"Time Zone" is a multimedia project about Lashawna Etheridge-Bey, a 39-year-old resident of Washington, DC, who spent half of her life in prison for a double murder and was paroled in December 2011. The project uses video, photography, and sound to focus on Lashawna’s personal transformation while in prison, her difficult yet highly successful reentry into society, and the conflicts that remain within herself and with family members. This highly personal account, achieved by intensively following Lashawna for more than a year, moves beyond stigma and cliché, achieving a deeper awareness of the difficult issues surrounding incarceration and reentry.

The subjects of imprisonment and its aftermath are among the most important and overlooked topics in America today. With more than one million women behind bars or under the control of the criminal justice system, women are the fastest growing segment of the incarcerated population.

The United States, with 7.1 million people, or 1 in 33 adults, under the supervision of correctional authorities, has the highest incarceration rate in the world. In Washington, D.C., the numbers are even higher. An estimated 60,000 people, or approximately 10 percent of the total population, have criminal records, and about 8,000 of them return to the city each year after serving sentences in prison or jail.

“I was one of the worst people you would probably ever meet,” says Lashawna of her life when she was nineteen. While Lashawna’s crime, the murder of two women who were involved in a dispute outside her home, was violent and irreversible, Lashawna worked hard to transform her life in prison. She turned to Islam, immersed herself in classes, worked out intensively, and did everything possible to become a different person. Given her good behavior, she was paroled at her first hearing.

For many former prisoners, the basic tasks that face them upon release – getting housing, a job, and an education -- become overwhelming obstacles. Lashawna’s successful reentry has made her a role model for other ex-offenders. She quickly obtained housing, found a full time job, and continued her college education. “Right now I am who I have always been, who I was supposed to become,” she declares.

However, the less perceptible currents of her life -- rebuilding relationship with her family, and living with and answering for her past -- have gone less smoothly. LaShawna’s children were 10 months and 3 years old when she went to prison. They are now 20 and 22. “I think those relationships are severely damaged,” Lashawna says. Most importantly, Lashawna struggles constantly with the question of whether she will be able to forgive herself. “People say you did your time, you
paid your debt, and you deserve to forgive yourself. But is there really a debt [for taking two lives] that you can pay?"

Our nation is paying more attention to the issues surrounding incarceration, including the growing number of inmates, the racial imbalance in sentencing, and the high financial and social costs of imprisonment. “Time Zone” contributes to our understanding in this regard, but it also goes further. By focusing on the issue of how incarcerated individuals can reintegrate into society and contribute to their communities, it begins to suggest ways in which we can enhance not only our sense of justice but also the quality of our lives and the safety of our communities.