

First Coast pair among Florida's youngest female inmates

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BY DEIRDRE CONNER | STORY UPDATED AT 12:41 PM ON MONDAY, OCT. 12, 2009



Photos Stephanie Gonyeau and Patrick Dixon were running away, but they had no car and no money.

Later, she would say it was her idea, and he would say it was his.

She didn't think Patrick would actually do it until he walked up to a woman at River City Marketplace, punched her, snatched her keys away and knocked her to the ground, leaving her cut and bruised. Stephanie joined in, then got in the driver's seat. Her foster sister jumped in the back.

There wasn't much of a plan. They thought they would go to Chicago, but they didn't know how to get there.

It didn't matter: The car broke down as they careened through the parking lot. They were busted as they scattered in the woods nearby.

Charged as an adult with unarmed carjacking, Stephanie, who was then 15 years old, landed in jail in April 2008. Soon, she would start to disappear, just another girl who, as her attorney put it, "never really had a chance."

There was an upside to jail, though. She was about to meet her best friend. Because just a few days after Stephanie's attempt to run away failed miserably, Morgan Leppert's was succeeding.

Or so it seemed at first.

Everyone knows about Morgan because of what happened next: She and her boyfriend, Toby Lowry, 22, were convicted of first-degree murder after killing a man in Putnam County and stealing his car. They had gotten all the way to Texas before they were caught. Morgan, 15 at the time and now 16, was sentenced to life in prison on Sept. 29.

No one knows about Stephanie. She was the youngest female inmate in Florida's adult prison system, but even she didn't really know that until she got a letter from a reporter. She's about a year and a half into the four-year term she got after pleading guilty.

Right now, four years "feels like my whole life," she said.

Last week, her closest confidant arrived at Lowell Correctional Institution in Ocala, and replaced Stephanie as Florida's youngest female prison inmate. Morgan is slated to spend the rest of her life there, unless she can successfully appeal her conviction.

Her "whole life" is just that, a vague prospect still seemingly beyond her comprehension.

Morgan and Stephanie became best friends after spending nearly a year together in virtual isolation in the Duval County jail. They are emblematic of a dramatic rise in girls and young women in the justice system, both juvenile and adult.

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Stephanie, who grew up in Jacksonville, and her on-and-off boyfriend, Patrick, 18, faced the same charges in the carjacking.

It wasn't the first time Stephanie had been in trouble with the law. Her record is standard downward spiral: Criminal mischief was the first charge, then she got arrested for bringing a weapon to school (a box cutter, she said). A few battery charges followed, stemming from fights with her mom, usually over her habit of running away. Oceanway Middle is the last school where she spent much time.

Finally, after one fight, her mother refused to come and get her from juvenile lockup, Stephanie said. That's when she went into foster care.

She hated fighting with her mom, but foster care was worse.

She and her foster sister had been skipping school all week. Get right, they were told, or they would have to move on.

She ran away before she could get kicked out.

They went to Patrick's house, but the friend he was staying with wanted him out. So they decided to leave town.

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It's a disturbingly common pattern of risk factors, said Lawanda Ravoir, director of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency's Center for Young Girls and Women in Jacksonville. Falling at school is a huge predictor of future crime, she said. Further warning signs - such as running away or domestic violence - are often missed.

The No. 1 risk factor for women going to prison is spending time in juvenile detention.

"It's a life sentence," Ravoir said.

Girls in crisis are often invisible to the rest of the world, Ravoir said, but not without warning signs.

"I've never seen a situation where there were not sirens going off," said Ravoir, an advocate for more gender-specific funding in criminal systems and earlier intervention for at-risk girls.

Those girls are growing up to be the women flooding into the justice system so fast that Lowell is under construction to up its capacity by over 1,000 beds.

1,014 - The number of girls in juvenile justice facilities in Florida in 2006.

384 - The number in Georgia.

383 - Boys under 18 in Florida adult prisons.

9 - Girls under 18 in Florida adult prisons.

15 - Percentage of juvenile offenders in residential placement nationally that are female.

207,700 - The number of women nationwide estimated to be held in prison or jails in 2008, up 33 percent since 2000.

\$27,193 - Florida average cost to house a female inmate in adult prison for one year.

6,888 - Number of women in Florida's state prisons on June 30, 2008.

Since 1999, the number of women admitted to prisons every year in Florida has more than doubled and grown twice as fast as the number of men. There were 4,611 women who came into the system in 2008, versus 1,926 in 1999. On June 30, 2008, the female population was 6,888.

There's no question that girls need to be held accountable, Ravoira said. But squeezing more and more young women into a system designed for men is a recipe for failure. Incarcerated girls and women are far more likely to have histories of sexual abuse, mental illness and substance abuse. Without treatment for those issues, she said, they're almost certain to leave more broken than before.

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The boyfriends are the constant question mark. They are reluctant to talk about them. When asked about Toby Lowry - who shared her bed at home until her mother realized he was 22, not 17 - Morgan looks down. They met through friends. That's all she'd say.

In an interview with the Times-Union, her attorney would not let her discuss the case pending an appeal, but in court he argued that Toby was in control of her, leaving her less responsible for the savage murder of James Thomas Stewart.

Stephanie said she and Patrick were sometimes friends, sometimes boyfriend-girlfriend.

Perhaps the reluctance is because their relationships could have added to the boys' legal troubles (both were old enough to potentially face sex charges, although unlikely). Or because their relationship was always so passionate and so ambivalent.

Girls sentenced for violent felonies are the exception, Ravoira said. But when they do get in trouble, there's always a pattern. Relationships are central in the lives of women and girls, Ravoira said, and they become a primary motivator as a girl's life is spinning out of control.

"They will do anything to preserve a relationship," she said. "They will give up themselves."

Stephanie thinks of Patrick every day, and not just because of the tiny tattoo on her arm that bears his name.

The carjacking was her idea, she said, but she would have been too scared without him.

She both longs to see him - "I didn't know I could go this long without seeing him and be OK" - but is somehow able to see why she shouldn't.

"I want to [write to him] but I also want to separate myself from him at the same time," she said. "Because it got me here. Because I felt like then, he had control of my life, like I would do anything that he wanted me to. Like going to prison."

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Stephanie and Morgan lived in a special holding area in the adult jail that's reserved for women under 18 who have been charged as adults. There were always other girls who came in and out. But Stephanie and Morgan were there for the long term. Stephanie stayed 242 days; Morgan had been in the jail for about 16 months when she was sentenced Sept. 29. Putnam County, where she was charged, didn't have the facilities for her.

There were a few hours of school, then mostly they slept all day or played cards, the girls remember. They brought the food in because the girls couldn't be mixed in with the adult population. A few times a week they would get to go outside.

Morgan's face lights up when Stephanie is mentioned.

"That's the one good thing about all this, is that I'll get to see Stephanie soon," she said. "We're both goofy. We had a lot of stuff in common."

They talked about everything: music, clothes, boyfriends, what happened those terrible days that changed so many people's lives forever.

"I felt like I was there with her, when it happened," Stephanie said.

When she learned that Morgan might be arriving at Lowell soon, Stephanie said she wanted to hug her.

"She's probably my only best friend that I really had," she said.

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Florida incarcerates more girls and young women than all but two states, Texas and California, and at a higher rate, according to the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. In 2006, there were more than 1,014 girls in juvenile justice facilities in Florida, compared with 384 in Georgia. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, however, has been working to reduce the number of children and teens sent away to residential placements over the last few years.

Fewer girls under 18 land in the adult system. But when they do, they often have no way to appeal the path to it. Most, like Stephanie and Morgan, are "direct filed," which means the prosecutor can decide to charge them as an adult. Even a judge can't transfer a case back to juvenile court.

When Morgan became a state inmate on Oct. 1, the number of 16-year-old girls in the state's adult prison system rose to three. Six more girls are 17. Stephanie is in Lowell's youthful offender program (which is boot-camp style); Morgan's ultimate placement remains uncertain. For now, she is under close supervision while the Department of Corrections determines what to do with her, said spokeswoman Jo Ellyn Rackleff.

Boys in adult prison are far more numerous: 363 inmates under 18 years old. The youngest is 14, and also from Duval County. Irvin Northfleet Torian was sentenced last month to five years for armed robbery and grand theft of a firearm.

Rosa DuBose, a former prosecutor and associate dean of academic affairs at Florida Coastal School of Law, said people are more likely to treat women equally in the justice system than in the past.

Sometimes juries still tend to be swayed by emotion when there is a female defendant, DuBose said. Sometimes prosecutors have to work doubly hard to help them understand what the law requires.

DuBose said she did find that women who committed violent crimes tended to do so in conjunction with a man. In those cases, it's the evidence, she said, that must guide decisions about whom to charge, and with what crime.

"As a prosecutor, that old saying holds true," she said, "that if you do the crime, you should do the time - no matter what your gender."

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Attorney Fred Gazaleh doesn't claim to remember every client he's defended on criminal charges. Stephanie, though, was different.

"She's a bright young girl, very charming. I think she has some potential and plenty of time to change her life," Gazaleh said. "She's got it in her."

Gazaleh said she was remorseful.

Stephanie said she thinks about the day of her sentencing, when the woman she carjacked talked about how she was scared to go outside.

"She's had to change her whole life around because of this," she said. "I think about that a lot."

A violent felony on her record will limit later job options despite the GED she will earn. Yet she said she's glad she got caught and still believes that her compass has changed.

Morgan can't say much about the crime, but she did say she's grown closer to God.

"I just pray every night about forgiveness and found that I know it was wrong - everything that happened," she said.

The murder was the first time Morgan had been in trouble with the law, but other parts of her life were deteriorating in the months leading up to the moment when, according to tapes of her confession, Toby was crying, "Hit him, baby, hit him!"

She wishes she had stayed in school instead of leaving Palatka High in the ninth grade. She said she was going to be home schooled and enroll in online classes but never did.

Perhaps the biggest question, though, is one of fate, and the difference between Stephanie and Morgan.

"You've got to wonder what would have happened if they'd gotten away," Gazaleh said.

Stephanie doesn't wonder.

"If we wouldn't have gotten caught it probably could have escalated," she said. "That [Morgan] could have been me."

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