

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

February 16, 2015

"Grandma, I don't care if it's snowing,
get in your wheelchair and
go send me a money order . . ."

These are the words I over heard a fellow prisoner tell someone over the phone last week. I was sitting in the dayroom at a table a few feet away from the phone the guy was talking on. There were several other prisoners at the next table over who also heard what the guy told his grandmother.

There was a quiet pause, then the unintentional eavesdroppers burst out laughing and started making fun of the guy for what he said. He got angry, told them to stop listening to his conversation and turned to face the other direction. After this, he kept his voice low so no one could hear what else he said.

The next day he was back in the dayroom sitting with some of his buddies next to the table where I was sitting. He had the hobbies supplies catalog and was looking for things to buy for his yarn hobby. One guy pointed out to him that he already had the allowable 6-pound limit on yarn so he couldn't buy any more until he used up the yarn he already had.

I like to think that there aren't many people who are so selfish and self-centered that they would send their ailing grandma out in a snowstorm in her wheelchair just so he can show off to his buddies how much cash he has in prison. I wondered if the grandmother was living on social security disability and by sending her demanding grandson money, she was depriving herself of food or medication. I doubt if it would have mattered to him if it did. He was a young, white, wanna-be gangbanger with an image to maintain. That meant he had to have lots of money to squander on canteen items, personal property and hobby supplies. If he had to threaten his wheelchair-bound grandmother to get that money, it was all part of being a gangster.

In my opinion, she should have hung up on him and not had anything more to do with him until he apologized and began to treat her with the respect she deserved. Many people are slaves to their emotions. She no doubt loved her grandson very much and made excuses to herself to his abusive behavior. By caving in to him she sent him the wrong message. She showed him that he could and would be rewarded for his bullying behavior.

I have seen similar scenes throughout my years in prison. Children and grandchildren who make unreasonable demands on their parents or grandparents. Sometimes, those men successfully bully their loved ones into meeting their demands. Other times, they are told not to call back or write until they grow up and apologize. A situation like this needs tough love. No matter how much it hurts to say no to a son or grandson, he must be taught to respect his family and put their welfare before his own. If he doesn't, then the family is better off not having him around. These same prisoners will get released and, if given the chance, continue to make unreasonable demands - even going so far as to take by force that which they cannot get by intimidation.

This is my advice for all you parents and grandparents who have someone in prison. Do not give in to unreasonable demands. If your child or grandchild tries to take advantage of you with emotional blackmail or intimidation, do us all a favor and force them to grow up. If you don't, it will only be worse for you when they are released.

There is nothing wrong with sending money to (or buying things for) your loved one who is in prison - as long as you can afford it. But don't make yourselves into victims and subject yourself to privation and suffering just because someone you love chose to come to prison.