

Good morning, my name is Darlene Mason and I'm 35 years old. I was raised by my mother who was the third oldest child out of 12 children that my grandparents had. However, with 4 older first cousins and 21 of us altogether, I was the first to attend school. I was also the first to vote, ever!

I remember that day very vividly, you see it was November 7th of the year 2000. The night before my future sister-in-law had gone into labor with my second nephew. We drove from Fairbury to York in a blizzard that night to be there. I was frantic the next day as I was so worried with the weather conditions that I wouldn't make it back in time to vote. I drove home anyways and even though I hadn't a clue what all the questions meant on that ballot, the only one that was important to me was marking the box for the next president. I chose President George W. Bush and he won. Even though everyone laughed at me, I thought my vote had made a difference. So when I received the letter stating my voting rights had been taken away because I chose to finally stand up for myself in an abusive relationship, I was crushed.

Reading the words my rights would be returned two years after completing my probation offered some hope but I couldn't help but think does giving someone the label of "FELON" mean that I am no longer a citizen of the country I was born and raised in? I did not take anyone's life, I did not commit treason, so if I still live in this country am I not allowed to decide who will run it? But yet the label of "FELON" changes everything, from getting a job to putting a roof over your head. I chose to fight for my life and in essence had my life taken away from me. I was released from probation two days after this past election. Maybe my one vote wouldn't have changed much, but I wonder how many others are there out there like myself? How many felons are waiting for their two years to be up so they too can make their opinion heard? Have I not been punished enough, haven't we all as a nation been punished enough? Show me that you hear me. Show me that my one voice can make a difference.

Thank you for your time.