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Star Tribune photos by Stormi Greener

"I paid my debt," said Serena Nunn. "I just want another chance to have a job, pay taxes, all the stuff I should have been doing when I was in [prison]. You want to be whole again, clean your slate, start fresh."

TURNING THE PAGE

By Rosalind Bentley
Star Tribune Staff Writer

Walk into this south Minneapolis house, and you just know someone has stayed up all night cooking for somebody special.

Potato salad, chicken, hamburgers, greens. Every Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and birthday feast she missed over the past 11 years, all piled atop the kitchen counter.

The family tells her to sit down, let them pamper her. Certainly the guards up there never did.

This is her homecoming. It's sunny and warm, and the day is perfect. Actually, it wouldn't matter if it were pelting rain. She could splash in a puddle if the spirit moved her. Freedom affords such privileges.

It's been so long since Serena has seen most of the 100 or so cousins, aunts, uncles and friends gathered here. Time has added lines and pounds to some of them. But not to her — she looks better than she did at 20, when she was sent away. Lean, muscular, her face framed by golden hair. Not many who spend hard time in a federal penitentiary can say they look better for it.

How she has waited for this day. The sentence had been 15 years and six months for conspiracy to distribute cocaine.

Everybody — the judge, her attorney, even the prosecutor — agreed that she had played little more than a cameo role in what was then the state's biggest drug ring. But play she had, and Serena had gotten caught. She'd still be in a cell in an Arizona desert if a young attorney hadn't taken her case and persuaded President Clinton to commute her sentence and set her free almost five years early.

Is she thinking of this when she looks at the sheet cake that reads, "Welcome Home, Serena"? Or is she thinking that at 31 years old, someone has pressed the play button again and given her a second chance?

Just what is Serena Nunn going to do with it?

The box fan in the living room of her Arizona home tosses limp air that refuses to cool. A few feet away, Serena's tall frame is folded across a pillowy black chair. An "American Politics" textbook blankets her lap, and the thermal heat makes her forehead *just* prickle with sweat. But the questions lobbed at her make her simmer.

NUNN continues on E4:
— There's no point to bitterness, she says.

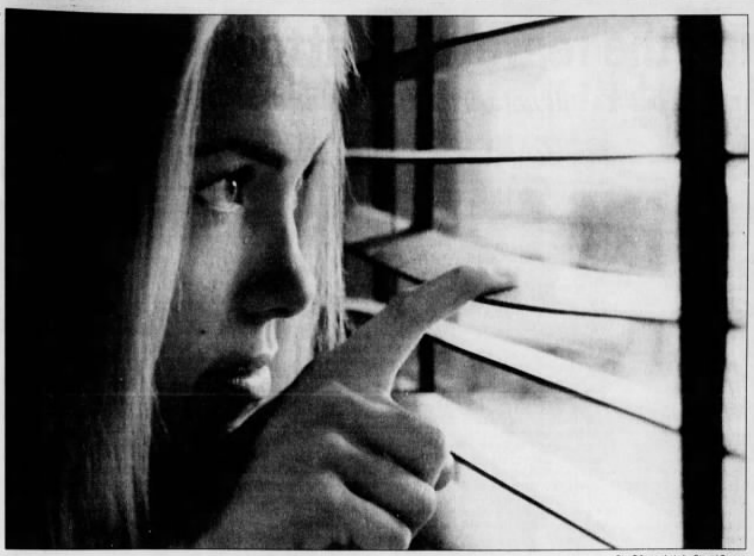
Serena Nunn, second from left, walks with friends at Arizona State University: from left, Jared Quinton, Mike Lavarias, Susan Trower, Ken Whelen, an unidentified student and Jeff Farner.

Catching up

An occasional update on people, places or things that we have previously written about.

Photo from North High School Yearbook, 1987
Serena Nunn and Andre Livingston were Homecoming Queen and King at North High School in 1986.

Serena Nunn is out of federal prison, after serving almost 11 years for a minor role in a Minneapolis drug ring. Like five other women in similar situations, her sentence was commuted by President Clinton last year. Now, at age 31, she's building a new life for herself.



Star Tribune photo by Stormi Greener

"I take time to enjoy stuff now; to look at the trees, hear the birds," Nunn said.

Photo from North High School Yearbook, 1987

NUNN from E1

Nunn doesn't want to relive the years in prison or talk about her crimes

Here it is, weeks after the Minneapolis welcome-home party. She's back in Phoenix, where she now lives, enrolled at Arizona State University, living on work-study, trying to get herself back on track, and all this person can do is ask questions about how she got involved with the son of a drug dealer almost 13 years ago. Ancient history. Yes, she agreed to this interview, but no, she doesn't want to talk about her ex-boyfriend, prison or the things she did that got her there.

"Look, I cannot relive all that, I can't," she says, in a voice polite but steel-firm.

In 1989, though, it was big news: The drug empire of Ralph Chavous (Plukey) Duke had been brought down. For nearly 20 years, state and federal law officers had been after the leader of what was perhaps the most notorious criminal enterprise in Minnesota.

Duke, along with 23 others — including his son Monte — were charged with conspiracy to distribute cocaine through a network that stretched from Minneapolis to Los Angeles to Texas.

Back then, Serena Nunn was a college sophomore. She was in love with Monte and, perhaps, taken with the glitz and power of his world. Her involvement in that world was small compared with that of others, but it meant she would spend her entire 20s behind bars.

Serena grew up in one of the largest families on Minneapolis' North Side, with scores of aunts, uncles and cousins. Everybody seemed to know one of the Nunns. Serena was the oldest of Shirley Nunn Billingly's three children.

Her sister Charlita remembers how Serena always took charge. "She'd act like she was the second mama." Even her rebellion seemed well-behaved: Many nights Billingly came upstairs and found the light still on and Serena buried under the covers, reading a book.

Among the Nunns, there was a rule: "No betrayal. You might argue, but whatever went down, you stayed together," her mother said.

To this day, court officers wonder why — in the face of wiretaps of her voice counting money and videotape of her with Monte as he drove to a drug deal — Serena never took a plea, never turned on that boyfriend when she was facing *real* time in prison. Perhaps she was abiding by the Nunn family rule. Even now she will not say.

"I can only be responsible for what I did," Serena says.

The room goes silent except for the *whuuuuRRR* of the fan's losing battle. Not one thing is out of order in this apartment; there's not a speck of dust. It's most likely always this way, whether company is expected or not. Serena's that particular. Almost everything in here was a gift. At her welcome-home party, nobody came empty-handed. They knew that on her release day, after almost 11 years in prison, all she had was a few clothes and a box of legal papers.

The futon, stereo, chrome-and-black dinette set, even the little car parked outside — all were "love gifts," as a friend put it. One of the few exceptions is a Bible opened to Psalms and lying on top of the entertainment center. Its verses are brightened by yellow, blue and green highlighter. She read this every day when she was locked up.

Serena peers down at her homework. She has been patient, but she wants this interview to be over.

Does she think other young people could learn something from her experience?

She looks up and her face seems to soften at the suggestion. But then, pointedly, she looks at her watch. This interview is only supposed to last an hour and a half, and she's as prompt as she is particular.

"I hope so. But you know, young people, they're very hard to reach. You're young, you don't want to hear a sermon. You're naive, you think you're invincible." Her voice rises with each word.

"In the span of eight months I met him and went to jail. . . ."

In 1988, Serena had just finished her freshman year at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, which was to be her first stop on the way to a law degree. Home in Minneapolis on summer break, she met a tall, good-looking, brown-skinned guy — Ralph Lamont (Monte) Nunn. Although they shared the same last name, they were not kin. Monte was soft-spoken and polite, and they clicked immediately. He took her to Valleyfair, the movies; they hung out. By the time she headed back to school, they could sit up and talk for hours.

Back in Atlanta, Serena planned to take a semester off to work for tuition money. After a few weeks, Monte called and asked her to come home for a weekend. He missed her. He'd buy the ticket.

Serena's roommate and best friend, Stephanie Yelverton, remembers her friend leaving for the weekend. "She was young. I knew she was doing whatever she wanted to do," Yelverton said. Only, "one day turned into another."

The 1980s was a drug era, and cocaine was king. It seemed wherever drug dealers went, they flashed the fruits of their labor: Porsches, Mercedes-Benzes, miles of gold jewelry, head-to-toe leather outfits.

Monte wasn't flashy and he wasn't loud. But he was a drug dealer. And he was the son of the most notorious and elusive drug kingpin in Minnesota, Ralph (Plukey) Duke. Longtime North Siders say you'd have to have been blind, deaf and dumb not to know it.

Did Serena?

At the question, her expression flattens and her guard goes up.

"I was in love with him and I believe he was in love with me. Love makes you look past a lot of faults," she says, highlighter pen clutched in her hand.

And when your man is taking you skiing in Colorado, letting you drive his car and buying you things, those faults might vaporize. Soon, they were spending so much time together that she all but moved in with him and his mother, who was also involved in Plukey's ring.

Eventually, so was Serena.

During the height of the "war on drugs," Congress passed stringent drug laws that took virtually all discretion away from judges. Even if someone was a bit player, mandatory sentences could toss that person into prison and not let them out for decades.

"We felt cocaine was taking over this town," said Jon Hopeman, then an assistant U.S. attorney and the lead prosecutor in Serena's case. "Drug dealers were like mushrooms; for every one we pinched, three more popped up."

Plukey was their prime target. Informants were deployed, undercover agents enlisted, wiretaps activated. On May 17, 1989, authorities rounded up a slew of the principals in a massive sting operation. They, and anybody associated with them, were going down, and wouldn't come up for a long, long time.

That included a Morris Brown College sophomore.

Those wiretap recordings and surveillance videotapes have long since been destroyed, but court records say the following:

"Serena Nunn drove Ralph Nunn to meet the informant . . ."

"She transmitted drug messages . . ."

"In a taped telephone conversation, Serena Nunn could be heard counting a large amount of money . . ."

One tape was pivotal. During a conversation with an informant in March 1989, Serena said, "See, the thing with it in Minnesota is, you know, people don't never kill the snitches here."

Hopeman said that sounded like a threat, although in an affidavit seven years later, the informant said he considered it to be little more than "street talk."

"*I did not threaten that man,*" Serena says, hammering the highlighter into her palm with each syllable. "God knew and I knew *I did not threaten that man.*"

She tries to explain her involvement this way: "Everything was gradual; then you're more able to accept it. Your interest in answering the phone is to see if other girls are calling."

She lowers her voice to sound like a man. " 'Is Monte there? Yeah, well this is so-and-so. Tell him I'm looking for him.' You're not thinking you're becoming part of a conspiracy. You have a degree of peer pressure. You're trying to be badder than you are."

There were others who were dug into the conspiracy much deeper than Serena was — people who were actually transporting cocaine across state lines and laundering money. But when the feds charged her with conspiracy, she refused to testify against anyone. *No betrayal.*

"You're so fearful, you're 19. You don't know anything about the judicial system. You're sitting there thinking, 'It wasn't even like that.' You still don't think it's about you."

Monte was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Billboards around town touted the sentence that his father, Plukey, got — four consecutive life sentences, plus 40 years, plus supervised release after that.

And three days before Christmas 1989, at age 20, Serena Nunn was sentenced: 15 years and six months in federal prison.

"OK, look," she says, glancing again at her watch. "I'm going to give you 20 more minutes, but after that I've got to study. I'm trying to get straight A's. So ask what you've got to ask."

And in exactly 20 minutes, she's saying thank you for coming and opening the door.

"I should've had some tuna," she says the next morning, sleep still etched on her face. The heat is rising with the dawn and Serena's on her way to Spanish 102. She didn't finish her reading assignment and she's dreading the possibility of a test.

"I eat tuna every morning before a test. Makes me smarter. I read somewhere where tuna releases some endorphins in your brain."

In a T-shirt, baseball cap, khaki shorts, sandals and toe ring, she looks like any of the other groggy students as she settles into her seat in the language lab.

Within two years, she figures, she'll have a bachelor's degree in political science. She had bounced among federal women's prisons in Illinois, California and Kentucky before landing in Phoenix to finish her sentence. There, she enrolled in an in-house two-year associate of arts program offered by Rio Salado Community College and graduated with a 3.7 grade-point average.

Kitchen work and hours spent with other inmates debating all sorts of topics — interracial dating, politics, drug sentencing — filled her days. Other details about prison life Serena refuses to discuss. It makes her stomach churn to think about it.

Lawyers will say most prisoners doing serious time survive their first five years by feeding largely from a diet of anger and bitterness. Eventually, they begin to realize that hate won't get them out early.

"When things happen to you, you either lay down or strive," Serena says. "What are you going to do? Cry? Be depressed? I decided, 'I'm going to pick myself up, go on and make myself the best person I can be so when I walk out of here I'll be the best person I can be.' "

Her prison self-improvement plan :

- ➤ Rise early.
- ➤ Do aerobics, lift weights.
- ➤ Read the Bible.
- ➤ Enroll in college.
- ➤ Get to work on time.
- ➤ Stay away from negative people.

And her fervent prayer: "Lord, keep my family safe; keep me in good health, and Lord, *please* get me out of here."

After class, Serena takes a break in the shade of a tree. Her teacher has commented that her Spanish is more conversational than most.

The teacher doesn't know this, but, "I learned it up there," Serena says, nodding her head in the direction of the prison.

"The first thing I learned how to say was my birthday. '*Mi cumpleaños es Junio viente siete.*' Boy, the first day I learned that I was walking around saying it all day. '*Mi cumpleaños es Junio viente siete.*' "

She wrote down phrases learned from other inmates, first in Spanish, then in phonetic English, in a notebook.

Someday, she says, she'll have a family, and she wants her children to speak Spanish. "I want to teach them at home so when they go to school they'll be ready. I just want to make it so my kids have a better life.

"But I ain't even thinking about that right now. I'm just trying to get my schooling together."

When she does, she'll be the first in her family to graduate from college.

December 1997. A lawyer on his way home to San Diego picked up a Star Tribune at the airport and read about the effects of mandatory minimum sentences on women involved in drug rings. On the front page was a photo of Serena Nunn. She was just one year older than he was, Sam Sheldon thought.

He wrote and asked to meet her. Luck had been with him on a previous case, and he was able to get a client out on parole. Maybe luck would favor him again.

Over the next two years, Sheldon worked without a fee to get Serena's conviction reversed. By March 2000, he had only one shot left, and it was a long one — a presidential commutation. It wasn't a pardon — it wouldn't erase her record — but it would get her out based on time served.

The application included forms, depositions and sentencing summaries. It also included something that might have been more powerful than any good-luck charm: a letter from U.S. District Judge David Doty, the man who had sentenced Serena.

Sheldon was surprised by what Doty wrote: Based on her role, age and clean record, he would never have given her 15 years had he not been forced to by the law.

"She was obviously a minor player from the beginning," Doty said not long ago. "I've come to think that maybe she was trying to fit in with the people she was around."

Also included were letters of support from U.S. Rep. Martin Sabo, Gov. Jesse Ven-

NUNN continues on next page

Star Tribune file photo by Stormi Greener

In 1997, Nunn had just been transferred to a federal prison in Phoenix, Ariz. After serving nearly 11 years on drug charges she said adjusting to life outside can be challenging: "You don't realize how much things have changed."

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tura, State Attorney General Mike Hatch. Even one from Jon Hopeman, the man who helped lock her up.

Hopeman's was not a letter of support as much as it was a carefully worded note saying he wouldn't stand in the way of Serena's release.

During the trial, "it was obvious that she wasn't stupid," Hopeman said recently. "You wondered where she made the left turn instead of the right and fell in with the wrong crowd."

Since then, he hadn't thought about Serena much. Once was when he stole away from the office to watch another man involved in Plukey's ring finally get sentenced. Although the man got more than 17 years, Hopeman thought it wasn't enough. Then he thought about Serena.

"Hell, she's done too much time already," he thought.

A fairer sentence, he said, would have been somewhere between six months and four years if she'd testified. Not one that sucked away her 20s and ate into her 30s.

July 7, 2000. Serena strode across the prison yard, her gait deliberate and swift, her face stone-cold serious. She was looking for Janine, her best buddy inside. Were her slender feet really touching the ground, or was she dreaming? When she found Janine, the words came out in bursts, like steam escaping from a pressure cooker.

"I got it. I got it! I got the commutation!"

Two states away, Sam Sheldon was nearly as giddy. This is it, he thought. What to do? Rent a white limousine; it's what she'd always wanted for her grand exit. Call her mother and Charlita so they could get her some clothes. He couldn't believe it. They'd done it.

The unmarked squad car hurtled down Interstate Hwy. 10, carrying Serena toward downtown Phoenix and away from the glint of razor wire and the blare of bullhorns. Signs along the dusty road read: "Federal Prison. Do Not Stop For Hitchhikers."

There had been no white limousine waiting when she stepped outside the prison, her things in a canvas duffel bag, copies of court records in a cardboard box. Her attorney, mother and sister hadn't had time to get there. That was OK. She was free. Didn't have to worry about somebody telling her how to jump, when to jump, how high to jump and in which direction.

Photo by Emmanuel Lozano

After her release, Nunn shopped for furniture in Phoenix with the lawyer who helped get her sentence commuted, Sam S. Sheldon.

It didn't seem real. It had to be a dream. Like the white limousine she thought she saw a few cars ahead on the left. *White limousine.*

"I think that limousine is for me," she told the driver.

She just kept driving.

"I'm telling you, I think that limousine is for me," Serena insisted.

As they grew closer, a hand waving a cell phone was visible through an open window. It was Sam Sheldon.

Serena rolled down her window and crawled out to the waist. Her hands waved frantically and beat on the blistering hot top of the car as the white limousine slowed.

"Hey! Hey! Hey!"

"OK, Serena, all right, just get back in the car, let me pull over," the driver told her.

"Hey! Hey! It's me! It's me!"

"There she is, there she is!" Charlita screamed from the limousine. She leaped up and tried to wedge her body through the sunroof so her sister could see her. For the first time in a decade, nothing between them but air.

Classes done for the day, Serena grabs lunch at a Chinese restaurant. A restaurant lunch, swimming, wandering to the kitchen for a glass of water. These are the simple joys of being out.

There are reminders of change, too. Like when she and Charlita stopped for gasoline not long after Serena was released. The pump seemed to stare at her, a blinking, bleeping, digital steel canister. *You don't know how to use me.* Charlita showed her the buttons to punch.

Or when Serena stepped into a stall in the ladies' room at an airport and found herself frantically scanning the ceiling, floor and walls looking for the, the, *thing* that made the toilet flush without her touching a button.

Apart from school, her new life is boring. Study. Church. Home. Study. Home. She loves it. To mix things up, she rents movies and sprawls on the futon. The first three she picked up were "Life," "The Green Mile" and "Double Jeopardy."

"Umph, I guess they're all prison movies, aren't they?"

Funny the things you gravitate toward.

Monte's still in prison, and Serena hasn't spoken to him in years. She harbors no bitterness, blames no one else for what happened. But she would like to see mandatory minimums abolished. "I never feigned I was innocent," she says. "I'm not saying I shouldn't have been punished. All I'm saying is, should I have received the sentence I did if other things could have been considered?"

She checks the time again.

"OK now, we're going to have to wind this up."

Why is she so structured with her time? Is that an old habit from prison?

"Everything about prison isn't bad," she says, a tinge of defensiveness in her voice. "You take the good you learn out of any situation and apply it."

A little later, she tries once more to explain. "You ever had somebody do something to you that hurt you really bad? Something you carry with you for life?

"Now, you could just let that fester, eat you up inside so bad that every morning you wake up with a frown on your face. I can't do that. I don't have time for that. I lost 10 years of my life. I've got to move forward. I can't let a negative attitude or bitterness hold me back. I've got too much to do."

At the end of her first semester, Serena received two A's and two B's. The conditions of her prison release require her to stay in Arizona for three years, but she still hopes to attend law school.

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