

WOMEN ON REMAND

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8.45 am It is Thursday, not that it really matters. Every day brings a variety of tasks, dilemmas, disappointments and hope. Sue the probation clerical has already checked the Reception list, and has made up 2 new files. I check the post, confirmation of 3 student placements, copy of a letter to Rachel from her Probation Officer and a copy of Laura's presentence report.

9.15 am I cross the yard to the Female Wing, and as I unlock the gate and door, I'm greeted by shouts from an angry officer - will I 'remove' Amy, the cat. She is petrified of cats and cannot handle the situation. Two inmates find this amusing - but the officer disappears into the visits room locking the door firmly behind her. The inmates help me to get Amy outside, through the bars of the gate, and peace is restored. Maria giggles. She has taken an unofficial break from scrubbing the entrance floor, and enquires after my welfare. "Y' alright, Miss?" she asks. In the centre office I collect a print-out of the 32 women in custody today. I'm told the new women are located in the class and the workroom and Chris tells me the date of her next promotion board. On the way to the classroom, I meet Kathy. Her visit with her social worker yesterday was not good news; care proceedings are going ahead on 2 of her 3 children - and she has just received a 'positive' result from her pregnancy test. She talks of a termination next week, and she feels in a 'no win' situation. I agree to spend more time with her before the weekend.

9.40 am I sense a relaxed atmosphere as I enter the classroom, it is an art lesson and the eight women are engrossed.

I take Jill downstairs, find an officer to check her and show her into the office. She is 32, sentenced to 12 months for theft from her employer. Her husband Bob, had known nothing of this until three days ago. She is devastated and begins to cry unable to control her emotions any longer. She could not sleep last night - she could not believe Bob was still there for her. She said she did not deserve him. I wonder why she feels the need to punish herself?

10.10 am I walk back with her to the classroom, and then enter the workroom which is adjacent. In contrast the workroom is noisy. The sewing machines are all occupied, and Elsie, the instructor, shouts to Dora to turn down the radio. I ask for Maggie, who greets me.

"I would like to ring my mum - she's got the kids."
"How is she?" I enquire (having previously met her

on Maggie's last remand period). "Not too good; she has been in hospital, only come out 2 weeks ago."

Maggie, a single parent with 3 children under 6 needed money for drugs. Her chaotic lifestyle had meant the Social Services Department were already involved with the family. Then her sister Lizzy also with 3 children had been bailed. The pair had been arrested for fraud and deception of several thousands of pounds, using cheque books and cards. Maggie was in breach of a suspended sentence, which was only imposed 6 months ago - having been on remand here for 4 months. Well known to the system she knows what to expect.

10.40 am I attempt to make various telephone calls. The latest news on Sue's mum is not good, but the social worker will bring the children and mum to visit next week. I hear shouts in the corridor - it is Ruth again - being helped to her cell by 3 officers. I deliver the message to Sue and on passing the showers feel the women were right to ask for curtains at the windows which look directly into the cubicles. The answer was no, for security reasons. Whose security? As I make for the hospital wing, I can still hear Ruth venting her anger on the toilet seat - I expect it to land in bits in the exercise yard any minute. On entering the hospital wing the sister in charge is talking to the Governor on his daily round. I see Alice; she has her own clothes on today and her furniture is back in her room. Gone are the 'strip conditions' of the past two days - only the stitches in her wrist remain. Her self-mutilated arms tell their own story. After years of sexual abuse by her brother, she is rejected by her parents who do not believe her. Alice is so angry but cannot understand her feelings. The love/hate relationship she has with her brother; and the longing for normal family life. But today, she is smiling and it is the highlight of the week as she has received a letter from Paula an ex-inmate.

The two have much in common; they both wear layers of clothing, even in the summer, and prefer to sleep under their beds rather than in them. This really annoys the staff who sometimes need to do a 15 minutes watch on them.

11.15 am The women are in the exercise yard. They walk round in small groups of 2 or 3 sharing cigarettes and gossip in equal quantities before they are allowed in and seated for dinner. I return to the centre, and the senior officer Chris, informs me that one prisoner is being transferred to Styal tomorrow in exchange for Tracey. The staff are really down at this news; Tracey is well known in the system for being a disruptive influence and it seems that it is our turn

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Paul Kidd-Hewitt

to take her for 28 days.

- 11.45 am Before returning to the office to deal with messages, I met Barry, the Reception Officer. He has already been advised to expect a fine defaulter within the hour. After lunch I prepare for Liz's 'mini case conference' she has been known to various social workers since the age of 6; she is into heroin and her status in the prison system depends on her ability to control. She has breached her bail once, now we will have to convince Malcolm and Eve from the hostel to give her another chance. This is the first time I have gathered everyone concerned into the prison but I have made no progress with Liz, who had returned many times over the past four years, and I am unable to make sense of her complex childhood. Joanne, her social worker for 6 years has agreed to attend - so has Pete the prison addictions worker. Maggie, her field probation officer, and the deputy warden and another worker from the hostel.
- 2.00 pm Initially Malcolm and Eve need convincing that Liz is worth another chance. It takes an hour of negotiating and assessing risk factors before Malcolm agrees to attend the Crown Court next Friday to try to influence the Judge in his decision to allow Liz to return to the hostel. We all sigh with relief.
- 4.00 pm I meet Joy in the classroom after her teaching

session and we share the afternoons events. We have met to finalise tomorrow's group session, the third for the women who have been sexually abused. It was initiated after we ran an anger control course when we discovered it was impossible to deal with the victims' anger in that setting. It had also been requested by Ruth and Kathy, two inmates. Tomorrow's session is on Abusers. We panic in case we have not all the answers, then we relax when we realise if we are brave enough to attempt this groupwork, we are brave enough to say, "we don't know, but we will find out."

- 5.00 pm Work completed, I call into the office. I glance at a couple of messages - Liz's solicitor rang - will the hostel take her back? I return his call, yes, they will. As I walk away, I think of the strength Sue will need to cope, Liz's determination - "not to let us down again"; and Alice's destructive anger. Tomorrow, she will share with others in the group, and hope that one day she will realise she was not to blame - the unequal power in relationships and systems shatter the lives of so many. All we can hope to achieve is to empower these women so that yesterday's victims become tomorrow's survivors.

Jean Tyers worked as a probation officer in a Female Remand Centre for 5 years, before transferring to a local prison.