

From Behind Bars... to Taking the Bar (Exam) Lynn Burke's Successful journey from Prison to Law School.

At 24, Lynn Burke was struggling to feed her four children. She had moved to North Carolina to be closer to her mother, but her mother died less than a year after her arrival. Desperate, she reached out to her husband's family in Tennessee, hoping that a sister-in-law would come to Raleigh and help. Instead, Burke said, that phone call brought her husband and his drug problems back into her life. Burke was depressed. She began writing bad checks and stealing. Within six months she was arrested, and soon she was headed to prison, sentenced to 10 years for eight felony counts of



false pretense and writing bad checks. At the time, her children were 5, 4 (twins) and 3, and she was a student at N.C. State University. It was 1987.

But that life is behind her. The next time she steps into a courtroom it will be as an attorney. Burke, now 47, will earn her law degree from North Carolina Central University School of Law this month. "It is almost unbelievable. I remember driving past the law building and saying, 'I'm going to go there one day.' I get a lump in my throat thinking about it," she said.

When she went to prison, Burke said she nearly gave up on being a parent. Six months into her sentence she still had not seen her children. “I just kept thinking, maybe this is it. Maybe my children are better off without me,” she said. But then the teachers at the preschool her children attended brought Burke an early Christmas gift. “I remember walking to the visitation area and they were all dressed up in their Christmas outfits. They came running up to me screaming ‘mommy, mommy when are you coming home?’ At that time I realized, they don’t care that I’m locked up. They just love me. I realized I’m all they have.”

Burke decided she needed to be the kind of mother her mother was to her. She went to counseling, worked in the kitchen, sent money home, re-enrolled at N.C. State University through a program that allows minimum-security inmates to attend college, and made an agreement with her husband, who had care of their children: If he would agree to keep the home they shared in the Kentwood public housing community in West Raleigh, she would find someone to help him with the children.

A year before her arrest, Burke had developed a friendship with Diane and Tad Butler, whose oldest daughter once worked with Burke in a fast food restaurant. The agreement was simple, if Burke’s husband would care for the children during the week, the Butlers would take care of them on the weekends. “When Lynn went to prison, her children were so small and I knew how much she loved her kids,” said Diane Butler. “It gave her peace of mind to know that her kids were OK. As a mother myself, I know how that would feel. Besides, they were so cute.”

Burke’s husband and the Butlers kept the arrangement. Burke was released on parole after serving 20 months on a Friday in February. She found her home and her children waiting for her and decided to end her relationship with her husband. The next Monday, representatives from the county Department of Social Services came to her home planning to remove the children to foster care. “They were surprised to see me; they thought I was still in prison.” Her timely release kept Burke from losing her children to the foster care system, and she believes it would have been permanent.

Under her parole agreement, Burke served one-eighth of her original sentence and completed the remainder of her time through community service at the Women’s Center of Wake County. At 32 hours per month, it took her 2 years to complete her sentence.

With prison behind her, she focused on raising her children, making it clear that she was not going to leave them again. Her children were now school age and Burke began looking for a job — a difficult task for someone with a felony conviction. “I worked several different jobs, but I would get fired once they found out about my record. Sometimes I didn’t even get an interview.”

But Burke was determined to find a legal way to provide for her family. When she learned that smaller florists in the area could not afford full-time delivery drivers, she started a floral delivery business called Petal Pushers. Before long, she had eight regular clients and made deliveries using a van she bought from her friend, Daniel Wakely, making weekly payments.

In 2003, when her youngest daughter graduated from high school, Burke returned to N.C. State and finished a social work degree in 2006. One day, as she watched Judge Greg Mathis' television court show, Mathis discussed his own personal journey from jail as a teenager in Detroit to college, to law school and eventually a district court judgeship. Burke was inspired, and decided there was no reason she couldn't follow the same path. "I sat on the bed and went, 'OK, God, no more excuses.'" She applied to NCCU School of Law.

When her first application was rejected, she enrolled at Meredith College and completed a paralegal certificate in real estate. She raised her LSAT score, improved her study skills, removed several failing grades from her college transcripts and was admitted to the NCCU School of Law through the Performance Based Admissions Program. "When you have a felony, it is hard to get your foot in the door," she said, "but I was coming to this school. I was going to stand outside the window and listen if I had to."

Early in her law school career, Burke recalled, she read an article that described real passion as the result of personal experience. That article, her own missed opportunities because of her criminal record and the clients she was meeting as an intern in public defenders offices helped launch her on a legal mission.

Today, Burke advocates for removing the social stigma attached to ex-offenders. "The criminal system strips away every aspect of self-confidence and self-esteem," she said. Because of her record, Burke said, she could never work as a bagging clerk at a grocery store. "The only way out is education and self-employment. That's why I want to work in a public defender's office. I want to be good at this and open my own practice to hire people like me that can't get jobs. What people don't realize is that for ex-offenders, we are sorry; we just want to know, can we have our life back?"

Law Professor Michael Wallace is confident that Burke will thrive as a public defender. "You have to have the heart for being a trial lawyer," he said. "You can't merely accept what clients tell you. She understands that and goes out and looks for the information, she pushes the envelope." Wallace heads the law school's internship program, through which Burke has worked with public defenders offices in Orange, Wake and Durham counties for the last two years. She has completed more than 1,000 hours of community service.

Burke also vigorously supports inmate mother-child visitation programs, which allow parents serving time to see their children on a regular and consistent basis. Here, too, she draws from personal experience. “I saw my kids three times the entire time I was locked up,” she said. “If it weren’t for my children I wouldn’t be here today. Their love and acceptance of me gave me the courage to stand up for myself.”

From the day she was released, Burke focused on her children, involving them in extracurricular activities and teaching responsibility and accountability through employment. Her children are now adults—and college graduates, every one. James, 27, is a Raleigh police officer and an Iraq War veteran. The twins, Candice and Cristin, 26, are working in the public administration field. Her youngest, Courtney, is a graduate of NCCU and a social worker.

Some challenges remain. Burke must pass the bar exam this fall. Then, because of her criminal record, she will go before a North Carolina Bar panel that will decide if she is morally fit to be an attorney. But for Burke, the entire experience has been for a greater purpose. “I know a miracle when I see one, and I’m supposed to do this for other people, not just for myself, to show other people that they can do this.”

Daughter Candice, for one, admires her mother’s fighting spirit. “She’s been through a lot but she finds a way to get it done,” Candice said. “She taught us to keep fighting, no matter what you go through. If you want it, go get it.”

Burke gives credit to the support system she built over the years. “I didn’t do any of this alone,” she said. “The School of Law, my children, the Butlers, the entire community that has surrounded my family, they all helped me. When it looked like we had nowhere to turn, there was somebody waiting to help.”

Burke is now a grandmother. Her children are her friends. On weekends, there is even time occasionally for manicures, tanning and sitting poolside together. Burke still delivers flowers to pay back Wakely who first gave her a chance when she needed to work for herself. She is also co-owner of a party bus that takes people out on weekends, and does title searches for her father’s law practice.

“She never stops,” daughter Candice says. “I can’t keep up.”

“Lynn is a kind and giving person,” says her old friend and supporter, Diane Butler. “If she can help you, she helps you.” And this is something Butler knows first-hand. Her kidneys were failing, so last year, Burke got tested to see if she might be a match. “It was the least I could do,” she said. “They gave me my children back.”

Extensive testing revealed that she was a complete match, and she donated a kidney to her friend. “I am proud of her,” Butler says. “I know she’ll do good things for people.”

Lynn has also volunteered since her first year in law school with Community Success Initiative (CSI), a local nonprofit organization, led by Dennis Gaddy (also formerly incarcerated)) that helps create support networks for people coming home from prison. Lynn serves as mentor and a member of CSI's Ex-offender Speakers Bureau. You can find more about CSI's work at www.communitysuccess.org and Lynn's story at: <https://www.communitysuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Lynn-Burke-article.pdf>

View her video, speaking at the Second Chance Lobby Day Press Conference:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YzQE854vsyA>

CSI Executive Director, Dennis Gaddy congratulates Lynn Burke, at her recent Law School graduation. We're all very proud of what she has done!



www.communitysuccess.org

PO Box 61114 **T** (919) 715-0111 x216

Raleigh, NC 27661 **F** (919) 715-0165

inquiry@communitysuccess.org