

## Many unexpected adjustments come with return from prison

Laure thought that when Jerry came home after six years of incarceration, it would be like a second honeymoon. She had dreamed and planned for his return, sure that her regular visits and their years of a solid marriage before Jerry went

down, would all pay off, and the family would be whole again.

But she was wrong. Small things turned into big arguments — bigger than they had ever had. Laure had worried about Jerry learning how to get

along again in the outside world, but she had not realized that she would have to learn about life on the inside and it would test her love, compassion and understanding daily, until she learned some hard lessons.

Jerry had dreamed about the joy of reuniting also. He was just as surprised as Laure that they both had a lot of learning and adjusting to do. The reentry programs and advice from counselors had told him to be ready for computers, a new economy, and perhaps estranged friends and family that would not welcome an ex-con.

But they did learn and love, and are living happily today. However, they realized that if they shared their experience it might help make it easier for others to get through the welcome home that waited for other families. Laure told about her experience (and the lessons learned) at a workshop presented at the National Prisoners Family Conference in Portland. I was lucky enough to be there, so I'll share the story with you — readers who are loved ones, prisoners about to go home, friends, co-workers, employers and others who will be in contact with more than one million folks that will be released this year from prisons across the United States.

Laure and Jerry developed and continue to work with Extended Family, a support system for families of prisoners. Perhaps a glimpse of their first year together will help others during their welcome-home period.

One of the first lessons they learned

concerned respect. Jerry taught Laure that in prison, respect is everything and the perspective of respect after serving time is not the same as the world's perspective. It started when Laure squeezed herself between Jerry and the sink as she went about preparing supper. Jerry was outraged that she had not said "excuse me" as she "shoved him aside." But Laure caught on when she noticed how often we on the outside witness the behavior of others in a crowded store, or anywhere that one is supposed to quietly stand in line and let those who get there first, be served first.

It was also apparent that Jerry would react, sometimes with hostility, to behavior that was absolutely unacceptable in prison. But their love and respect was always maintained. Their discussions were loud, or perhaps for a time they'd stop speaking to each other. But finally, they'd talk it out — which meant listening to each other — until they got to the bottom of the real issues. Life on the inside had left its mark on Jerry and now, he and Laure had to weave some new values into their relationship.

They had to recognize and work out ways to handle sensory overload. This occurred when sights, sounds and smells around Jerry just overloaded his brain. He would feel irritable and "trapped."

At gatherings (such as a family wedding) the solution was to just remove themselves (or at least allow Jerry to leave the scene) and get away from the crowd for a while, go to the bathroom, step outside, or sit in the car and listen to some music.

Sometimes it was just being faced with too many choices, after having years of limited or no choices. She thought it would be a great treat to go to the Subway sandwich place and let him pick out whatever he wanted to build a sandwich. Instead, she saw that look of panic and Jerry said, "I'll have what you are having" without even considering the overwhelming options in front of him.

Respecting space was a physical reaction that took quite a bit of adjustment for Laure. She had longed for a chance to be near him without rules of "no kissing, no touching,

etc." that had existed during the six years of their visits.

A few more lessons included that it was not a good idea to approach from behind, or quietly put a hand on his shoulder. Also it helped if they hollered when she or the children came home to identify who and where they were, like, "Hi, it's me, Laure, I'm going upstairs for a few minutes before I come down to start supper."

Then there were the cookies. Unexpectedly, cookies became "yours" or "mine" and Jerry liked to have a little stash of cookies in a special place, in case someone finished off the ones in the cookie jar. And it was a serious matter if someone helped themselves to "his" cookies.

Another problem Jerry and Laure ran into was his mindset that everyone was "playing a game" or "trying to put one over on him." He had to learn that he needed to base his thoughts on facts, and reacquaint himself with the notion that some behavior in others is truly based in love.

The lessons around energy sounded so obvious and simple to the group that listened to Laure tell her story, but a discussion and a few stories from those who had to welcome home a loved one were told. It had seemed to them that part of sharing was to vent. As time goes on, perhaps the communication will be restored to the point that an exchange of venting will be acceptable, but, it is not an appropriate part of the welcome home process.

Readers who want to learn more about some of these lessons, can write to Laure and Jerry Clemons at Extended Family, P. O. Box 26, Centre, AL 35960. Extended Family groups now exist in several states, but if you wanted to start a group where you live, you can call 256-927-7997, or email, extendedfamil@ytds.net, and Laure and Jerry will help you. The website for Extended Family is [www.extendedfamilysupport.org](http://www.extendedfamilysupport.org).

Soon, I'll be doing a telephone interview with Laure on Prison Pipeline (KBOO.FM 90.7, Monday, 6:30-7 pm.) and you can hear Laure tell more of the stories from her welcome-home experience.

### FROM THE DESK OF

Ruth Kovacs



Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and the 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.

## Random acts of violence against the homeless demands action

BY COLLEEN SINSKY  
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Yesterday was the first time I cried while one of our folks told me his story. I wasn't feeling only sadness, rather it was a kind of wounded rage — at senseless violence that clashes against my hopeful understanding of the world.

Earlier this week, a couple of homeless men were randomly attacked and robbed in the early hours of the morning in Southeast Portland. We're still trying to find out more information and follow up wherever we can, but this afternoon I spent trying to get "Ray" (name changed), one of Lio's long-time friends, into a safe place. Ray explained, "I didn't see them coming because I had my sleeping bag over my head because it was so cold that night." A group of men attacked him while he slept. They hit him hard enough with something (a baseball bat?) to completely break his shoulder, and they stole the only things of value they could find — his ID and a food stamp card. Now, immobilized and in constant pain, Ray can't go back to his job as a laborer, and it'll be a few weeks before we're able to get him a new ID.

Ray keeps to himself and doesn't cause trouble on the streets. I feel so much anger on behalf of Ray, a random victim of this terrible violence, and I continue struggling to digest the fact that this kind of evil exists. It's sad that there is enough brokenness — even here in Portland — that people feel the

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need to physically attack people more vulnerable than themselves. Ray's story made me feel helpless, as there is so much that I will never be able to control or understand. Ray's story doesn't have a happy ending yet.

I think that the impact of hearing Ray's story today was compounded by the fact that I spent the morning talking with Bradley, a friend of JOIN since the very beginning, who this winter was also a victim of random violence. The day after Thanksgiving, Bradley was camping in his usual spot in inner SE. Two guys pulled up in a Jeep, and while Bradley was asleep, they threw a brick onto his face and then drove away. Bradley and his campmate spent the rest of the night trying to get the bleeding to stop.

Early the next morning, the usual police officer showed up to shoo them away, but the officer took one look at Bradley and said "What happened? Get in the car, you're

going to the hospital now." Bradley was laughing yesterday as he told me that "This officer was known as a real hard ass, but I guess when it came down to it he was a pretty good guy." In the emergency room, Bradley found that his nose was broken in five places and that his nasal passageways were in danger. His surgery and recovery were complicated by the fact that he had also developed a severe cold from living on the streets in such chilly weather. Though the officer did a report on the incident, there were few leads to follow and this hate crime remains unsolved.

Bradley told me that sometime during his recovery process, Jarvis, one of JOIN's outreach workers, somehow heard what happened and immediately stopped by Bradley's hangout spot, the St. Francis Dining Hall, to hear the story. "I couldn't believe that he approached me," Bradley said, expressing his surprise that a social service agency would instigate housing,

rather than the other way around. "It was really a shock. After that conversation I couldn't believe how fast everything happened. It was just one friend helping another, you know? And when you put your mind to it, you can get things done fast for a friend." Jarvis helped Bradley get back in touch with his family, get an ID, and move into an apartment. Today he's doing great and he can't say enough about JOIN, St. Francis Dining Hall, and wanting to help anyone else out who is in a situation like his. Bradley knows just what he would say if he ever gets the chance to speak to the person who threw the rock: "I wish I could ask them, 'Why me?' Why did they single me out? At least though, it ended up with me being in this apartment."

Like Bradley, I don't think I'll ever understand why violence of this type exists or how a person could be capable of such hatred. For now, I'll try to focus my energy on picking up the pieces and helping victims like Ray and Bradley move forward rather than dwelling passively in my frustration.

Maybe feeling this justified wounded rage on behalf of our folks is part of the process of awakening to what social justice is. Letting myself be disturbed by this, and embracing the churning frustration is going to manifest in productive action.

Colleen Sinsky works with JOIN. This was reposted from JOIN's blog, [joinpdxblog.blogspot.com/](http://joinpdxblog.blogspot.com/)