



—NCR photos/Joshua J. McElwee

Jean Grant, left, looks over at Jim Marren in Leavenworth, Kan., in October. Grant visited Marren at the federal prison in Leavenworth, Kan., as a volunteer with the Prisoner Visitation and Support Program.

Visitors bring ‘a touch of humanity’

By JOSHUA J. McELWEE

LEAVENWORTH, KAN. For Jean Grant, the best example of love isn't found in a church with the faithful or at the kitchen table with family. It's found in, of all places, the prison visiting room.

It's there, the journalist and author says, among the sessions between prisoner and visitor, that you'll find love's hallmarks: the hug of a husband and wife who haven't seen one another in months, a mother's caring glance, "the first holding of a newborn baby."

"In that prison visiting room," Grant said, "there is more love there than just about any place I know. There's more love there ... because the prisoners are there with people who care about them, who haven't seen them, are missing them."

But what about those prisoners who may not have someone to visit, or who have been moved into a facility far away from family? That's where Prisoner Visitation and Support, a program centered on some 300 volunteers who visit federal and military prisons, kicks in.

Begun as a Quaker organization in 1968 with an eye toward visiting incarcerated civil resisters, the group is now the only nationwide, interfaith prison visitation program running in the country. It focuses on recruiting and training people near federal and military prisons to volunteer once a month to visit prisoners who otherwise wouldn't have people see them.

Grant dedicates one day a month to visit prisoners at the federal facility in Leavenworth, Kan. That's where nine years ago she met Jim Marren, a former marijuana dealer who served 19 years and seven months in the federal prison system before his release in 2005.

Sitting together at the sidelines of the volunteer program's annual conference in Leavenworth in October, Marren and Grant both reflected on the importance of the program to their lives, and what the volunteers mean to those incarcerated.

Marren, who received visits from volunteers with the organization for 15 of his years in jail, said the visits "brought a touch of humanity" to his time there. He said he received his first visit from a volunteer while he was

held at the federal penitentiary in Lompoc, Calif., and then was assigned new visitors as he was moved, eventually ending up in Leavenworth.

Grant said she was surprised when she first met Marren because the large man, more than 6 feet tall, was so "smiling and jovial." The two, she said, "immediately hit it off," connecting over the fact that they both keep a journal. Over time, she said, she came to consider the prisoner a friend, and was



Eric Corson

a little surprised when she learned he would be released, wondering if they would keep in touch. While their visit at the conference was only the second time they had seen each other since Marren's release, Grant said those fears weren't fully realized, as they had exchanged emails in the interim.

Eric Corson, executive director of Prisoner Visitation and Support, said in an interview during the conference that Marren and Grant's story isn't unique. While some of the prisoners and visitors don't hit it off, he said the "vast majority really get something out of the experience."

For many prisoners and visitors, he said, it's a chance to meet people neither would ever have had the opportunity to encounter. Among the many things visitors give prisoners, he said, is "the chance to talk with someone who isn't judging them."

"I think that's one of the big things for prisoners," Corson said. "We are not judgmental. People have already been through being judged. We just visit them, to make sure they have

someone to see them."

During the conference, some 100 of the visitors gathered to meet each other and to refresh themselves on the many guidelines and regulations covering federal prison visits. Among the rules outlined in the organization's manual are what visitors can and cannot bring into the prisons, and how they should act with prisoners.

Corson, who has been with the organization since 1977, said that volunteers have to take the role "very seriously." That seriousness, he said, is what keeps the program successful, and ensures that it can continue as the only program of its type to gain the support of both the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Department of Defense.

One proponent of the program's work has a unique perspective on why those organizations support it.

Before joining the volunteer group's board of directors in 2009, John Vanyur worked for 27 years in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, serving as an associate warden at the supermax prison in Florence, Colo., before eventually retiring as the assistant director of the bureau in charge of its correctional programs.

The visitation program, Vanyur said in an interview at the conference, is a "win-win" for prison administration staff, as it helps "reduce prisoner misconduct" and "improves the humanity of the incarcerated."

To give an example of how the visits help improve the lives of prisoners, the former prison official pointed to the daily routine of the incarcerated. While people who visit prisons might come away thinking life there doesn't seem so bad, he said that living within the walls day-to-day creates a sense of isolation and "pulls you from everything you know."

"Prison is a monotony," Vanyur said. "We tell you when to eat, we tell you when to work, we tell you when to sleep. Everything is regimented and routine."

Visitors with the program, the former warden said, give prisoners something else to focus on.

"When the visitor comes in, they break up that routine — it's something different to look forward to — and then

it breaks that isolation," Vanyur said. "For the prisoner, it's somebody to talk to who's not part of this closed-in world, who does have contact with the real world."

After nearly two decades in prison, Marren, who now also serves on the volunteer organization's board of directors, knows something about that routine. He said that one visitor with the program in particular helped him make it through the monotony, and continues to shape his life now that he is back in society.

While he was at the Lompoc facility, the former prisoner said his visits from the late Anglican priest Ev Simson, who volunteered with the program, eventually led him to start reading Thomas Merton and to become a lay Benedictine oblate.

Simson, Marren said, "started me on the path of thinking and acting in a contemplative manner."

Despite the human success of the volunteer program, Vanyur said it faces serious problems with the growth of the federal prison system. Reflecting on the fact that he started his career in 1980, when the federal bureau of prisons reported some 24,000 inmates in the system, the former warden said the current numbers — with the bureau reporting some 216,000 inmates today — are just "explosive."

"During my career, it grew sixfold," Vanyur said. "It's difficult for [the volunteer program] to keep up with that growth."

If that volunteer group wants to respond, the former warden said, it will have to grow too.

Asked what advice he'd give a new volunteer, Marren said he'd tell the person to remember that inmates are "wounded souls."

"We're all wounded souls, Marren said. "But people that are incarcerated and separated from their families and support groups are even more deeply wounded."

"Part of the isolation in prison dehumanizes you, even though that might not be the object of incarceration. The volunteers allow people that have been isolated to really open up and feel that they're human beings again."