

## Prisoners' Voices

The seminar entitled 'Prisoners' Voices' was extraordinary for many reasons, not least for the juxtaposition of the voice of a convicted murderer and the voice of the wife of another man convicted of murder. And in truth the audience was remarkable too for the breadth of experience of so many aspects of the Criminal Justice System.

Geoff had been a young, macho, skinhead when he was involved in a murder for which, of course, he received a life sentence. During the sixteen years he served in prisons he undertook a journey of reflection and questioning which gave him great insights and strengths, ultimately allowing him to become a Quaker, a Quaker Meeting House Warden, a speaker, married, and a fully participating member of society.

Geoff's journey was not straight forward. As he explained "Rehabilitation is hard; there is no easy fix". Nevertheless he recognised that he had to shed his defensive outer shell and to be his real self, to stop blaming others and to acknowledge his remorse and guilt.

In time his insights were such that he wanted to share them with serving prisoners. But he was 'on the out' and as a licensee he could not go into a jail to do this. This extraordinary man then decided that the only way was to commit a crime that did not exist; he walked into an open prison. At evening tally there was one prisoner too many! The authorities tried to discharge him but he maintained his right, as a licensee, to serve his sentence. And so for seven years he did – working with both staff and inmates.

His was a unique perspective and he used it to do all he could to work with prisoners towards their rehabilitation. Geoff was adamant in all he told us that it was often only a millimetre of movement; there was no Big Scheme, just little human interactions. Maybe a single word could lead to some healing; sometimes this came long after the word was said. Using empathy and compassion on what could be 'hard-wired' attitudes he would open up alternatives for those he worked with.

Geoff's voice was followed by that of Tracey\* who whilst working in a prison unexpectedly fell in love with Max\*, a lifer. Though they faced a great many problems they did eventually marry. Any relative of a prisoner can face difficulties, however those faced by Tracey were manifestly more so. She outlined to us the social stigma with which she had to deal. Friends, family, work colleagues, prison staff were very judgemental and it took years for her to divest herself of a sense of shame. "I am no longer ashamed of loving him" she said.

Like any marriage this one had its crises but in Tracey's case they were made worse by the fact that she can't ever phone Max; it just isn't allowed. He can phone her but if he chooses not to then she is left wondering and worrying. It is often a lonely life for Tracey and it is a life sentence as Max, as a lifer, does not know when he might be released. One of the hardest elements of their marriage is that their time together is conducted in public, on prison visits where they have to "Keep your hands where I can see them". Yet hands are so important. Tracey told us how after visits she could

“Smell his skin on my hands” and how over the long years their hands weathered and changed.

So much is made difficult for prisoners’ families yet such connections are vital. At the moment 160,000 children are affected by imprisonment. They are all being punished. Below is a list of organisations for prisoner’s families

- Action for Prisoners’ Families ( National policies and guidance)
- Partners of Prisoners (North West and Beyond – runs Visitors’ Centres)
- The Offenders Families Helpline (National Phone line and Website)
- Prison Chat UK – on line (Run by and for prisoners’ families)
- The Jigsaw Project - Leeds Prison
- The Prison Reform Trust (National helpline and website with advice and info for families and prisoners)

This was a moving and enlightening seminar. Ironically, as both speakers to one degree or another demonstrated, imprisonment – when occurring with the effect, if not the intent, of rehabilitation and change – was the gateway to freedom and restoration to society. And it was enhanced from briefings from Louise and Ami\_of Circles of Support and Accountability, an organisation formed to help former sex offenders back into the community . They are looking for volunteers in West Yorkshire (training is provided). Also seeking volunteers was Human Writes Watch regarding penfriendships for people on Death Row in the USA.

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\*Some names have been changed