

Email Letters from Marie

July, 2007

Dear Email Friends,

This is an article written by an inmate at Chowchilla women's prison in California.



Marie Kolasinski

Who Are We to Judge?

by Jane Dorotik (c/o AllianceEditor [at] Comcast.net)

Wednesday Aug 9th, 2006 12:33 PM

Ever wonder what life is like inside the California Prison System? Here is a first hand account of the horrors of what is like in the Chowchilla prison for women, located in the Central Valley.

I choose to define myself by my spiritual leanings, by my intentions, not by my surroundings. I am a psychiatric nurse by education. I have worked all my life in the health care field, the last twenty years in a leadership senior executive capacity for mental health organizations. I am a mother, a wife, an optimist, a nonconformist, and an animal lover. But now my surroundings threaten to swallow me up, engulf me in a sea of despair.

Six years ago my life was blown apart in a hurricane of events that I am just now beginning to put into some kind of perspective. My husband was brutally murdered by an unknown assailant while he was out jogging. Four days later, I was arrested and charged with killing my own husband — the man I loved and lived with for over thirty years, the father of our children.

Through an ego driven trial lawyer, a seriously flawed defense strategy, and a sequence of judicial rulings that allowed the jury to hear less than half of the actual evidence, I am now serving a 25 years to life sentence at Chowchilla prison. Even to write the words "25 years to life" is unreal and chilling. It all still seems like a terrible nightmare, except that the nightmare is the daily existence that I wake up to. My sleeping hours, my dream world is much safer... a kinder reality.

But I want to tell you much more than the story of the injustice done to me, for the story is much bigger than my plight. It is a story about society's prevailing need to find fault,

Piecemakers Country Store
1720 Adams Avenue Costa Mesa, CA 92626
(714) 641-3112 mail@piecemakers.com

Email Letters from Marie

to place blame somewhere, anywhere. It is a story about our inability to recognize the wisdom of rehabilitation as a viable consideration for troubled souls. The U.S. now incarcerates more than 2,000,000 of its citizens. In total 6.7 million people are in jail, in prison, or on parole: 3.1% of all U.S. adults, or 1 in 32! And the number of women in prison is growing at a rate faster than any other group in the U.S. Almost 1,300,000 are incarcerated for non-violent offenses. What are we doing here? As a mental health care giver, I am horrified at the sheer numbers of women who should be in a treatment setting instead of a prison. It is a story I knew nothing about until I was sent here.

Here in this geographic location defining the twin prisons of Valley State Prison (VSP) and Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) exists the largest concentration of incarcerated women in the world: more than 7,000 women in a few square miles. We are packed in, eight women to each small cell, originally built to hold four. The enormous range in age, race, and temperament exacerbates the stress of this constant crowding, noise, and regimentation. Most incarcerated women smoke, so although smoking is supposedly forbidden in the building, non-smokers must constantly choke on secondhand smoke. The correctional officers (COs) tell us they don't care, nor will they group non-smokers together in one cell.

There is never any privacy, no solitude; every day is filled with constant bickering, screaming, and racial agitation just from the severe overcrowding. We have to endure frequent and pointless cell searches for contraband, which includes scotch tape, paper clips, an extra state towel, etc. We are subject to "lockdowns" on the slightest pretext (like valley fog). We are lined up and marched over to the dining hall for meals, and four armed COs stand guard outside the door to make sure we don't take an extra 8-oz. carton of milk or exit with ice in our cups. We are treated like cattle, or worse, because cattle are generally well fed.

And what are we doing to "correct" these women? Even if we temporarily ignore the issue of whether these women should be here, removed from society, removed from their children, who then grow up in state systems, shuttled through foster homes... Even if we ignore the 1,300,000 non-violent people currently incarcerated... What are we doing with these 7,000 women? Couldn't they be doing something productive for society? Couldn't they be learning something of themselves, something about the patterns and choices that brought them here? What motivates them? What feeds their souls? What contributes to their real happiness so they may learn to work toward the betterment of themselves and their community?

Would it surprise you to learn that even the word "rehabilitation" has been removed from the California Department of Corrections (CDC)? Even that fragile hope of rehabilitating a human being who may have taken a wrong turn in life — even that illusion is gone. Don't we realize the future is a place we are creating, not a place we are going to? What will our future look like when we wake up and realize that we have traded educating our youth, our future generation, for incarcerating our troubled

Email Letters from Marie

citizens? University funding decreased nationally by \$945,000,000 while prison funding has increased by \$926,000,000.

God knows I want to keep society safe as much as anyone else. Maybe more so because I know that the person who killed my husband is still out there. But locking away literally millions of U.S. citizens and then treating them like animals is not the way. Haven't we recognized that placing individuals in prison actually fosters criminal behavior instead of curbing it?

We are definitely not succeeding at keeping society safe; instead, we are creating an environment of fear and conflict, hatred and power. This prison industry is an industry gone awry — gravely compromised, rampant with abuses and hatred. It is a terrifying breeding ground for racism, sexism, homophobia, and dominating exploitation of other human beings. We are warehousing people, punishing them and returning them to society worse off than when they entered the system. The violence that then comes out of these prisons is a much greater threat than terrorism. Keep things quiet, don't talk about the abuses, the special treatment granted for sexual favors, the drugs supplied by the COs. I know an inmate who for six months could get any kind of liquor she wanted — not even repackaged to hide it. COs covertly supply inmates with a wide array of contraband from cigarette lighters to heroin in exchange for favors or payoffs. I know of COs who literally reek of booze all day long, often stumbling, slurring through their work hours. Then they are "on leave" for several weeks. They return to work and the cycle starts all over.

Many of the COs (and most are male in this female prison) openly humiliate and denigrate these women and then laugh about it:

"Keep moving; you're attracting flies."

"Get your ass back in here and stop slutting around."

"Now what do you want? To put your mouth on my cigar?"

But to speak out against any of this guarantees retaliation in the ugliest of ways. One inmate was actually brave enough to report a sexual assault on her by staff. The incident was "investigated" and reasons were found to issue her a "115" (disciplinary action). Her telephone privileges were rescinded, cutting her off from her family, effectively preventing her from seeking legal help outside the prison for the assault she suffered. This is a horrifyingly difficult environment to try to survive in; many compromise a great deal to assure survival.

Health care is similar to that in a third world country. Many needed diagnostic tests, or simply a thorough assessment of symptoms, are needlessly delayed until it is a crisis situation, in some cases until the cancer is inoperable. Inmates are not routinely screened for Hepatitis C even though the transmission in prison is practically epidemic and the Center for Disease Control has requested all states to screen total prison populations for Hepatitis C infections. The Center for Disease Control further states,

Piecemakers Country Store

1720 Adams Avenue Costa Mesa, CA 92626

(714) 641-3112 mail@piecemakers.com

Email Letters from Marie

“The nation’s prisons are primary incubators of the worst diseases affecting the national population.”

One inmate in this yard tried for several days to access medical care for alarming symptoms. After waiting in the clinic line for hours, she was consistently refused care and derisively told to stop malingering and get the wheelchair she was in back to the clinic. The next morning she was dead. The inmates attempted CPR; the COs wouldn't touch her. You might assume that this degraded level of care at least carries a cheap price tag, but in fact the costs are staggering. California's starvation budget is disproportionately burdened by this corrupt system.

I am learning so many things in here. I am learning to rise above the stigma of being identified as a “criminal.” I am learning to let go of the anger, the anguish. When I first arrived here, I was devastated, but it was a stunning and humbling experience to realize — these are also God's children. We are all souls trying to find our way in life. No person has any more or less value; no ethnicity, no occupation, no accomplishment has any greater or less intrinsic worth. Who are we to judge? Who are we?

Certainly my perspective has been radically changed by this experience. I am truly innocent. Yet I am not alone. According to the statistics published in the growing Innocence Projects and the Northwestern University Law School: anywhere from 10 to 25% of persons currently incarcerated are actually innocent of the crime they were convicted of. In the cases its staff reviewed, Northwestern University revealed a 60% error rate.

How can our society tolerate this error rate? What do large companies like IBM or Microsoft tolerate as a margin of error? And they are monitoring only machines and business processes, not the freedom of human lives. And why is the success rate for appeals only 3% when the known error rate in convictions is so high?

I have finally been able to let go of some of the personal sense of injustice. It is a great injustice... but on some level — so what? Injustices happen all the time; people contract diseases, get hit by automobiles, suffer great tragedies. So what? We still have to get on with life. We still all have a responsibility to add some comfort, bring more kindness, promote integrity in our daily lives regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in. And in a larger context, we all also have a responsibility to speak out against a social wrong.

I am learning to live in the moment, to seek joy in small glimpses, to value the wisdom of the universe despite my surroundings and the constant fear. I am learning to look for the love and goodness in most people despite the facade or anger they may exhibit.

I know in my heart I will eventually get out of here; the truth will come out and it will set me free. I hope it is sooner rather than later. I hope I win the appeal even though the

Email Letters from Marie

statistics are so discouraging.

Maybe in the bigger picture there is a purpose in all of this. As hard as it has been - and continues to be — to live through the horror of this great injustice that we impose on our fellow men, I know without a doubt that the rest of my life is meant to be dedicated toward amending this arcane and destructive system. So I know where my future lies. But what of the rest of these women in here? Someone has to help them. Someone has to speak out against the atrocities. And then everyone has to listen.

As Dostoyevsky wrote, “The degree of civilization a society exhibits is best determined by how it treats its prisoners.”

Written by: Jane Dorotik W90870 CCWF 506-26-3L, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla, CA 93610-1508