

Finding the parallels of isolation, behind common bars

FROM THE DESK OF

Ruth Kovacs



Until recently, Ruth Kovacs was a Portland activist, former teacher and the host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 FM. She recently moved to Chicago to take care of her sister. She writes periodically about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.

Greetings to all my friends in Portland from Street Roots and Prison Pipeline. I've talked and written a lot about one's ability — in fact, inevitability — to change. Well since July, and my move back home to Chicago, once again, I've changed. Observers see my change as amazingly drastic, but I've already discovered that change brings

with it past experiences. Experiences that may have taught us what to do, or what not to do — nonetheless, experiences that have made us who we are.

During my 21 years in Portland, I was very busy relating to folks enduring poverty, political awareness, and incarceration. Here in Oak Park, Illinois, I find myself connecting with senior citizens. These folks are enduring financial crisis, political roadblocks, and — much to my surprise — a kind of imprisonment.

Many are confined to their room in their loved one's home or at a nursing home. They are no longer able to control or choose when and where to go, or who to see. Family and old friends are uncomfortable when visiting to see a person they used to know struggle with walkers or getting out of a chair as if tied down by chains. The laughter is gone, the past only tells about times that cannot be recaptured, the present is a boring, repetitious look of each day being the same, and the future has only devastating prospects. They have become institutionalized.

Those of us who have our strength, and

look forward to tomorrow can bring joy to our loved ones, whether they be seniors or prisoners. We can give them the love they need. We can help them plan for a new kind of life that includes being useful, fulfilled, productive and yes, happy. We can help them focus on who they are and how important they are to us.

As these patterns unfolded, I began keeping notes on what seniors do, and how their needs compare with those who are incarcerated. Perhaps we can help them financially. Or, we can work to get the system to provide options that acknowledge, "I am my brother's keeper." And certainly, we can alleviate some of the loneliness with phone calls, letters and visits.

We seniors spend most of our time waiting and wanting. We make schedules for the day based on the times pills should be taken, meals should be eaten, doctor appointments, mail deliveries, and favorite TV shows. We wait for telephone calls from loved ones, call backs from "services" such as therapists, the telephone company, doctors, and insurance claims folks. We wait for friends who will give us a ride to get groceries, prescriptions, bank errands, haircuts, church events, occasional free concerts in the park, at the church or at the library. We wait for the day Social Security deposits our checks. Then for the utilities, charge cards and insurance to deduct their payments — always hoping both are on time and our account is never overdrawn because the check didn't come or the bill had extra charges. We wait for bright sunny days that are not too hot and rainy days and lightning storms that happen when we plan to stay inside anyway. We look forward to meals with special desserts or our favorite entrees

and fresh yummy croissants instead of cellophane wrapped whole wheat bread. We secretly taste-test to discern real butter from "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" and "krab" from the real Alaskan crab that we can't afford. We make our mark on charts that tell when we took our pills and appointments and which days our sons and daughters called or came to visit. We're always working on a grocery list so that we won't run out of panty liners, toilet paper, Gatorade, Cheerios, eggs or milk — or that package of Dixie Cup ice cream. When we get a ride to the bank, we always check to see if we have enough quarters to keep the laundry done. Sometimes we watch TV or play a DVD our son sent us, but when the house is quiet, we listen to hear neighbors coming and going and sometimes a bit of gossip. We watch the clock a lot. It's the only way we stay on schedule with all we have to do.

Waiting and Wanting

By Ruth Kovacs

She's waiting for the call from her grandson
And wanting a chance to hug him once more.
She's waiting for Sunday morning
And wanting her friends to greet her at the door.
She's waiting for Saturday night
To see the Lawrence Welk Show.
But must wait through Friday TV programs
Showing things she doesn't want to know.
She waits for the pain to stop
Hoping to handle the strife.
And so she waits each day to die,
Though she wants much more from life.

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