Creating community in prison

To Sisters of St. Joseph Ruth Brooker, CSJ and Baya Clare, CSJ, the "dear neighbor" also lives inside prison walls and behind bars. Their work with women at the Waseca, Minnesota, federal prison connects them with some of society's most vulnerable and isolated people. But, they tell us, the power of presence and the strength of community can be transformative.

“Some women will start the class with, 'Who do these chicks think they are coming in here?' But we're consistently nice to them. We don't let them push our buttons.”

You work in a women's prison. What exactly do you do?

Ruth: We teach a class called Threshold, a six-month spiritual growth curriculum that is provided by the federal system. It's an interfaith one, so it's suitable for anyone no matter what their religious background because it's not focused on religion. It uses nine building blocks that make for a stable life. Among them are wellness, education goals, mental and emotional health, spirituality, spiritual wellness, positive use of leisure time, and personal relationships.

We'll ask, "If you decide that to help your wellness would be to walk more, make a plan: walk the track two times every day. Keep track of that. How do you feel when you do it?" Sometimes people will get ambitious. They say they're going to walk five miles every day; but then they start doing that and their knee hurts, and then they think, "Oh, I failed." The goal was too ambitious. Rather, we help them think about what they need to do and not hurt themselves. It's not about failure, which is something they're used to. We teach them how to think about setting goals without setting themselves up to fail.

What level of offenders are they?

Baya: Their offenses - since it's a federal prison the crimes tend to be federal crimes - are often drug and financial crimes, bank robbery, bank embezzlement and tax fraud. We're starting to see people who are there because of immigration, like smuggling people...
Who are the 993 : women in Minnesota's prisons?

Average length of sentence (excluding life sentences): 53 months

Offense (some inmates are serving for multiple offenses)
1. Weapons (n)
2. Crimes against administration of justice (17)
3. Criminal sexual conduct/prostitution (25)
4. Other (31)
5. DWI (62)
6. Burglary (72)
7. Assault/domestic assault (81)
8. Counterfeiting/Fraud (89)
9. Homicide (95)
10. Theft/Stolen Property/Robbery (n2)
11. Drugs (398)
federal prison because of where it was committed, for example on an army base or an Indian reservation.

Ruth: There are only six federal prisons for women, so women who end up in a federal prison are far from home. We have women from all over the United States. It is hard for them because they don't have visitors if their families can't afford to come and see them.

Do you see the women transform?

Baya: All the time. And you never know who it's going to be.

I think the most important thing we do is spend time caring about them for two hours every week. They don't get that anywhere else. We tell them at the beginning that what they say there stays there. They can blow off a little steam. They can complain about staff people. It's a way for them to be people, instead of inmates, for two hours. We call them by their first names, which is not regulation. The meditation period is the only time they have quiet all week. I don't know how many of them consistently do it, except in our class, but even that seems to be transforming for people.

Some people have never had quiet in their lives. Our class gives them new ways to think about things. We spend time on conflict management, communication skills and relationship repair - some things that people have never encountered before. One woman told us that the only way people solved problems in her family was by physical fighting.

How do you know your presence is helping them?

Ruth: We see how they blossom in the class and communicate with one another and us. They know They know that when they get out, they cannot go back to the same friendships they had because those led them into their imprisonment. They come from dysfunctional families in which other members have been imprisoned, too.

Baya: One of the things we emphasize is making amends. That's a big chunk of the curriculum, taking responsibility for what you did. And we tell them they don't have to take responsibility for what they didn't do, even if people try to make them do that. That can be transforming for women. We say to them, "If you were raped or abused, that is absolutely not your responsibility. It is not your fault, and you don't have to act like it is anymore, even if people have told you that it is your fault. It's not." That's news to some people. They think it was their fault.

Do they learn how to live with each other?

Baya: As we go on with our course, they become a little community for each other. They start to see themselves as kind of ministers in the prison.

Ruth: Or mentors for each other.

Baya: One of the things we work on is how to respond to things rather than react to them. Such as, pause and ask yourself, "What should I do here? Is this something I need to deal with, or is this the other person's problem? Can I respond with compassion, rather than in anger, or can I ignore it?" Sometimes people aren't getting along with their roommates and there's no way to resolve that, but they don't have to escalate it. We hear about those conflicts all the time.
**Do they come back week after week and tell you how they did?**

**Baya:** One woman was mad because she was in the cafeteria line with a person who piles food on her tray and then doesn't eat it. She told me, "She throws it away, and it's wrong for her to do that. Why does she do that?" I asked, "Does that mean other people won't have enough food?" "No, no," she told me, "there's always enough food, but she shouldn't be doing that." I asked her if she had thought about why she might be doing that. Maybe that woman came from an environment where she never had enough food. Maybe, it's a way of dealing with anxiety. She said, "I never thought of that before." We give the women alternate explanations, or different ways to think about things. Maybe the first way you think about it is not the right way; maybe there's another way. You don't have to respond to whatever you're thinking the situation is.

**Any surprises?**

**Baya:** One surprise that made me understand these women in a different way was the unit on moving from hostility to hospitality. We asked about times when they felt hospitality, such as their Thanksgiving dinner. I was shocked at the number of women who could not come up with an example. Wow. To have never experienced hospitality, to have been shuffled into foster care and have never been wanted.

**How has prison ministry changed you?**

**Baya:** It's helped me. I knew this before but now it's sharper. People live in all kinds of prisons. When I do laundry in my apartment building, many times people will come, sit and talk to me while I'm sitting out there.

I'm aware that I'm doing exactly what I do in the prison. All I do is listen attentively to them. It doesn't matter what they or I say. It's just giving my attention and being there with them for a little bit. Some of them probably are as lonely and isolated as the people in the prison.

**Ruth:** For me, it's the compassion that I have for the women. Even though I hear some hard things, I know I'm supported by the community, and I get energized by being with the women. My dad was a policeman, and I grew up seeing right and wrong, black and white. But this experience has changed me. I don't see black and white anymore. I see and hear with compassion the injustice in our criminal justice system.

**And along the way you bring so much more.**

**Baya:** One way I like to think of this ministry is to think about the first sisters and lace making. We're not teaching someone how to make lace; we're teaching them how to make a better life. But it's kind of the same thing. How can they support themselves in some other way besides whatever they were doing that got them into prison? Sometimes that's recognizing when a relationship is unhealthy; we give them the signs of an unhealthy relationship and what a healthy relationship looks like. They don't know that stuff. Many women got in trouble because they don't know how to be alone, and they take up with the first slime ball that comes along. "It would be better for you to be alone than to be with some person who's pushing you around, being mean to your kids, keeping you isolated or not letting you have access to your money, we tell them." They need instruction to do that, where to go, what to look for, and what to run away from. It's how you make lace.