

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Life After Murder
By Nancy Mullane

I read the above titled book after I heard about it on public radio because it profiles the experiences of 5 lifers who were released from California prisons from 2006-2010 and I thought I might be able to glean some information or strategies to help lifers in Wisconsin (including me) get released. I can't say for sure whether anything I read will be applicable to Wisconsin but it was an interesting, very well written book.

The author began going into San Quentin prison to do stories about lifers for public radio and gradually came to know numerous lifers - many of whom were convicted of murder. She found out about (and reported on) something those of us in prison already know: those in prison for murder are for the most part normal people who went wrong at some point and ended up in a tragic situation. there are exceptions, of course, - psychos who raped and killed, etc. - but many lifers are regular people who used their time in prison to address issues in their lives and become responsible, well-regarded citizens.

The problem is the propaganda the news media and politicians disseminate to demonize us. Sensationalism sells newspapers and scaring the public garners votes for tough-on-crime politicians.

Wisconsin has thousands of prisoners (lifers and others) who have been incarcerated for decades, no longer pose a risk to anyone if released, and are being warehoused so Governor Walker can show everyone he is tough on crime. Lifers get the brunt of these kind of policies because we're the only ones who don't have predetermined release dates. Keeping murderers off the streets is a laudable goal in principle. The reality is that tomorrow's murderers are today's petty criminals. People convicted of murder and released on parole don't return to prison for murder (I have encountered one exception in the 27 years I've been in prison).

One notable difference between the Wis. and Cal. systems is that Cal. lifers do not leave maximum security until they are "found suitable" for release and within a couple of days

of final approval, they are out in society. I can't imagine how any rational decision maker can find a lifer suitable for release without having a chance to observe that person in reduced security to ease the transition back into society.

In Wisconsin, lifers work their way down to medium, then minimum and finally community custody. I spent a total of 9 years at minimum security and/or community custody, was out on work release in a factory in society for 19 months and worked as a state van driver where I drove over 30,000 miles unsupervised while I ferried other prisoners to and from their work release sites. I can't imagine how a rational decision maker could find that I still pose an unreasonable risk to the public. But they did and that's why I'm currently stuck in medium security.

The California court system is vastly superior to the Wisconsin system in that their judges are not afraid to compel the executive branch to act fairly. Wisconsin judges - those we look to for vindication of our rights - routinely abdicate that responsibility and adopt a hands-off doctrine (which is why the parole commission is free to deny me release on parole even after I proved I'm not a risk to anyone).

One point all of the lifers agreed on was the need to stay positive and keep working toward release no matter how many times they were denied. Those who give up never get out. I agree with them and have stayed focused on the goal: release from prison. But I have to admit that since I've come back to medium security it is sometimes very difficult not to just give up because it seems so hopeless and unfair. But I always gather up a handful of resolve, reaffirm my faith in God and continue to focus on the goal.

I pray that one day all lifers who have turned their lives around will be acknowledged and granted the release on parole that they have earned. After all, even George Bush said that we were a nation of second chances.