

## **Bridging the Gap**

**When Judy Garvey realized the county jail failed to help young inmates prepare for life on the outside, she found the people who could--her friends and neighbors.**

*by Kathleen Caldwell*

WHEN JUDY GARVEY'S young relative landed in the Hancock County (Maine) Jail, she despaired. And as months passed, she got angrier and angrier--but not at him. Her fury was for a system that was failing to help the mostly young, chemically addicted men deal with their demons and prepare for fruitful futures. Then one day something inside her whispered, Maybe you can do something.

Three years later, more than a hundred local residents have joined Garvey in Volunteers for Hancock County Jail Residents. The group's goals? To build a bridge between young lawbreakers and the community, to mentor them, and, ideally, to reduce recidivism. They want their community to be a safe place to live and work, a place where folks lend a hand to those who need it and work together to give youth a good, healthy start in life.

So far they've brought Saturday concerts, a weekly "bookmobile," round-table discussions, and small classes on everything from yoga to computer skills into the jail. When a resident is released, typically at 6:00 a.m., a free hot breakfast is waiting for him (or her) down the block at the Riverside Café. A meal coupon, a phone card, and a listing of free community services are included in the "release packet" the volunteers have assembled for each resident--as a welcome back to the outside.

When Garvey first decided to take action, she did some research, learning everything she could about effective programs. She discovered the Tomkins County Offender Aid and Restoration project--a large, twenty-seven-year-old prison project in Ithaca, New York--and Keith Leenhouts, a Michigan misdemeanor court judge who promotes the use of volunteer mentors to lead young offenders away from effects of the criminal justice system. Then she networked, gathering a small group of local citizens who wrote to the county sheriff and the jail administrator proposing a small, experimental program.

After months of seemingly failed overtures, the group finally was invited to try out a yoga class for men. Since then about sixty courses, concerts, and one-time discussion groups have been approved. A Native American flutist performed at the jail, for example, and after September 11, a college professor led a discussion of Islam. The rotating schedule of classes has included creative writing, weight training without weights, recording stories for HeadStart kids, drawing, and "Boot Camp for Dads." This spring the volunteers started one-on-one mentoring. "The whole point is not to go in there and preach, not to give advice, not to try to change people, but just to offer friendly companionship for an hour and a half, with maybe a little skill [in] something," says Garvey.

Although responses have been positive on all fronts, it's too early to assess the effects. According to Leenhouts, however, such volunteers have prevented millions of repeat juvenile offenses, misdemeanors, and felonies--and with each felony conviction costing several thousand dollars, the fiscal benefits are massive. Leenhout's group, a division of the National Judicial College, maintains that "[the] mainstay of [this] volunteer movement is the one-on-one volunteer who at first can only 'be there and listen.'"

Volunteers say that they're reaping their own rewards and satisfactions. Published mystery writer and self-described gadfly Karen Saum leads a writing workshop for women residents. "I get more out of this class than any other activity I do," she says.

### **What They Learned**

Persistence pays.

Be consistently non-threatening and cooperative with jail administrators, and take frustrations in stride.

Gratitude from the system won't sustain you, so learn to appreciate small victories.

Network, network, network.

Garvey, too, is amazed at the insights she's gained: "Many times the inspiration comes from people who are in prison, go through an incredible change, and are now inspiring people on the outside. So some of my own mentors have become people whose ideas I would not have considered before.... And I've learned to see the humanity--it's odd--in the people who have done injustice to me." The jail project grew out of a notion that a healthy community tries to nurture life in those who are foundering--but it has shown that in respectful relations, healing flows both ways.

Kathleen Caldwell is a frequent contributor to Hope.

#### **WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

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