



Local News

January 26, 2010

OC tackles female prisoner rate

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Tools



James Coburn The Edmond Sun

EDMOND — Cultural shock can hit a woman like a freight train after she is released from incarceration, said Barbara Saunders, who has been there.

“There’s so much and it’s so fast — it’s scary,” said Saunders, who was released from prison in 1990.

Saunders was just one point of light Tuesday when she was among more than 400 audience members gathered for a statewide summit at Oklahoma Christian University focusing on incarcerated women.

As part of OC’s Complex Dialogues series, the event focused on early intervention and prevention for nonviolent offenders, a group comprising 68 percent of the state’s female prison population. OC hosted the event along with the George Kaiser Family Foundation and Don and Donna Millican.

Don Millican said he believes that his Christian faith should be expressed in public policy.

“We believe that we should pursue policies dealing with non-violent offenders, particularly women and mothers,” he said. “Policies that do not overlook their offenses have a chance to give them the tools to become the women and mothers their creator intended them to be.”

Oklahoma currently leads the United States in incarcerating women at a rate of 134 women per 100,000, compared to the national average of 69 women per 100,000, according to the Oklahoma Department of Corrections.

Ken Levit, executive director of the George Kaiser Family Foundation, said the issue is a crisis confronting Oklahomans morally and spiritually.

Today, Saunders teaches women incarcerated in state prisons and jails to prepare for living a safe, sane and normal life after they are released back into society.

“The primary thing that gives it power is I’m an ex-offender and I teach the class,” Saunders said. “And I’m able to say, ‘Been there, done that, and this is how I handled it.’”

The Women in Transition curriculum gives women hope that they can change their lives, she said.

“Women in Transition is helping me by teaching me the fundamentals of transitioning into the world,” one of the inmates wrote. “... Also the class has helped me develop a strong, healthy relationship with God.”

Women learn how to live safe and sane after being released from prison. The program includes topics such as setting boundaries, the power of saying “no,” codependency, family secrets and shame, goal setting, recognizing the warning signs of falling back into destructive relationships and behaviors.

Stand in the Gap Ministries sponsors Saunders’ participation in the program. The ministry provides a spiritual family of four to six people to give the women positive reinforcement when they are released from prison.

Dr. Laura Pitman of the Oklahoma Department of Corrections said Oklahoma’s three-year recidivism rate for women is at 14.7 percent.

Volunteers for Stand the Gap Ministries are Christian people who commit for a year to spend regular time with the women for a year after their incarceration.

“They become bonded,” Saunders explained. “Through the relationships, through the spiritual family, the woman learns new behaviors to replace old, destructive behaviors.”

To challenge policymakers and community leaders to help change the state’s high incarceration rate for women was a call to action by Oklahoma Christian University President Mike O’Neal.

Retired Maj. Gen. LaRita Aragon said a number of her friends in law enforcement have said, “We’ve got to stop putting people in jail that we’re mad at and put people in jail that we’re afraid of.”

The poverty rate for women in the United States is 14.5 percent. The poverty rate for Oklahoma women is 17.7 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau 2009

statistics.

During fiscal year 2009, 1,284 female offenders were received by the Oklahoma department of Corrections. Of these offenders, 63 percent were assessed with a moderate to high need for substance abuse treatment, according to the DOC.

Aragon said nonviolent women offenders are not bad people. They have made bad choices, she said.

“Our faith and our family and our system of society help us to find that route between the lines that says we can find success,” Aragon said. “... We have to give them a hand. We have to be their support system and we have to find the answers.”

TO LEARN MORE about Stand in the Gap Ministries, go to standinthegapamerica.org (<http://standinthegapamerica.org>).

Local News



- **Edmond residents put fitness first on snowy day**

During the snowstorm Friday, Aspen Athletic Club attracted an unusually large crowd of members dedicated to their fitness routine. Their parking lot stood out as one of the few packed parking lots in town.

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- **Storm shuts many Edmond businesses**

Many Edmond residents remained home Friday, heeding the travel advisory related to the storm that dumped ice, sleet and snow on city streets.

January 29, 2010 1 Photo

- **Edmond North magic show postponed**

Due to the recent snow and ice, the Edmond North Band Booster's fundraiser, "An Evening of Magic" scheduled for Saturday has been rescheduled for Feb. 6.

January 29, 2010

- **1-30 Meetings: on the agenda**

Board of Adjustment

The Edmond Board of Adjustment will meet at 5:30 p.m. Monday in Room 104 of