



Tuesdays at Oakhill

I was driving to Oakhill Correctional Facility in early May, wondering what on earth I was doing going to prison— a prison of 600 men! Of course, it was Jerry Hancock’s Prison Ministry Project which drew several of us to ask, “How can we help?” Jerry suggested a program at Oakhill called “Community Connections.” So, I took their required orientation led by a stern warden. The message was simple: Take nothing in, nothing out, watch your back, don’t be manipulated, do no favors, have no sexual contact, always watch your back. Be careful and good luck! She expanded on all these commands for three hours. Intimidating, Scary!!

So why was I going to prison? “To be a presence,” Jerry had said. I really didn’t know what that meant. My experience with criminals was only what I had read or seen on television – men in orange jumpsuits, in shackles, often with heads bowed, convicted of felonies, domestic violence, rape, homicides. How could I be “a presence” to men like this?

I turned left onto a quarter mile tree-lined road to the administration building. I met three other veteran volunteers and walked under the rolls of barbed wire to be met by guards who gave us badges and sent us through a sophisticated metal detector. Several locked doors later; we stood inside the grounds waiting for a van to transport us to the school.

We were in the heart of Oakhill where no visitors go. We were really “behind the walls.” What was I doing there? As we walked up to the school, to my amazement, we were surrounded by inmates, greeting us. “Hi Donna, Stacy, Sara, Camy! Who’s this? Hey, Elizabeth!” I was surrounded by big, tall, strong, yes some handsome young men, predominately minorities. They bounded up the steps, one opened the door for me, and the rest stepped aside to let me enter. The Community Corrections door was unlatched, lights went on. A sign-in sheet was put out along with notices of upcoming parenting classes, art classes, discussion opportunities. Boxes of art supplies were put on a round table. The cart of children’s books was rolled into view. Men familiar with all this made themselves comfortable. The air was full of pleasant male voices. A guard from the office nearby stepped in and looked around.

Of course, I was uncomfortable. What was it that I was to do? I knew that Community Connections had begun three years ago to help incarcerated men to be better fathers. Children’s books are available for them to choose one or two, and then read them on video

tape. The tapes and books are sent to their children to keep. Art materials are there to make cards to send. Resource materials are available for life-after-prison.

Where could I begin in this setting? I noticed that hand shakes were acceptable, so I began connecting. Wayne got me a chair and said he needed help finding a book for his nine-year old son. He found “Goodnight Moon.” He mumbled nostalgically about this being one of his favorite first books. He disappears in memories.

Henry approaches me, “So, Elizabeth, tell me about yourself.” Of course I shouldn’t and didn’t, but turned that question to him. “Well, I’ve been in prison for 14 years. I was stupid when I was 17. I killed a man. Thought I knew everything – I was a hot-shot! But I’ve had time to think about it. There’s nothing else to do here. I’ve written some poetry. Want to read it?” He leans forward. “You gonna be here next week?”

Jamile was quiet, listening and turned to say, “I’m worried about my daughter. She’s ten now. I have seven years to go. I don’t want her to get into trouble...” “Oh this card? I’ve been working on it for three weeks.” Rick showed me his card, decorated with glitter, cut out flowers and careful printing. “I’m going to start a card company when I get out. No more drug dealing for me. I’m never coming back here! Juan had written a Father’s Day play to be presented to other inmates. We sat and made cardboard shackles for props. The men around the table began stories of their own fathers being absent from their lives. The play’s powerful message spoke of the need for the cycle of family crime to stop.

Michael came into the room, folder in hand. “I’ve got a grant proposal that Donna’s going to help me with. We’ve got to get a bus to bring our kids from Milwaukee to see us! Otherwise they build no relationship with us. My daughter is four. We gotta get a bus here!”

Two month’s later, on one of those very hot Tuesdays in July, as the volunteers left the school steps, a group of young men walking ahead of us were returning to their units. A man whom I have not yet met, turned back to us and with a huge wave, called, “Yo! Miss Lizbeth!” It’s August now. I’ve been to prison for almost four months and I’m comfortable. To be “a presence” a simple presence and to listen and for each man to be heard is a remarkable experience. And do I feel God’s presence in that room each Tuesday night? Yes, I do.

-Elizabeth Armstrong