

Faith Over Fear

I have been incarcerated since I was seventeen years old. These past nine years have taught me many things. I got my G.E.D, earned an Associate's Degree, and became a certified optician. I've learned a good work ethic and maintain full-time employment. I've developed course curriculums, written proposals, and formed a good reputation with staff. I've learned personal lessons in love, faith, and family. This past January I went from having no option for release before the year 2033 to becoming parole eligible in 2031. Discovering the capacity to learn, lead, and remain hopeful has been one of the greatest moments on this journey. Yet, of all these lessons learned, nothing could prepare me for what we would face this 2020.

I am incarcerated at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women. This is Virginia's largest and only maximum security prison for females. It has the capacity to hold 1200 offenders. At the beginning of this year we had that many women here. Now, at the beginning of September we only have 900 housed here. This, one would think, is due to The Early Release Initiative in Response to Covid-19. That is not the case. Nearly all of these released offenders went home on their scheduled release-date. The lack of women here is actually because of the State's hold on new intakes. When that is lifted, my prison will once again overflow with women.

When this pandemic began in March, the prison went on a modified lockdown. No buildings could mix with each other. Only essential offenders are allowed to work. Visitation shut down; Volunteers were kept out and programming screeched to a halt.

Sanitation went to a two-hour schedule and masks were issued/mandatory for all staff and offenders. Even though all of these precautions were taken, the fear that we were waiting for the fire-storm of Covid-19 to take hold here was still palpable. About 2 months in we had point-prevalance testing for all offenders and staff. Of this, only a few false positives showed up. The fear became a thing of the past and it almost seemed as if our safety measures placed us in a bubble.

Sadly, our bubble was popped on September 4th when 2 offenders tested positive. They were showing symptoms and hiding in their unit for five days before others told on them. Administration tested the 234 offenders that are housed in that building. Of this, 41 offenders were positive. During this time we only had 3 positive staff members. Now, two weeks later, we have 11 positive staff members and 3 offenders in the hospital. Covid-19 has finally found Fluvanna. Every offender and staff member has been tested again. It's been four days and we still have not received the complete results.

Fear abounds in Fluvanna: Fear that we will be placed in isolation, fear that we will test positive, fear that our population has received the death sentence. As we wait to find out what our fate is I try to lean on the lessons I've learned so far. I cling to my faith, friends, and family. I've seen people with life sentences be released, offenders with cancer survive, and laws pass that cut people's sentences in half. I've witnessed too many miracles to not hold onto hope.

It is my goal during this pandemic to be a light in a prison full of dark fear. I must remain positive and show love to those around me. If the lessons I've learned can't see me through 2020, how will they help me in the future?