

Prisons Of Our Own Making

The first time I drove through the entrance of Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, I wondered, "What happened to all the color?" The high fences topped with razor wire were less intimidating than the overwhelming tones of neutrality. I walked through the huge metal doors and saw the officer sitting behind a glass wall. I slipped him my identification through the metal slot. "You're a little older than the rest of the students, aren't you?" he mused. "Thanks for noticing," I answered. He gave me a red visitor's tag and led me through a metal detector.

The inmates came into the room after us; we were the "outside" students and they were the "inside" students and together we were participating in a college class called "Inside Out Prison Exchange." This terminology was intended to create a more equal atmosphere in which we could relate to each other as fellow pupils, classmates and peers. The idea is good in theory, were it not for the fact that at the end of class, we checked out with the guard and got our driver's licenses back. We walked to our cars and drove away to continue our days, going to work or class—or like me, to Costco to make my weekly \$100 contribution that keeps me in Cabernet Sauvignon, shampoo and rotisserie chicken.

They seemed just as intimidated by us as we were of them, anxiousness permeating the room



living out loud

BY KATHRYN MARTINI

like an invisible cloud. They tried not to look too long at us, each taking a quick inventory of our clothes and shoes, something quite interesting to someone who's been wearing the same thing for years: denim jeans and navy blue sweatshirts with "INMATE" printed in orange. All of their shoes were clean—like they'd never been worn outside.

I wondered how long it would take before I heard their stories. We weren't permitted to ask them what crime they committed—and they were encouraged not to tell us—but most people can't help but share glimpses of their lives.

"Tami" came to Coffee Creek six years ago at age 19. She has two sons that she only mentioned once. Seventy percent of the inmates have children; my classmates shared the difficulties of keeping in touch with their kids—most of them separated by long distances and caregivers or ex-husbands who can't or won't bring the children for visits. Envelopes and stamps must be purchased with money earned from each woman's prison job. The most an inmate can earn in a month is around \$70, which must pay for everything, including phone calls, toiletries, shoes and extras. Tami told me about the opportunities afforded her in prison. "In here I have a bed and

warm shower," she said. "Before I came to prison, I was sleeping under a bridge." I told her that prison shouldn't be a step up for anyone.

There are nearly 1,200 inmates at Coffee Creek, and it's estimated that close to 80 percent of them have a diagnosis of mental illness. Most were victims of violence who often turned to illegal drugs to self-medicate. When "Jenny" was a young mother of two, she suffered a serious car accident that required her to be on large doses of pain medication and, like so many, she became dependent. Upon losing her health insurance, she took up a friend's offer, heroin. "And that was it," she explained. "I ended up here."

"Lisa" didn't finish the eighth grade but always managed to find good jobs, ending up in the mortgage business. When she lost her job, things started to go downhill. That, coupled with a few bad relationships and poor self-esteem, led her to crime—and to the minimum security unit she shares with 200 other women.

These three classmates made big enough mistakes to land them in prison. Still, I can't help but think that the rest of us played a hand in their fall. If Tami had proper shelter and a basic education, would she have turned to crime? If

Jenny had access to health care, would she have shoved that needle in her arm the first time? If Lisa hadn't lost her job due to a financial crisis and had help getting back on her feet, would she have succumbed to the downward spiral in which she found herself? It's easy to speculate—and harder to change—a system that focuses on cleaning up messes rather than preventing them from occurring in the first place.

The number of women incarcerated in the United States has increased more than 400 percent since the 1980s and is rising. They are virtually invisible to the rest of us; their stories don't really matter to anyone and there will be a long line of women to replace them upon their respective releases. They will walk back out into a world that doesn't care about their situation, and their future will consist of trying to find someone to hire an ex-convict and figuring out how to put food on the table for their children (those who still have custody of their children).

For many of the women in my class, the prison in which they live is and will continue to be their safety net. That concept seems so very backward to me but can't change until we collectively decide to put humanity first and capitalism last, and learn to serve people rather than attempt to fix them. Maybe then women like Tami, Jenny and Lisa will have a chance. ☐

Names have been changed to protect the inmates' identities. Kathryn Martini is a freelance writer, blogger and columnist. Reach her through kathrynmartini.com.

First Unitarian Church

Wills and Estate Planning Workshop for Same Sex Couples

Hosted by The First Unitarian Church Foundation

Saturday, April 30, 3:30–5 p.m. at First Unitarian Church
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- Benefits/burdens of registration under Oregon's Domestic Partner Law.
- What if you're registered/married in another jurisdiction or country?
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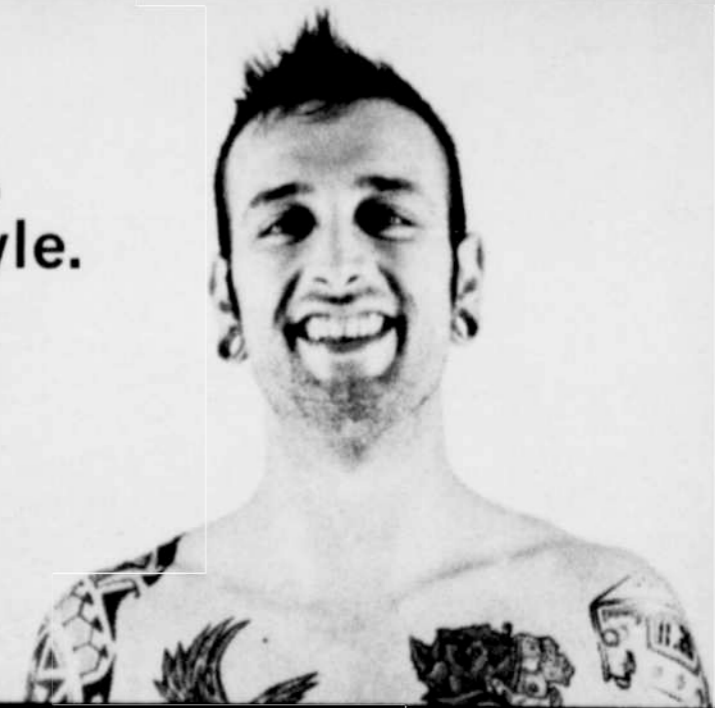


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