

HOPEFUL, from page 10

children with serious emotional and behavioral problems at a mental health treatment facility or wanna-be gangsters in inner city schools, she has always known where to draw the line.

"As a teacher you have to have that edge of toughness, someone has to be the adult, the boundary setter." She wasn't going to let David slip away.

"One day I said, 'David, are you in there?' He started to laugh and I said, 'What shall we talk about?' Venice, Mary, have you been to Venice? I said, 'Yes, I've been to Venice.' That's how it goes with us. We get back to talking about stuff."

That "stuff" can range from the Civil War to mystery writers. They share a love of books. "He's intellectually curious," she said. "He's a lover of literature and history. When they offered classes, he took them."

Over the years she has been friends with David, Mary has seen a decline in the number of educational programs offered in Oregon State prisons. At his current facility there are no classes available at all.

Some inmates in the Oregon prison system can take college courses. College Inside, a program run by Chemeketa Community College in Salem, offers two-year college degree programs in general studies, business or automotive technology at three prison facilities. And the classes aren't watered down.

"Each instructor says that they do not change their expectation of what is required of their campus students and their inside students. In fact, some have said they have to add more because the students are so focused on learning," said the director of the program, Nancy Green.

Correctional education works. College Inside's recidivism rate is 3.8 percent, whereas the state average is 26 percent. But if the inmate isn't getting out, why educate them? If they can't rejoin society, what's the point? For those whom society has deemed to be the worst of the worst, the lifers, giving them the mental relief of a long-term goal like a college degree could be viewed as a luxury. One that many citizens on the outside can't afford. Essentially, the question becomes, is prison primarily for punishment or rehabilitation?

"We are Calvinistic," said Mary of Americans' attitude toward inmates. "They deserve to be there, they need to be there."

But Mary, the pragmatist, looks beyond the moral debate over the purpose of prison. She knows that if prisoners, even those with no hope of release, can become engaged in learning, the atmosphere improves for everyone behind bars.

"They need an occupation of the mind," she says, of the constant conflicts between inmates. "Largely the drama is to have action in their lives."

Mary is no stranger to drama. Now a respected academic who collects art, travels, and writes, she recalls a chaotic childhood. "I was raised in a violent house," she said of her childhood. "Poverty, too many kids. Going to college was not in the game."

But school provided an escape. "For me, it was the nuns. They asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wanted to be one of those people," she said, of the teachers who were her role models. "Do what good I could."

Yet the reality of life in prison is grim, and unlike most people, Mary doesn't look away.

"People in prison live in a different world," she said. "It's not like on TV where they dramatize big moments. The numbing days become months and years. How do you get up every morning and live knowing you could get hurt? You do get raped in prison."

Mary struggles to come to terms with the conditions of David's life. "I did once talk with my priest." She knew him to be a man familiar with prisons, intellectually aware and with a good heart. He tried to temper her hopes about David's release. What she wanted to talk about was the spirituality of serving people no one else is serving, of not forgetting people, not throwing people away.

When the monotony, boredom, provocations and hopelessness of prison life threaten to overwhelm David, Mary does what any friend would do: She tells him the truth. "I tell him, you have to get hold of yourself."

"We all have a choice how we respond," she said of life inside and outside prison. "We can develop inner strength. We each have a path."

FCC caps cost of inmate phone calls

Cost of Multnomah County Jail inmate calls to drop slightly, from \$2.55 to \$2.10 per 15 minutes

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

The Federal Communications Commission voted 3-2 earlier this month to cap local and in-state prison and jail phone rates and to cut its existing cap on long-distance calls by up to 50 percent.

"While contact between inmates and their loved ones has been shown to reduce the rate of recidivism, high inmate calling rates have made that contact unaffordable for many families, who often live in poverty," FCC's announcement states.

New caps mandate both local and interstate calls in prisons cannot exceed \$1.65 for a 15-minute phone call – a substantial decrease from current rates reaching as much as \$14 for a single minute once fees and service charges are applied.

Local jail costs are capped on a sliding scale, with a 14-cent-per-minute cap on jails with 1,000 or more inmates, such as in Multnomah County.

"Fees were really jacking the costs up in a lot of cases," said FCC spokesman Mark Wigfield.

While additional charges may still apply, the FCC also moved to further regulate fees, which can add nearly 40 percent to the cost of a call. It also banned flat-rate calling – the practice of charging for a full 15 minutes, regardless of a call's duration.

While still allowed after Thursday's vote, the FCC "discourages" jails and prisons from taking commissions from phone call sales, as is common practice.

Wigfield said there was "some question" as to whether the FCC could get involved in the relationship between a phone company and a state, but "we have authority over rates and fees, so that was another way to skin the cat."

In anticipation of the FCC ruling, when Multnomah County Sheriff's Office

renegotiated its contract with prison phone company giant Securus Technologies, Inc. earlier this year, it lowered charges for a 15-minute call from more than \$5 to \$2.55 for both local and interstate connections.

Multnomah County Sheriff's Office spokesman Lt. Steven Alexander said Thursday that under the terms of the new contract the county is no longer collecting commissions on phone calls and no additional fees are tacked on to calls.

Before the FCC initially capped interstate calls in 2014, Multnomah County Sheriff's Office was collecting about \$400,000 per year in commissions from Securus.

Alexander said, "We actually put a provision in in case the FCC did rule something that ended up being smaller than what we had." He said the new lower rate provision guarantees his office would not face any additional costs.

Last week, Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) joined 14 other U.S. senators – including Sens. Al Franken (D-Minn.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) – in signing a letter to FCC Chairman Thomas Wheeler, commending him on his agency's proposal to cap prison phone charges and applauding the discouragement of commissions.

"Currently, 2.2 million Americans are incarcerated and more than 2.7 million children in the United States have an incarcerated parent," the letter states. "These children are often only able to connect with their parents by phone, as prisons and jails are often far away from where family members live."

The FCC also announced it's seeking comments on reforming video visitation and international calling rates.

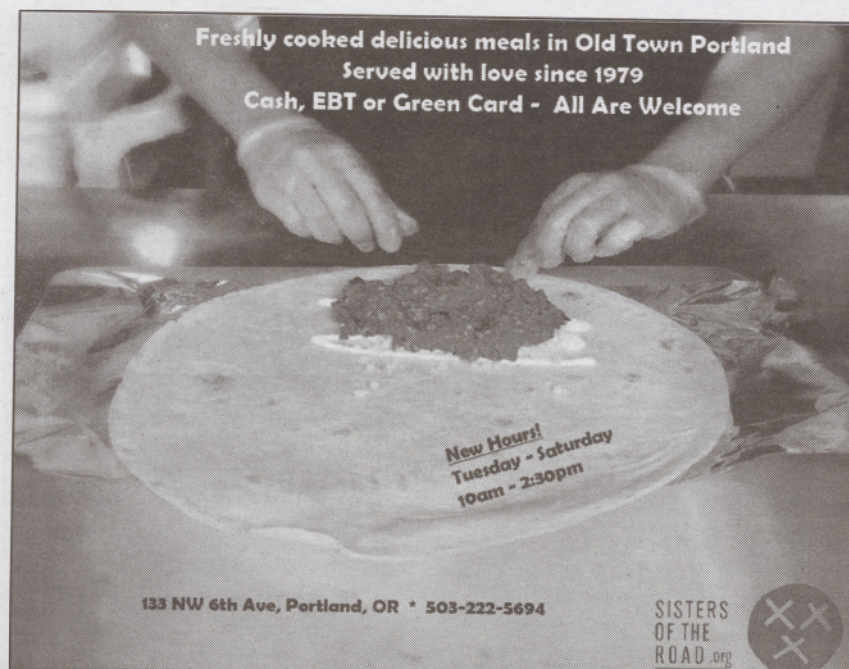
Wigfield says the new rates can be expected to take effect in prisons in early 2016 and in jails mid-2016.

Untitled

By Maddy Brown-Clark

The falling autumn rain washed my senses clean of all the dust of complacency confusion that had settled on them. And I was able to think again. My thoughts were like streams from a great river branching off this way and that. Suddenly, there was an overflow, like a flood over swollen river banks. The water of knowledge flowed and flowed, and I couldn't keep up, so I just floated down the rapids of wisdom and let it come naturally till it ended up in a great sea of humanity. We're all different, but we're all alike. And I wrote about it.

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