

Becky Vance: 'A hopeful glimmer'

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Becky Vance emerges as a hopeful glimmer in a mire of questions about the possibility of actual "rehabilitation" in prisons.

At 21, she has a personal history of "22 or 23 juvenile incarcerations for theft, truancy, runaway," a two year marriage which ended in divorce at 17, drug addiction, "other games of the fast life" and a 1971 conviction for armed robbery.

Two years later, she says, she has come from being a black revolutionary—"an extreme racist"—to the realization that "all people need chance and opportunity, that everyone regardless of blue eyes and straight hair or black eyes and kinky hair is beautiful" and has developed the personal philosophy: "I am not going to take anything from someone who has less than I do and if I do take something from someone hopefully I will be able to give something back."

Becky attributes the "many changes and so much growth" she has experienced in the last two years partially to the hassles and satisfaction she has known in prison.

She says that since she was "caught" in 1971, since she "got off heroin on my own" while she was out of jail on bail, since her "man" was found "o.d.ed—dead" while she was in the Multnomah County Rocky Butte Jail, since she began talking with "sisters and brothers" inside the prison and since she was admitted to the Newgate educational program inside, she has answered a question she began asking herself two years ago:

"Who are you woman? Think, think, who are you?"

Becky is now a prisoner in the Oregon Women's Correctional Facility, 2605 State Street, Salem. She says she should get out no later than August of 1974.

It is hard to pinpoint just what made the atmosphere in the small, long building squatting behind the tall, massive, concrete-walled prison so different.

The blooming flowers snuggling the bright yellow painted outside walls, or the sculpture on the front lawn, or the smallness of the building itself might have something to do with the free atmosphere inside.

But the unlocked doors, the women freely wandering through the building, the bright open dining room where unrestricted visitors talk with inmates and the occasional smile of an employee probably contributed a lot more to the unconstrained air of the place.

And then there was the man in the small outer office, the new prison supervisor, whose welcoming smile, eagerness to cooperate and constantly expressed concern for the lack of opportunities for women prisoners added a lot too...

Becky says that the women's prison has completely changed since T.G. Toombs became the superintendent last year. She says she believes the facility "will continue to improve because Mr. Toombs is just oriented in that direction."

T.G. Toombs was a tall, slight man who moved with a quick, soft step. His

tranquil-appearing face masked deep, sensitive green eyes set under neatly trimmed, longish blond hair.

He readily responded to questions about the women's correctional facility. He continually expressed concern that the needs of the 52 women inmates there are constantly overshadowed by the monumental needs of the nearly 1000 men confined in the "big prison" just a few yards away. He said that there is just not enough money in the state Corrections budget to go around.

"In contrast, there is no comparison between the program and staff at the penitentiary and what we have here," Toombs said. He feels that educational and vocational opportunities are greater in the men's facility as well as a better program of psychiatric and psychological care.

Toombs said the problem also stems from the size of the women's facility. "We have only 1780 square feet of floor space here," he noted. "There are no physical facilities for in-house education or vocational training."

The young-looking superintendent reported that he has developed a "library of sorts" in what was "originally intended as a health services ward." And he said that 45 of the 52 women prisoners currently go outside the prison for some kind of educational or work program.

But he appeared inwardly frustrated at his inability to do more.

Toombs said that the lack of space in the women's prison also contributes to almost all of the problems which develop between inmates.

"People are living in a concrete pressure cooker here," he observed. He said that "hardly anything is

unnoticed here. There is little opportunity for personal privacy."

The Women's Superintendent gave the same response to questions about current prison reform legislation as the other Correction Division administrator interviewed. But the responses were soft and he admitted that he agrees with the theory behind legislation to make Corrections hold hearings on disciplinary measures and provide a procedure for inmates to appeal those measures.

Toombs appeared less informed about the bills than other Corrections administrators and his talk of the legislature quickly turned back to the specific need of his institution: more money to purchase resources and program opportunities for the women who live there.

He said that the lack of opportunities for all women prisoners forces many inmates to live with "prolonged periods of idleness."

He said that this situation worries him. Empathy flickered in his green eyes.



T.G. Toombs

'...all people need a chance and an equal opportunity...'

Sunlight filters through panes of glass piled one on another almost covering one side of the comfortable dining room. The glitter adds to the already screaming brightness of the place — light beige walls surround light-colored tables and chairs orderly placed on light beige linoleum.

Becky, like the room, is dressed in beige. Her thick black hair waves and curls out from her head and down to her shoulders where it rests in sharp contrast to her light blouse. Freckled dark skin covers her calm, composed face. And she sits quietly at one of the bright tables, waiting for questions about the prison, herself, her future.

A dark tape recorder sits on the table urging her to pour out complaints or frustrations or indictments of the prison. But she offers little criticism of the current situation "inside."

She readily talks, however, of "the way it used to be here under Mrs. Calloway."

Under Mrs. Calloway, the women "had eight hours out on the floor and the rest of the time was in lock up."

Under Mrs. Calloway, "We could only shower between 1:30 and 2:30 every day, we could only go outside during certain hours."

Under Mrs. Calloway, "you weren't even considered for a pass outside until you had served six months in the institution. And they were sometimes used as bait for inmates to maybe become snitches or to get a militant inmate to become calm and docile."

Under Mrs. Calloway, "you could have visitors only twice a month and you could only have ten."

Under Mrs. Calloway, "they used to take the mail back in those rooms and the officers went through it...the mail was being

censored and some words were xed out of letters and sometimes inmates didn't even get their mail."

Becky says that racial tension between prisoners and staff was intense then, that few women left the institution for any program outside, that there was a general air of oppression.

But Mrs. Calloway, she explains, was dismissed when inmates "made the people on the streets and the media and the governor aware of what was happening in here." And she says that since "Mr. Toombs" was hired, things have changed:

Mail is no longer censored, anyone is eligible for passes, visitors can come any time, showers can be taken at any time, the doors to the grounds outside are open all day, inmates are only locked in their cells at night.

She smiles and mischief flashes in her dark, tranquil eyes. She admits that she was involved in the group that pressed for the dismissal of Mrs. Calloway.

Now, Becky says she has no complaints about the institution. "I haven't heard any either," she notes. "Oh, maybe once in awhile there are a few personal gripes, but it is usually something like 'I didn't get a pass and I have been in here for two months and should have gotten one.'"

"I stayed in here 16 months and didn't get a pass. Now, when you walk in the door you are eligible for any of the programs the institution has to offer."

She says that if an inmate asks Mr. Toombs for reasons, "He'll always tell you. Sometimes he even shows you the exact law and says that he may not agree with it, but that he has to do it."

"Mr. Toombs has done a job with this institution," she says. "The floor is a lot more mellow...I personally don't feel

the amount of racial tension I used to feel here. I believe that he is fair. He has not projected any racist attitude toward me...and that is comfortable."

Becky reports that when problems do come up in the institution "Mr. Toombs calls town meetings. He comes into the dining room and all of the inmates are called in and says 'this is what is happening' or 'these



Becky Vance

The conversation slowly slips from what it is like to live in the prison to what it is like to be Becky Vance.

She enthusiastically talks of Project Newgate which she has recently entered. She explains that an inmate has to prove him or herself in the program inside prison before being released to attend the University outside. She says that she is one of four women in the program, that she attends classes at the men's penitentiary, that she does a lot of studying.

In order to get into the program she had to first take a high school equivalency course, she notes. But she admits that if she hadn't come to prison she "probably wouldn't have ever gone to school."

"The situation in my marriage was that the man — being a part of this society — thought I should be in the home...that there was no need for me to have an education as a lot of men think today about women...that I should have children and keep the house clean and go to the grocery store and be happy."

Becky doesn't characterize herself as a feminist now, but simply says, "now my man and I would definitely have a different understanding. Personally I feel whatever I can do, my man is just as capable of doing and that I am just as capable of doing whatever he can do."

She says that this is just one of many ideas she has considered since she entered the prison April 16, 1971. She thinks that the hassles she experienced "under Mrs. Calloway," as well as the satisfaction she now feels in the Newgate Program contributed to "so many changes and so much growth I have gone through in the last two and a half years."

Becky says that she has developed a philosophy all her own. "Everybody calls their philosophy something...some kind of 'ism' but mine is just me now and how I relate to life and how I relate to all people."

"I used to be a revolutionary, extremely racist, very, very much so. Now I am still very much involved with what is happening in the world, with what is happening with poor people, what is happening to people that are colored. But I am not at all in favor anymore of confining myself to just one particular race of people...I think all people need a chance and an opportunity."

She describes her "main value": "I am not going to take anything from someone who has less than I do...I am not out to just

get from people — whether it is money or material things or a feeling."

Becky thinks that she has something to offer people. And she is trying to establish a channel for giving by going to school.

"I am going into CSPA," she says. "I am really interested in sociology...it just fascinates me...it really turns me on. I am interested in people and what makes us tick. There are those deep-down secrets in each individual and sometimes we need someone to keep pulling at them until we recognize our own potential."

Hopefully, she says, she can be "a tool to help other people" when she gets out of school.

She feels she has come a long way from that day when she tried to commit armed robbery and was caught. "I needed money to support my habit then...I was working for a while with the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, but that wasn't enough money to support my habit of \$70 and \$80 per day. My man was doing some things and that helped but it wasn't enough. One day, that was it. I had taken some heroin that day, had dropped some acid and was really strung out."

"I stayed in jail about four days before I got out on bail and when I got out I got things together — stayed hooked only about two more months and just decided that wasn't it. I got off on my own," she proudly proclaims.

"You have to have it in you to do it...there is just no substitute for a decision..."

Becky says she hopes to come to the University as an "educational releasee" this summer or fall term. Sparks of determination flash in her black eyes — she says she has got her head together at last.