

## Reflections on the Prison as Community

*Judith Clark*

The words, *prison*, and *community* are usually thought of as antithetical to each other. To be sentenced to serve time is to be removed from "the community" and sent "away" to prison. The nature of prison as an involuntary, isolated, guarded and oppressive institution runs counter to all that we associate with the notion of community. Yet, the very existence of this journal and many of its writings speaks to the ways that prisoners create community, often despite the prison's structure, rules and mores, and in so doing, reclaim and grow our humanity.

I have been incarcerated in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, New York State's maximum-security prison for women, since 1983. For 20 years, from 1984-2004, Bedford was administered on an unusual basis that promoted the values of community. The prison was not viewed as an instrument of punishment—the punishment was coming to prison--but rather, as a community—albeit involuntary and guarded--in which everyone who lived *and* worked, was a member. While no prisoner chose to be here, each of us was challenged to decide who we wanted to become—what role we chose to play—in this community. In many ways, Bedford was very much a traditional woman's prison, shaped by the history of reform and a recognition of the differences between female and male prisoners, that gave rise to women's reformatories in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, in the decade after Attica, many saw a shift toward promoting education and rehabilitative programs and developing administrative structures that were more responsive to prisoner's needs and rights. Throughout the 1970's, women at Bedford had successfully pursued class

action suits which resulted in significant reforms including: ensuring their rights within the disciplinary process, a court ordered monitor of the medical and dental care, and specific privacy rights in relation to male officers. Perhaps most significantly, the Judge who ordered court monitoring of the disciplinary process also put the women who had brought the suit in charge of polling the entire facility to decide how the sizable fines levied against the facility should be met. Not only did this give unusual authority and respect to prisoners, but it also created a dynamic in which those women shifted from an adversarial relationship with the prison administration to a cooperative one on a practical level. All of this helped set the stage for the policies instituted by Supt. Elaine Lord, who headed Bedford's administration from 1984 until 2004.

For a decade, the Bedford model was emblematic of a number of reform oriented prisons, particularly but not exclusively women's prisons. Then in the 1990's, the skyrocketing numbers being sent to prison and the ratcheting up of the rhetoric in the "war on crime," resulted in a shift toward more punitive and bureaucratic models. Bedford bucked the trend for another decade, until a change in administration in 2004 gave way to a push for this prison to conform to other maximum-security men's prisons in the state system.

It is common to hear the "old prison" described as overly lenient, lax, and just too easy for a maximum security prison. Some say, askance, "the inmates ran the prison," or complain that it was too cushy to teach us our lesson and to keep us from coming back once released. But how then to explain the low recidivism rate for women who served long sentences at Bedford through this period? Why have so many of them gone into human services careers where they are serving their communities? Why were there so few incidents of serious violence<sup>3</sup> and almost no intentional harm to staff? Without an atmosphere of overt threat and coercion, how did the prison function so well as to be recognized internationally as "a model prison?" I would argue that much of this success

lies with the community model prison, and that superficial reactions to its seeming laxity miss the real workings of this model.

In this essay, I want to take a closer look at the community model prison that was Bedford Hills, to understand its operating principles, how it worked and some of the conflicts within the model. This is in no way "an objective study." I write as a participant and beneficiary of that model.

### **The ethos of community**

The notion that everyone who lived or worked in the prison was part of one community turns on its head some basic relational assumptions of *Prison*, where the divide between *keepers* and *kept* is wide and adversarial. In reality, every prison is dependent upon inmate labor and most prisoners would rather work than sit idle and locked. But the dynamics of coercion obfuscate this reality. At Bedford, the value of everyone's work was recognized. Women were encouraged to take initiative and gained status through their work. There were women who facilitated groups, developed programs, maintained the facility as plumbers and carpenters, fixed electrical appliances as well as the wandering gardener. When the prison came under pressure to improve its mail room, trusted prisoners took on working there under civilian supervision. Over the years, these jobs grew into identities that everyone recognized and appreciated. Likewise, while there are often conflicts of interest between prison staff and prisoners, there are also overlapping interests in having the prison function well. In the community model, this latter reality was highlighted and encouraged, by maintaining informal lines of communication between staff and prisoners and encouraging far more interpersonal communication between staff and the women than is the norm in prisons, where relationships are formal and distant and informal interactions are suspect. This informal, interpersonal approach began at the top, with the Superintendent, who regularly walked the prison grounds, notepad in hand, and allowed

anyone who wished to line up and talk to her. She also maintained an open door policy for security and civilian staff. Rules, searches, locks, control of movement and all the usual machinery of prison security were utilized regularly. But they were not the sole or primary way that order was maintained. Correctional Officers in charge of living units and work areas were respected for their communication skills and ability to problem-solve. They were encouraged to know "their women," to build rapport and make use of informal relationships to maintain calm and cleanliness and to talk a problem down, rather than rely on threat or force. Long-time officers also took pride in taking initiative and putting their individual stamp on their area of work. For example, officers who were in charge of processing visitors for many years, made a point of getting to know families and interact with the children, who were put at ease by this personal attention.

Civilian staff and volunteers were critical and valued members of the community. In addition to the teachers, counselors, and chaplains, all of the educational and therapeutic programs relied on strong oversight by civilian staff, many of whom played key roles in the lives of numerous women. A few, most notably Sister Elaine Roulet, the longtime director of the Children's Center, were guiding lights in fostering the sense of community and common concern for the whole facility. Bedford's many programs relied on hundreds of volunteers, who enabled program to function within budget limits. While relationships between staff and inmates are usually suspect in prison, in the community model, the close bonds were seen as vital in providing informal mentoring, personal support and incentive to change. The volume and intensity of interaction between insiders and outsiders broke down the traditional isolation and insulation most prisoners experience and women actually grew in their sense of and participation in the larger society.

### **Prisoners as potential resources**

Recognizing incarcerated women as potential resources has enormous implications.

That we were here because we were guilty of serious crimes was not forgotten, but we were not solely defined by our crimes. Our lives before prison were seen as more complex and that however we came into the prison, we had potential to grow and become productive. Thus, the depersonalization which is intrinsic to the dynamics of prison — assigning numbers, uniforms, congregate care, etc—was balanced by the environment in which each woman was encouraged to tell her unique story and to rewrite her story in different terms.

While the therapeutic model of recovery from addiction was a major element of the rehabilitative environment, there was also a strong developmental model, in which education, including college and vocational training, was promoted as a community value. This was highlighted every Spring, when Graduation Day was celebrated by the entire facility. Every woman who had achieved some advance in her vocational and academic courses participated. Graduates got to invite their families and friends. The gym was packed, from the rows of chairs for the graduates and honorees, to the bleachers from which women cheered, as the robed graduates marched in to celebratory mayhem. The event took hours, as each woman got her moment to walk on to the stage, often accompanied by her children. A woman who was struggling in her ABE class and with basic education—got to see her friends receive college degrees and say to herself, "one day that will be me." The youngster who kept getting in trouble and locked watched her proud peers complete their state apprenticeships and felt a desire to find a new direction. The community's role was highlighted, as teachers, aides, civilian and inmate volunteer tutors were thanked, along with families.

### **Building community and becoming part of the solution**

The women's investment in taking responsibility for their own change was

enhanced by illuminating the social context of people's personal problems, be they the drug culture, health or issues of violence. Under the rubric of "inmate centered programming," women were encouraged to address their personal problems through coming together to create community and programs, which could serve our needs and affect social change.

The policy of inmate centered programming began with The Children's Center, a multi-faceted program and community which involved the majority of the population, who are mothers. Many, many women, along with civilian staff and volunteers worked to ensure visits in a comfortable, child centered playroom, developed parenting classes and support groups, advocacy and phone calls, making of cards, tapes and every other means possible to

enhance the mother-child bonds. We were challenged to recognize how we had harmed our children by our actions and to take responsibility as mothers to be a resource to them in coping with their lives and our incarceration. Women who initially utilized the resources of the Children's Center often became active in developing and facilitating its programs.

Our response to the early AIDS epidemic offers another instance of this community mobilization approach was. As in all prisons, fear and ignorance fueled conflict, stigma and rumors, as those suspected of being infected were shunned and sometimes attacked. At the same time, unsafe behaviors, such as sharing needles and unsafe sex posed enormous risk. While other prisons maintained policies of containment, at Bedford, a group of women who were given permission to meet, broke the stranglehold of silence by voicing how AIDS was affecting them personally. We underwent an intensive process of education and mutual support, while reaching out to women in the infirmary and others. In cooperation with the administration and staff, we developed an outreach program of

education, skits, songs and speaking out, which raised consciousness and built a spirit of sisterhood and support, throughout the facility. ACE—AIDS Education and Counseling—the organization which grew out of this mobilization, became a model for programs throughout the country. Women who had always felt themselves to be "a problem" experienced being "part of the solution," and this proved life-changing.

Community mobilization again promoted individual and social change when a group of women, with staff support, organized public hearings within the prison where they testified to their experiences of childhood and spousal abuse to audiences that included judges, legislators, district attorneys and others. These hearings helped raise public awareness of the impact of violence against women and children on crime, addiction and other social ills, and they promoted changes in laws and public policies. They created the Family Violence Program, which continues to provide individual and group counseling and support.

Community mobilization was utilized even to address security problems. For example, there were a few incidents of serious interpersonal violence and sexual abuse. While those involved faced the normal disciplinary repercussions, the administration also assembled a group of women active in programs addressing these issues and went around to every living unit, holding mandatory meetings to discuss how people felt about what had happened and how to address problems of intimidation, violence and abuse. Always it came down to the question, "how do we want to live with each other?" What avenues of redress can we use? What values and behaviors do we want to promote? Certainly, this did not consolidate a unified commitment to non-violence and respect, but it challenged everyone to see themselves as active participants in shaping community standards.

### **Limits**

The hierarchy and ethos of security was never absent from Bedford, nor was it

fully integrated into the community model operations. Rather, there was an uneasy fluctuation between the two outlooks, in terms of how policy was instituted. For example, while women were given unusual latitude to create and lead innovative programs, at some point, the administration would intervene to modify that grass roots effort, by bringing in civilian staff who were accountable to the prison hierarchy. Some of these transitions were smooth, while others involved varied levels of repression. We had to learn the limits of our "empowerment," and learned that strong civilian supervision was critical to the long-term stability of programs.

While cooperation between staff and prisoners proved enormously productive, the relationship and accountability was never mutual. The needs and power relations of the prison predominated, and every prisoner experienced the "pains of imprisonment" on a daily basis. The informal style of management could at any time lead to sudden, inexplicable changes that left us feeling blind-sided, angry and disoriented. We had to learn to ride those waves by developing a strong sense of what was important over the long run.

### **Why it worked**

The community model worked because it represented an investment in and development of human potential. It relied on the strength of relationship-building, and the ethos of inter-dependence, rather than solely, force and control. The result was that women who came to prison with long histories of social marginalization and feelings of alienation, became stake-holders and active participants in our community. Women underwent profound changes in identity that lasted into their lives on the outside. The communal sense of responsibility produced a positive environment in the prison and in the larger society.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, *Judith Clark* was deeply involved in social protest movements in her teens. “Unwilling to heed the moderating influences of aging, changing conditions, or even motherhood,” she says, she was arrested in 1981 for participating in an attempted robbery of a Brinks truck, in which three people were killed. She is serving a sentence of seventy-five years to life in Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. She earned her BA and MA at BHCF and helped to rebuild a college program when public funds were rescinded. She recently received her certification as a chaplain and currently works with the nursery mothers and raises service dogs for returning veterans in the *Puppies Behind Bars* program.

Much of Judith's work comes from her attempt to reckon with and take responsibility for her crime. Her poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Aliens at the Border*, *Doing Time*, and *Bridges*. Her scholarly work includes pieces in *The Prison Journal* and *Zero to Three*. She is co-author of *Breaking the Walls of Silence: Women and AIDS in a Maximum Security Prison*. For a complete listing of her writings, go to:

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