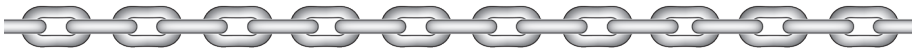


UNLIKELY COMMUNITIES

Breaking the Alienation of Incarceration



When Michigan prisoner Kebby Warner attempted to call her daughter on her fourth birthday, she discovered that the phone number, which she had been calling once a month, was restricted. The reason? Michigan Department of Corrections had started a new phone program with Sprint. Those on a prisoner's telephone list had to pay a minimum of \$50 before they could receive a call from their incarcerated loved one. If the outside person was unable or unwilling to pay, Sprint and the prison kept the number restricted.⁶³ Wittingly or unwittingly, this new system reinforced the sense of isolation and alienation that prisons inflict upon their prisoners.

"Roberta," an incarcerated mother in California, learned of Warner's situation and offered to pay the \$50 deposit from her own prison wages. (The pay scale at Roberta's facility ranges from eight to 32¢ per hour.) "I know how it is not to hear your child's voice," she wrote in her offer. "I've been there. And thank God for the kindness of strangers that I was able to talk to them [my children] a few times during the roughest times. I would give it [the deposit] to her [Warner], just let me know if I can and where to send it, okay?"⁶⁴

Although women in prison often complain about the apathy among their peers, giving the impression that there is little to no unity in female facilities, these same women have also demonstrated a willingness to share and help each other in times of need.

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Simple Actions

Some acts can be as simple as listening. Six years after Michigan prisoner Kebby Warner lost custody of her daughter, she met a prisoner returning from the hospital after giving birth to her first child. “She was distraught! I felt her pain deep in my soul!” Warner reminded the woman that her parole date was only a few months away, encouraged her to focus on that date and offered to listen if the new mother needed to talk about her feelings. Because they lived on different housing units, Warner made plans to meet her on the yard. “I know she’s hurting and I want to be a shoulder that she can cry on,” she wrote.⁶⁵

When Oregon prisoner “Boo” was taken to a prison infirmary after turning yellow, Barrilee Bannister made a get-well card and had 80 women sign it.⁶⁶ After Boo was released from the infirmary, the women on her unit, seeing how much weight she had lost, shared their food from the canteen with her.⁶⁷

While these actions do not overtly challenge or change Boo’s medical condition, the inadequate health care system or a protocol that separates mothers from their newborns, they do break through the sense of isolation that prisons inflict upon their prisoners.

In Colorado’s Clear Creek County Jail, women detained on immigration violations are housed with citizen women awaiting trial or sentencing. Although the jails receive money from INS to keep these women, no efforts are made to accommodate their needs, such as translation assistance. Sarah Daniel and RJ, two women awaiting sentencing at Clear Creek, remembered that other women often attempted to help monolingual detainees be understood. Women who spoke both languages, no matter how badly, acted as translators. Those who spoke no Spanish used a Spanish-English dictionary to try to help the Spanish-speaking detainees. RJ, who had taken three years of Spanish in high school, translated for one older Peruvian detainee. “We would also exchange English and Spanish by reading poetry books together,” she recalled. While the citizen women’s actions did not change the jail’s lack

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of translation assistance, they did help alleviate the exacerbated fear and frustration the monolingual detainees must have felt at their inability to communicate.⁶⁸

When Marcia Bunney first began her 25-to-life sentence in California, the prison routine disoriented her:

Mealtimes were traumatic because I had somehow acquired the notion that prisoners were assigned to specific eating areas and that using the wrong door to the cafeteria would be cause for a disciplinary report. This fear caused me to avoid most meals for my first few days in the main population until I became acquainted with a woman on my housing unit who recognized my plight. She literally led me by the hand to the cafeteria, as one would a small child. For years afterward, we often went to meals together, sometimes hand in hand as a reminder of the way our friendship had begun.⁶⁹

The action of that one woman helped Bunney begin to overcome not only her fear of prison, but also the effects of years of abuse she had suffered on the outside. Bunney later became a jailhouse lawyer (a prisoner who assists her peers with their legal cases and paperwork).

Larger Effects and Multiplying Resources

Other strategies have had even broader effects. After Kathy Boudin, a prisoner at New York's Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, began utilizing prisoners' interest and concern about AIDS to teach literacy in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) class, her students became aware of themselves as a community—first in the classroom and then in the larger setting of the prison. They not only began to help one another over the stumbling blocks towards literacy, but also used their new-found knowledge of the disease to support and comfort others.⁷⁰

One student told Boudin that a woman on her unit had attempted suicide after learning that she had AIDS. "I'm the one person she told. I know why she tried. She came to me, I'm the person she talks to."

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She was not alone—although HIV/AIDS had previously been a shameful and taboo subject, prisoners began to seek out ABE students on their housing units to talk about their concerns, fears and experiences.⁷¹

Sometimes women's acts of sharing have multiplied available resources, such as when women have assisted their peers with their legal work. After losing custody of her own daughter, Kebby Warner used the knowledge she had gained in the prison law library to assist another prisoner with the legal paperwork that kept her from losing her own child.⁷² While in federal prison, Yraida Guanipa used her self-taught legal skills not only to advocate for herself but also to help the women around her with their appeals. "They don't speak the language, they don't see their children, so I have to file motions for them," she stated.⁷³ Colorado prisoner Dawn Amos, who financed her college education by finding scholarships, did not hoard that information: she helped three other women find and obtain scholarships.⁷⁴

Similarly, "Marg" and "Elsie," in two different Illinois prisons, have assisted women around them with their legal work.⁷⁵ This sharing of resources is often reciprocated: when "Elsie" was placed on a suicide watch after engaging in a hunger strike against the unsanitary preparation of food, another woman lent her a pen and paper to write letters to outside supporters.⁷⁶ Similarly, when Kebby Warner filed a grievance against a male officer, the woman whom she had helped agreed to hold her paperwork so that prison officials would not "lose" or destroy it during a search or transfer.⁷⁷

In Texas's Hobby Unit, the "old school" jailhouse lawyers took the time to teach new prisoner Helen Caples about the law. Caples used her newfound knowledge to file a lawsuit against the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, challenging its dangerously unsanitary conditions, including maggots in the shower, birds in the chow hall, rats throughout the facility and contaminated drinking water that caused widespread illness.⁷⁸

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Creating Programs

In the 1980s, prisoners at New York's maximum-security Bedford Hills Correctional Facility visited the patients with HIV and AIDS isolated at the prison's In-Patient Care Unit (ICU).⁷⁹ In doing so, they broke through the isolation and ostracization that ICU patients faced from both their fellow prisoners and their unit's medical staff, who often knew little about the disease and were afraid to have physical contact with their patients. In one instance, fear led to a woman dying alone at ICU with no nurse or guard willing to attend to her needs.⁸⁰ These women not only visited the ICU to provide contact and counseling, but also helped bathe and cooked for the patients.⁸¹ These early efforts to combat the stigma and ignorance around HIV/AIDS led to the formation of ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education program). Women organizing around the issue began to feel a sense of responsibility to one another. Later, when the AIDS Institute provided the program with English-language educational materials and certification training, two bilingual prisoners voluntarily sat with ten monolingual Latina prisoners during the entire three-day training, translating eight hours each day.⁸²

ACE's community-building is not an anomaly. AIDS peer education programs have often had the effect of creating community among women prisoners. Linda Evans, a political prisoner, used ACE as a model for PLACE, the Pleasanton AIDS Education and Counseling program at California's Federal Correctional Institution at Pleasanton. Her fellow prisoner (and PLACE organizer) Laura Whitehorn later recalled, "In every prison I've been in, when we start doing the AIDS work effectively, it's meant that everything improves. There's an overall direction that picks people up and lands them in the center of their own humanity. It's not something you can necessarily articulate. But it exists in the looks and the touches and the being together that we can give each other."⁸³

Domestic violence survivors have also reached out to connect with others in similar situations. Bunney, who had been convicted of shooting her abuser, became one of several prisoners who formed

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self-help groups for battered women at both the California Institution for Women and the Central California Women's Facility. The groups were originally initiated by the prisoners themselves, then formally implemented through the prison's administrations. The programs use a one-to-one approach between prisoners, a method which Bunney characterizes as "a major strength and source of effectiveness for self-help groups, as it encourages a degree of sharing, frankness, and insight not generally achieved by more traditional methods and exercises."⁸⁴ At the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham, "Dolly," a grandmother and a domestic violence survivor convicted as an accessory to murder, did not allow her life sentence to keep her from helping others. She began a support group for other battered women in the facility.⁸⁵ Given that domestic violence survivors have often been isolated by their abusers and then further humiliated by court proceedings that refuse to understand the effects of battering and often blame the victim, the simple act of being among others who have had similar experiences is a breakthrough.

Becoming Political

In some cases, groups that were originally formed to support individual women on a path to recovery became more political as women realized that they had come to prison not simply because of their individual choices but because both society and the legal system were stacked against them. Such was the case with the LIFE (Looking Inward for Excellence) Group in Marysville, Ohio. The LIFE Group was originally formed as a support group for women serving life sentences.

It was made up of all women that were doing life and it was sort of like a big support system within itself, because . . . when you're doing life, you had nothing there. All the programs are made up for people with short time. You know, it's about getting you educated or whatever 'cause you're moving on to society. And we were not going back . . . And so they needed something to kind of get through.⁸⁶

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As time went on, members began discussing how the institution was run and actions they could take to improve their conditions. Recognizing that many members had been sentenced to life imprisonment for killing their abusers, the group began working around issues of domestic violence, particularly petitioning for clemency for survivors of domestic violence. In 1990, the group met with Linda Ammons, aide to then-governor Richard Celeste, and Celeste's wife Dagmar. Their stories of abuse and imprisonment for self-defense moved both Ammons and Celeste, both of whom worked to organize a process in which women incarcerated for self-defense could request clemency.

LIFE members spoke with other prisoners and encouraged survivors of domestic violence to apply for clemency. In some instances, LIFE members helped women overcome denial about their abuse, understand that they had been abused, remember incidents of battering, and recall where documentation of their experiences might be found.⁸⁷ Their efforts led to 18 additional women to apply for gubernatorial clemency.

Members also began monitoring parole board hearings, timing the amount of time that each woman spent before the parole board: "We were sort of taking inventory about how many minutes did you stay in that [hearing] room when you went? Some women said three minutes, four minutes. Well, how could you tell a life story in three or four minutes?"⁸⁸

They encouraged women to write follow-up letters to Governor Celeste about events they had forgotten in their applications or brief explanations to the parole board.⁸⁹

These actions countered the usual way that prisons operated. According to one LIFE member (whose application for clemency had been successful):

We were sending out for articles and . . . we would share it. When you're in the institution, you get to be kind of secret . . . But as we started to get information, we would put packets of stuff together, illegally Xerox stuff and kind of under the cover, 'Read this, you know, this is good reading.'⁹⁰

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In the end, 25 women were granted clemency.⁹¹

The actions of LIFE Group inspired women at the California Institution for Women to organize a clemency drive. Members of Convicted Women Against Abuse (CWAA), the support group that Marcia Bunney had helped form, wrote a letter to then-governor Pete Wilson asking him to consider commuting their sentences and inviting him to one of their weekly meetings so that he could understand how they had ended up in prison. Although the governor declined the invitation, the letter drew the attention of lawyers and advocates who offered to help the women draft arguments and gather evidence for clemency petitions.⁹²

Wilson granted clemency to three, denied it to seven (including Brenda Clubine, a cofounder of CWAA serving fifteen-to-life for killing her abusive husband), and made no decision on 24 of the petitions.⁹³ This did not dissuade women from continuing to use CWAA meetings to share current news regarding domestic violence, homicide cases, and court rulings and their own experiences with the justice system. They also continue to discuss possible legal strategies, media stories about women who fight back and journalists with a focus on domestic violence.⁹⁴ The advocates and lawyers who originally helped CWAA members with their petitions did not disappear either. They formed the California Coalition for Battered Women in Prison and continued organizing and raising public awareness around the issue. Over 15 years later, the group, now called Free Battered Women, continues to advocate for the release of women imprisoned for self-defense.⁹⁵

Both LIFE Group and Convicted Women Against Abuse began as domestic violence support groups operating with administrative approval. However, without the groups' work around educating their peers about domestic violence and empowering them to speak out about their experiences, the clemency process would not have occurred on the same scale. In addition, women who had suffered domestic violence—whether they were ultimately released or not—would have continued to feel alone in their experiences and ashamed to talk about them.

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Sharing as a Threat to Security

Seemingly simple acts of sharing resources, comforting one another and supporting efforts to win clemency may not seem threatening to prison control and security. However, the potential power of women sharing and networking undermines the operations of a system that seeks to foster an atmosphere of alienation and isolation. Prison administrators recognize this and often impose seemingly arbitrary rules to prevent this threat: the Idaho Department of Corrections has an outright ban on its prisoners sharing resources or materials. Women who are caught either bartering or sharing items more than once are sent to “the hole” or segregation.⁹⁶ The administration at Bedford Hills scrapped Kathy Boudin’s model of literacy teaching in favor of multiple choice questions about readings that had nothing to do with prisoners’ experiences.⁹⁷ In the summer of 1988, less than six months after approving the formation of ACE, the prison superintendent, Elaine Lord, effectively shut the program down for six months. Years later, Lord identified the cooperation and self-reliance forming among prisoners as the administration’s central concern: “How can you talk about community organizing in a prison when prison itself is a community paranoid by definition?”⁹⁸ The work of ACE—and individual prisoners—challenges this definition, threatening the system’s complete control over its prisoners.

Because they pose a threat, women who reach out to their fellow prisoners risk repercussions. After nine years of assisting her fellow prisoners with their legal work, California prisoner Marcia Bunney was fired from her position as a law library clerk.⁹⁹ At the Central California Women’s Facility (CCWF), women who demand medical attention for their fellow prisoners face reprisals: “Our administration has elected to punish us because our peers are dying,” one prisoner reported. “A team [of guards] was assembled and trashed our cells within one to two hours of the last death . . . but not one inmate has been afforded grief counseling.”¹⁰⁰

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Despite the risk of retaliation, women in prison continue to help each other. Women at CCWF continue to advocate for proper care of their sick peers as well as work to educate and empower them. “I believe that every person, Black, white, male or female, incarcerated or free, has a right to decent and responsible healthcare,” stated CCWF prisoner Judy Ricci. “I collect information to share with other women here, so that hopefully with education will come empowerment.”¹⁰¹ At Oregon’s Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, Barrilee Bannister reported that prisoners are usually the first to act when another prisoner is hurt or having a medical emergency. Realizing that staff members are slow or reluctant to respond to prisoners’ health concerns, Bannister relied on a medical manual that she won several years ago and which she often lent to her fellow prisoners.¹⁰²

Another woman circumvents her prison’s no-sharing policy by donating her books to both an outside books-to-prisoners program and the facility’s library so that other incarcerated women may also read and enjoy them. Others leave their books in the shower for their fellow prisoners to find and read. The more daring leave their paperback books face down and open to the center. “The girls ‘fish’ from room to room and, using string, can get it in their rooms,” one woman recounted. “It’s amazing to see the girls pass things.”¹⁰³

Occasionally even prison administrations recognize the benefit of prisoner cooperation and community-building: after years of hostility, the administration and medical director at Bedford Hills now ask ACE members to provide 24-hour care and companionship to prisoners with AIDS isolated in the ICU unit.¹⁰⁴