

The Hospitality House: Portrait of a Prison Ministry

BY MARY ALICE WISE

In a small Texas town that is home to six state prisons, Central Texas Hospitality House is an oasis of rest, food and drink, and needed clothing for those who have traveled far for a short visit with an incarcerated friend or family member.

The stigma of imprisonment affects the whole family. Can you imagine the pain felt by mothers who have daughters in prison? What would you do if you learned that your first grandchild was to be born while your daughter was serving time? What if you were a child and had to explain to schoolmates why your mom could not be a room mother along with their mom? What if you knew your mother would not be at home with you for twenty years? What if you had spent your last dime to get to the prison for visitation and found that you could not go in because you were wearing shorts?

Each weekend at Central Texas Hospitality House (CTHH) we see faces with painful expressions from such situations. CTHH is a non-profit organization formed in Gatesville, TX, in 2000 to soften the pain of families and friends visiting individuals who are currently incarcerated.¹ Gatesville is a small town, but it is strategically located: it is home to six state prison units with approximately 9,000 inmates, including the Mountain View Unit that has the state's death row for women.

The founding members of CTHH include a current warden, a former correctional officer, and a senior citizen who never dreamed that his grandson would be born in prison or that he and his wife would be frequent prison visitors. They saw the importance of visitation in the lives of the incarcerated ones and their families as well. CTHH now includes a board of directors

with two of the original group, and a faithful band of weekend volunteers.

With contributions from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, a local church association, several congregations, individuals, and ministries, CTHH is well on its way to a dream of building an overnight facility on five acres of land near several of Gatesville's prison units. Currently a small modular home serves as a Welcome Center. One of its rooms is filled with clean, used clothing that is distributed to those who come to visit inmates, not knowing the dress code for visitation. In another room, family members and friends sit and read quietly while they wait for their scheduled two-hour visit in the prisons. Sometimes in that room there is a guest sleeping on a floor pallet, exhausted from an overnight drive from a far point of Texas. A children's room has toys and books to fill the hours of waiting. Free snacks and light meals are available to help the time go by, or fill in where a meal was missed.

A much larger facility is on the drawing board to serve guests who travel from over 300 miles away. It will have nineteen bedrooms, bathrooms on the hall, a double kitchen, a dining room, a glassed-in play area and outdoor playground for children, a laundry room, a clothing room, an office and apartment for a director, and a room where a social work intern can meet with the families. The great room will serve as a day-visitor room. Local ministries will be invited to offer Christian movies, music, testimonies, and other activities for guests on the weekends.

Describing the plight of the children of prisoners, Byron Johnson has noted, "When parents are incarcerated, the lives of their children can be disrupted in many tragic ways. A change in the child's caregivers or addition of a new member to the household can be quite traumatic."² CTHH is searching for ways to help these children. The new facility will enable families to help one another cope with the enduring complications of their lives, and their children can look forward to a Saturday fun-day, along with their visit to the prison.

CTHH partners with the chaplains and ministries who offer discipleship programs in the nearby prison units. For instance, one unit has a faith-based dorm in which fifty ladies voluntarily commit to hours of study and to disciplines that can change their way of life. They are learning how to be free, even if they should spend the rest of their lives in prison. The Hospitality House is seeking ways to support the families of these women, so that when inmates return home, they find healthy support for those changes and do not revert to old habits.



My husband and I have been prison volunteers for thirty years. After we started with ministry to the general population, the chaplain invited Charles and me to be the chapel counselors for Women's Death Row. Because we make weekly two-hour visits to a smaller number of the prisoners — usually

there are eight to nine women on the row – we have seen clearly the impact of visitation upon these women. Recently we invited the four who regularly attend our small group to describe how visits help them.

Chelsea was the first to send us a lengthy letter, pouring out her heart about the impact of visitation upon her life.

Visits do many things for us locked up! They are a life line, because the people that come to see us are really our only contact with the world, besides our letters. They are an incentive to stay out of trouble, to keep hanging in there when we want to give up; a highlight to our day, week, month, and (for some) years. They are as a family reunion or a holiday with your beloved family and friends. A reminder that we do matter; that we are not alone, we are not forgotten, and we have a chance to refocus our minds and goals. We live in a place full of drama, pressures, stress, no privacy, and where it is so easy to feel forgotten, alone, hopeless, and to fall into despair. The Hospitality House blesses our visitors to be able to have a place to go, to be provided with clothes, a rest area, and a place to feel safe and welcome. A respite on an often long or tough journey, like a caravan in the desert before you make it to your oasis: a visit!³

Lisa wrote, “Seeing my family and friends lets me know that I’m not forgotten; and that I am loved and cared for. It’s like sunshine...it brightens my lonely, sad days. And brings a smile to both my heart and face.”⁴ And it does. We see the effect upon her life after she has visited with her son and felt that assurance. He can share his ups and downs with her, and she feels like a mother for that small amount of time.

Linda wrote, “As water is to three days of continual running, so are visits to an incarcerated inmate.”⁵ That is a good description. Linda’s family has been through births, cancer, and many complications. They have been faithful to drive a long distance to see her, even though visitation times for death row can be inconvenient, since they must be scheduled when the other prison visitation is closed.

Darlie said that “visits from family and friends are like having hugs wrapped around my heart.” She called it “a connection of heart strings.”⁶ Those on death row cannot have any contact visits. Glass and wire form a barrier. Seeing her loved ones helps her keep focused and fight for the truth.



Working as a volunteer for the Hospitality House, I have heard stories first hand that tug at my heart. One farmer from near Amarillo shared his plight with us recently. He had become tired during a four-hour visit with a niece who is in prison, and when he went to his vehicle for a break and tried to return, the officer who discovered a nail-cleaning part of his key ring had

denied him another entrance. When he asked for a restroom, the officer told him about the Hospitality House. This man told me that for a living he farms for another man, working from sunup to sundown. Earlier when his wife was imprisoned, he had saved for six months to accumulate the \$500 that allowed him to visit her twice a year. During this time he had cared for her three sons—ages two, four, and thirteen. He said that even though he had never been a part of a crime and had no criminal record, Child Protective Services checked him out to determine whether he was suitable to care for her children. Fortunately, his wife had been released from prison and, with the computer skills learned in prison had started a new job. Now a niece was in prison and he was back with other family members to visit her. This family's story is similar to many others.

Another man drove up to the Welcome Center as we opened at 8:00 a.m. one Sunday, asking if he could get free pants for his thirteen-year old boy to wear for visitation. The boy mistakenly had worn short pants. I ushered them to our clothing room and quickly found some appropriate pants from our collection. As the young man tried on the pants in the bathroom, I asked the father how many children he had. "Six children," he answered; the oldest was still in Houston, but he brought the five other sons regularly to visit their mother. I said, "I'm sure that raising six children by yourself is hard. I hope you have a church to help you." He replied, "I need to get back to church." When I asked the thirteen-year-old if owned a Bible, he told me he wanted to have his own Bible. So, I picked up a new Gideon Bible, which has study helps all lined out in the front of it, and gave it to him along with a hug as he left to join the other children. The dad and son had big smiles on their faces. They were ready for their two-hour visit and four-hour return to Houston. All this was done with a prayer for the Lord to bless that small chance to plant a seed in a heart.

In the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus tells us that when the Son of Man returns to reign "on his glorious throne" (Matthew 25:31), he will say to the ones invited to join his kingdom: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." And when they are puzzled, he will explain that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matthew 25:35-36, 40, NIV).⁷

This is the mission of Central Texas Hospitality House. We offer food and drink, a place of comfort for the hours while waiting to go into prison, needed clothing for visitation, and a quiet place for someone who feels ill. Often when I return home from volunteering at the Hospitality House, I think "I absolutely know that I have been where Jesus wanted me to be for this day." Serving as a volunteer is an adventure, for we never know who will walk in the door. It is fun to watch and see what the Father is doing in love, and join Him.

NOTES

1 For more information on Central Texas Hospitality House, see the organization's website www.cthhouse.org.

2 Byron R. Johnson, *More God, Less Crime: Why Faith Matters and How It Could Matter More* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2011), 29. Johnson refers to Elizabeth Inez Johnson and Jane Waldfogel, "Children of Incarcerated Parents: Cumulative Risk and Children's Living Arrangements," Joint Center for Poverty Research Working Paper #306 (Chicago, IL: Northwestern University / University of Chicago, July 17, 2002), accessed December 8, 2011, http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/jcpr/workingpapers/wpfiles/johnson_waldfogel.pdf.

3 Chelsea Richardson, personal letter to author, August 23, 2011.

4 Lisa Coleman, personal letter to author, August 28, 2011.

5 Linda Carty, personal letter to author, August 28, 2011.

6 Darlie Routier, personal letter to author, September 6, 2011.

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