

Pause Button

by Captain Helen Geslak

When we think of the trajectory of our workshops for women in Long Island's three county jails, we realize that our project could not have come to fruition without the support we received from four Suffolk County corrections officers who immediately saw the purpose and potential impact of what we were trying to do. With great care Captain Helen Geslak and Lieutenant Darlene McClurken, and later Sergeant Noreen Fisher, selected the

women whom they felt would be able to benefit the most from our workshops, spreading the word, until there were long waiting lists on the tiers, helping to create a model—first in Riverhead Correctional Facility and then gradually expanding to Long Island's two other jails. When we moved into Yaphank Correctional Facility, Jonathan Scherr, who was in charge of the women's trailer, felt the program was so important that he mandated it for every woman, along with other compulsory rehabilitation activities. He was later to write:

At first it was uncomfortable to listen to these women share their lives, fears and needs. But I have come to understand that all need to hear the words of these women; they are our mothers, sisters, wives and friends. The women who raised us, loved us and supported us, even now deserve no less.

As these officers helped us break the stereotypes that so often exist around women in jail, by providing opportunities for the women—and later teen girls—to write with us, so our experiences with them also broke our own stereotypes of the corrections officers hidden behind the dark blue uniforms shining with badges and stars.

Still we cannot adequately convey how moved and surprised we all were when, at a reading at Suffolk Community College, Captain Helen Geslak came forward with her own "Page one Moment," which we are sharing here. In the time leading up to that moment, the officers closest to our project had participated in many of our readings and

events for the public. They had raised their voices about the issues that afflicted women in jail, and had called for the teaching of the women's stories in Suffolk County's Correctional Academy. But each time Captain Geslak read her own story—whether to women still incarcerated or to audiences of students—a deeper, more compassionate dialogue across the roles that would normally divide the players took place.

We are ever so grateful for the opportunity to share this story and the poem that follows with the captain's permission, as we continue to break down those stereotypes and barriers.



© Copyright Captain Helen Geslak

Pause Button

by Captain Helen Geslak

When a woman comes into jail, the "PAUSE" button is pushed on her **TIVO** of life. She will enter her new home of concrete, steel, fluorescent lights and piercingly loud slamming steel doors. Her soul is surrendered upon entry, as are her dreams and aspirations. Her dignity and self worth are stuffed inside a small brown bag, stapled shut, marked with only numbers, and then stuffed inside a foul smelling metal box crammed with identical small brown bags. Her given or married name is erased and substituted with a series of numbers and letters; the numbers for identification, the letters to denote her legal status. Personal clothing is confiscated and replaced with a drab green—a stiff and poor-fitting pajama-like outfit, not flattering to any female shape or size.

She will not be cleansing her face with cold cream tonight, but with her molting, no frills, jail issued bar of soap. She'll be washing her scarred and tired body without a washcloth, shampoo, body lotion, or baby powder. She will be using the one jail-issued 160 3 300 towel with the drying power of a cheap paper towel. There will be no nightgowns or bathrobes, no slippers or warm fuzzy socks. There will be no cozy comforters or big fluffy pillow to nestle into. She'll be assigned to a cold metal bed with a 40-thick plastic used mattress, two sheets (possibly intact) and one recycled

polyester-blend twin size blanket. Surely, not the Ritz-Carlton or even Motel-6. A cardboard cereal box will be her dresser, and an overturned bucket, if she's lucky enough to score one, will be her chair. All that is comforting and soft is no longer an option. All that is warm and soothing has become unattainable and forbidden.

At 11 P.M., as the lights are dimmed (but never off), and before the reverberating clang of that massive steel door slams shut for the first time, she sits cold and alone, wishing it was yesterday, because today she has lost what was left of herself.