

HOW LONG IS LONG ENOUGH?

By Linda Stermer

The first year of prison, the most profound, but certainly not the most devastating changes begin. You've been torn from your family, children, friends and community. You realize that you've been taken from all you know and that it is your fault.

You become completely dependent on the people who care about you. More than ever before, you rely on them for all of your financial and emotional needs. You have to navigate your life in the new world that you have been placed into. You must set up a new "household", acquire the things you need in order to get by. Everything you do is on "prison" time, not your own.

The friends you still have are largely sympathetic and try to help you to keep some connection to your life in the world. Others are embarrassed and begin to turn away from you.

Your second year, you've started to develop relationships, creating or becoming part of a circle of people you can count on. You begin learning how to get around the rules. Which officers you can get away with things and how to get the things that you want, but aren't supposed to have.

Your visitors begin to come less and less frequently. You look for comfort, lash out, or try to find a way to fill the time productively. Only to learn that you cannot get into a group because you have too much time on your sentence or are placed on a waiting list that will take, most times, a year or more. By the time you have served five years, you have become a financial burden on your family. If you have children, you have missed many of the monumental firsts in their lives. Whether it was learning to walk, ride a bike, the first day of school, first date or graduation. Or your parents are becoming elderly and are having major health problems and you cannot be there to help them.

Few if any of your old friends are there for you now. Life simply got busy and is passing you by. You've weathered the losses of all your appeals and are coming to terms with the reality of your sentence. Visits are rare and vending machine food is now a delicacy.

The job you have does not pay enough to afford your necessities, let alone any extras. You've begun to develop a "family" among the inmates. A prison mom,

sisters, brothers, uncles, wife. It's likely that you've had something important stolen or been betrayed by someone you thought was your friend in prison. Just as you've likely learned which officers will bring things in from the outside.

Whether it is drugs, sunglasses or makeup, you know how to get it. Pictures of your family are rare and as much as you look forward to your calls to family, they no longer answer as quickly as they once did. If you were married or had a significant other, they've likely moved on by now. If have health issues, you've learned that they will become much worse because your health is of no concern to the DOC. You just need to be alive for them to collect money for you and if it isn't you, there are hundreds waiting for your bed in the county jails.

Once you have done ten years, if you had young children, they no longer look forward as much to seeing you. They are busy with sports, friends, school and other activities. If your parents were already elderly, you're blessed if they can still visit. Visitors are more often outreach or religious visitors just so you can have a visit with someone from the outside world, or get food from the visiting room and get out of your cell.

You are more reliant now on your prison relationships because outside relationships are nearly nonexistent. If you came in young, you are now grown up. You've lived through regret, loss and are still waiting for rehabilitative programming. The courts sentenced you to a long time in order to make you learn a lesson, but you have likely learned that prison is not interested in your becoming rehabilitated. Your rehabilitation will only happen through your own efforts, your incentive.

Once you have been here for twenty or more years, it is unlikely that you still have anyone on the outside that helps provide for you or even visits. Not only have you suffered loss from your family in the world, but the family that you have created in prison begins dwindling. Some have gone home, others are elderly and can no longer visit you in the yard. Some have expired and others are getting close to it. You will never attend a funeral and have a little time or outlet for grief.

If you are fortunate enough to be released, you will leave the only "family" you have known for years, only to have no family left on the outside, to go to. The biggest lesson that you have learned in your years of incarceration is that Michigan discarded you when you were sentenced, they never expected you to improve yourself and they never expected you to walk its streets again.

Lifer's with or without parole.