

Life in the Body Dump

How Prisons Warehouse Discarded Women

Kelly Pflug-Back

At 47, Edith Marie Price shows more than a few signs of wear. While her mannerisms generally convey a buoyant and carefree geniality, her face's gauntness betrays the ravages of decades of intravenous drug use, poverty, and the inevitable progression of HIV. Even when she laughs, her dark eyes seem to sparkle with the disarming intensity of all that they have seen.

For Edith, or Edie, as she is known to most of the other residents of the maximum security cell block she currently calls home, 2012 is a very special year. It marks the 30th anniversary of her ride in the revolving doors of Canada's prison system.

Since her first conflict with the law at age 17, Edie has been arrested over 100 times and convicted of 52 offenses, all of them drug-related. A long-term opiate user, Edie once worked in the sex trade to support her addiction. "I quit working the streets because I'm gay" she explains. "That, and I realized I could sell drugs instead."

"It's not like I'm out to hurt people," she says of her line of work. "A lot of people come to me. If they're hungry, I feed them; if they're sick, I take care of them."

Police target drug dealers who they see as being responsible for the unsightly presence of addiction on the streets, and for thefts, robberies, and break-ins which people commit because they lack other means to pay for drugs.

Although the activities of drug dealers create major problems in poor communities, they are not the root cause of crime and addiction, according to Edie. In fact, she says, cracking down on trafficking generally escalates levels of street crime as dealers become more aggressive and reckless in order to make the risks worth it for themselves financially, often engaging in violent turf wars and cutting their product with toxic substances to increase weight, resulting in epidemic deaths within the user population.

Drug abuse, Edie says, usually stems from the emotional and psychological pain of trauma, one of the few commodities which the poor and disenfranchised are allowed to possess in sheer surplus. Like a grotesquely high proportion of women who end up on the streets and in conflict with the law, Edie's life has been shaped by abuse and neglect. From the age of six, Edie was sexually preyed upon by her step-father. The abuse was an open secret in their home, known to all but never acknowledged until Edie became pregnant at 16 and her mother demanded she get an abortion.

While the high percentage of abuse survivors in the female prison population is clear, the institution which houses Edie and a few hundred other women does nothing to address this in the allegedly rehabilitative structure of its policies and regimen. "The guards here," Edie tells me, "have no training for dealing with mental health issues. And, having been raped is a mental health issue. But how do you go up to a guard and say 'Look, I was abused, I was raped?'"

It was abuse which pushed Edie to drop out of school in the eighth grade, confused and alienated by the grim reality of her home life. Unable to bear her father's violence and her mother's denial any longer, she ran away at 17 to live on the streets of Toronto. Her older brother, already a heroin user, was the only person she knew from whom

to seek companionship. “My brother was the first one to put a needle in my arm,” she tells me, her eyes welling with tears. “And every time I tell him that, he cries.”

While Edie’s drug use itself has not significantly interfered with her ability to work and lead a relatively stable life, the criminalization of her addiction has. When she moved to Edmonton after earning a forklift operator’s license a few years ago, it was not long before local authorities learned of her extensive drug history and began routinely searching her whenever she was spotted downtown.

These searches were often coupled with violence as a deep scar running down her left shin attests, and it was not uncommon for male officers to illegally strip-search her. Now back in Ontario, the searches of Edie’s home and person are no less routine and systematic. A raid at the St. Catherine’s house where she lives with her wife of 15 years, resulted in the discovery of two prescription opiate pills, and is the reason for her current incarceration.

If drug use were not treated as a criminal offense, Edie feels that she could have had a very different lot in life. With access to safe injection sites and a greater availability of harm reduction services, she would not have resorted to using the contaminated needle that infected her with HIV. Without the disruption of frequent periods of incarceration she could have pursued her career interests rather than working the sex trade against her wishes.

Like many people who grapple with addiction in a society which regards drug dependence as a crime and a moral defect rather than a complex and layered social issue, Edie’s life has been characterized by bitter, “If Only;”—if only she hadn’t developed an addiction, she would not have spent the 30 years in and out of jail. If only she’d had love and stability in her childhood instead of violence and isolation she would not have spent her life carrying the pain which pushed her down the road of drug abuse to begin with.

“When you really get down to the bottom of it,” Edie explains, “it’s because I was raped that I am in this position today. It is because I was raped that the system fucks with me.”

It is here that the majority of public criticism relating to the carceral system shows its limitations as gender-biased analysis. Prisons in general may be a way of warehousing the surplus populations whose presence on the streets challenges the fundamental myths of capitalism, but the institutions which imprison women in particular are in many ways a different entity.

Within a patriarchal society, imprisoning impoverished and marginalized women functions as a sort of return policy, through which broken or defective objects may discretely be disposed of once they have been used to the point where they can no longer serve their allotted purpose. Sex trade workers who rob pimps or attack abusive clients, rape survivors who turn to drugs to escape the pain of post traumatic stress, and underpaid workers who skim off of lecherous bosses may easily be discarded.

The inequalities inherent in patriarchal society will continue to produce a seemingly endless selection of newer, more vulnerable, more easily dominated models for the benefit of the consumer class. And, when they too become drab, worn out, or scarred to the point of complete disfigurement from over-use, they can join their predecessors in one of the prison system’s numerous dumpsites for damaged and rejected goods.

While Edie’s body remains physically confined, she has in many ways attained a level of freedom which many survivors, incarcerated or otherwise, go their entire lives without realizing.

“I didn’t go through this for nothing.” She says, her face hardening with a stony conviction. “Do you know how many people I advise in here? I know this system. I know it like the back of my hand.”

Edie is a woman who has stared back into the faceless gaze of the overseer, studied the drives and motives of the state’s judicial apparatus in painstaking detail. She has come to understand and accept that her life’s circumstances are the product of complex systems of power and oppression, rather than the simple outcome of her actions as an individual.

It is this understanding which has allowed her to free herself from the internalized shame and self-hate which torment so many survivors of abuse, both structural and direct, and that is a freedom which no one can take away from her.

Kelly Pflug-Back, a Fifth Estate editor, is imprisoned in the same facility as Edie.

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