

"The Call for Reformation"

I have experienced firsthand, the need for criminal justice and prison reform within the state of Virginia during the fifteen years of my incarceration. Were I to list the many complaints of offenses done to us, the number would be too great. And yet they call us "the offenders."

What of the offenses we suffer at the hands of this so-called justice system? Is it really justice? Or just-us? Just us, against them? And I speak not presently in the terms of racial injustice or inequality; for that is another matter altogether. I am speaking in terms of a system that seems its only prejudice is against justice itself!

Sound the battle cry! The call for reformation has been declared. Great is the need; but few are the soldiers. Many began as strong warriors, but

eventually grew weary in fighting what seemed to be a perpetual war of defeat. Year after year of petitioning the governor for clemency, meetings with the parole board, even seeking presidential pardons, is enough to knock the fight out of anyone. I too, have fought this fight. We are tired and we need help people!

We need help, and on a more positive note, we are now getting it! Many have begun to take a look at the debauchery suffered by those trapped inside of America's penal system. A system which shows no mercy and which has no regard, nor regret for lives turned upside down and families torn apart. No respect for individuality once a person becomes incarcerated.

We are labeled as offenders, inmates, and criminals. Felons; one who has committed a felony. While

each of these four words bears the weight of its own offensiveness, by far to me, the stamp of offender, is the most repugnant of them all. Yes we did offend someone who was affected by our crime; but that term should also be applied to those in charge of our rehabilitation.

Merriam-Webster defines the word offender as: one that offends. A word used much too loosely to describe one who is still human in spite of their mistakes. There is no human on earth whom has never offended another. No human on earth that has not made a mistake. And the last time I checked, none of us can ever lose our humanness. So technically, all of humanity are offenders. I suppose it's just that those of us locked behind bars are of the criminal kind.

But making headway, is the realization that those of us locked down are not the only offenders;

the only criminals. Gaining national attention lately is the way with which we are being mistreated, marginalized, and abused.

I cannot speak for the men on the inside, but I can speak for us women who are constantly abused verbally, physically at times, and beyond the shadow of a doubt, mentally and emotionally.

The abuse is ongoing. It has become habitual among the majority of staff and is just as damaging, if not more so, than the abuse many of us may have suffered prior to our incarceration. How does one deem that rehabilitative?

It is destructive behavior exhibited by brutes. Tyrants. Heartless overworked and underpaid individuals whose only concerns are showing up for work and receiving a pay-check. No respect for anyone who is just as human as they are. Many fail to realize that the only

differences between us and them is the uniform and the fact that they weren't caught for their offenses.

In every other aspect, we are all one and the same. We have feelings, families, health issues, financial difficulties, and so on. One and the same.

So what would make one treat another so inhumanely? Is my life not worth just as much as yours? If they serve us food they would themselves not eat, what makes it acceptable for us to eat it? If I have a complaint of pain, why tell me that my symptoms are psychosomatic, yet send me to an outside specialist who runs a test and finds a legitimate condition? Why address me with profanity and when I respond likewise, I am issued a disciplinary infraction? Why provide poor quality things at outrageous costs when some of

us survive off of our meager
twenty-seven cents an hour income?
And on and on is the list.

There is much to be said,
and definitely much to be changed
within America's penal system.
What will it really take? I would
like to leave you with one final
thought... Delegate Rob Bell (R), in
an interview that was published in
"The News and Advance" newspaper
stated, "Those policies that would
make our schools more dangerous
or result in the early release of
violent offenders are the ones that
are certainly causing the most
unease among those of us who
have made public safety a
priority in the last few years."

I wonder if Republican Bell
has any friends who are employed
as Correctional Officers in one
of these overcrowded prisons? I
wonder that if he did, how he
would refer to his buddy if

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After his buddy had worked his normal shift and unfortunately got drafted and was forced to work overtime, was driving home late at night tired from work, got distracted from sleepiness, took two seconds and rubbed his eyes and in that blink of the eyes, hit and killed a pedestrian?...

Would he call his buddy an offender? Would his buddy's accident not have offended the family of the deceased? His buddy would then become a violent offender as well. He would become one of the people being mistreated, marginalized and abused, sadly. That should be enough proof that it is time for a change! Clearly, the justice system is no respecter of persons!"

Written by:

Chanell Burnett

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