

# Life proceeds one day at a time for those inside and out

For Karen, it felt like a sunny day, even though it was pouring rain in Portland. Joyful thoughts filled her heart. In less than an hour, she'd be with her 26-year-old son. It had been more than two months since their last visit. He hadn't been moved yet. That trip took almost four hours each way.

Then, the waiting — all for a few precious hours just to quietly hold hands. She hoped he wouldn't have to be in chains today. There wasn't much for them to say, but the touching showed more life and love than any words.

She'd been told that here, in the new place, there could be a better evaluation and better treatment facilities. The shorter trip and more frequent visits were unexpected bonuses for Karen.

As she turned past the gate and found her way to a vacant spot in the huge parking lot, she tried to maintain her positive attitude, but the gloom of high walls with barred windows and fences topped by barbed wire brought gloom to the scene and her heart.

She stepped out of the car, the shadow of the tower, armed guards peering out of high windows, blocked her sunny spirit even more. She put her purse, jewelry and lunch basket into the trunk and took out the paper shopping bag of books with the envelope of flyers. Her glasses, ID card and a clear plastic bag of quarters went into her pocket with the supply of tissues. Karen's blue outer jacket was also left behind even though there was a chill in the air. Luckily, the rain had stopped. The brisk walk from the parking lot, past the well-tended gardens and families of free wandering ducks, then up the high prison steps to the entrance to the visitor waiting room, warmed her a bit, but made her wonder how some of the older parents met the challenge.

First she signed in, showing her ID, then changed the quarters for tokens in the vending machine. For four of her quarters, she could have gone to another machine to get cellophane wrapped cookies, candy, crackers and cheese or a can of soda that she could have brought from home for half the cost. Next she took the fliers out of the envelope, passed them out to other waiting visitors placed a few on the magazine table, posted one of each on the bulletin board and

put the few remaining in the "take one" tray.

The guard accepted the books and promised that they'd get directed to the prison library. Just six months ago only new books, mailed directly from publishing companies could be donated to the library. Used books for specific prisoners or gifts from family also had to be sent to the prison directly from the publisher. Karen had supported the many months of efforts to accomplish this change. She regularly volunteered with Books for Prisoners and donated many books.

Now the waiting started. It usually took an hour until her name was called so she could take her turn to walk through the metal detector. Karen always passed through without the beep that could deny her visit because she had learned to be careful — no underwire bra, jewelry, barrettes, and of course no food, drugs, books from home, papers or photos. No clothing that is blue, has metal buttons or is too short, too tight or too revealing is allowed.

It was useless to argue with the guards. If they objected to anything she brought or wore, she surrendered it to be put into her locker for just one token.

When her name was called, a guard escorted her through the iron gates to get her hand stamped and down several long hallways and electronic doors of iron bars until finally she was in a large empty room, except for the cage in the middle.

There, in a 10-foot-square cage, seated with his hands cuffed to a table was her son. His head was drooping and he did not look up as the guard opened the door to let her into the cage. She sat down on the chair across the table from him and gently touched his hand. She was shocked to see that he was apparently drugged and showed no response to her arrival.

Hiding her pain, Karen softly spoke to her son. When he heard his name, he lifted his eyes to meet hers. He blinked a few times and almost smiled, and as a tear came to his eye, he spoke the words she had driven 70 miles to hear.

"Hi, mom."

There are two Karens. The mother who visits her son and pretends to be brave even though she is weeping and angry inside, and the citizen Karen who understands the big picture and works for prison reform with other loved ones, the community and the

legislature.

Her son was incarcerated and sentenced under Measure 11 to five years and 10 months.

He is dual-diagnosed as mentally ill and addicted. His doctor describes his addiction as "self-medicating," and his drug problems began when he was 16. As a devoted parent, concern for his well-being and justice strengthened Karen's life of activism. She visits him regularly, despite the cost of gas and time off work.

Often she wonders if she should just send the money to his account instead, but overwhelming evidence indicates the importance of maintaining contact with loved ones.

Karen began her political activity long before 2006, when her son was incarcerated. Her mission has been to educate folks. She is active in the National Alliance for Mentally Ill and initiated a ministry at her church concerning addiction. Also while volunteering in the schools since her oldest son entered kindergarten, she also campaigned to close the Trojan facility, to ban land mines and in the 1980s participated in protests and action with the Portland chapter of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Her interest in prison reform began by investigating the details of Measures 11, 57, 61 and other legislature concerned with mandatory sentencing, three strikes you're out, and budget expenditures for more prisons instead of rehab programs. As she gathers information, she prepares flyers which she distributes at church, in visitor waiting rooms, on street corners and at the many meetings she attends.

"I didn't understand these issues until I started to listen and read. I hope my flyers educate the people I give them to, and that they will help spread the word."

Recently I called Karen to suggest supper and a movie to get a break from the intensity of our work. Her reply sums up her day-to-day life in addition to her full-time job that provides support for herself.

"I don't know. I'll visit the prison Wednesday and I'll see how well I handle it.

"If I have the strength, I'll try. Or maybe, I might be too busy preparing for my next meeting. I'll let you know Wednesday evening. I'm human, too, and sometimes just have to take it a day at a time."

## 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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If you've ever found yourself in need of social services, you know how confusing it can all be. Long lines, limited hours, seemingly arbitrary eligibility criteria, going from place to place to connect the dots in hopes of getting the help you need.

The Rose City Resource makes it all just a little bit easier. The 100-page booklet records the hours and locations of basic services including shelters, meals, and health clinics, as well as advocacy and long-term solutions such as recovery programs, legal aid, and transitional housing. The guide includes more than 350 listings in Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties and is now available in both English and on the Web. Every year, the pocket-size guide helps thousands of individuals and families independently access the services they need.

The Rose City Resource is partially funded through partnerships with the City of Portland and 211 Info. But to keep updating and publishing this all-in-one resource, Street Roots needs community support. The guides are more important than ever. While programs are shifting and shrinking, many people are finding themselves in need of services for the first time. Your support will keep the Rose City Resource in the hands of the people who need them.

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