

The Experiences of a Lifer's Wife

By Sherry Edmunds-Flett This article first appeared in *Time Together: A survival guide for families and friends visiting in Canadian federal prisons*, by Lloyd Withers (Kingston: CFCN, 2000. 51-54).

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In 1979, as a member of the Queen's University West Indian club executive, I went into Millhaven Institution to the inaugural meeting of B.I.F.A. (Black Inmates and Friends Association). Filled with trepidation and fear, I didn't know what to expect. I had never been in a prison before. Little did I know, but that meeting would change the course of my life forever.

I was born in Kingston, Ontario to a family that had lived in the city since 1800. Prisons have always been part of the area's social and economic landscape. Riots and other disturbances would be reported in the Kingston Whig Standard. Going into town from the farm, we would drive by Collins Bay Institution or Kingston Penitentiary. A picture taken in the 1950s of my parents playing baseball in K.P. hung on the wall of my dad's office at home. I never thought about the people who lived behind the walls. It was if they didn't exist.

The West Indian club executive - Angel, Pam and I - were met that first night in Millhaven by the Lutheran minister who had phoned and asked if we would come in. Our identification was checked at the little building at the front gate. I looked up and saw the gun towers as we walked through the two perimeter fences topped with barbed wire. Going down into the institution to the chapel where the B.I.F.A. meeting was to be held, I felt the curious stares and heard the catcalls as we walked past.

B.I.F.A. was founded by a lifer named Roni Grant. He envisioned B.I.F.A. as a group open to all that celebrated Black culture and was a political force in the institutions for people of African descent. B.I.F.A.'s first social convenor was another lifer. His name was John Glendon Flett. A good friend of Roni's and the only person inside that Roni

ever introduced me to, Glenn and I hit it off immediately. We wrote back and forth and became friends over time. Eight years later on June 21, 1987, Glenn and I were married in the church at William Head Institution.

I never thought I would ever get married, much less to someone in prison serving a life sentence! It has been an arduous, rewarding journey of highs and lows as with all marriages. Thirteen years later, I am glad we made the decision to marry. Glenn and I have, thanks to God, survived the separation of prison, the transition to the street and have created a meaningful life for ourselves. To others who are in the same situation, there is hope. You can survive as an individual and as a couple. I would like to briefly share some recollections about what we did and how we made it thus far.

1a. Educate yourself! It is critical to know all that you can in order to make an informed decision - especially when you meet the person inside. Before Glenn and I got married, I knew about his crime. I had read the articles in the newspapers. He gave me permission to read his files so I saw his criminal record and knew about his institutional life. I met his family-his parents, his ex wife, his children and his friends both inside and outside prison. It gave me a sense of Glenn as a person. His willingness to share his life with me (and vice versa) helped to establish open lines of communication that have held us in good stead.

1b. Learn all that you can about prison through articles, books, C.S.C. regulations, and any available community support. This is important and assists you to navigate the murky world of prison. Know the names, telephone numbers, and meet wherever possible, the warden, the case management officer, the psychologist,

the Chaplain/Elder, the Visits and Correspondence staff and the regional office of the National Parole Board. This also helps you to establish the fact that your partner has credible community support.

2. Don't isolate yourself. Build a support network. Prison is a shaming experience for all concerned. The more you can name your experience and talk about what is happening to you with people you trust, the easier it is to cope with it all. Often people isolate and think that it is "us against the world." This is a recipe for disaster. Our support network has been a vital part of our relationship. Support is especially important when you are with someone who is serving a long sentence. When they are getting out, community support is crucial.

3. Get used to the fact that Life means Life! Being married to someone who is serving a life sentence is both a blessing and a curse. Right from the start I knew that Glenn's sentence would last for the rest of his natural life and that he would always be under some sort of supervision. In 1992, when Glenn got full parole, there was a category called parole reduced. After five years of incident free behavior, he would be eligible to apply for once-a-year reporting to his parole officer by phone, letter or interview. But the category of parole reduced was cancelled. In its place, a lifer can apply to see his/her parole officer every three months (Glenn reports every month). Like lifters inside the institution, lifters on the street have concerns about continuity of supervision. Glenn has had nine parole officers. Each one has had

varying ideas as to how his risk should be managed on the street.

4. Don't think that when they are out that "it" is over. A new chapter has just begun! Glenn used to tell me, and he still does, that a person is at their most ideal while inside prison. Unless someone is totally wild, they have taken programs and made substantial changes. After getting out of prison, this new way of life needs to be reaffirmed all over again. Out in the big, wide world and feeling uncomfortable, your partner will go back and forth as they try on their old skin but they will realize that they like their new self. Sometimes the awkwardness of the changes makes them long for life inside. I can remember when Glenn was out for a year. He said that he couldn't handle life on the street anymore and wanted to go back in. It wasn't until we were in the Ferndale Institution parking lot that he decided that he wanted to stay out.

5. Intense debate is the order of the day! The longest ongoing argument in our house has been over space. As Glenn got out on escorted and unescorted passes, and then day and full parole, we began to notice that we were both very independent individuals who were set in our ways. While Glenn was inside, my lifelong habit of reading before going to sleep was not a problem. When he got out, however, I lost my side of the bed and Glenn wanted the light out so he could sleep! That Christmas, one of my stocking stuffers was a book light.

I am a messy but clean person. Glenn is very orderly. After twenty-three years in prison, he discovered that you feel better with a neat and tidy cell. As a result, our house is pretty clean even with our three year old running around. We have negotiated that Glenn makes the bed as soon as we are up and I file the piles of paper that appear periodically upstairs.

Glenn has a need for privacy, especially in the morning when he reads his Bible, prays and goes running like he did in prison. I took this as a personal affront. To me, his actions meant that he wasn't happy being around me. The meaning changed when I found out that Glenn needed a place to think. Our first home together was a one-bedroom house situated in an old apple orchard. There

was a wood shed out back that I cleared out and cleaned up. I put everything that had been in his prison cell in the woodshed and put a lock on the door. This was Glenn's room. If I wanted to go there, I had to ask him. Woody, an American friend of mine from work at the time, when I told him about Glenn's 'cell', said that he had his bunker at home too. Woody was president of an organization for Viet Nam veterans in Canada. He had survived two tours of duty in Indochina.

For anyone whose partner is just getting out, especially after a lengthy period of incarceration, I would highly recommend giving them a private space to process the experience.

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