Missing Persons Report

January 1, 2000 By Laura Whitehorn

I sat in the dark of Lincoln Center, clutching my girlfriend's hand in grief while listening to the gorgeous words of women prisoners in works read by Rosie Perez, Glenn Close and other actresses. The October reading, called "Net of Souls," was a benefit for a writers' workshop at New York's Bedford Hills women's prison and for the college program that had made the workshop possible.

We were sitting in the last row, and the hall was too hot. As the evening wore on, the air grew stifling—not because of the temperature, but because something was crowding and suffocating me. It was my awareness of what was missing. We listened to vivid descriptions of one woman's rape by her teenage cousin and of a mother's anguish at being absent as her daughter chose a prom dress. And during the performance, credit was given to many who deserved it. But no one acknowledged that it had all started in the '80s with Bedford Hills prisoners who, when asked in a GED class to write about their lives, focused on AIDS. They wrote about watching their friends grow sick and die of a disease that wasn't even supposed to affect women; they wrote about their terror of being found out to have HIV themselves.

During those years, I was in a prison in Lexington, Kentucky, where more than 100 women with HIV had been sent. At the first support meeting we held, 12 women haltingly told the same story: "You have AIDS," a physician's assistant had informed each one. "There's not much you can do. Can you get back to your cell by yourself?" We grew used to sitting watch with women dying alone, far from family and community. Twilight still reminds me of going to the "hospital" unit and helping a woman try to eat the inedible prison fare or write a last note to a child. The only AIDS education provided by the prison consisted of warning new prisoners against sharing food: "Don't eat behind anyone. If they have AIDS and bleed on their food, you will catch it."

Now, just two months out of prison, I found myself in the unfamiliar plush of the concert hall, holding my breath, hoping someone would say that among the workshop's proudest graduates were members of ACE, the AIDS Counseling and Education group that has shattered taboos at Bedford Hills and laid the foundation for similar programs in prisons nationwide.

This history is in *Breaking the Walls of Silence,* published last year by Overlook Press. Written by the women of ACE, the book is a slightly anarchic and extremely moving account of how the group began. It is invaluable for the very reason that it received little notice: Prisoners are a growing but ignored segment of this country's population. Behind the wall, unseen—but now heard by those who care to listen.

When the evening ended, I was grieving still. I wanted the audience to know that the richly varied voices of these women had also joined in one powerful chorus to save lives. Read *Breaking the Walls*, and you will hear that chorus and feel that power. And you will know that these women, in their own isolation and sorrow, have organized to bring knowledge and hope to the women behind the walls at Bedford Hills—and beyond.

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