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A Knock at Midnight

A Story of Hope, Justice, and Freedom

by Brittany K. Barnett

Crown

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Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

ABOUT THE BOOK

Brittany K. Barnett was only a law student when she came across the case that would change her life forever—that of Sharanda Jones, single mother, business owner, and, like Brittany, Black daughter of the rural South. A victim of America’s devastating war on drugs, Sharanda had been torn away from her young daughter and was serving a life sentence without parole—for a first-time drug offense. In Sharanda, Brittany saw haunting echoes of her own life, both as the daughter of a formerly incarcerated mother and as the once-girlfriend of an abusive drug dealer. As she studied this case, a system came into focus: one where widespread racial injustice forms the core of America’s addiction to incarceration. Moved by Sharanda’s plight, Brittany set to work to gain her freedom.

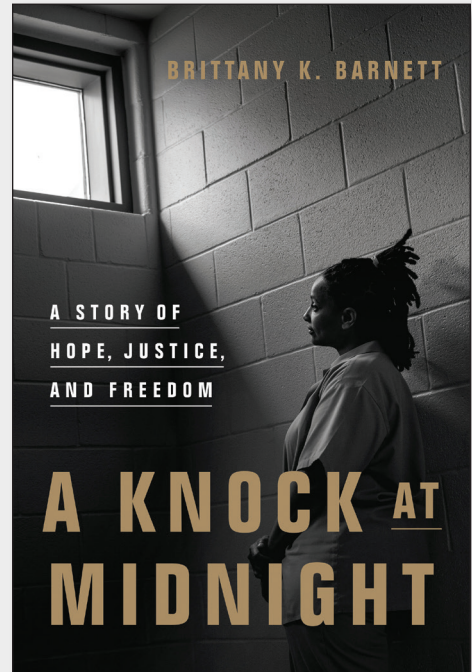
This had never been the plan. Bright and ambitious, Brittany was a successful accountant on her way to a high-powered future in corporate law. But Sharanda’s case opened the door to a harrowing journey through the criminal justice system. By day she moved billion-dollar deals, and by night she worked pro bono to free clients in near-hopeless legal battles. Ultimately, her path transformed her understanding of injustice in the courts, of genius languishing behind bars, and the very definition of freedom itself.

Brittany’s riveting memoir is at once a coming-of-age story and a powerful evocation of what it takes to bring hope and justice to a system built to resist them both.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRITTANY K. BARNETT is an award-winning attorney and entrepreneur focused on social impact investing. She is dedicated to transforming the criminal justice system and has won freedom for numerous clients serving life sentences for federal drug offenses—seven of whom received

First-Year and Common Reading Guide



“*A Knock at Midnight* is a book that is just right for this smoldering moment, a memoir that offers an irresistible invitation to examine the evolution and the impact of injustice in America.”

—Michele Norris, contributing columnist at *The Washington Post* and founding director of The Race Card Project

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
(CONTINUED)

executive clemency from President Barack Obama. Brittany has founded several social enterprises, such as XVI Capital Partners, Milena Reign LLC, the Buried Alive Project, and Girls Embracing Mothers. She has earned many honors, including being named one of America's most Outstanding Young Lawyers by the American Bar Association.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading this book, what did you know about the War on Drugs? Did you have an opinion about long-term sentences for drug-related charges? What information, sources, and stories informed your perspective?
2. What did you learn about Brittany's experience growing up in mostly white communities? How was her upbringing similar to or different from your own experience?
3. How did Brittany react when her sister Jazz found a crack pipe in her mother's pocket? How did Brittany know what the pipe was? Why did Brittany describe her mother as a "functioning addict"? How did witnessing their mother's worsening addiction impact Brittany and Jazz?
4. How did the War on Drugs impact the availability of resources and social services for addiction treatment throughout the United States? Why was it difficult for Brittany's mother to get treatment for her addiction? What resources and support exist in your community for people seeking treatment for drug addiction? Do you think additional support is needed? Why or why not?
5. What messages about drugs did Brittany hear at school and in her community? How did these messages impact her relationship with her mother? How did Brittany internalize these messages? What messages about drugs and addiction were you taught in school, from the media, and in your community?
6. What was Brittany's experience living in "the Hole" like? How was the community different from the towns where she grew up? How did the War on Drugs impact the neighborhood? What was the culture of your community like while you were growing up? Did it reflect the experiences and identities that you and your family hold?
7. Why was it initially hard for Brittany to imagine herself as a lawyer? What support and encouragement did she receive from Christa Brown-Sanford? Have you ever received mentorship from someone within your community? If yes, how did it impact how you think about your own growth and success?
8. What did Daddy Sudie mean when he said, "Ain't nothin' but a step for a stepper! You just gotta keep on steppin'"? What influence did Daddy Sudie have on Brittany? What influence did Brittany's father have? Is there a family member in your life who inspires or encourages you?
9. How did being in an abusive relationship impact Brittany's life? Why did she compare being in an abusive relationship to drug addiction? What personal change did she experience after Red's attack in the middle of the night?
10. What did Brittany experience while visiting her mother in prison? What did she experience going through the screening and visiting procedures? How can painful experiences like visiting an incarcerated loved one lead to physical pain and internalized trauma?
11. What did President Barack Obama's inauguration mean to Brittany? Why did she call the inauguration a "moment of profound spiritual velocity"? Do you remember President Obama's inauguration? If yes, what do you remember about that moment in history?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

12. Why did Mr. Mitchell reach out to Brittany to help his son Keyon? Why was it difficult for the Mitchell family to keep sustained media attention on Keyon's story? Why did Brittany feel limited in what she was able to do for the Mitchell family?
13. What disparities did Brittany notice during court sentencings? Why did judges hand down sentences in months rather than in years? Do you think that this is an appropriate way to sentence people? Why or why not?
14. What did you learn about the Anti-Drug Abuse Act and the 100-to-1 sentencing ratio? How did the media's coverage of crack cocaine impact the War on Drugs? How did publishing stereotypes about Black people and people addicted to drugs lead to an increase in racial bias and fear?
15. Were you surprised to learn that Keyon was sentenced to life despite the absence of any physical evidence? How was witness testimony used against him? What evidence of racial bias did Brittany uncover while reading Keyon's trial transcripts?
16. What hardships did Sharanda experience during her childhood? How did her mother's accident and need for long-term care impact Sharanda's life?
17. Why did Sharanda's lawyer discourage her from taking a plea deal? How was she portrayed during her trial? Do you think Sharanda's clean record should have been taken into account at her trial? Why or why not? Why did the judge determine that Sharanda was responsible for distributing a large volume of drugs?
18. What are sentencing enhancements? How do sentencing enhancements impact mandatory minimum laws? Why do prosecutors choose to use sentencing enhancements? How do sentencing enhancements disproportionately impact people who decide to exercise their constitutional right to trial?
19. What is "relevant conduct" (also commonly referred to as "ghost dope")? Why is witness testimony used to calculate drug quantities? Do you think this is fair? Why or why not?
20. Why did De-Ann Coffman, Mike Wilson, Donel Clark, Wayland Wilson, and Terry Levels choose to go to trial rather than accept plea deals? How did racial prejudice impact their cases? Why was De-Ann Coffman granted clemency while the other men involved in her case remained in prison?
21. How was Genice treated at the Carswell Federal Medical Center? Why was her request for compassionate release denied? How did the quality of medical care in prison contribute to her declining health? Do you believe that incarcerated people should receive the same quality of medical care as people who are not behind bars? Why or why not?
22. How did Sharanda build community while she was incarcerated with a life sentence? How did she support and care for others? How did her community support her following the death of her mother? Did reading Sharanda's story change how you think about the communities and relationships that exist behind bars? Why or why not?
23. What is the difference between a full pardon and a sentence commutation? Why is there little transparency in the clemency process? What were some of the limitations of Obama's Clemency Initiative?
24. How were the families of Brittany's clients impacted by having loved ones incarcerated with long sentences? How did Brittany involve them in the clemency process? Why did Brittany feel it was so important to treat all of her clients as singular individuals with distinctive heartbeats?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

25. Why did Brittany describe the Black church as “one of the few places in America where Black people can feel truly free”? What support did Brittany receive from her congregation? What sources of support and encouragement exist in your community?
26. What restrictions did Donel face following his release from prison? Why was he not allowed to go running? Why was Corey in federal custody for nearly a year following his release? Do you think that people who are granted clemency should follow the same parole and probation guidelines that others re-entering their communities must follow? Why or why not?
27. What challenges did Mike Wilson face after suffering a severe stroke while incarcerated? Why did the Federal Bureau of Prisons release him suddenly, without making arrangements with his family? What stress did this place on Mike and his family? Do you believe his release should have been handled differently? Why or why not?
28. Why did Brittany struggle with her corporate job as she became more involved in criminal legal work? What obstacles did she overcome, as one of the only Black women in corporate boardrooms? Why did she eventually decide to leave her corporate job?
29. How did a story published in the *Washington Post* raise awareness about Sharanda's case? What role does the media play in spreading information and awareness about the criminal legal system? What media do you consume in order to learn more about issues of incarceration?
30. Why does Brittany refer to self-care for Black women as a radical act? Why was it difficult for her to prioritize caring for herself while advocating for her clients? How did her clients' joys and sorrows impact her own emotions? How do you care for yourself during challenging moments?
31. How did Corey Jacobs find Brittany and convince her to take up his case? Were you surprised to learn about the similarities between his case and those of Brittany's other clients? Why or why not?
32. Why did Brittany title this book “A Knock at Midnight”? What inspiration did Brittany receive from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon? What messages of strength and hope do you turn to during challenging or uncertain times?
33. How was Chris Young's early life impacted by violence, economic stress, chronic pain, and an absence of social support? Why does Brittany call clemency for Chris a first chance, rather than a second chance? How are extreme poverty, intergenerational trauma, and societal neglect connected to the War on Drugs and the crisis of mass incarceration?
34. How do mandatory minimum laws impact sentencing? How do these laws disproportionately impact people of color? Why did Judge Kevin Sharp resign from his federal appointment? What did he remember about Chris Young's trial?
35. Why does Brittany describe a life sentence as burying someone alive? How do life sentences impact entire families and communities? Did your beliefs about the criminal legal system change after reading Brittany's story? Do you believe that systemic change is needed? Why or why not?

**FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION
AND ACTION**

Learn more about the Buried Alive Project, the advocacy project that Brittany co-founded with Sharanda Jones and Corey Jacobs: www.buriedaliveproject.org

Read more about Girls Embracing Mothers (GEM), the nonprofit Brittany founded to empower girls with mothers in prison: girlsembracingmothers.org

Find out more at Nation of Second Chances, a project that profiles Obama clemency recipients: www.nationofsecondchances.org

Read the Department of Justice's Fact Sheet: The Impact of United States V. Booker on Federal Sentencing: tiny.cc/FederalSentencing

Read Sari Horwitz and Nikki Kahn's profile of Sharanda Jones: "From a First Arrest to a Life Sentence," tiny.cc/JonesProfile

Read Sari Horwitz's profile of Donel Clark: "Slow Steps to Freedom," tiny.cc/DonelClark

Read Vice's profile on Chris Young: "How Christopher Young's 14-Year Plea Deal for Drug Crimes Turned Into Life in Prison," tiny.cc/ChrisYoung

Read Eric Holder's 2016 opinion piece: "We Can Have Shorter Sentences and Less Crime," tiny.cc/ShorterSentences

**ABOUT THIS
GUIDE'S WRITER**

RACHAEL ZAFER is the author of discussion guides for many books, including *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. Rachael has led hundreds of creative and educational classes and workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Colorado, and provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. She was the founding director of the NYU Prison Education Program and co-founded the Prison Arts Initiative at the University of Denver. Rachael holds an Executive MPA from New York University and a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan.

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