

A Chance to Learn

Cheryl Bonfanti

Virginia's prison system is not any different from other states as far as having only one facility for women and several for men. The one thing that does stand out here at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women (VCCW) is the educational programs, the institution's greatest asset. The Literacy Incentive Program gives a woman a chance to learn to read and write so she can go on to get her high school diploma in the form of a General Education Development (GED) certificate. From there she can go on to enroll at either J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College or the Mary Baldwin College Adult Degree Program.

So often women come to prison with the handicap of no education or else with just enough to get by. Many people do not realize that without an education they are bound for whatever unskilled job is available at the time, if any at all. In today's society working women are making moves up the ladder. It has taken them many years to get to this point. Men have had vocational schools open to them for many years, due mainly to their role as breadwinner of the family. But what about the woman who does not want a family or to be married; what options are open to her? She must provide for herself and with little or no education this task can be very difficult.

Many women are single parents today and they need the skills that will enable them to provide for their children and themselves. To this end, vocational training is useful. Here at VCCW some vocational training programs are offered to women. One example is drafting, both manual and the Computer Assisted Drafting (CAD) system. The first drafting class gives a woman a chance to learn drafting basics. Then, she can go on to the CAD system where she learns the computer system most companies are using today. Another example is an apprenticeship program run by the buildings and grounds department which offers training in carpentry, electrical, plumbing, and general maintenance. This program provides the opportunity for women to learn not only how to fix things in their own homes but skills to get a non-traditional job as well. I feel that this is an area where all women could use some experience given that repair costs are so high. We should all know how to replace something as simple as a washer on a leaky faucet instead of calling a repair person and paying the high cost for such minor work. This program should be expanded so that more women can acquire these skills.

Cheryl Bonfanti is a prisoner at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women, Goochland, Virginia.

The community college program at VCCW offers training in the business field. This certificate program is one that will get a woman in the door of most business offices since she will know how to operate their equipment.

The Mary Baldwin Adult Degree Program offers the opportunity to earn a B.S. degree in four years. In this program, classes make the same demands as those given on the Staunton campus where Mary Baldwin College is located. Prisoners are not given any sympathy for being in prison, and that is the way the students want it. Some of the instructors teach at the college and drive here for classes. Each student receives a Pell Grant and a \$2,000 scholarship from the college. The grant and scholarship are renewed annually. Each year we must pay our own admittance fee of \$25, a small amount to pay when one considers the benefits that a student will reap.

This is one of the best things that has happened to VCCW because it gives so many women hope. A woman can come to this institution with little or no formal education, and depending on how hard she works and the amount of time she has, she can leave with a degree. This is not an impossible dream; it is one that can become a reality.

I must say that I am biased in my views of the programs because I completed the CAD course and am presently working on my degree from Mary Baldwin College. I believe these programs offer excellent benefits which a women can use once she is back outside.

During the time I have been at VCCW, I have heard several women say "What is the use of a GED? I'm not going to work on the outside. I didn't before and I'm not when I go back out there." These women are only fooling themselves because once they get 'back out there' and see that times have changed, they will wish they had taken advantage of the educational programs that were offered to them. It is difficult for me to understand how anybody can hold themselves back from something that only costs time, when that is one thing that we have plenty of right now. Just as they found time to meet the drug dealer on the street for drugs, they need to find time for an education. In the past there were more important things to do than sit in a classroom somewhere. I know I would have much rather gone shopping than study for a test. Many women were busy working two jobs just to make ends meet on a monthly basis. Women who go to prison are not those with the elite backgrounds and the best education money can buy. They are instead those from lower class America, struggling to make ends meet. For them, education was not a top priority within their families. What was important was having a roof over their heads and food on the table. Crime, well, that was a quick fix for a long term problem. In many families drugs and the shortage of money took precedence over anything else.

I can understand this, but as a prisoner I cannot stress enough how important education is. A prisoner has so much time and the best way to spend it is by preparing herself for a better future for herself and her children. An education is something not every parent can afford, but while that parent is in prison she can make changes which will benefit her and her family when she is released. The knowledge and skills she obtains while in this situation may prove to be the stepping stones that will help her to prevent her children from going down the road of hard knocks in a prison environment. An education is the one thing that we could all benefit from in or out of prison because being in prison does not make us stop living and does not keep the world at a standstill until we return to society.

Today in Virginia's prison system there is not one educational program in any facility without a waiting list, be it for three months or a year. Prisoners are seeing the difference that education can make and are starting to make the changes in their adult lives that were denied them as children and teens due to the economic status of their families. Women are making more and more positive gains in the workforce today because they realized that an education will pay off. This is the same thing that women in prison are realizing. They see the need for change and are taking the steps to meet that need.

