

*Keeping Love Alive
While in Prison*



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A publication of Oregon CURE

FORWARD:

As noted in the introduction, this pamphlet was originally published by Michigan CURE and the Criminal Justice Program of the American Friends Service Committee in Michigan. The authors, Dan and Sharon Van der Boegh, have generously agreed to let us make the material available to our members and other interested people in Oregon.

To update: Dan has now been released from the Michigan prison system, and is on parole. Just days before his release, their son Danny died in his sleep following a seizure. Their marriage remains strong, and they continue to work to keep their family together.

INTRODUCTION:

There are many men and women in prison who try to keep their marriage intact. It is not an easy thing to do, especially after the judicial system is through with the accused. If you and your spouse have had a good, loving and meaningful relationship before, it is possible to keep that relationship alive while in prison. If your marriage was rooted in deceit, distrust, or codependency, the likelihood of it surviving is not good. This does not mean that you and your spouse cannot save your marriage, but that to two of you will have to work harder. You will have to take the artificial relationship and change it to a solid, loving marriage. It can be done. Both you and your spouse will have plenty of time to work at it. It *will* be work, but the result will be a closer, more intimate, loving relationship that will survive anything.

My wife and I are writing this from our experiences and from the information I have received from dozens of other inmates who have tried to keep their marriage alive. Some have a good relationship still going: others are separated or divorced. A lot can be learned from others mistakes and successes. I thank all those men who were willing to talk about their marriages in detail. I am an inmate in the Michigan prison system, and my wife is a registered nurse. We have seven children, one of whom is married and another who is mentally impaired. Our source of power is our commitment to each other. We would like to thank Michigan CURE and the American Friends Service Committee for giving us this opportunity to help you with your marriage or relationship.

Keeping Love Alive While in Prison

BUSTED.....

Unless your crime was against your spouse, more than likely your spouse will be on your side during the court proceedings. She wants to believe you. Her life is intertwined with yours and an accusation against you will be taken as a failure on her part. She is your greatest supporter and she needs you to support her. She is just as frightened about what the future will bring as you are. Her life is also in turmoil.

After years of marriage, communications between husband and wife usually breaks down and is replaced with assumptions. Now, both of you must reestablish good communications. She needs to hear and see how you really feel about her and you need the same. She needs your warmth and security to get her through it. The same old "You know I love you" will not get it. It will also give you some sense of security.

Truthfulness is also very important. She will be very interested in what you did and why. Remember, she will hear many things in the courtroom, and possibly in the newspaper or on TV. If she cannot trust that you have told her the truth, it will place a big strain on your relationship. Shame and depression lead us to feel that we are not worthy of being loved by anybody, even oneself. You will be unable to see why your wife is willing to stay by you. She can tell you are a good man who has done something wrong, not a bad man. Many men tend to push their wives away, or tell them to leave and find someone better.

These are not your true feelings, and you really aren't in a state of mind to make these decisions.

Friends and family may rally around you and your spouse during this time and throughout the first part of your imprisonment. Their emotional support will slowly diminish as time goes by. With you gone, your wife will find them visiting less often, as their lives get back to normal. She will feel like a fifth wheel when she goes out with friends who are married. Don't depend on friends and family for long term emotional support: they are likely to disappoint you. They are not abandoning you or your wife, but fail to understand the needs of both of you. You and your wife have to depend on each other for emotional support.

This is the time to get all of your affairs in order. You have to look at the worst case-you are going to prison-and settle whatever financial, business, contracts, and other affairs that can be resolved. If you don't, your wife or someone else will have to resolve them in your absence, which may not be to your advantage. Being open and honest with others will usually lead to them working with you to settle these matters. Your wife is not going to be in the best frame of mind to settle these affairs after you are sentenced.

The worst thing you can do is to isolate yourself from those who love you. Do not bury yourself in a bottle or some other self-defeating behavior. You have to take the responsibility for what you did, but do not think that no one can love you because of what you have done. You will be making a decision that is not yours to make.

DOING THE TIME.....

The most important factor in rehabilitation is family contact in a loving and caring way. When first coming to prison, you will be frightened. You do not know what to expect and all you can think of is how the movies and TV show prison. You will adapt to the routine of prison life, in time. It is natural to feel sorry for oneself, but you do have someone else who needs your concern. Your wife and family are not having a great time back at home. They also feel the loss of your presence and of the security you provided. You have the job of consoling them as they are doing the same for you.

Your wife has just taken on added responsibilities for which she may not feel ready. She may be the principal bread winner, or need to make arrangements to go on welfare. She has to make the final decisions for the family and make them work. She, alone, has the burden of disciplining the children. She has full responsibility of running the family. She need not do this alone. You can still be a part of your family system, become involved and supportive of your family making decisions. Do not just put down your wife for making a decision you feel is not right. You will just have to trust that she has made the right choices. Whenever possible, both of you should discuss the problems and the possible solutions before anything becomes final. Then, don't second guess afterwards. If she is to do the jobs at home that you did before, she needs your confidence in her ability to do them right.

Do not become a financial burden to your wife. She has to maintain the family finances without your income, and any nest egg that you had put away for a rainy day has probably been

used to pay for your lawyer. Running up huge telephone bills and demanding money for your comfort will create a financial burden. If it causes your family to do without things they need or to lose things (phone, housing, transportation) due to lack of payment, you will soon find your marriage in ruins. The state will provide the essentials that you need, but putting your family into bankruptcy or out on the street only adds a tremendous strain to the relationship. Be concerned with their financial welfare.

Maintaining family contact is thought to be one of the greatest factors in rehabilitation. Unfortunately, many inmates are housed far from their families. This makes it difficult to have visits. So it is very important to make the most of every visit you do get. Your wife has come to see you because she loves you, not to fight with you. She wants your love, appreciation, and reassurance that she is doing things right, not to be put down and humiliated. It is best to look at a visit as courting your wife again while sitting in her parents' living room with them present. Don't do anything that will embarrass you or her. Learn how to discuss problems, not to argue and fight. In order to do this, you must learn to listen as well as talk. These are things that should already be part of your relationship, but for many, they aren't.

Letters will be your main link with your wife. Many of us are not good letter writers when we first come down, but practice and commitment to writing will improve the quality of your letters. Don't worry about spelling and punctuation. She will figure it out. It is the idea that you do write that counts. You don't have anything to say? Every day is the same? You are missing the point. Every woman loves to receive love letters. Remember, in order to keep marriage going, you must keep romance alive. You will find other things to write about eventually,

just keep the letters flowing back and forth.

Don't forget your kids! They love it when Daddy writes a personal letter to them.

Some men believe their wife is so dependent on them that she can't do anything without him. If that is true, she will probably find someone else to be that dependent on. Give your woman credit. She can do things without you telling her what to do. You'll be amazed at how quickly she will learn your duties and how to perform them.

You may see many changes in your wife while you are in prison. Bouts of depression are common. If she gets too depressed, let someone on the outside know about it, and encourage her to get professional help.

Infidelity can be another problem. An affair does not have to be the end of your marriage. A woman, at times, needs the physical security and warmth of being in a man's arms. She may be questioning her femininity. She feels bad enough for having done such a thing, and your ridiculing her will only drive a wedge between the two of you.

Jealousy is another big strain on the marriage. If you question her about who she was with every time she goes out, and to go into a rage if she so much as talks to another man, you are carrying it too far. Mild jealousy can be good in a marriage if it makes your wife feel special. You will have to trust her.

What your wife needs from you is honesty, encouragement, respect, understanding and trust. All of these should already be important parts of the love that you have for her.

NOTES ON GETTING OUT.....

When you are finally released, things will not be the same as when you left. Your wife has handled the bills, bank account discipline, household maintenance, etc. Do not expect to walk back into the house and take over all the jobs you handled before. If you try, you will find yourself overwhelmed in no time. Furthermore, it tells your wife you were not confident in her ability to deal with those tasks. Ease back into them by helping her with them at first. Then she will release those tasks to you as she feels that she needs to no longer carry all of the burden.

This is a time to learn to relax. This may sound funny after spending years doing almost nothing, but you have spent that time in a tense environment. Find a hobby, or do something that you enjoyed doing before going to prison. But do not go back to old pleasures or people that will violate your parole.

Too often a man's biggest concern is to get a good job and help support his family. Stop and look at all of your options. It may be to your advantage to go back to school or some training program so you can get and keep a very good job. You have to look to the future, not just next week.

Seek out a support or therapy group, if needed, and become active in it. You must still work at breaking the old habits that contributed to your getting into trouble in the first place. This may mean leaving old friends and finding new, more positively supporting ones.

These things are not just for yourself, but for your family too. Being in prison may have been a negative experience, but now you must turn it into something positive-a change in you. You will not do any good for

your wife or family by doing something stupid and returning to prison. Rehabilitation is entirely up to you, and it takes continuous practice.

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE OUTSIDE.....

For my part of this endeavor, I thought that sharing some of our personal experiences might make what my husband tried to point out more meaningful. Keeping love alive while in prison could be one of the toughest, but most rewarding battles you may ever fight.

I had never had any experience with the judicial system before. Believe me, my eyes were opened wide to a whole different truth. Conviction is the number one priority. They don't care who gets hurt in the process- just get that conviction.

Between the time of my husband's being charged with his crime and his receiving his sentence, I had to deal with many emotions-shock, fear, anger, distrust, sadness and loneliness. No one, not even our lawyer, told me what was happening. I felt totally helpless and very confused. Strangers were changing my life and I didn't know how to stop them.

I found myself falling into a deep depression. I felt like I was going crazy. Luckily I was put in touch with our Community Mental Health Department and placed in an outpatient program. Medicaid covered these expenses. This program helped me get to a point where I was strong enough to function again. I found it was very important for my husband and I to talk about what had happened. I needed to understand why. I loved him, but felt very betrayed. Our communication took on a whole new meaning.

It meant the survival of our marriage. Yes, truthfulness was very important. If I didn't know the whole truth, how could I ever trust him again? My self-esteem was at an all time low and I needed his love and support just as much as he needed mine.

Unfortunately, we didn't believe he would go to prison, and did not put affairs in order. I, while in total shock at his being sent to prison, had to settle affairs myself, and at the same time, be a source of comfort and strength to our children. We were fortunate to have family and friends around at that time to help where they could.

Since that time, I've learned that maybe I could have been more aggressive in my support of my husband with his lawyer and the prosecutor. Too often money or convictions are the only things these people see. They need to be reminded of the broader picture-spouse, children, victims, etc.

At first many family and friends were there to comfort and support Dan, myself and the children. But as time has gone on, their numbers have lessened. Many have gone on with their own lives. I don't think they have purposely turned their backs on us, but rather that they don't realize we still need their support.

From the outside, we look like we are doing okay, but inside we still have shaky times. Just having someone call or come to visit means so much. Through reading and talking with people who are knowledgeable, it has been pointed out to us that we must reach out to these people ourselves. We need to continually remind them that we need contact with them. We need their support now and when Dan gets paroled. It has been proven that if an ex-offender doesn't have a support group of family and

friends when he or she gets out, it is very difficult to make it on the outside. Reach out to these people. Let them know how important they are to you and to your marriage surviving.

Unfortunately, we have had some family and friends turn their backs and walk away from us. They can't deal with what Dan did, nor the fact that I'm standing by him. Even some immediate family members are in this group. This has been a very difficult hurt to deal with. I've had to face the fact that I can't make people change. I've had to go on without them being part of my life. It still hurts, but I can't let it destroy me. I made the choice that keeping my marriage intact is my number one priority, and keeping my family together is most important. My energy must be focused on these goals now, nothing else.

When I found myself focusing on what I've lost or how people are ignoring me, I end up very depressed and good for no one. I just recently forgot my important focuses and started dwelling on the hurts and losses that I have no control over. I found myself seriously considering dying. Because of my husband's love and support, I am now on the upward swing. He encourages me to talk about my feelings no matter how bad it hurt. In the visiting room, I cried on his shoulder. He wrote letters, and in some cases, called family, friends and even my psychologist to get me help. In other words, when I was ready to give up, he wasn't. It wasn't easy helping me from prison, but he didn't just say "I can't do anything for her when I'm in here" and give up. No, he used paper and pen and phone and most of all he listened and cared.

During this last low period, I refused to reach out to others at first. I sat home, called no one and then told Dan that nobody cared about me. Later on, I found that people did care, they just

didn't know how I needed them. I thought they were pulling away from me, but in all truth, I was backing away from them. Important lesson to remember: both you and your spouse need others to form a circle of support, especially in the low times, but you must let them know you need them! No one can read your mind. They can't help if they don't know you need help.

At this time, I am a fifth wheel. I get left out of a lot of things. I have learned that I also was sentenced to do time the same day as my husband. Not only am I left out of a lot of activities because my husband's gone, but I find myself isolated in many instances because the outside world doesn't understand my being able to love someone in prison. People ask me if I'm married, and I have found I must be cautious as to what I say. Usually, I just say yes, but that he can't be with me at this time. Society has a distorted view of those in prison. They lump all inmates into one category-scum of the earth! They don't realize that many who are in prison made a mistake and are really sincere in changing. Therefore, I, as the spouse of an inmate, am also looked upon badly. So, I must learn to choose carefully those in whom I confide. My outside support system is very small.

Thus, I must depend on my husband for much strength and support. I'm raising what is considered a large family all by myself. I have had to take over all the responsibilities-children, home, care, bills, etc. My husband has a roof over his head and three meals a day-maybe not good meals, but at least food. The outside world doesn't care if we have a place to stay or food to eat. Bill collectors are only concerned with getting their money- they don't care if little Carrie needs shoes.

Dan and I try to work out financed together as much as possible.

Before any major expenditure occur such as need for another car, we discuss the pros and cons and he shares some of his expertise on what to look for. I must make the final decisions, but his input is very important.

Many times I've sat in the visiting room listening to inmates demand more money and more clothing from their wives and family. I've heard some inmates complain because the new jeans they just got weren't a certain name brand. My blood pressure goes sky high when I hear this. I must budget my money carefully and we must sacrifice often to survive. The children and I don't wear name brand clothing. We get what is affordable I our budget. Dan is not demanding of us for clothing or money. He understands how tough it is, and accepts whatever I can give him. He also says that we are not to go without just so he can have. He respects our needs and this is very important in a marriage.

Dan also understands the pressures I am under and that even though I am surrounded by several children, I often feel very lonely. I need time away from the children and work. I need to be kind to myself. He encourages me to get out with other adults-to do things I enjoy. For a time, I attended ceramics classes. I attend church, and this summer I've had the opportunity to spend two to three days at a time at my uncle's cottage which is about eighty miles away. When I spend time at the cottage, I give up time that I could be visiting with Dan. But Dan doesn't complain and feel sorry for himself. He understands that I need to get away from all the pressures. Those two to three days renew my strength and, in fact, make future visits with Dan even more enjoyable. It also gives us more to talk about. I share everything I see and do. I try to

describe settings I have seen. I also take pictures to send in to him. Many times, it is easier just to sit home and just hibernate, but Dan encourages me to be active and get out and do things. I have sat in the visiting room and overheard inmates angrily react because their wives went out with the girls or weren't home when they called. These men expect their wives (or girlfriends) to sit home and wait for a phone call that may not come, and not associate with anyone or have any fun until they get out. Phooey!! This is a sure-fire way to end a marriage (or a relationship). Trust your spouse (partner) to make wise decisions on what she does. Support her, trust her and encourage her. Believe me, she'll love you more for it.

At first, I felt it would hurt Dan if I shared with him things I was doing that he couldn't, but actually it hurt him worse not talking about them. He felt like he was being left out completely. When our oldest daughter decided to get married, I kept Dan up to date on all the plans. I took pictures of the showers and- of course- the big wedding. I sent him pieces of the material for the dresses. I even asked for his input on some of the plans. Even though he couldn't be there, he still was a part of it.

I find writing letters are an easier way to explain things at times. I draw pictures with words. I take lots of pictures and send them to him. If I make something in ceramics, I send him a picture of it. When I moved, I sent him pictures of our new home so he could know what it was like and what I was talking about. I even took pictures of the neighborhood from our front steps so he could see what the area was like. I share all the kids' activities with him and take pictures whenever possible. I also try to tell

him of changes in our town and send newspaper articles when possible. I don't want the outside world's changes to be too much of a shock when he gets out.

We visit as often as possible, and I try to take the children also. But remember, you need time together alone. The children need time with Dad, but you and your spouse need time alone together also. Sometimes we sit on a visit and talk very little. Sometimes just being together with his arm on my shoulder or holding hands is what is needed at this time.

Even though we can now visit often, we still write letters at times. Letters are a great communication tool. I find I can say things in a letter that are difficult to say in the visiting room. And I love reading Dan's love letters to me over and over again. Sometimes I find a card that says something special and I send it to Dan. One Christmas, the kids made homemade Christmas cards for Dan and we sent them in a big envelope. He was told not to open them until Christmas morning. Sometimes, the children draw pictures to send. They need to share with Dad also.

Some activities they can share in are crossword puzzles. Send a copy of one to Dad, and have the kids do one at home; then they can compare answers. Have the children read a book and then write about it for Dad. Make homemade cards and pictures.

This past year, I made Dan a calendar and on each month I put a special little note or saying. I marked all the special days of celebration. It was more fun than buying one. Let your imagination run wild. Be positive in this very negative time.

Dan often finds it hard to talk about what he's doing because it seems so boring, but I need to share his life too. I need to feel a part of his world. What seems dull and boring to him gives me insight into what doing time means for him. It's very difficult for him to share his emotions at this time, but he tries. I have to remember he's in a place where they are conditioned to not show emotion- they could be interpreted as weakness.

Our faith in a higher being is also of great comfort to us. We place our lives in His care. We each get the "Daily Bread" and read it every day. Sometimes we discuss the lessons. We each take time during the day to pray for the other. Since I can't be there with Dan to be sure he's all right, I find comfort in having my higher being watch over Dan. My church family can be a great comfort at times, but even they can't understand what all I'm going through, so I can't depend on them only.

I have found if you can find someone else who has or has had someone in prison; you can share best with them. They've been there; they do understand. I have been blessed by having met several people through Michigan CURE who can and want to give me support. Reach out to these people.

Dan and I recently were privileged to attend a marriage seminar sponsored by Prison Fellowship. We learned the importance of not listening to negative people. If we love each other, it's okay! If I want to stand by my man, it's all right! We were encouraged to continue good communication practices, to put our priorities in order, and to set goals together. It was a beautiful weekend. At the end, Dan and I renewed our wedding vows. We are starting anew. No longer do we have secrets or mistrust. We are one together. Dan has been in two and one-half years, and I can

see where our relationship has grown stronger through this experience.

His 'out date' will come someday and it's important for us to plan for it. We have both been damaged by this experience. We have both changed. It has been recommended that we take the first year after he is out to get to know each other again. Think of this time as courting. We have been advised not to get involved in too many outside activities at first. We are preparing now for that time. We are setting goals. Dan must decide what he wants to make of his life and how he will accomplish this. We want to help others going through what we have. Dan wants to go back to college and get a degree in social work or psychology. We are making decisions together- after all, it's both our futures that are involved. We each must give 100% of ourselves to this relationship if it will work. We must build up each other's self esteem. One must complement the other.

I have been handling all the responsibilities. I will turn over a little responsibility at a time as Dan feels he can handle it. I will try not to demand too much too soon. He needs time to adjust to this strange new life. To make the transition of once again being a disciplinary figure to the children, we have begun working on that already. When one of the children has a problem or gets in trouble Dan and I discuss it and then we talk with the child together. We decide on punishments together and stand unified before the children on these decisions. Often when one of the children is troubled, Dan will write a letter and try to help him or her find a way through it, always building them up as he does it. He lets each child know that they are loved and they are very special.

Another ex-inmate told us it was important to plan what you're

going to do on the out-date, especially. Will you want to be around a lot of people, or will you want more private surroundings? Will you want to eat out or go straight home? These may seem unimportant, but if you think about it, it does make sense. You've waited a long time for this day and it would be a shame to see it ruined. On that special day, do what the two of you need to do to keep it positive. It's your day, not anyone else's. Plan it out ahead of time and do what feels comfortable to you.

Over the past two and one-half years, we have had many high times and also many low times. My psychologist told me to think of the low times as a big wave coming over me. You can't stop it. Just ride it through and in time it will be gone.

The Department of Corrections is always changing policies and rules. Some guards are very decent, but others tend to abuse the power given to them. In many cases, relationships are discouraged more than encouraged. Those guards who enjoy flaunting their power can make a visit very uncomfortable. Sometimes they delay the start of the visit. Remember, your goal is to keep your love alive. Let them play their games but don't become one of their victims. Be extra cautious during these visits. Don't give them a chance to terminate your visit, and most important, try very hard not to turn your anger against your loved one, which is very easy to do.

Believe me, Dan and I have had to experience some very difficult and low times. We have experienced family deaths, loss of friendships, appeals being turned down, repossession of material items, and earlier this spring, giving up custody of a child. We have a 15 year old son who is mentally impaired and has a seizure disorder. We both love Danny very much, but Danny

became very defiant and combative. I tried everything. Even his school worked with me, but he just kept getting worse and worse. The other children were suffering also from this. I couldn't get any help for, or a break from Danny. After much soul searching and praying, our only answer was to have Danny placed in foster care. This meant giving up our custody rights and placing him in the care of the state. We didn't want to, but we had no other choice. Looking at all the pros and cons, this was only good choice for all concerned (especially Danny) at this time. Both Dan and I suffered some very heavy guilt trips. Of course, in order to have the state take over custody of a child, the parents must be charged with either abuse or neglect. They state it's only a formality, and no official charges are brought, but it still hurts very deeply to say, yes, I'm guilty of neglect. This was one of the lowest times we've experienced. We truly had to use every ounce of energy within us to survive. We could easily have let our anger and hurt destroy our marriage. We had to work harder than ever to support each other and keep our love alive. Because we had been working right along to strengthen the foundation of our marriage, we were able to survive this most trying experience. I can take Danny whenever I want and I make sure he gets to visit Dan also. This was the wise choice, but making it still hurt very badly.

There will definitely be more low times and more battles to fight. But if we are sincere and work hard at it, we can make our love survive. It would be very easy to just give up and walk away from it- after all, that's what society wants. But I don't, and even though it's tough, I'm hanging in there.

Yes, keeping love alive while in prison is a difficult task, but it can be worth it if you work at it. Others may say your spouse is

scum, but you know different. Look at the positive and good points in this person. If there are enough positive reasons to love him or her, then do it! Don't let others decide the fate of your marriage. Hopefully someday, through good education, society will be able to understand why we stand by our spouses. But for now, as I stand by my man, I will hold my head up high and walk proudly. I love him and he loves me, and that's all that matters. And every day I tell myself, it's okay to love someone in prison. It's okay for you to love someone in prison, too.

*LOVE AND BEING LOVED ARE WHAT LIFE
IS ALL ABOUT! DARE TO CARE!
IT'S OKAY!*

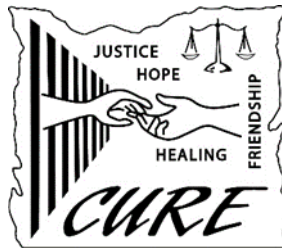
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