The Power to Forgive

by Kate Campbell

I was a judge you really didn’t want to appear in front of, says Tom Kohl, presiding judge in Washington County, Oregon. “I was really harsh, especially toward drug addicts that were charged with crimes.”

An estimated 30,000 people abuse alcohol or illicit drugs in Washington County, and Tom felt little compassion when they appeared before him in court. But Tom’s attitude changed when he learned that his own daughter, Megan, was abusing drugs. As he saw her sinking deeper into drug abuse, his sympathy for drug addicts grew, and he began a drug court in March 2005 to help people like her.

Drug court is an intensive treatment program for addicts who have been charged with crimes. It involves counseling, group therapy, employment, and a weekly meeting with a judge. “Our mission in drug court is to save people’s lives, to break the cycle of addiction, and to restore family relationships,” says Tom. Tom hoped that drug court would help his addicted daughter.

 “[My wife and I] were praying that Megan would be brought into the system because she wasn’t being accountable to anyone,” says Tom. “People who are moms and dads of addicts can understand that prayer.”

The Kohls’ prayers were answered when authorities charged Megan with meth distribution in May 2006, but she would never have an opportunity to face justice. On July 21, 2006, at the age of 21, Megan was murdered. “It’s a parent’s worst nightmare,” says Tom. “When I received word from the police officer ... there was so much sorrow, despair, hopelessness.”

“I Turned to God”

In the midst of tragedy, Tom found hope in his relationship with God. “You either turn to God or away from God in situations like that,” says Tom. “I turned to God.”

This decision to turn to God saved Tom from being unforgiving toward Robert, the man who murdered his daughter. “Unforgiveness turns into bitterness and anger, and that can just ruin your life,” says Tom. “Unforgiveness is a prison. When you come to a point when you can forgive, you’re set free.”

During the trial, Tom came face to face with Robert. “I had a chance to tell him in court that I had forgiven him before I even met him, which was only possible through the presence of Jesus Christ in my life,” says Tom.

On April 9, 2009, the jury sentenced Robert to life without parole.

A Father Becomes an Author

After the trial was finished, Tom felt compelled to write a book.

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Brotherhood Behind Bars

by Quovadis Marshall and Jesse Wiese

Quovadis Marshall is the director of spiritual development at Prison Fellowship Ministries. Jesse Wiese is a policy analyst for Justice Fellowship, a branch of Prison Fellowship Ministries that works to improve the criminal justice system. These long-time friends sat down together with Inside Journal to discuss what it takes to form lasting friendships behind bars.

“Both received the same sentence, and we were both serving the same amount of time. We were even released within two weeks of each other. But besides being in the same prison at the same time, we were as different as black and white, in every sense of the word. Jesse is an introvert, but I (Quovadis) am an extreme extrovert. I grew up poor, but he grew up pretty affluent. He went to private Christian schools, so I think I was the second black friend he had.

From our personal differences to the distinctions of prison culture, there were plenty of barriers to our friendship. But we found that we did have something in common – we were both fallen men in need of a Savior, and that brought us together. What drew us together was our depravity: what solidified our friendship was that we had become new men, and we had been invited to be brothers in the family of God.

A Friendship Begins

Our friendship actually started off on a bit of a rough patch. (Jesse) worked in the library, and Quovadis used to come in all the time with all these young guys, and it would annoy me. They would talk about the Bible and different theological topics, and I thought a lot of what he said was wrong and inaccurate. One day, I (Quovadis) was in the library, and Jesse joined in on the conversation, and we ended up having somewhat of a lively debate. I remember thinking, ‘Who’s this white uppity rich kid?’ But I still saw him in the library every day, and after a while, we just began to strike up conversations. As soon as we got to know each other, it became obvious we would be friends for life. As much as we would get on each other’s nerves, we both knew we were in it for the long haul.

Jesse and I were part of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, which is a reentry program run by Prison Fellowship. Going to that program was culture shock for me. Prison is highly segregated, but in this program, I saw hundreds of men, black and white together, singing songs and praising God.

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We've been friends now for 12 years. We were each other's best men at our wedding, and we began working together for the Christian Prison Fellowship Ministries. We are advocates against the death penalty. We speak at open our ways as more than just a faithful friend, but a brother.

Finding Friendship Behind Bars

When people go to prison, they lose all their friends. No one is in prison because they want to be. To begin story about angelic world, ideal place to lodge likable foreigners, readers can follow few by who seek, and who seek friendship that brings, community can happen anyhows.

The Story Speaks

Tom began sharing his story in prison for 12 years, and he is even traveling to financial and spiritual problems. If you write to the prison where he went, he would be happy to share the same story with us.

Tom’s Brother

I am Tom’s brother. I am very happy to hear that you are interested in sharing Tom’s story. He is a very intelligent and humble man, and I am sure he would be happy to share his experiences with you.

Dear Tom

I am a reader of your story, and I am very interested in reading more about your experiences in prison. I have been looking for someone to share my story with, and I think you would be a great listener. I would love to hear more about your journey and what you have learned from your time in prison.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
Ohio Changes Policy on Solitary Confinement for Juveniles

by Kate Campbell

Ohio will drastically reduce the use of solitary confinement as a punishment for juveniles in its correctional system, with plans to eventually get rid of the practice altogether, according to a Department of Justice (DOJ) press release on May 21, 2014. The DOJ issued an order for all Ohio correctional facilities to limit the length of solitary confinement for young prisoners and ensure that they receive proper mental health care.

According to a report by news radio station WBUR, the order will limit seclusion punishments to four hours for Ohio prisoners ages 10-21, and will phase out the practice completely after time. The changes will begin September 1, 2014.

Research Shows Effects of Solitary Confinement

Research from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has shown that solitary confinement can be especially damaging to juveniles. Because mental health problems often cause behaviors that land kids in solitary confinement, the overuse of solitary confinement only continues the cycle. Representations from the DOJ hope that this order will encourage correctional facilities to provide better mental health programs that address juvenile prisoners’ mental health needs.

According to the press release, the DOJ began investigating the conditions of Ohio juvenile correctional facilities in 2007 and found many problems, including poor care for the mentally ill and excessive use of solitary confinement. The DOJ moved in 2008 to fix the violations, but data gathered in 2013 showed that Ohio prisons continued to rely too much on solitary confinement.

The DOJ gathered data from the all-male juvenile facilities in Ohio. Reports found that in the second half of 2013, 229 boys with mental health problems spent a total of 60,000 hours in solitary confinement. Many of the juveniles were experiencing suicidal thoughts or had harmed themselves during their confinement.

Remembering the Purpose of Solitary Confinement

In spite of the downsides of solitary, it is sometimes necessary as a safety measure, and can be effective when used with limits and for a short time. Rick Raemisch, executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections, voluntarily spent 24 hours in solitary confinement in February 2014, just to know what it is like. In the op-ed article he wrote for The New York Times, Raemisch says that solitary confinement “allows a prisoner to run more efficiently for a period of time.” However, Raemisch empha-

sized that “by placing a difficult offender in isolation you have not solved the problem — only delayed or more likely exacerbated it.” He says the role of correctional facilities is to protect the community by releasing people better than when they came into prison, not worse.

With this in mind, other facilities are looking to change their policies about solitary confinement. Recently, correctional facilities in the state of New York banned the use of solitary confinement on prisoners under 18 and set up alternative programs for those with mental health conditions.

Research has shown that excessive use of solitary confinement can have negative effects on incarcerated juveniles.