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The Sister of Second Chances

By JOHN LELAND JUNE 13, 2014

Venita Pinckney grew up around Catholic schools and churches, and she thought she knew about nuns. Then a small, gray-haired sister named Teresa Fitzgerald came to fish her out of a Harlem crack house. Ms. Pinckney had been a drug addict for 23 years, a dealer and a prostitute, and had lost both of her children to foster care. She was high at the time.

“She looked past all that,” Ms. Pinckney said of the nun. “She must’ve hugged me for two hours.”

Sister Tesa, as she is known, helped Ms. Pinckney get into a residential drug program, then gave her a job and a room and helped her get her children back.

“I never thought there was people like that in the world,” said Ms. Pinckney, now a peppery 42-year-old overseeing a group home for other former offenders, with a three-bedroom apartment of her own, in a brand-new building Sister Tesa had constructed. “People that genuinely care.”

In an unglamorous pocket of Long Island City, Queens, between two of the nation’s largest public housing projects, dozens of women could tell comparable stories about Sister Tesa.

Twenty-seven years ago, answering an open call from an older nun, she started a home for children whose mothers were in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Last year she was honored by the White House.

Now, on a drizzly May afternoon, she walked the battered streets of her expanding domain: three apartment buildings, three thrift stores, a day care center, an after-school program, a job-training program, a group home for women with children, a food pantry, a mentoring program. Three more communal homes, including one where she lives, dot nearby neighborhoods.

In each of the buildings, nearly every woman, whether resident or staff member, is an ex-convict. They are former murderers, drug dealers, embezzlers, smugglers, burglars and addicts. And for many, it was Sister Tesa who turned their lives around, often after they failed on the first or second try.

“There are uplifting stories and tragic stories,” Sister Tesa, 67, said the other day. “They can all be motivating.”

Nationally, just over 100,000 women serve time in state or federal prison in a given year — six times as many women as in 1980 — and most have children under 18, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics. Nearly 150,000 children have a mother in prison. In New York, 2,420 women are currently in state prisons.

But in the debates about how to reform the penal system, nearly all of the focus has been on men, who make up more than 90 percent of all prisoners.

“Women get overlooked because they’re such a small part of the prison population, and they don’t commit the crimes that make headlines,” said Georgia Lerner, executive director of the Women’s Prison Association, a nonprofit advocacy and service organization.

“But it matters a lot when a woman goes to prison,” Ms. Lerner added. “If a father goes to prison, usually the mother takes care of the kids. If a mother goes to prison, there might be no one to take the kids.”

Teresa Fitzgerald did not plan to find her life’s work among prisoners and their children.

On a recent morning in her basement office at Hour Children, the nonprofit organization she runs, she gestured to a verse from the Old Testament book of Micah: “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

“What more can we do than that?” she asked. “‘To love mercy and walk humbly.’ When I get off track I look at that. Play it again, Sam.”

One of four children born to poor Irish immigrants, she grew up in Hewlett, N.Y., on Long Island, playing basketball and planning to attend college. She surprised her parents by entering the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood after high school, she said. It meant being away from her family except for occasional visits.

She worked in the Catholic school system, first as a junior high school teacher, then as a principal and curriculum coordinator, until she received a different kind of call.

Sister Elaine Roulet ran an innovative nursery program at Bedford Hills prison, where children could live with their mothers until age 1. But what about older children, or those who aged out of the program after a year? Sister Elaine put out an open request for nuns to create a home for these children, and to keep them in contact with their mothers.

“It was an epiphany for me,” Sister Tesa said. “I never put myself in the position of what the children must be feeling when their mother was taken from them. I couldn’t imagine being separated from my mother that way.”

Along with four other members of her order, she started taking in children with mothers “inside,” and set up a shuttle system to take the children to visit them. Quickly she realized that she couldn’t help the children without helping the mothers — that they needed parenting classes, housing and job training, both in prison and after they got out.

“I had heard stories, because I was a principal and a teacher, but not to the depth and extent of what I heard inside,” she said. “Stories of: ‘At 12 years of age, my mother died. My father was an alcoholic and he never sent me to school.’ You’d be like, what? How could that happen? It happens. There was a huge drug epidemic, and you saw it. Or, ‘My mother and father were drug addicts.’ Story after story of that.”

She began adding more programs, then still more: transitional group housing, permanent housing, parenting classes in the prison. Most of the women had been physically or sexually abused; on average, their education ended at the seventh grade.

She called her organization Hour Children, for the critical hour of the mother’s arrest, the hour allowed for visits, the hour of her release. When some neighbors tried to block her expansion, papering the area with signs protesting a home for drug addicts and prostitutes, Sister Tesa took two women to a community board meeting to talk about their lives.

“By the time they finished, they had everyone in tears,” she said. “The negative people drifted off. That was the last time we had opposition.”

Today Hour Children provides permanent or temporary homes to as many as 70 families, often taking in children when their mothers go into drug programs or return to prison. “If you fail here,” said Carol Taylor, 65, who moved into one of

the organization's group homes after serving 35 years for murdering her husband, "you fail because you choose to fail."

Last year, the group finished constructing an 18-unit apartment building with \$9.4 million in public money. Rents are capped at 30 percent of a woman's income. Sister Tesa is now eyeing more real estate for expansion.

"I'd hear people say, 'Oh, they could have made other choices,'" she said. "For some there weren't any choices; it was just a life experience that they were channeled into for whatever reason — economic or personal or addictive issues. But I was amazed and touched by their goodness and their openness. These people talked about what really happened, and, 'I take ownership of it.'

"I met very few people who blamed someone. And their resiliency, their hopes and dreams are big. I didn't know anything about the barriers. I was ignorant. You realize their American dream is fraught with potholes. I had no idea."

On a morning in midweek, the potholes were apparent. It was eviction day for a 21-year-old mother and her daughter, and Sister Tesa was prepared for a confrontation.

"She wasn't ready for this," Sister Tesa said. "She dropped out of G.E.D. school. She dropped out of job training. She wants to do nothing. Which is fine. But not here."

Upstairs, the apartment was in disarray, and a visitor was holding the woman's child. Sister Tesa spoke directly but without anger.

"Give me a date and time," she said. The woman agreed to be out the following morning, when she and her daughter would go to a homeless shelter in the Bronx. Sister Tesa offered black trash bags to move the woman's things.

"It's sad, but at least she was pleasant," Sister Tesa said on the elevator down to her office. Perhaps the woman would be back, she said. It happened. "She grew up in foster care. Her family is all over the place. Everybody rallied to help her. You say, you agreed to go to school and not smoke marijuana. I have no choice but to move you. She knows I'm not the sheriff."

Ms. Pinckney arrived with more bad news. Another mother, newly arrived from prison, broke curfew on her first night in the group home, then argued with her about it.

"I think she has another agenda," Ms. Pinckney said.

"I say we cut our losses now," Sister Tesa said, firmly.

Then she said something that the women in the program say defines her.

“Give her another day and see what happens.”

Ms. Pinckney knows all about Sister Tesa’s second chances. Before the sister fished her out of the crack house, she had walked away from Hour Children to go back to the streets.

“Now I know I have choices,” she said. “Before, I thought the life I had was all there was.”

Statistically, women in prison get fewer visitors than men and are more likely to become alienated from their families, said Ms. Lerner of the Women’s Prison Association. Often they come out to homeless shelters, having to build relationships with children who have grown up in their absence, and who might know them only as drug addicts or criminals.

Sister Tesa does not always advocate reuniting mother and child, especially older children who have found stable lives while their mothers were in prison.

“I don’t believe that children should be uprooted,” she said. “You can’t treat a kid like a piece of property. The child has rights, and they have to be respected. And in some cases it’s good that their kids come, and in other cases it’s not. We’ve had wonderful experiences, and we’ve had disasters.”

Ms. Lerner noted that with the exception of Hour Children, there was not a lot of support for the women. “Instead of modeling constructive ways of doing things, we wait for them to screw up and then tell them what they do wrong,” she said.

In New York State, 28 percent of female prisoners are arrested again within three years of release. Hour Children claims a rearrest rate below 4 percent, though this could not be verified.

Now, in Sister Tesa’s office, Kellie Phelan, 40, had a question involving Hour Children’s citywide mentoring program for children affected by incarceration, which she runs. Ms. Phelan met Sister Tesa seven years ago on Rikers Island, where she was jailed for possession of drugs. She was seven months pregnant and addicted to crack. The turning point for her was going into the nursery for the first time, wearing shackles and an orange jumpsuit. “That was it,” said Ms. Phelan, whose own parents met in a methadone program. Ms. Phelan recently reunited with her old boyfriend, who is also her former crack dealer, and newly out of prison. His son, James, lives with Ms. Phelan in Hour Children’s new building; the boyfriend, John, cannot move in until he gets permission from his parole officer.

Of Sister Tesa, Ms. Phelan said: “Her door is never closed. And I know that what she says to me is what’s best for me.”

On a recent night at the Astoria House, a former convent where Sister Tesa lives with eight ex-offenders, all focus was on dinner. Pat Keane, 61, cooked spaghetti and meat sauce on a Viking stove, as Miyoshi Benton, 24, gathered her children, Najire, 6, and Serenity, 3. Najire was a year old when Ms. Benton went to prison for burglary; Serenity was born in Bedford Hills prison.

The furniture in the house, like some of the women’s clothes, comes from donations to the thrift shops, which also provide jobs to some of the mothers. The women here rarely discuss the crimes that sent them to prison, and Sister Tesa said she often does not know. Some women do not tell their children why they were away. Ms. Benton is hoping to move into the permanent apartment recently vacated by the woman who had to leave the program.

“We’ve all been through something traumatic,” Ms. Benton said of the other women in the house. “We all have that connection. So we’re mindful of each other’s feelings and sensitivities. It’s hard to find somebody that understands and that’s not judgmental. You know they genuinely care and you want each other to do good.

“If you’re running late, someone will say: ‘Oh, I got your kids. It’s no problem.’ And the kids feel the love. My kids, you cannot tell them that these are not their family members. And you grow emotionally attached, so this is family.”

Just before Christmas, Sister Tesa helped Ms. Benton, recently released from prison, get her children back from her mother in Georgia. The children have thrived, Ms. Benton said.

“My kids love the attention,” Ms. Benton said. “My son, before he came, was having problems in school. He wasn’t listening. Every day there was a note home. I could see the path that he was going down.

“When I got him I instantly saw the change in him. My son is doing amazing. He’s very affectionate now. When he first came he was standoffish. He didn’t want no hugs or kisses. Now he runs and gives everyone hugs and kisses.”

Yet the women know the challenges they and their children still face. And for Sister Tesa, Hour Children remains much smaller than the problem she set out to address. Out there in the prisons or homeless shelters are women who never made it to her, or who failed and had to leave.

One morning at her desk, she read aloud from a letter from a woman who had left the program and was back in Albion state prison in western New York, near Lake Ontario, asking Sister Tesa to take her back. “I know I’ve messed up,” she wrote. “Honestly it’s either your program for me or death. I’m at my rock bottom and looking for a helping hand.”

Sister Tesa said: “It breaks your heart, but what can you do? We’re not for everybody. All you can do is give them another chance.”

And another, if necessary. And another.

A version of this article appears in print on June 15, 2014, on page MB1 of the New York edition with the headline: The Sister of Second Chances.

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