

We are all a collection of experiences, not all of them good

Recently, I found myself at a nail salon in Dayton, Ohio, explaining what exactly it is I do for a living.

Those who know me well might have trouble picturing this scenario, as I am much more likely to be found getting my hands and nails dirty rather than polished and clean. However, I was in Dayton to join in the wedding of a good friend from college. It seems to me that lately, the further I am from our building on Burnside, the more I am

and their problems more complex than we will ever know. I shared that in my almost four years working in the Old Town neighborhood, I have come to learn that for every person experiencing homelessness or poverty, there is a specific journey that they are on and a story to learn from them. We chatted for a few more minutes while my nails dried, and then we parted ways.

I have returned to that conversation over and over in the past few weeks, and have decided that I would change my answer. I would tell Cecilia that I have come to believe that the issues I see people grapple with every day are sad and troubling: hunger, isolation, gripping loneliness, addiction, lack of access to medical resources, unemployment — the list is long.

I would share that from where I sit, we need more funding for successful programs that empower folks to end their own cycles of poverty and homelessness. Adequate resources and widespread access to them are crucial for people who are living on the margins, but I would argue further that we could be doing so much more to get at the heart of many of these prevalent issues in our society today: What we really need is to start caring about each other again, and to make sure everyone believes in themselves starting at an early age.

One of the greatest gifts that I receive through my work in our neighborhood is the chance to journey with people, many of whom go through turning points in their lives. Each new day can bring much to celebrate — a job interview, a new day of sobriety, entry into a treatment program, a

connection with a long-lost friend or relative. Each of these things can often be the beginning of hope in one's life.

A woman I've known for a few years, Mindy, recently brought in a letter she had written to her future self. A survivor of abuse at different points in her life, she wrote of how proud she is of all she has dealt with in her life. She wrote of how she certainly has regrets and has made bad choices over the years, but is doing her best to learn from them. She wanted to share it with me and together we celebrated how far she had come and how limitless her future could be. She told me that for the first time in her life, she had come to believe in her own potential. She went on to say that she didn't always love who she saw in the mirror, but that she was working on it.

I often think of Mindy and the many others I've known who have done the hard and courageous work of believing in themselves after losing hope for many years. I wonder what it would be like to transport them all back to their childhoods, and give them the encouragement and support that everyone needs and deserves to believe in themselves. In some ways it is hard to let myself think of all of the disappointments, harsh words, failures, and missed opportunities that one person might collect over a lifetime. But it is also important to begin to see the person in front of me as a collection of their experiences, as part of a lifetime's worth of stories and encounters that formed them, instead of seeing them as a label that is all too easily attached.



Sally Martin
FROM THE
DOWNTOWN
CHAPEL

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compelled to talk about the wonderful place I work and the community I get to be a part of each day.

I had just sat down with Cecilia, and I started to answer her question, "So, what do you do?" with my usual answer: "I work for a Catholic church in downtown Portland where we have a variety of ministries that support folks in our neighborhood, both those who are experiencing homelessness, and those living near us who need help in meeting their own basic needs..." I expected her to smile and change the subject, but instead she looked up from my fingers, stopped her work for a moment, and said, "Gosh. I bet you see a lot. I see a lot of folks here who are down and out. It makes me sad and I wonder how they ended up that way. What do you think?"

Her question caught me off guard. I stammered and explained that I am not an expert on homelessness or poverty, and that people's lives are often more complicated

News you can use, on an issue we can't afford to ignore

Justice Matters is 24 pages of truth, printed four times a year by a non-profit organization that "unites people convicted of crime, survivors of crime, and the families of both to redirect policies from an over-reliance on incarceration to effective strategies that reduce violence and increase safety." It is published by Partnership For Safety and Justice (PSJ), a nonprofit organization. The staff is professional, dedicated and well-informed.

Ever since I became concerned about the prison system, I have looked to this organization for up-to-date and accurate information. When I am looking for the facts about a current legislative issue pertaining to prison news, budgets or a human-interest story, I turn to PSJ. I can find out what's going on by searching the Web, or I can telephone their office here in Portland, and any staff person I get connected to either answers my question, gives me to someone who can, or calls me back after the answer has been

secured.

Or I can read Justice Matters. Usually within the context of the articles, there is some data I may have known, but forgotten — such as the News Brief concerning sentencing reform reminded me that "with 5 percent of the world's population, our country now houses nearly 25 percent of the world's reported prisoners; about one in every 31 adults in the United States is in prison, in jail, or on supervised release, at a cost to taxpayers: local, state and federal spending on corrections adds up to about \$68 billion a year."

The current issue presents such topics as sentencing reform news, the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA) and their "Cautious optimism about President Obama's selection of Chief Gil Kerlikowske as the country's new drug czar," and an update of New York's repeal of the Rockefeller drug laws (enacted in 1973). Also covered under the heading "Youth Justice News" was a report that Multnomah County passed a resolution "declaring that juveniles in county custody should not be housed in adult jails."

The "Legislative Overview" includes (in addition to other information) the fact that a budget hole for 2009-2011 is expected to be "anywhere from \$3.1 to \$5 billion." This

massive shortfall results in asking all state agencies to develop a budget that envisions a 30 percent cut. Other legislative news items discuss youth justice, crime survivor services and House Bill 2335, which concerns parole board hearings.

There's more, but my favorite story in this issue was an Interview by Patty Katz with recently released prisoner "Barb."

Katz is the director of PSJ's Beyond Barriers Program. If you're a regular listener of Prison Pipeline you may recall her sharing a report of her work with folks from All Of Us Or None, who talked about the box an ex-felon has to check on job applications. (Barb was granted parole on July 22, but she was not released until January 16.) This is definitely a "must read" interview.

You can also request various materials including "Prisoner Support Packets" which include the newsletter and a resource directory.

It's worth your time to learn more about these issues, because with each passing year, more and more of us know a friend, family member or a member of our community affected by the prison system.

Learn more about the Partnership for Safety and Justice at www.safetyandjustice.org, or call 503-335-8449.

FROM THE DESK OF

Ruth Kovacs



Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 fm. She writes regularly about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.

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