



CSOR

*Though I have fallen,
I will rise. - Micah 7:8*

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Making Room For All Of Us

It is nothing new for our house to have someone with a sexual offense living here. It has been going on for many years, since a lady at the womens' prison started writing to me years ago regarding her 15 years inside, and what she had suffered during that time, in her mind, unfairly. When it came time for Rene to get out of prison, she was able to move into an "o.k." apartment in Aurora which I found for her. After some time, the apartment owner decided to sell her building and Rene was forced to move. One of the places she lived for a short time included the lower half of our house in Denver – Bear Valley to be specific.

Bear Valley is middle class America to say the least! Because Rene is a woman, and wasn't with us for a terribly long time, there was not much notice of her presence at our address. She was able to find another apartment within a month or so, and wasn't here long enough to create any kind of gossip throughout our area as to who she was, or what she might have done at one time in her past.

Not so after around ten years of housing people here (usually one person at a time and all women up until the last four years)! At that time, a good friend of my son Mark came back from Arizona on a reverse Interstate Compact, and needed a place to live. He lived with us for over two years while he was pulling his life back together and trying to succeed in treatment and under supervision. Before that, only women had shared our home, each time for fairly short periods of time (no more than a month or two for each of them). Recently several more men have lived here – one who was here while waiting to Interstate Compact to Texas, and the other two who both have SVP designations are still here. Thus the reason for this particular newsletter article.

A story came out a few days ago in the Bear Valley Improvement Association News that made some astounding statements. There was a vote several months ago by the Denver City Council which passed an ordinance allowing 5 unrelated people to live together in a domain in the City of Denver and expanded the area(s) that would accept Community Corrections facilities. That was great news to those of us trying to find housing for people with "our offense", as it would potentially give us more options for men and women coming out of prison here in Colorado.

The "righteous" people of Denver who want to preserve their own safe and lovely dwellings for those who already have the most and the best, called for a revote on this issue via ballot. That vote has now been taken, and fortunately, all the money thrown at reducing the just voted in a few months ago number of 5 unrelated people back to 2 unrelated, did not do what those who supported it moving back to only 2, wanted. It stays at 5! Nice to win one once in a while!

In the midst of all of this, I was able to “educate” the man who is the President of the Bear Valley Improvement Association about our issues, about the faulty assessments that have declared many men and a few women in Colorado “sexually violent predators”, and about the fact that I have been housing folks with an S.O. offense in their background for many years without a single incident of anyone in the neighborhood being threatened or hurt in any way. After reading what I had written he invited me to the next Zoom Meeting of the Board for the Bear Valley Improvement Association to share my thoughts and experiences with the Bear Valley Board. He learned a lot from what I wrote to him about the men and women living with insane rules and limitations. I plan to attend that Zoom Meeting. I was also pleased that Chris Lobanov-Rostovsky, the Manager of the Sex Offense Management Board, offered to be part of this Zoom call as well to support me. Since they will also have a D.A. for Denver, a policeman who oversees Bear Valley etc. present and doing a short presentation, I’m not sure how much time I will get, but what time I do get, I will try to make the best of. It is not clear whether Chris will be able to be on the call or not.

Education of the public is the most important thing that we can do moving forward. What the format for that education should look like is not totally clear, but I plan to do a lot more thinking about it. While I am still on planet earth, I would like to see some real progress in terms of clarifying for our communities what the risks are and what they are not concerning our population. As we know, people with “our offense” who have a job, have a place to live, and have pro-social support from family, church, neighbors etc. are at very low risk to re-offend. This message must get to the businesses, non-profits, government entities, apartment managers etc. in Colorado, in order to stop the extreme desecration of our men and women! I will use what strength and abilities I have to make this happen! We need everyone’s help moving forward – no slip ups; no new sexual offenses; no sneaky behaviors; no phones, pictures, relationships with kids until people have cleared the system. So much of how we move forward, no matter how much it may feel as if we are living in an uncomfortable, imposed vacuum, depends on how well we follow the rules, help to change rules that need changing, get rid of policies that are outlandish and ridiculous, and seek to build a life for our men and women that we can be proud of, and that will make others proud of us as well!

Denver’s Department of Housing Stability

I was listening to the Denver City Council take care of its business the other night and in so doing, learned about a department of which I was not aware. It is the Denver Department of Housing Stability. This council discussion interested me, as housing is such an amazingly complex subject for our particular population. I stayed tuned for quite some time to hear the woman who heads this department talk about housing needs in the City of Denver.

As I did, I thought about a man who has called me frequently in recent days, to inquire about the possibility of housing. He is one of Denver’s homeless populations bringing in around \$800.00 a month from SSI/OAP (Old Age Pension) who is currently living at the coliseum. He will have to leave there by December 3, when the city shuts that accommodation down. Strange, isn’t it, that the coliseum would close as cold days become common? I suspect that getting ready for the Stock Show takes precedence in the city’s mind over ongoing use of the building for those experiencing homelessness.

This man is not necessarily someone you would think of as a typical person without a home. His major problem obtaining housing is that he has a previous sexual offense on his record and has so far not been able to get off the registry. He calls me faithfully to ask if I have anything for him – unfortunately, he will not be able to work, and there is next to nothing for people that are only able to bring forward \$800.00 from SSI to pay for housing.

The Department of Housing Stability has included those with mental illness challenges, those with drug and alcohol problems, and those who have walked the streets homeless for many years for a variety of other reasons. It is sad that men and women with a sexual offense in their background are not welcome in the programs of this Denver Department.

I have tried to call the Department, but like most government departments, you are put through a myriad of numbers to push, messages they want you to leave, and sadly, no-one who calls you back. The older man I mentioned above tried to take advantage of the new outside, fairly well-built tents that are going into certain areas of Denver (i.e., around churches and other buildings), but was told that because of his offense, he couldn't live there. I will continue to call this Department in the hope that there will be a "solid tent" solution for some of our less monetarily endowed men and women who have only shelters as their housing resource.

Treatment that May Not Meet Everyone's Needs and other Enigmas

As we observe people coming out of prison with a variety of physical, cognitive, intellectual challenges, we are asking the following questions with more vigor. Are we hitting the right buttons? Are we addressing the correct issues? Is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) the right primary treatment for those who have committed a sexual offense, but who also suffer from a myriad of challenges, such as hearing deprivation, autism, drug and alcohol addiction, brain injury, childhood trauma of various kinds including neglect, beatings, sexual abuse by elders, church leaders etc. Is the best choice for people who have committed technical violations but not broken the law to go back to prison, or are there other "straight and narrow" roads they need to be on? Do the Sex Offense Management Board Standards and Guidelines weigh too heavily on the specific sexual offending behavior, without acknowledging incidental but incredibly destructive things that happened in the early and/or later lives of those who have committed a sexual offense?

Acquaintances of mine recently opened up the lower level of their home to three men who have committed a sexual offense. One of them is physically and cognitively stable. The other two men face a variety of challenges that inhibit their movement forward. Those of us engaged in finding housing and helping people get settled on the outside do our best to enhance the chances of success for those leaving prison by vigorously inquiring regarding things like: 1) family support that is or is not available to them; 2) their monetary situation – i.e. ability to pay at least their first month's rent, and friend/family assistance that may be able to help while they are looking for a steady job; 3) inquiry of case managers regarding physical or cognitive challenges that make it difficult for the person to complete necessary life tasks, such as getting and keeping a job, travel successfully around Denver or wherever they live to meet their necessary parole/treatment obligations and so on.

While advocacy groups have been represented in attendance for many years here in Colorado at Sexual Offense Management Board Meetings, including general meetings, Best Practice Meetings, at the Legislature, and at other important criminal justice gatherings, the focus has always been on the horrific nature of sexual offenses, including those of a non-violent nature. Someone close to me failed on probation because he had a drug and alcohol problem, not because he committed an additional sexual offense. He received a 4 – Life sentence for that, and never got treatment for his drug and alcohol issues. (Happy ending – he got out in 5 ½ years and is doing amazingly well despite horrific sexual offense (CBT) treatment inside DOC, and due to a Christian cellmate with whom he "roomed" and the work of God in his heart).

Recent movement by the Parole Department (at least in some areas) to be sure that specific issues such as drug and alcohol abuse are treated specifically and separately in addition to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, is a start in the right direction. It is not clear how often those who are on probation are getting this treatment, but it is crucial for those with these addictions that are on probation to get treatment for these maladies before they end up in prison – not for committing another sexual offense, but for technical violations.

A very smart and conscientious parole officer just reached out to me regarding housing assistance for a man needing assistance with drug and alcohol issues. He was looking specifically for assistance in the way of somewhat “sheltered housing.” Since drug and alcohol organizations will not generally take our population for in-patient services, it is sometimes necessary for parole and treatment to reach out for living situations that offer not a program per se, but a supportive environment. These kinds of environments are hard to find, as the only housing that has been generally available to our population is housing that is on its way out! It is generally in poor areas, and will likely soon be sold and torn down so the land can be used to make way for more cubicle buildings in which it will cost a lot of money to live, and which, furthermore, will NOT accept our men and women. We are working on a new way to engage the public in assisting us with men and women coming out of DOC or on probation with physical, cognitive and emotional needs through local churches. We just began this approach, and have been successful with one older man who has a brain injury and is now happily living with a couple from my church. Today the man of the family took him to downtown Denver to complete his responsibility to register. He is also attending church with the family!

Supportive environments that limit themselves to six to nine months may not do the trick. There is no magical number of months that go by in a person’s life that guarantee that moving on from that transitional setting will secure their success in the future. Finding housing at all right now is a challenge, and it doesn’t necessarily become less of a challenge after folks have lived in a transitional setting for six to nine months. The decent properties just aren’t presently there to accept our men and women. Being able to purchase a property CAN be a better option, but doesn’t happen for most until a number of years down the road.

A man called me yesterday to let me know the situation in which he found himself. His Dad had given him a condo that was paid off. He moved in assuming it was his, and that no-one could take it from him. It was Quit-deeded to him. Out of nowhere, a woman who lived there came up to him and told him children lived in the building and he couldn’t live there. She did not appear to have any authority to tell him that, and stated that if he would move out quietly, she wouldn’t tell anyone about his “temporary” presence there. He was so frightened, he immediately engaged a couple of realtors to look at the property and give him a selling price. This man’s age is 44, and his offense took place when he was 17. While this man had no outstanding physical or cognitive needs per se, he is being treated as less than human, which is something our men and women will carry for the rest of their lives, and it can become a serious psychological problem. People don’t feel that their “classification” is ever going to end, and will haunt them for life.

The “normalcy” approach that Executive Director Dean Williams is trying to develop inside the prisons is an important step in the right direction. We can only hope and pray that the idea catches on, and that even In old, traditional buildings such as DOC presently owns, and here on the outside, the public becomes aware of the humanity of our population of men and women, and strives to include them as fellow and sister human beings. The very nature of prison, the abuse suffered by men and women with a sexual offense in that environment, produces lifetime psychological and social challenges that are not easily overcome. All the more reason for treatment and supervision on the outside to work to help the public to take an inclusive approach with our men and women who have committed a sexual offense, realize they that this population should not be known only for their sexual offending, but for the human beings that they are, and the attributes that make them just like the rest of us. We all have social emotional, social, physical and spiritual challenges that need special attention from people around us who care. Those coming out of prison with especially confounding challenges need more than Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to get them on the right path for success on the outside!

Empathy is really the opposite of spiritual meanness. It’s the capacity to understand that every war is both won and lost. And that someone else’s pain is as meaningful as your own.

Barbara Kingsolver

News Tidbits

1. It is crucially important IF you are moving toward a parole hearing or toward being ready to get out that you work with your Case Manager to make sure that you have all of your I.D. information in the I.D. Bank and ready to go with you to the outside. It is very difficult if not impossible to get a stimulus or other check cashed at my bank IF you do not have an account there. If you are within 6 months of an MRD or of a parole hearing that you are pretty sure will result in your leaving prison for the outside, PLEASE contact your Case Manager to ask him/her to start the process of collecting your I.D. information from the I.D. Bank. IF the information you need is not all in the I.D. Bank – i.e., cards/information that you need to be successful, and your Case Manager is not moving on getting it together for you, PLEASE let me know, and I will “push some buttons” and try to get it done. Having your State I.D., a drivers’ license, your Social Security Card, a birth certificate etc. is crucial. I know a man who recently spent 4 – 5 months trying to get his I.D. on the outside so that he could open a bank account. In the meantime, I had to keep his money in my bank, and drive to the other side of Denver to give him rent every month, or write a check to his landlord for him. There is no excuse, if your C.M. starts early, why you should not have your I.D. items together for your departure from CDOC!
2. If you are writing to me, please do NOT write to Tami and Rick as well or vice versa. Also if you are writing to Stephen, Peggy or LeAnne, do NOT write to me, Tami and Rick etc. Tami and Rick both work full time, and the reason we now have multiple writers is because we have hundreds of people writing to us. It is true that some of our folks who are helping write letters do not have as much experience at doing it as I do, and as Tami and Rick have had. Please give them a chance to work with you on your “issues” and don’t write letters to all of us. That is called, as you are aware, a “duplication of effort”. If our team of writers have questions regarding how to write their letters, they will talk with me to get my input and opinion. The same goes for calling. If you are working with Tami and Rick, don’t call me; if you are working with me, don’t call Tami and Rick. It is true that we may or may not be immediately available, but because of our overwhelming work schedules (Tami and Rick have both full-time jobs and CSOR work); I work from early morning till late evening answering phone calls, e-mails, writing letters, picking people up who arrive at the various parole offices from prison etc. etc. This is not meant to be an unkind message, just a sincere request that unless it is a serious emergency, try to stick with the primary person with whom you have been working.
3. Now the first two tidbits might have seemed a bit “scolding”. We’ll get off that track in this Tidbit! We are generally pleased with the direction that the Parole Department is moving. We are seeing much more flexibility in terms of Parole giving people chances to stay on the outside instead of going back to prison for a variety of missteps that do not include a new offense. Many less people seem to be going back on parole technical violations. A good example is drug and alcohol issues. People who reach out for assistance with these issues are generally being worked with, and encouraged to move forward with appropriate treatment for the challenges that they are facing. Things that may still seem unkind and inappropriate are visits by parole officers in “full dress”, making it likely that neighbors will see that people are under the tutelage of the Colorado Department of Corrections. This is uncomfortable for folks who are trying to make a new and better, more successful life. A conversation with David Johnson, Director of Parole, at the request of a man who is “low custody, low supervision” who had a parade of folks enter his home in full gear, brought forth information from the parole side regarding why these things frequently happen. Even though a significant number of people are considered “low custody, low supervision”, Parole has not yet really pinned down exactly what that means. Certain statutes and administrative regulations are sometimes vague and unclear, making oversight of persons on parole who are considered low custody, low supervision, hard to clearly define. David Johnson assured us that Parole is working hard to get more clear and definitive guidelines as it regards such things as why someone on low custody, low supervision, should still have a number of fully dressed “for battle” officers show up at their front doors, and for all the neighbors to see. With renewed hope for change, there are still pesky problems! Unfortunately, that is often how life in general can be.

4. The Sex Offender Management Board voted 10 to 6 at its SOMB Meeting Friday November 19, to no longer utilize the words “sex offender” in its Standards and Guidelines. This decision, besides being written up in the Denver Post as well as other local and statewide papers, drew national attention from Dr. Bill Dobbs of The Dobbs Wire as well as from NARSOL (National Association for Rational Sexual Offense Laws). Besides the testimony from yours truly and others involved in Colorado advocacy issues, other advocates from outside the state spoke on behalf of those under the tutelage of the Colorado SOMB as well.

A 20-day period must pass where people can present testimony either for or against this change. Once that passes, we can only hope that this small ray of sunshine will become a first step toward even more release of the words “sex offender”, from the title of the SOMB itself (Sex Offender Management Board (in statute)), and on the lips of all who will continue to utilize those unfair and inappropriate words in spite of the Board’s move toward change! Labeling hurts any population that experiences it! This is a small step toward making a statement that all men and women have value and the right to become something other than a label!

5. It was our pleasure to host, besides our immediate family at our home for Thanksgiving, a number of men who are moving forward from their previous offense, to a new life! We also have two close family friends and relatives of “Aunt Nadia” who has been part of our family since Mark and Danae were little, who came from Texas to enjoy the Thanksgiving meal and fellowship. They continued on to Montana to see their son and his wife, and their grandchildren after Thanksgiving. My granddaughter Elaria, blessed us with her presence, along with her “boyfriend” whom we had never met, and her roommate. I think all in all, we were about 14. It was tight, but we had a plan worked out to accommodate everyone with a seat of some kind at a table of some kind! It was just fine. The other members of our family, a standard poodle named Cayenne, a mini-pincher named Bella, and a cat named Hey-you, also enjoyed some good bites of turkey – the dogs dug in more than the cat! We only wish that we could have been with all of you for this meal and fellowship. Know that our hearts were with you as you continue at DOC, and hopefully also enjoyed some unusually decent food for the holiday!

