

Nov 29, 2012

Doug Hood Testimony
Connecticut Sentencing Commission
Juvenile Sentencing Proposal

A few years ago I joined Wally Lamb's writing group at the York Women's Prison. I am a Physician Assistant, grew up in a military family, and had never been in a prison.

I've taught at colleges for twenty years. So I'm quite used to catatonic students, watching students surf the net, and getting timid hands with sophomoric questions.

At York, as you walk into the classroom you better take a deep breath. It's alive. During class there are polite interruptions, eager hands that shoot up, and a lineup of inmate readers ready to go. After a read, we "faculty" critics find ourselves on par with women who got their GEDs behind bars. Analysis and dissection would match anything I saw at Breadloaf. We drop off a pile of old New Yorkers and there's a frenzy. When there was an offer for a college course with two slots, fifteen applied. One applicant was a one-time ganger that dropped out of seventh grade with a life of debris—now she has a home, a roomie, a high school diploma, a skill, and a *resume*.

Daily stripping in front of strangers and having nothing but a shoebox of letters to their name has a way of inviting a bare honesty for all to see. After you get past their childhoods of ghettos, shelters, missing dads, waking to gunshots; and the ways they had to cope, through gangs, cutting, tattoos—you find the memories and desires, the rarified smell of Thanksgiving and grandmother curling their hair. And you get to the funny survival parts, creating mascara out of pencil lead, cooking dinner with a hair dryer, maintaining posture with shackles.

Many in our group were teen one-time offenders, in for the long haul—25, 30, 50 years. Each one has had to restart from scratch. Writing has been the conduit to explore, bond, and discover a talent, a voice, and purpose. One of our girls will get out when she's 64. Her dad, a one-time career addict and convict, now has a real job, a counselor for parolees, a guy that drives the streets rescuing the homeless. He comes down from Massachusetts every Friday to visit his daughter. They talk about her future.

They all have plans for when they get out, like it's tomorrow. They want to teach, be a CNA, a counselor—"so no one else goes through this hell." Some get out. We've "graduated" 200. Only two have ever come back.

For even the hardened and faithless, you do this long enough and you believe—that goodness eventually tips the balance.