

## DO THE RIGHT THING<sup>1</sup>

*As a beginning graduate social work student intern, I was faced with ethical dilemmas, moral conflicts and decisions that shaped my views about, systems, institutions and professional advocacy. This narrative describes my work with incarcerated women who were able to keep their babies with them while they were in prison. My practice, in support of the women's informal system which acted to prevent the spread of HIV and AID's, I believe was in the women's best interests.*

### By Annie L. Houston

Annie L. Houston, LCSW-C is Supervisor, Intensive Family Services, Anne Arundel County Department of Social Services, Annapolis, Maryland.

As a graduate student, I had the difficult assignment of working with incarcerated mothers who had their infants with them at a large correctional facility. This story describes my experience with the competing demands which are present within such a system: competition between concern for clients' welfare; and the social worker's responsibility to retain a focus on the governing bureaucracy.

I was outposted in an agency that advocated for incarcerated mothers, but spent most of my time working inside the women's jail. I made this choice because of the conflicts that were present at the small agency in which I was placed. Working in the jail's restrictive environment appeared to me as the better decision.

The "nursery" housed 10 mothers and their infants. I felt glad to get to that part of the facility after passing through several series of barred gates. In the "nursery," painted in baby pastels, the mothers' cells lined up against the walls of a square formed a middle area for cribs, rocking chairs, TV, other family items, and a children's play area. There was an enclosed outdoor area used by the mothers to wheel their babies around in strollers. The "nursery," as the rest of the prison, was under the constant supervision of uniformed

correction officers.

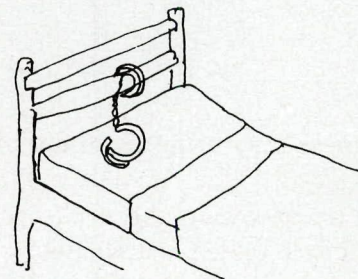
The culture of the prison hierarchy automatically gave special privileges to those inmates "in power." The sameness of guards, and those being guarded was striking, particularly in this facility. The population mirrored the tightly knit neighborhoods from which they had come. Everyone knew everyone else and occasionally it happened that a guard who had been arrested, "became" one of the guarded.

Due to their special circumstance, the incarcerated mothers were separated from most of the other prison population. They were considered uppermost in the prison hierarchy, along with the pregnant women who had yet to deliver. It was always disturbing to visit the hospital locked ward where women in labor were handcuffed to their bed rails guarded by correction officers.

Individual and group counseling was provided to these women, along with supervision of their parenting skills. Most of

### Author's Note

I wish to acknowledge and thank Dr. Barbara Levy Simon, Associate Professor at the Columbia School of Social Work for her endless patience and guidance in mentoring me through this narrative and my own professional career.



these women had other children in some form of placement. I was expected to advocate for their parental rights with foster parents, and extended families where their children had been placed. It was always a systemic challenge.

This program was the ultimate in family preservation treatment, at least for the mothers, and fathers with visiting rights that were incarcerated elsewhere on the grounds. The "nursery" was a time-limited option, much dependent upon the child's birthday and the mothers' sentencing. Children could not stay past their second birthday and if the mother were sentenced to any length of time, she was moved to another prison where such in-house programs did not exist. Critics have argued that the loss and separation experienced by mother and child, coupled with the restricted environment, often outweigh any bonding benefit gained during their time together.

Other women's issues that were relative to these mothers' needs cast constant anxiety on

their day to day life. The most evident was their child's second year birthday: the mothers counted the days on their calendars with red and black Xs, as if counting down to the electric chair. Extraordinary preparation and group support surrounded this shared tragedy.

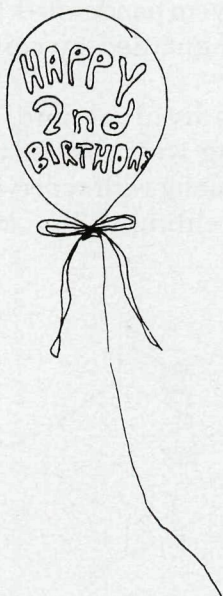
The other overriding theme was the women's experience with sexuality within the prison. Despite that fact that some women became pregnant after being incarcerated, the Corrections Department refused to supply safe sex paraphernalia and sex education because officially "there is (sic) no need, they're not having sex."

There was denial by the Department that there were widespread lesbian relationships; and of the women's concern about HIV/AIDS prevalent among the population. As a student in a large bureaucracy, I had suggested, what appeared to be the impossible to the formal structure: the distribution of condoms, dams, and safe sex education groups. I realized that although the formal structure considered these items contraband, the informal structure had a steady stream of drug contraband flowing into the women's correctional facility. Something was wrong with this picture.

A woman named Tyrae confirmed my feelings about the dilemma. Tyrae was 25 years old, a multi-ethnic woman of color, and the mother of Jamal, her 2 year old son who was with her. Tyrae was on her second incarceration for drug trafficking, and in the prison's methadone program (which was a daily assem-

bly line) for her heroin addiction. Jamal's father also awaited trial in prison for similar charges. The parents had an intact relationship and planned to reunite in their neighborhood after finishing their sentences. Tyrae's 7 year old daughter lived with her parents. Tyrae's father was the police officer that had her investigated and arrested for drug trafficking. He was determined that she would "learn her lesson or die." Despite the unyielding expectations, communication between Tyrae and her family was good, although her father refused to visit her, saying, "I won't see my grandson behind bars, that's no place for a baby." Her mother visited frequently; and used her strong religious beliefs as the framework to encourage Tyrae.

My weekly intervention with Tyrae consisted of supporting her day to day needs while being an advocate and bridge to the free world, and planning for her release. Tyrae was one of the "lucky" ones as she only had 9 months remaining on her sentence. I am hesitant to use the term "lucky" as Tyrae's perspective on the remaining time ranged from the opposite of victimized to ambivalent. For her, day-to-day life was protective as opposed to restrictive, and routine as opposed to chaotic. Things were certain in contrast to uncertain, clean instead of filthy, provided instead of poverty. This is not to paint a glamorous picture of incarceration, but for Tyrae and some others like her, there almost seemed to be a choice—to be incarcerated and "cared for," as opposed to being "free" to be downwardly mobile in the street.

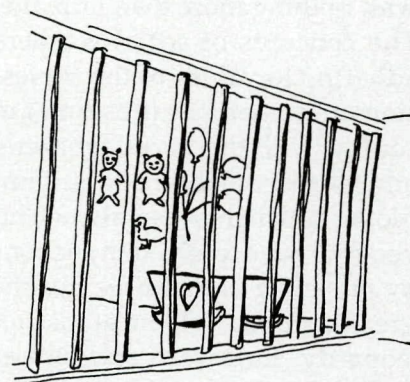


Basic human needs often precipitate the notion "starting where the client is," and can simultaneously present a spark of hope for, at least, a desire for change. The multiproblem, multi-need situation presented by Tyrae's impending release was in sharp contrast to matching client to services that were almost non-existent, and public attitudes which would continue to harden over the next 9 months.

Tyrae possessed several strengths and competencies on which I tried to focus. It seemed that several "systems" had long focused on her mistakes. I sought to redirect this energy. The pending changes that would alter her life space seemed to motivate her to make positive change in her internal focus. Tyrae's motivation was future oriented in that she embraced change, not entirely because of past events, she wanted a different and better future. She desperately wanted to succeed as a mother, lover, and daughter; and knew that the lack of financial and emotional independence were barriers to achieving these goals, once she was released.

Tyrae had sexual relations with another mother in the "nursery." She explained that she was not a lesbian, "It's just to satisfy me in here." She was one of the women concerned with safe sex who had requested contraband dams. I initially responded within the policies of the bureaucracy. I explained that her request was out of the question as it was against the prison rules. However, sometime after the first few months of my field placement in the correctional facility my perspective changed. I was always

glad to drive across the bridge from the prison, and on home, but I started to realize why I was glad. I was glad because I hated the smell, I hated the food, I hated the guards, I hated the hierarchy, I hated the attitude, I hated the rules, and most of all, I hated being locked up! My appreciation for my freedom sparked my advocacy toward the women, par-



ticularly Tyrae. I was no longer just on the outside looking in. It began when I listened to, and became connected with Tyrae's needs and pain. We started to work as a team to accomplish the end while considering the means. (I might add that as a zealous student, I was caught up in the militant milieu of the environment, but still had enough restraint to survive field placement.)

Although the mothers' needs were provided for in terms of baby things, we could occasionally bring in through the gates a toy, pampers, and other such things. These items were searched by hand as well as by metal detector wands.

Of course, as I have said the informal structure really ran the facility. Many of the inmates, including Tyrae, had readily ac-

knowledgeed the receipt of "contraband" in the form of protection, not only from visitors, but also from the guards themselves.

I explored this further, intrigued by the obvious double standard of the system. Needless to say, it was not difficult to find evidence of this as Tyrae was thrilled to death upon receipt of a package of dams from the outside after she confirmed that her woman partner was HIV positive. If you are wondering about her hiding the dams, much less using the dams, I can assure you that the informal hierarchy was more lenient on the inside than in getting through the gate. There was no question that I had made a conscious choice to look the other way concerning the contraband trafficking, thus condoning and passively participating in the activity. The end seemed to justify the means and I occasionally used my position to allow such contraband exchanges in the counseling rooms.

During this time I had befriended three female guards who were compassionate and motherly toward the infants and their mothers in the "nursery." These women seemed to feel bad about their role as guards and tried to down play it as much as possible. I had cautiously approached the subject of safe sex during lunch with the "nursery" guards. Casually we talked about the difficulty the inmates had, particularly around AIDS and being sexually active. The women shared stories and laughed about "looking the other way" when the inmates engaged in sexual activity.

An air of sympathy sur-

rounded the babies in particular with regard to their being incarcerated as extensions of their mother. This sympathy was key, as was the sameness among the prisoners and guards which fostered cohesiveness and responsibility for one another, allowing me access to the activity in the underground. With my field placement coming to an end I knew that the right of self-determination could only continue for Tyrae and the other women with the help of others. Several of the guards exercised power collectively and began to smuggle in the contraband to help their sisters. In reading the signs of the times, the future risk was clear. I left the incarcerated "nursery" with a mix of emotions. I knew that during my short stay, I had made little impact on the formal structure, but perhaps the controversy had managed to mobilize the informal one.

There are some obvious ethical and legal conflicts present in this story. During that time I focused my primary responsibility as a social worker toward my client. In the broader perspective I can "justify" my action as advocacy in the name of making services available to incarcerated women, and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

In retrospect, I have read and reread the NASW Code of Ethics and further explored my own dilemmas. I was faced with a situation where I was bombarded in my emotional responses to being surrounded with sights, sounds, and feelings of women like me, mothers existing in cells, dying of AIDS.

I truly struggled with

what to do, while it seemed day after day nothing improved for these women. It was not an easy decision for me to make. I am a person who "follows the rules." I still believe this situation was an exception to the rule for me.

As social workers a priority must be set on our relationships with clients. In this extreme scenario, offering the possibility of hope, where systems denied it, was nothing more than humane. The concepts of social workers adhering to values of the profession are sometimes (this time) in conflict with the social worker's ethical responsibility to an employer and in this case, also a University. I have resolved my actions by reflecting on them as "for the greater good," albeit at risk of jeopardy for myself and others. It is difficult to make decisions against "the rules" for many reasons. However, many "rules have been based on prejudicial attitudes; and over time, many persons have made the difficult decision to go against them. The ethical and legal dilemmas about safe sex and incarceration may not be on the level of a major civil rights movement, but for me it was the "Right Thing To Do."

The recent film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991 MCA Universal Pictures) comes to mind as Kathy Bates' character, Evelyn Couch, a woman scorned by the lack of respect for women by individuals and society, fights back. Determined to effect change over herself and others, her freedom cry "Towanda" yields power. I can't help but wonder, if even today the prison underground continues to supply the needs of the women in the "nursery." So for all

the women in the "nursery," inmate and guard, "Towanda."<sup>1</sup> □



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Lee, Spike (Writer, Producer and Director), Ross, Monty, (Co-Producer). (1989) *A 40 Acres and a Mule* Filmworks Production. A Spike Lee Joint "Do The Right Thing." Universal City Studios, (MCA Home Video, 70 Universal City Plaza, Universal City California 91608).

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.