Taking woodshop and auto-mechanics classes furthered my knowledge. Showing off my handiwork in making bowls on the lathe to be viewed in the display cases at Corcoran High School, in Syracuse, N.Y. where I lived with my biological father for a while as a teenager.

When I returned to my mother’s house in Rochester, N.Y., I was the center for East High’s Girls varsity basketball team in 1980 to 1982. Then, I went to the U.S. Army working as a Multi-Channel Communications Equipment Operator. Most of my time was spent in South Korea. I gave the Army almost two years and then decided to return to the United States. Not really knowing what I wanted to focus on, I took a job as a

Security Guard. With too much time on my hands after or before work I discovered my love for music and isolated myself in my room listening to all kinds of music, but mainly R&B, Jazz, and Rock & Roll.

Then the extension of my experimental phase began with drugs and alcohol, which lasted 25 years. What Betty Tyson and I had in common is the fact that both of us were missing 25 years due to being locked up. I just did not have the bars around me constantly. I did, by chance, get to meet Betty in 1989 during a one and a half to three year sentence at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York State.

Pre-production:

In the decision to make a documentary I combined my skills as a journalist and a filmmaker to bring light to a situation I had knowledge of, but had never heard it from the individual it happened to. I would hear from people who had their own version through rumors on the streets of Rochester, New York. I wanted Betty Tyson to tell it all, especially about the night in question.

My plan was to make an elaborate documentary that would let Betty take us through the pain she suffered as a child growing up with little parenting and her struggle of having to feed her siblings by any means necessary and then moving into the home of a childhood friend whose family was involved in drugs and prostitution. Betty's hard life was then devastated by being framed for a murder she did not commit, by this same friend.

I wanted to go to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, which had been renamed "Betty's House" by the women who came through there and still reside there.

However, this scene just did not make it into the time schedule. There were no replies to my calls to Bedford, and the political lines were not open.

I tried a Kick Starter fundraiser, which did generate \$165.00. I realized I had to scale back my film and get it done as cheaply as possible. My first budget was estimated around \$8,000 the final production cost was about \$3,000 right out of my pocket.

My intentions were to speak to everyone that I could find who had a part in this situation of Betty's who was still alive. During my investigation into this trial and time period I discovered some people held some animosity toward this topic and even toward Betty personally because she was released.

I was further discouraged trying to recruit a film crew. When searching for a film crew one female student told me this topic was not of interest to her. I respected her opinion and moved on. Two months before my first shoot I had nine committed crew members, including myself:

Director - Taunja Isaac

Producer – Brianna Scott

Assistant Producer- Alexis La'Boy

Assistant Director - Ihab Mardini

Cinematographer - Kalle Bailey

Assistant Camera - Chris Viall

Sound Team - Tina Chapman-DeCosta, Kenton Cummings, Jamar Herriott

Art Director - Christina Ladato

My Assistant Producer, Alexis La'Boy, who stuck with me through thick and

thin, found it difficult to schedule meetings with the crew members who were supposedly committed to the filming of *The Woman Betty Tyson*. Everyone had an excuse. They were either too busy or scheduled other engagements during the times they were needed, Some flat out did not come. Separate meetings for the same information were set up to accommodate the varied schedules.

Some of my production experiences were more positive. During one experience when my Costume Designer, Christina Ladato suggested we try the second hand vintage clothes shops, a few of the crew and cast members ventured down Monroe Avenue to pillage through the clothing shops in search of 1960s and 1970s period outfits for my re-enactments of Betty Tyson's childhood and young adult life. We went into *Aaron's Alley*, where we found dresses and platform shoes that reminded me of my childhood in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The youth actors, Shanasia and Sierra thoroughly enjoyed themselves rummaging through the entire store's inventory. When it came time for the youth to actually try on the clothes we had gathered they were reluctant and bashful to come out of the dressing rooms and model the outfits we put together. We had to coax the girls out with food, and only one of them, Sierra, came out the dressing room. We told Sierra to bring her sister, the other young cast member, out of the dressing room. She then proceeded to go into the dressing room and farted, and her sister then came barreling out of the little dressing room. It was such a surreal moment for my crew and myself. It was a laughing moment and a little entertainment, which eased my spirits and made my filmmaking experience more enjoyable. We worked out a deal with the store for me to rent the clothing items we desired to use for the re-enactments.

Kristina Hiler replaced Sierra as "young Florine" the day of the shoot. Sierra lost

her voice in a softball game the night before. The script for the mid 1960s re-enactment was written especially for the young woman who would play Betty at age 13 and Florine at 14. I did not want the girls to say anything they would be too shy to say:

‘When Florine reveals the wad of money from her dress bosom, Betty has a curious look on her face and asks. “Where did you get all that money?” Florine replies like a child, “From Mr. Bill. He gim’ me whatever I want at my house.” Betty looks at her suspicious and puzzled. Betty looks back down at Florine counting her money.

Florine sees Betty staring at the money and suggests, “Let’s go to my house and play?” Betty then promptly says, “Okay.” Florine says, “Come on girl we gunna have some fun.” as the youth leave the front porch of Betty’s mother’s house.

The simplicity of this scene gives the audience a shock, letting them wonder what could be happening at Florine’s house.

This is the Actual Crew

Producer/ Director/Writer- Taunja Isaac

Assistant Producer-Alexis Laboy

Assistant Director-Ihab Mardini

Cinematographers/Editors- Christina Ladato & Taunja Isaac

Sound-- Tina Chapman-DeCosta

Costume Designer- Christina Ladato

Seamstress- Julia Wilson

Cosmetologist- Kristina Hiler

Archivist- Courtney Smith

Production:

Nervous yet determined, I took the reins and set forth to make this documentary. Reserving equipment and the times for the crew I was depending on was a challenge. Within eight hours before my first shoot the Assistant Camera dropped out, leaving me stranded, just saying he had something else to do on another shoot. The Cinematographer just did not bother to show up. I did not flinch and I moved forward with the initial interview with one cameraperson and my son helping us carry equipment. The original Cinematographer had the nerve to approach me a few days after with a concern about rumors, asking me why I would tell other students he bailed on me, and why were other students saying, “Kalle bailed on Taunja.” I gently asked him, “Did you bail on me?” He offered to help me at the other shoots but it was too late.

I have learned quite a few lessons working with other people to form committed

team members. Moving forward I discovered the individuals who wanted to work with me on my film. When it came down to the final crew only 4 of the original crewmembers maintained their commitment to my film.

An all female film crew developed:

Christina Ladato, Costume Designer, plus Assistant Editor

Tina Chapman-Dacosta, Sound Crew and Post Editing Consultant

Alexis Laboy, Assistant Producer, a Civil Engineering Major

Greer Gladney, a New School Film Graduate, Camera Assistant.

This is a great group of women! I commend them for their commitment to my film.

Ihab Mardini, the male crewmember, and my class fellow, stated from the beginning that he would help but could not commit in the field. It worked out because I used him as counsel and post-production Assistant Director.

The personal growth within me was revealed as I dealt with situations properly in a subtle mature manner. It brought tears of joy to me, as I became a better filmmaker and a great director. (My eyes are wet as I type this passage.) I was tired of being the scapegoat to people who slacked off on their commitments. I learned to let them be, because they will expose themselves sooner or later. I had to move forward to accomplish my goals for this short film.

The second shoot was planned for former Mayor William Johnson to speak with Betty Tyson at her home. Betty had promised me she would return home in the time frame we had to spend with William Johnson. We were in Betty's home setting up and

when we were ready to shoot she had not returned. She called and said she was dealing with a situation with her wife about a car. I refused to explode and the guy who lives in her basement said; “She does that all the time to people.” Now my subject has become a challenge for me, so I decided to film William Johnson alone. I moved forward using the time Mr. Johnson had given us before his scheduled flight.

Mr. Johnson could see that I was a little flustered with Betty. He said, “Taunja I want to see you complete this film.” I heard him and I took heed to his words. I moved forward with plans for the re-enactments and interviews.

Third Shoot

Gary Craig is the investigative reporter who pushed the boundaries to reopen Betty’s case. Craig also was the contact to help with John Jackson aka “Twiggy” the man who wanted to recant his testimony, and helped him on how to approach the court. Craig shared with me the fact that he did not want to hear Jackson’s recantation until it went on record. Gary Craig was pleasant and gracious in the way he cooperated with me, I was excited and honored. I was invited into the Democrat & Chronicle building by Craig. Because of building security issues, I went alone with my camera equipment, knowing I had to get the shot.

Here are the questions for Mr. Craig:

Could you please introduce yourself?

In 1973 where were you doing and when and how did you get involved in Betty Tyson’s case?

NEW YORK TIMES 1998, "For the record, I must give Mr. Mastrocola credit," Mr. Getz said. "He didn't make me fight to obtain this document, and a number of others. And he conceded that the trial attorney never received these documents." What would you say about this statement?

Did you know she was a victim of sex abuse?

**What of her vulnerability to the street life and corrupt police?

**Why was it so important to prosecute her so fast to close the case of Timothy Haworth's murder?

**Can you tell me about the "New York Wrongful Conviction Bills Stall," and why it was stalled?

***As a white man, did your friends, peers, and employer ridicule you about your investigation? What negative vibes did you face?

**Why were you persistent in your investigation?

****What would you like to say to Betty today?

*Why was it so simple to acquit George Zimmerman in Florida?

*Did you know that in 1944 George Stinney was executed at the age of 14? (Brown and Moon of Pleroma Entertainment are trying to overturn his case; A white man from a prominent family supposedly made a deathbed confession to the murder of the two white girls Stinney was prosecuted for.)

In 1998 did you say, "...But I worry we're doing less investigative reporting than we used to do." What did you mean by this statement?

Is that still true in 2013?

The interview at Democrat & Chronicle building took place in a conference room that Mr. Craig led me to. It was quite bland. I started moving things around so I could frame him. After I placed microphones on him we seemed to click and realized that we were about to let it fly. I was not afraid to ask Mr. Craig the questions and he was eager to elaborate on the topic at hand. I was in a journalistic state of mind that almost made me

nervous but I was cool. The revelation was happening as far as I was concerned. The truth of his part was being recorded.

I later reached out to Marge Booker, one of the activists from the “Free Betty Tyson Movement,” a connection I was excited to make. Our conversation started off with me letting her know who I was and the purpose of the call and I had been given her contact info from the investigative reporter Mr. Gary Craig, of the Democrat and Chronicle newspaper. We spoke on the phone for almost two hours and she seemed enthused to be a part of my film. Ms. Booker asked me if she was being recorded over the phone and I stated, “No, I would like a videotaped interview.” At first she seemed pleased to be thought of and included for the topic. We scheduled a date that was convenient for the both of us. She then called me up panicking on the wrong date thinking I should have been there. I politely corrected her and confirmed the proper date. The day before the actual date she cancelled on me.

Eventually Ms. Booker would back out of the interview and expose her true greed and animosity toward Betty Tyson, which she revealed to me over the phone call exposing her hidden agenda for participating in the “Free Betty Tyson” movement.

Betty confided in me about who Marge Booker was and what her role was in this movement. Betty spoke with me candidly about her association with Marge Booker. She told me Marge had befriended her during her incarceration. Betty said she thought Marge was sincere in her actions when she sent her care packages and accepted her phone calls from prison. Apparently Marge supported Betty and was generous with her gifts to Betty with a hidden agenda. When Betty was exonerated and released Marge gave Betty a

credit card with a ten thousand dollar credit limit. Betty accepted these gifts of favor without knowing that Marge expected repayment. When Betty did receive her settlement from the City of Rochester. Marge informed her that she had to pay for the credit card she ran up. So Betty wrote her a check for the credit card balance and drove over to Marge's house, gave her a check for the credit card balance, and walked out of her life.

When I spoke with Marge further trying to change her mind about cancelling the interview for my film, it seemed as though this woman was bipolar or something. Marge spoke at first with an enthusiasm to participate. Now, she said she did not want to be a part of this film because of her willingness to help Betty back then; it put a strain on Marge's relationship with her wife Lori. Marge informed me that she and Lori had been separated for a while but she did not want Lori to know that she was even associating with the topic of Betty Tyson. The couple had owned a bookshop when they were involved with the "Free Betty Tyson" movement.

When Ms. Booker called me to cancel the interview. I felt the ill will in Marge's tone as she gave me excuses for not wanting to participate. She offered me a lapel pin from the Movement. I already had footage of the pin that was on Betty's father's suit lapel. I started to meet with this woman anyway but my intuition told me to let her be. When it comes to money people get funny and I didn't want to get the bias feeling from this woman knowing she felt like Betty owed her more money.

Betty also shared with me the fact that all those people who flocked around her when she received a financial settlement for wrongful imprisonment were nowhere in site now. All that human support she had was gone. Betty received poor financial counsel from people who were only interested in what she could give them financially.

I was stumped for a minute with Marge's decision to back out. I moved forward and now I was stuck on this mysterious ill feeling. I realized how deep these negative feelings towards Betty ran as I researched the topic further. I discovered that some people held a deep animosity toward Betty. I found a blog where they felt as though she should not have been released from prison and they felt like the city of Rochester was wrong for paying her 1.25 million dollars; Mr. William Johnson, former Mayor of Rochester, New York in 1998 when Betty Tyson was exonerated, clarified the amount as 2.5 million dollars. The news reported that Betty was awarded 1.25 million dollars, which was only partially true, because she received the other half through an annuity.

Post-Production

Before editing I looked through the footage from the first shoot. I had a three-hour long interview with Betty in her back yard telling it the way she recalled it. My dilemma was how to deliver this story with out looking at a talking head for 30 minutes. Originally, I planned to make it full of re-enactments. I decided too many reenactments would make the story seem fake. Watching other documentaries didn't really help because I did not want to take away from Betty the opportunity for her to share her story the way she told it to me sitting on the worn bench behind her house. So using the re-enactments and the news footage mixed with the interviews was the way to go. Letting Betty flow and inter cutting Mr. Johnson's and Mr. Craig's participation and positions to support Betty's story was my rhythm of choice. Professor McQuiller's input was academically solid because she was the current Chair of the Criminal Justice Department at RIT. What became an issue was the time I was allotted for screening. My rough cut

was 49 minutes and I was only allowed 30 minutes of screening time for my film. I had to make some heart breaking decisions about what to leave in and what to cut out. It was painstaking. When I finally cut it down to close to 30 minutes the film seemed rushed to me and I didn't like the flow of it. So I tweaked it a little more and received some input from Christina Ladato and Ihab Mardini and we rolled with it. The original song composed for my film about Betty Tyson's situation plays at the end in full length. Which makes it a total of 31.55 minutes.

I still want to make a longer version of this film. I have hours of footage I did not include in my cut of the film for thesis screening. I have received some very good constructive criticism I will take heed to. Remembering professor Peter Kiwitt's advice to shoot a lot of footage stuck with me. Now I don't want to be stuck with just a lot of footage I plan to pursue a chance to take Betty to Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for an interview and see what she has been doing lately.

Screening

I went through my film several times the day before screening sign up. When I submitted my film I felt good about it. Tina Chapman-DeCosta even watched it with me to be sure everything was good and she complimented me on my work and how much I had improved since we started classes together. I appreciated the compliments.

Minus 25, Betty Tyson screened at RIT in the Carlson Theater on Sunday May 18, 2014 around 4:20pm. My respondent Mr. Richard McCollough showed up just a little while after I did. I was feeling okay and praying my film would be received well by the audience and hoping there would be no technical difficulties. Well when my turn came to

screen I felt like everything would be all right until I saw the first hiccup in the transition of the first cut. I thought my world was ending right then and there. I turned to my left where Richard was seated. I said, “What was that?” He shrugged his shoulders and I was about to freak out. I tried to breathe and hope that it didn’t skip again. It did! I sat through my screening with every cut skipping and hiccupping feeling like I had screwed up. I had followed the instructions to the letter. Tina checked it, Richard saw it, and it showed smooth and there were no skips. The credits rolled and it stopped.

I approached the podium and apologized for the skipping and the few missing words, which had been cut out because of the hiccups. One of the instructors in the back told the audience and I that it was because of the size of the file the transitions did not stay rendered when the file was transferred. I felt better when I heard his explanation. So I then introduced my thesis respondent, owner of MirusMedia, meteorologist, and teacher, Mr. Richard McCollough. He spoke of the filmmaker’s job and my passion about the subject matter. He pointed out that I used film-grammar, syntax, and form to compose my film to attract the audience. The choice of tools as a filmmaker I used to tell the story that needed to be told about injustice. He compared me to Ken Burns! He appreciated the shots and the incorporation of re-enactments as a reference in a way to legitimize the importance of Betty Tyson’s story. The film was accepted by the audience better than I thought it would be. Professor Kiwitt wanted more detail about the time Betty spent in prison. Understood, I am still working to make that possible. A young man thanked me for making the film because he never heard the story before and he was grateful for me bringing it to his attention. That was my goal in making the film, I wanted for someone to learn something about this situation and know that this is a local story and it is still

happening all over this country.

Conclusion

The Documentary Club of Rochester, New York called on me for an opportunity to screen my film at the Little Theater because someone else cancelled and I accepted. I was pleased to see my film on one of the Little's screens. After the viewing I took questions and comments and welcomed the criticisms with joy. They loved my film and were not afraid to let me know how I could make it better by bringing out more of her backstory and her current situation. They commented on the subtle use of re-enactments and the use of the actual footage from 1973 was great. One gentleman, an English teacher noticed some misspelled words and corrections, which were needed in some of the labels and credits, which was awesome because no one mentioned or noticed those mistakes at other screenings. I have fixed those mistakes. Also the club advised me to search for more people who were involved with her case who would be willing to share their thoughts. For instance the deceased, Justice John Connell, who overturned Betty's, murder conviction. His life as a Judge had been challenging. Judge Connell suffered numerous attacks and threats as a seated official of the justice system because he was deemed a fair and just man of the court. Maybe a look back on Judge Connell's life and pull some of it into Betty's release would be quite a feat. I would have to search for a secondary sources that were close to the Judge. I hope they are a reliable, honest source to reflect on the late Judge John Connell's life.

I shared with the documentary club, knowing I have accomplished some feats in my life. Having just skimmed the surface, as an aspiring filmmaker, I feel I can be a

voice of the community that should be heard. My mission has just begun. With the digital age in motion I started editing with film tape and a razor blade in high school with one of the most infamous teachers in Rochester's City School District, Mr. May. He was an inspiration to me to set higher goals and become successful.

Professor Cathleen "Cat" Ashworth, my thesis chair, has been the ultimate source of encouragement for me to go forth with this project. Cat has pushed me to reveal my ideas and let them flow. Some people thought my ideas were too raw, but Cat listened to my ideas and she liked them, "Taunja do not let anyone censor you!" This will stick with me for the rest of my life. My ideas are a part of my artistic ability. If I can think or dream anything, I would like to share it. My goal will be to try and position it in a frame the way I saw it in my head. There are limitless borders to my imagination to how I want to use the re-enactments. Professor Carl "Skip" Battaglia, another member of my thesis committee said something like this, "Do not overuse your re-enactments, it takes away from the story, if re-enactments rule they will make the documentary look fake." Professor Stephanie Maxwell, also a thesis committee member for my film stated she loved my raw style of filmmaking.

Research Material

25 Years to Freedom: An Interview with Betty Tyson

LaVerne McQuiller Williams

Women's Studies Quarterly, Vol. 32, No. 3/4, Women, Crime, and the Criminal Justice System (Fall - Winter, 2004), pp. 14-32

Monroe County Library System

William A. Johnson

Gary Craig & Democrat & Chronicle Newspaper May 1973, May 1998

Internet Blog sites: *Exonerations, Unsolved Murders*

WROC TV Channel 8 News Archives May 1973

Ms. Betty Dove-Tyson

The Woman, Betty Tyson
2013

By Taunja L. Isaac

MFA Thesis Proposal
Documentary Film
24 minutes long
HD format

Approved for Submission: _____

Chair: Associate Professor Cat Ashworth
Committee Member: Professor Stephanie Maxwell
Committee Member: Professor Carl Battaglia

In life we all have made mistakes and bad choices, both big and small at one time or another. Some of us have been wrongly accused and suffered the consequences large or small, for our own or someone else's choices. Most of the time, some of us walk around wishing we would have, could have, and should have, taken another route in life. Where we thought we were supposed to be is not where we are today. Is our destiny our choice? Betty Tyson is a surviving character to the inevitable situation of being falsely accused in 1973; she was beaten into a confession to a murder she did not commit.

Back Story

Timothy Haworth of Philadelphia, a consultant for EastmanKodak, was found in an empty lot in Rochester, NY, bound by his necktie and bludgeoned to death with a brick. There were tire tracks at the scene near where the body was found. According to the police Betty Tyson was the only prostitute known to have a car at the time. Even though the impressions did not match her tires, Betty Tyson and her associate Jon Duval, a male transvestite, were arrested and held for 12 hours while they were beaten and kicked into signing confessions to the killing Haworth.

Charged with 2nd Degree Murder, Tyson told her lawyer that she only signed the confession because the detectives had beaten her. During the trial important evidence was withheld from her lawyer; the fact that the tires on her car did not match the treads of the tire tracks found at the crime scene. This information was suppressed during the trial.

Teenagers Jon Jackson and Wayne Wright were taken into custody with Tyson's co-defendant John Duval on the day the police questioned him. The teenagers never returned home. They were held in jail until they agreed to testify under oath that they saw Betty Tyson and Jon Duval with the victim before he was found dead. They were held in protective custody for seven months after the trial. The verdict came in; Betty Tyson and Jon Duval were convicted by an all white Jury of 12 men, for the 2nd degree murder of Tim Haworth.

In 1997 Wayne Wright returned to Rochester, NY and recanted his 1973 testimony, his family contacted Rev. Raymond Graves so their son could bring forth the truth. Wright told Rev. Graves that he was threatened with a gun in a cell by a Police Officer to get his testimony straight. The same Officer, William Mahoney made up and typed the statements that Tyson and Duval were beaten and forced to sign. The first statement Jon Jackson wrote stated that he did not see Tyson and Duval with Haworth that night. It was found in police files in 1997.

Betty Tyson said she was innocent and so she stood her ground for 25 years in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Tyson was later freed at the age of 49 in 1998 after serving the 25 years. The City of Rochester paid Tyson \$1.2 million dollars for the time she served. She had served the longest time of any inmate at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

A Conviction Ruled Unjust Leads to a Redemption

Today, 25 years later, Betty Tyson is a new woman, physically and spiritually. On her first day of freedom, after a judge here reversed her murder conviction because of suppressed evidence and a district attorney chose not to try her again, Ms. Tyson sat in her lawyer's office

in a sleek black jersey dress, patent leather high heels and sparkling gold earrings. Her dreadlocks were arranged like a crown and her bearing was comparably regal. "I am a totally different person," said Ms. Tyson, who is 49. "If I'd have stayed out in the street I probably would have ended up dead -- killed, overdosed or from AIDS. That doesn't mean I'm grateful to have been in prison all this time. But I turned a negative to a positive. I found out who Betty Tyson was."

By Jane Gross Published: May 29, 1998

Treatment

The Woman, Betty Tyson (2013) will show this woman's peace of mind, while revealing her story of survival, strength and the ability to readjust to society. Since she has been home she has faced the media and society's ridicule, which is a shallow and unjust description of Betty Tyson. Why is she still being described as a prostitute and a heroin addict? Isn't there more to this woman to say about who she is? First of all I would like for my audience to hear her talk about herself and her journey. Then I would like to know more than what the news has to say. For example:

Murder conviction overturned, Betty Tyson arrested for petit larceny

Betty Tyson, who spent 25 years in prison for murder before having her conviction overturned in 1998, was charged with petit larceny in Greece last month, accused of stealing \$32.50 worth of items from a local grocery store. (Democrat and Chronicle 1:28pm, 9-13-2011)

Many news reports emphasize the fact that she was awarded \$1.2 million dollars from the city. They imply she should not need to steal. I think her actions were a cry for help. Why would such a small item make it into the news?

Did recidivism come in to play? Did anyone care or say to her "Are you alright? Can I help you with something? Or what's really going on or just see if she is ok?" When anyone has been through such a traumatic experience in life as Betty Tyson has, the norm cannot be easy. Betty's childhood was depraved and difficult, her early adult years were spent as a victim of prostitution, and then she spent 25 years in prison for a crime she did not commit. Those are "tuff" odds to overcome. The media is focused on the judgment; Tyson was awarded \$1.2 million for her time she spent in prison. Why was she stealing? What was the underlying issue? The media has recently distorted her image without knowing her current struggles with

life.

Ultimately, I would like for the audience to feel her present existence, frustration, gratitude, and to understand that while going through life we all face complicated situations. It is so hard to ask for help when we need it most. Themes that will be explored in this documentary are women, poverty, injustice, recidivism, and redemption.

“These folks didn’t see me. They just saw the way I was living. I was vulnerable.” Says Betty Tyson in a 2004 interview by LaVerne McQuiller Williams an adjunct professor at RIT, in the Women’s Studies Quarterly Journal. When the verdict was read in 1973 Tyson said in the 2004 interview, “I let out a holler that I think would have woke the dead.”

Betty’s childhood contributed to her low self-worth, self-esteem and self-respect to how she lived on the street and made her vulnerable to such a mishap with the Justice System. I want the audience to meet this humble yet outspoken woman who has survived this experience and appreciates what she gained from it.

Visual Style

I would like to open with a scene of a young woman walking the streets at night attempting to lure a customer, then the scene transitions into a newscaster’s voice and the picture fades into the actual news cast of the 1973 arrest of Betty Tyson. Then fade into her and I sitting at the shore of the Genesee River with a view of the city of Rochester in the background. I will introduce her and myself as we continue with a conversation like old acquaintances.

As the conversation advances there will be other scenes and images of Betty’s old neighborhood hangouts in Rochester, New York. I will also seek permission to shoot inside Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. As an alternative, if we cannot shoot inside Bedford Hills Facility, I will use archival photos and video of the facility, as Betty remembers her incarceration period. A medium wide shot will be used with us conversing with the prison in the background. If not we will shoot while having a

picnic, outside the gate as Betty briefly remembers her incarceration period. The film will close with Betty and I outside or inside her home talking about where she is now and what she does to encourage other women to be strong and keep living.

Why do I want to make this documentary? In 1989 I met Betty, nine years before her exoneration in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. As a Black woman who has been incarcerated, I need to let her tell us about what she is up against. I only served for 18 months, so I can't imagine what it is like readjusting to society after serving time for a quarter of a century.

Timeline

Summer of 2013-

Perform additional research and archival searches, collecting from local and national television news cast and news papers, of her 1973 arrests and coverage of the trial, exoneration and recent arrest.

Set up fund raising on Indiegogo

Fall of 2013 -

week #1 Confirm locations and shooting schedule to crew

week #2 thru #5 Shooting interviews with Tyson

week #3 thru #8 shooting street prostitution scenes (re-enactments)

shooting neighborhood in Rochester and street scenes

Week #4 Trip to Bedford Hills and collecting more Interviews w/ Betty in and or outside prison

week #5 thru #10 General shots with Betty of her life events, interviews with criminal justice experts and other individuals associated with the case

week # 10 thru #16 Organize archival material and pick up shots

Spring of 2014-

Additional shooting if needed

Supervise edit with editor

week #5 Rough cut

week #8 Fine Cut Picture Lock

week #14 Color Correction and sound mix

In process/music score (check fair usage Docs for Betty's music snippets of her favorite 70s, 80s, and 90s hit songs)

May 2014 Final Screening

Crew

Director - Taunja Isaac

Producer – Brianna Scott

Assistant Director - Ihab Mardini

Cinematographer - Kalle Bailey

Assistant Camera - Chris Viall

Sound Team - Tina Chapman Decosta, Kenton Cummings, Jamar Herriott

Art Director - Christina Lodato

Budget

Account#	Fee
100 Story	
Story and Script	0.00
200 Talent	0.00
Executive Producer	0.00
Producer	0.00
Director	0.00
Narrator	0.00
Extras	0.00
300 Production Personnel	
Camera Operator	0.00
Gaffer	0.00
Grip	0.00
Makeup/Prosthetics Artist	0.00
Assistant Director	0.00

Assistant Camera	0.00
Special effects	0.00
Sound Recordist	0.00
400 Travel and Locations	
Cast and Crew Meals	700.00
Petty Cash	350.00
Travel Expenses	1000.00
Hotel Accommodations	1500.00
Miscellaneous Expense	300.00
500 Production Equipment	
Camera and Support	00.00
Lighting	00.00
Grip	00.00
Sound Package	1500.00
Special Effects	00.00
Batteries	30.00
600 Art Direction	
Props	00.00
Set Dressing	00.00
Makeup Supplies	00.00
Costumes	00.00
900 Sound and Music	
Composer	300.00
Sound Mixer	200.00
1000 Titles and Opticals	
Art Work Cards	0.00
Artwork	0.00
Title Photography	0.00
1100 Editing and Finishing	
Editor	0.00
Effects	0.00
Post-Production Equip (Hard Drive)	350.00
Archival Duplication	200.00
1200 Office	
Duplication	100.00
Office Supplies	100.00
Film Festival Submission	500.00
Subtotal	7130.00
1300 Contingency	
Contingency %15	1069.50

Final total:

\$8199.50