

The Virtues Project in Prison – Hope for the Hopeless
by Linda Kavelin Popov

The Virtues Project, founded in 1991, recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Its simple teachings and strategies based on the virtues found in all the sacred traditions of the world's cultures have resonated with people in more than 95 countries. It is a touchstone for bringing out the good in all of us. In Fiji, many staff have been trained in The Virtues Project, and major prison reform has occurred. The violence from corrections staff to prisoners has virtually disappeared. Instead they use virtues to acknowledge and correct behavior. The inmates name each of their dormitories by a virtue, and their art has illustrated the Virtues Cards in Hindi and Fijian used throughout the country. The commissioner of prisons has made it official that this is a sustainable program to continue throughout Corrections Fiji.

Some of my most treasured moments have occurred in prisons, when I see the light dawn in people's faces, and the tears in their eyes, as they awaken to the reality that they are far more than the worst thing they have ever done. They *are* good people. They can choose to live by their virtues at any moment.

Terrie Ward, a chaplain for the Seattle Youth Detention Center, asked me to meet with the young women there one gray morning. I was shocked by the many steel doors that banged closed behind me as I made my way to their cell block. The bars of their cells clanged open and they were ordered by the guard to come out and put chairs in a circle. They didn't know me from Eve and hadn't yet met the chaplain. I put up a poster of 52 virtues, from Assertiveness to Unity. I looked around the circle at this rainbow of cultures – Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic, Native-American. A twelve year old sat on my left, tiny in tight braids. She had been there for two years, after shooting a stranger as part of her gang initiation. On my right was a seventeen-year-old with her head down on her arms, turned away from me. I spoke to them about the treasure chest inside them, that they could open any time they chose to use the treasures it contains – their kindness, their honesty, their forgiveness, their friendliness, their courage. The guard, Geraldine, watched over us from a platform above. We then did a Virtues Pick, each randomly

choosing a card from a virtues deck, read them aloud, shared a time we had used our virtue, and then others in the circle were to give virtues acknowledgments to the person who shared. At first, it was a bit strained. One young woman received Detachment. “What the hell is that?” she bellowed. Then she read it, and others, to my amazement, told her she used it when she avoided fights, when she stayed out of gossiping. She smiled. Halfway around the circle, one of the young women looked up and said, “Geraldine, what virtues do you see in me?” To my surprise, Geraldine had been reading our book, *The Family Virtues Guide* and had learned the language of virtues. Her words were precise, honest and deep. The girls began to cry, to hold one another. The young woman on my right sat up and asked for a card. When the circle ended, twelve year old Kanisha said, “Mrs. Popov, can I shake your hand? I knew I needed a new lifestyle when I get out of here but I didn’t know what it would be. Now I know. These virtues belong to me like you said, right? This is how I want to live.” I asked if I could hug her instead and wrapped her in my arms. It was not easy to leave them.

Terrie continued to sustain the awareness of virtues in her pastoral care. Alicia, a defiant fourteen year old, refused to participate in any group activities, was very aggressive and constantly in trouble. One day, Terrie left Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman” in Alicia’s cell. She read it and smiled. One day soon after that, she called out, “Chaplain, I really need to see you.” She explained her concern as they sat in Terrie’s office. “There’s this girl I can’t stand. I’m ready to hit her, so I decided I’d better come and see you first.” After helping her empty her cup, Terrie encouraged Alicia to draw a flower and write on the petals the virtues she felt would help her. The petals included virtues such as self-discipline, kindness, and friendliness. She wrote on her drawing, “Have patience with me. I’m still growing.” She skipped out, smiling.

Recently, a fourteen year old boy about to graduate from a correctional ranch in Sacramento pulled the “Service” card. He said, “This is exactly what I want to do. I don’t want to be a criminal. I want to help people.”

The very notion that we are free at this moment to change everything, to become who our Creator intended us to be, by the simple practice of the virtues we already have, is profoundly freeing. Guilt is never useful as a lifestyle. It is a signal for change, a catalyst for transformation. I have seen this same awe and amazement in the faces of inmates around the world, whether a young offender or adults in prison for life.

At William Head Penitentiary in British Columbia, Canada, Chaplain Judi Morin has posted the “Virtue of the Week” for over a decade. In a workshop I gave there, the men were mandated only for the first two hours. When that time came, no one left. We did an exercise “From Shaming to Naming” where each man reflected on the impact of the labels used by parents as they were growing up. “Useless”, “Rotten”, “Good for nothing” and obscenities were the descriptions their caregivers mirrored to them. Each was asked to replace this label with a core virtue they knew they had. There were many tears, especially as the others began acknowledging the virtues they noticed in each other.

I will always remember a woman in an Australian prison who had gotten drunk and murdered the four sexual abusers in her family. They had assaulted her as a child and were now starting on her daughters. In a Virtues Pick, she received the virtue of Forgiveness, which says “You can even forgive yourself when you do something you deeply regret. Forgiving yourself means to stop punishing yourself or feeling hopeless. It is moving ahead, ready to do things differently, with compassion for yourself and faith that you can change.” Her eyes were shining through her tears. “I never thought I could be forgiven, because what I did was unforgivable. But now, I feel God may forgive me. And I know what to do with the rest of my life.” She pointed to the word, “Service” on the Virtues poster. “I can’t raise my own children, but I can help every woman who walks through the doors of this prison, by telling her about her virtues!” She ran out to ask the warden about creating an ongoing virtues program for all inmates.

We all need forgiveness, resilience, and hope. We all need to break through the prison of our own limited thinking about ourselves and realize who we really are. We can open the

treasury of our virtues anytime we choose, and create the lifestyle that truly honors our spirit.