

MARY BOWERS

A link to the outside world

BY VICTORIA LEWIS ■ CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Teachers love to stop and catch up with former students they run into in the grocery store or on the street. But how many teachers would drive 425 miles across the state to visit a former student serving a life sentence in prison?

Mary Frances Bowers, a petite, elegant, retired college professor with a soft voice and an air of calm assurance, has been calling, writing and visiting one of her former students in prison for the past 23 years, ever since he was incarcerated for aggravated rape and murder.

"He's been in every medium and maximum security prison in Oregon," said Mary, who taught for years in some of Portland's toughest schools and, until 12 years ago, was a professor of Education at Lewis and Clark College. She taught her student, whom we'll call David, in eighth grade.

"I'm not his mother," Mary said. "He has a mother. I'm not his teacher. I'm his friend."

But from the beginning, Mary recalled, he'd been a challenge. "He was skipping school, writing gang signs. He was, at heart, a good boy, but he was angry." She'd taught his brother and had a relationship with their mother, a hard-working woman raising seven children. Mary learned over the years that rather than criticizing the parent of a troubled child, it's better to build an alliance. She proposed to David's mother that he make up for skipping by spending time with her after school. His mother agreed.

David came in to do make-up work and ended up helping Mary clean desks and talking. "He asked what I thought about

rap music. He could sing. He was creative," Mary said. "From that day washing desks, we were two friends talking."

After he went on to high school Mary lost track of David. "I didn't stay in touch with him," she says. "There were some big issues. I didn't understand his life. He outstripped my limits."

Then his brother was killed in a gang shootout. Mary went to the funeral and what she saw worried her. "I approached David and asked if we could get together because the look on his face was truly murderous."

He agreed to meet her but then he called and said he couldn't come. She didn't hear



PHOTO BY BEN BRINK

from him again until she got a letter from him addressed to her at school. He was locked up in the Multnomah County Justice Center. He had just turned 18 and was facing the possibility of the death sentence. His court appointed lawyer advised him to take the deal, life in prison. As in more than 97 percent of criminal cases, there was no jury trial.

Since that day, almost a quarter of a century ago, Mary has been visiting David, now 41, in prison, writing letters and talking with him on the phone about once a week. "He called on Christmas Day," she said. "That was a nice surprise." The Christmas before that she'd gone to visit him. "He was in the mental health infirmary. Seeing the look on his face when he saw me was well worth the trip."

Sometimes David can't call; he's in isolation. "If you are in prison, especially if there are no college courses and you don't have work, you bedevil each other all day. You are so bored you just get ugly, you have no friends. You masturbate in someone's

food, you spit in it, you go into their cell and take their little glass they like. He went over the edge with the games," Mary said.

After serving 20 years, David came up for parole. "He thought he'd get it," she said. "He had worked very hard for that. He attended classes, he attended therapy and he had taken whatever course work they offered."

But David's parole was turned down, and the boy Mary had known in middle school seemed to disappear. "He fragmented," she said of that time. "He was full of stories and illusions of fearful things."

By then David had been diagnosed with three mental illnesses. It got so bad, Mary hardly recognized him anymore. She sensed she was losing him, but Mary wasn't about to give up.

"People think I'm harmless because I'm small and white," she said.

But there is a steeliness to this quiet, cultured educator. Whether teaching

The Nothing More Hopeful series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies to highlight the unseen acts of good all around us. Gies resolved to enlist some writers who would hunt down and write those stories.

NOTHING
makes me **MORE**
HOPEFUL

than discovering
another human being to admire.

— ALICE WALKER —

See HOPEFUL page 11