

RESPONSE

A Tribute to Gayle Horii

Kim Pate

Editor's Note: Gayle Horii filed a complaint sixteen years ago with the Canadian Human Rights Commission about the discriminatory treatment of women prisoners in the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W). In the interim, several regional prisons for women were opened across the country in the 1990s and the first federal Prison for Women was closed in 2000. Her case was finally heard in British Columbia in April, 2002.

Gayle is a former contributor and member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*. She was the co-editor of the *JPP*'s special issue on women in prison (Volume 5, Number 2), and has contributed funds to provide free copies of the *JPP* to incarcerated women.

There really are no words sufficient to describe the impact Gayle Horii had on women with whom she was imprisoned, the prison administration in this country, or my own personal awareness, training, and development. She has consistently supported many of us throughout times of human frailty, while also clearly challenging us if we appeared to be lapsing into complacency. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me start at what is the beginning for Gayle and me. Here are a few of my memory snapshots.

I met Gayle during my first month as the naïve new Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS).¹ Since my predecessor had moved on to a busy government agenda and the organization's President had left the country for an executive training program, I had to hit the road running without a map or clear signposts. Accordingly, during my first few days I focused on reading through the files in the CAEFS office.

¹ CAEFS is a federation of autonomous societies in Canada that works with, and on behalf of, women involved with the justice system, particularly women in conflict with the law. Elizabeth Fry Societies are community-based agencies dedicated to offering services and programs for marginalized women, advocating for legislative and administrative reform, and offering a forum within which the public may be informed about, and participate in, aspects of the justice system which affect women. The homepage can be found at: <http://www.elizabethfry.ca/>.

One of the files I discovered was on co-corrections and included some correspondence that was critical of CAEFS' involvement in the decision to build more prisons for women, as opposed to allowing women to move closer to home by moving into units in men's prisons. The correspondence, which appeared to have gone unanswered, was approximately three years old. Having worked previously with men in prison, I recognized the return address as that of one of the men's prisons – Matsqui Institution in British Columbia. The author of the letter was Gayle Horii.

Up until that moment I had no idea that any federally sentenced women, other than Carol Daniels, was serving her sentence in a men's prison. As a result of a pre-CAEFS commitment to present at a victims' conference, I was to be in British Columbia later that month. I decided to try to contact Gayle and arrange a visit. After the predictable prison run-around, I eventually spoke to Gayle's case management officer. Her case manager at that time advised me that Gayle would be willing to meet with me, but that I should perhaps be aware that the Elizabeth Fry Society had had nothing to do with Gayle since she had transferred to British Columbia from the federal Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston.

Several weeks later I had the privilege of meeting her. I was really impressed by Gayle, the writer and impartor of knowledge and wisdom of women's issues, imprisonment, and the intersection of the two. I was pleased to meet an incredibly kind and gentle soul, whose calm, self-assured, and confident manner spoke volumes.

Gayle not only nourished my mind, she also fed my body in her "cage" that late January day and early evening. She had retained eggs, lettuce, and other salad ingredients that she offered me in the form of a delicious and incredibly nutritious meal. Since then, Gayle has left me many more times in awe of her amazing ability to whip up spectacular feasts with seemingly minimal effort. This reality notwithstanding, that first meal with her will never be matched. In addition to the food, that meeting provided me with a number of important directions and seminal moments. Gayle brought me up to date on the status of her case, the results of her attempts to obtain assistance from the Elizabeth Fry Society, and her predictions and fears about the new women's prisons envisioned as a result of the recommendations of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women.² Suffice it to say that every one of Gayle's concerns and challenges have ultimately proven to be prophetic.

When I was leaving Matsqui after our first meeting, I remember wondering whether Gayle would ever agree to meet with me again. Given the lack of support she had obviously felt from our organization, I presumed that my first visit might also be the last. I could not have been more wrong.

Gayle and I continued to keep in touch. After six months, I asked her if she would be willing to present at the upcoming Women and the Law conference in Vancouver. Another hangover from my pre-CAEFS time was that as the chair and member of the Calgary Association of Women and the Law, I had agreed to pull together a panel on women in prison. Gayle agreed to have her name put forward, but cautioned me not to be too enthusiastic, reminding me that up until then my efforts to get other women to participate – particularly women lifers or those serving long-term sentences – had been spectacularly unsuccessful.

In the end, and despite some inane wrangling, Gayle did attend the conference, in addition to bringing an overflow crowd to our session because of the mere reality of her presence. In her twenty minutes of presenting, Gayle ensured that the national women's groups would all eventually support CAEFS and issues pertaining to our work with and on behalf of women in prison. Her moving, graphic, and clear description of the incidents, issues, and needs of federally sentenced women brought the women in the room to their feet, inspired national policy development, and confirmed her important place in the initiation of national support for all women in prison.

Within weeks of that presentation, Gayle was granted day parole and was sent to a men's halfway house that had offered her support throughout her time at Matsqui. Several months later, she attended our Annual General Meeting in Kelowna, British Columbia. So powerful was the impact of Gayle's presentation that it was at that annual general meeting that the CAEFS's membership unanimously passed a resolution making CAEFS the first Canadian national women's and justice group to declare organizational support for penal abolition.

Moreover, by accepting our invitation to attend the post-meeting banquet, Gayle and her husband challenged the unspoken, but implied, notions and beliefs about the appropriateness of involving women who have been

² Found in *Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women*, April 1990.

criminalized in our work, much less our organizations. Again, so profound and powerful was her presence that soon thereafter CAEFS was encouraging our membership to review any organizational policies or practices that prohibited the involvement of women with criminal records, as well as those who were in or from prison.

Later that year I had the privilege of attending the wedding of Gayle's son, Arie. It was an honour to be invited and it signalled for me a vitally important and extremely significant deepening of our friendship. It was an incredible experience to share Gayle's day as the proud and beaming mother of the groom. I remember thinking, while I was watching the photo session after the wedding, that these images of women as mothers, daughters, and sisters were the ones that we had to inspire in people's minds and imaginations if we really hoped to challenge the myths and stereotypes about the women who go to prison. This reinforced my views that wherever possible, we must strive to have women in or from prison presenting on their own life experiences and thus fundamentally changed my approaches to our public education efforts at CAEFS.

Then, in 1995, Gayle had a phenomenal impact on the work and findings of Madam Justice Louise Arbour's Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston.³ She eloquently presented her own story and the stories of her sisters who lived and died behind the walls. Her mere presence at the table for the P4W inquiry inspired the women who were also present from the Prisoners' Committee and the Native Sisterhood to assert their cases more boldly and confidently.

When women saw Gayle re-enter the P4W through the front door with Louise Arbour, many were overcome with emotion. Many of her friends inside had feared the worst for Gayle when she was transferred, nearly dead, following a hunger strike to allow her to return to the Pacific Region to be near her husband following his near-fatal heart attacks. Yet here she was, an equal and valued witness before the Commission of Inquiry. As I watched her move around the prison, it was moving to see the impact of her return. Many women still talk about the hope and inspiration that Gayle's visit that day lit in the souls, hearts, and imaginations of so many women. I count it as one of the greatest privileges that I have enjoyed, as well as one of the most profoundly

³ This report was published by Public Works and Government Services Canada (1996), and is available through Canada Communication Group – Publishing, Ottawa, Canada K1A 0S9.

poignant visits to the P4W. I recall images of the smiles and laughter of several dozen women and Gayle, punctuated by the starkness of her visit with a woman in segregation. Getting that woman out of “seg” became the focus of Gayle’s remaining time in Kingston, and for a time her efforts were successful.

When the pre-eminent prisoners’ rights activist Claire Culhane died, Gayle was a key organizer of the large memorial tribute to Claire’s life and work. She repeated this effort when Jo-Ann Mayhew,⁴ one of her closest friends and freedom warriors from the P4W, succumbed to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) – mere months after they had celebrated the commutation of Jo’s life sentence to time served. Whenever she is called upon to assist women inside or out, she somehow squeezes it into an already impossible schedule. On top of this, she does the same for her family and friends. Over the years, despite many personal challenges and family upheavals, Gayle has not only remained the constantly devoted, loving, supportive wife, mother, sister, daughter, and grandmother, she has assumed primary care for her convalescing lover and life partner.

Simon Fraser University professor Karlene Faith met Gayle in 1991 when she visited Matsqui Institution, and they became friends. Working with Kris Lyons and others, in 1994 they organized Strength in Sisterhood (SIS), the one and only Canadian formation of women in and from prisons. Over the past eight years and undoubtedly into the future, she has and will continue to assist many individual women, often by personally advocating and even using her own limited resources. Gayle also continues to ensure that SIS presents briefs and substantive advice to governmental and non-governmental bodies. By continuing to recruit and involve women with direct prison experience, as well as some allies, Gayle and the other SIS members have ensured that SIS has established a solid foundation and future which history will credit as one of the most important and significant formations of women prisoners.

Reflecting on their friendship, and working with Gayle in SIS, Karlene says:

Gayle is an inspiration and a good friend, with a beautiful spirit. I learned about her from her sister Donnie, and from a series of 1980s articles in Nicole Parton’s column in the *Vancouver Sun*. At P4W she showed such courage in standing up for the women’s rights, at cost

⁴ Jo-Ann Mayhew was also a previous contributor to the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

to herself. And she is still doing it. With Kris, Sylvie, Jo-Ann (before she died), and so many others, she is building solidarity among women who are ex-prisoners. These women, who are transforming the stigma of imprisonment into a collective voice of authority, are key to public education about state punishment.

Whether fighting for a woman who is drugged and caged in a segregation cell somewhere in Canada, or speaking at a hearing, conference or university class, Gayle always comes prepared. She pores over mounds of documents and students are spellbound by her knowledge, analysis and stories. Above all Gayle is an artist. I have one of her sculptures – a strong, graceful woman holding the obstacles of life at bay.⁵ And that is what she is to a lot of us, a wise woman with a nurturing soul who is a foe of injustice.

Gayle will also be forever renowned for her refusal to let the Correctional Service of Canada trample on her *Charter* and human rights. For women inside and out, the significance of Gayle's ongoing actions inspire us all to stay active and engaged in the work, whether we are using internal grievance mechanisms inside or external briefs and presentations to the public, bureaucrats, or politicians. Susan Boyd, a professor at the University of Victoria in British Columbia reflects on Gayle's influence:

I have only had the opportunity to meet Gayle a couple of times and those were impressionable moments. It is Gayle's work that I am most familiar with, both her artwork and her writing. The first time I read something written by Gayle I was completely taken aback because finally I was reading about women and prison in Canada from a perspective that is far too often missing. Gayle's words express her experience but she does more than that – she painstakingly connects her own personal experience to other women imprisoned in Canada and links them to broader social oppression, and crazy-making policy by the Correctional Service of Canada.

But Gayle's and other women's voices always remain central in her work. In her writing and artwork, Gayle reminds us of our common humanity and how our liberation is intrinsically tied together. I have had it with abstractions when speaking about oppression and resistance. Gayle's work speaks to my experience, my sense of

resistance, and the movement towards social justice. Words fail to express how thankful I am that Gayle continues to write and create art that challenges the abuse in prisons and the uses of prisons.

Gayle's tenacity, principled integrity and forthrightness, brilliant and sound logical arguments, unconditional caring and love, combined with the most gentle and generous of spirits, make her one of the women most of us aspire to emulate. It is an honour and my privilege that Gayle is my mentor, ally, and friend. I think it only fitting that the words she introduced me to during my first meeting end this tribute to a courageous, brilliant, and beautiful woman. These words from Lilla Watson epitomize Gayle's life, her legendary struggles, and her inspirational successes:

If you have come here to help me,
you are wasting your time,
If you have come here because
your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.

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