

If These Walls Could Talk.....

If these walls could talk, Oh what stories they would tell.....

Today is a day of new beginnings for the staff of the Dale correctional facility for women. It is also a day of sadness and memories for staff who worked here for many years and for those women who have lived here. There are many memories of strength, courage and survival....of caring and compassion...of incredible team work

If these walls could talk you would hear endless hours of tears, laughter, joy and pain, teaching and learning, fears and dreams, change and growth. If these walls could talk you would hear joy, and the hopes and dreams of the women whose lives will be forever changed by the time they spent here.

If these walls could talk you would hear women being held accountable for their actions. You'd hear "Czuchrey's strict but with everyone! I get along with him." You would also hear about women finding their inner voice and strength. You would hear stories of women learning to believe, as we do, that they are capable of anything.

If these walls could talk you would hear of the first day at DALE, when Clark was new on the job as a supervisor and the headcount was 5 inmates. At shift change the unit officer informed him that headcount was secured with 4. As it turned out, an inmate was meeting with their case worker and they felt no need to count her. Clark thought to himself wow we have a ways to go here.

You would hear stories of a facility that got there quickly...a facility that became outstanding, that had outstanding contraband control that worked amazingly well with the community. You would hear stories of women coming through the door and feeling respected and safe. At Dale, the healing began for many women who had been hurt so much in their lives while they were held accountable for their crimes.

You would hear something about the tree in the rec yard (but I'm not sure what that was!). You would hear about how Dale became very overcrowded for a number of yearsof 5 to a room, and the "shack"

If these walls could talk you'd hear stories of the women being exceptionally compassionate with one another -especially those with mental health crises. You'd hear stories of women helping other women with personal care, walking other women up and down the hall, and letting MH know when they thought other women were becoming more symptomatic. You would hear about a woman holding another woman's hand when she cried about her child who had died.

If these walls could talk you would hear stories of inmates dressing up for Halloween up as a mummy, a witch, raggedy ann & andy, and only with supplies from the facility. You would hear about their playful antics, like the time 3 of the women crawled on their stomachs across the floor to put shaving cream on all the door handles. You'd hear about the line dancing lessons, the family and seasonal cookouts, and of Christmas trees on the units all decorated during the holidays. You'd hear a story of the great lice outbreak, when all the women had to dress in hospital gowns.

If these walls could talk you would hear stories of women on the porch exercising "because they felt better when they did" and on their own initiative (and all because of Carol). You'd hear stories of them doing stationary aerobics, because there wasn't any room for them to do the real kind. You'd hear stories of hip hop Dancing, yoga and fitness challenges. You'd hear of high school graduations. You would hear stories of the women doing crafts and crocheting and doing more crocheting and more crafts, and did I mention crocheting? How many afghans were crocheted at DALE in these last 9 years? You would hear of the pride the women felt contributing to various crochet projects; project linus, animal shelter blankets and the opportunity to be on WCAX TV talking about the mitties for kiddies project. You would hear the women talk about how these projects made them feel good that they were able to "give back to the community. And then there was the locks of love – time and time again, women at Dale would donate their hair to Locks of Love.

If these walls could talk you would hear stories of beauty makeovers and nail painting. And of Karaoke Fridays - poor Carol. How many ended up in fights?

If these walls could talk you would hear of stories of building dog houses on the porch with VT Works for Women Because the space would not allow for anything bigger to be built.

If these walls could talk, you would hear of individual stories of successmany of them.....like one young women who had been in and out of juvenile jails and foster homes all her life and Dale became her home. She had a very lengthy sentence for a serious crime. When it was time for her to be released she told her caseworker she was scared. She had no skills to live in the community. She had never worked before. She had never been to a bank and knew nothing about how to balance her checkbook. She did not do well in groups, so the facility provided one-on-one treatment for her. Her caseworker went over street skills with her. He talked with her daily about reentry. . This caseworker, Clark, would tell you a story of how he will never forget the day he drove her to the NL house and she saw the place for the first time and was in awe. You would hear how she cried on the way back to jail and he encouraged her saying that he knew she could do it. She was eventually admitted to the northern lights house well over year ago and she is still doing well out there being successful today.

If these walls could talk you would hear stories about women who were mothers. You would hear about many mother/child visits, including special visits on mother's day and Christmas....You would hear about phone calls home to their children. You would hear a story about one mom singing the Itsy Bitsy Spider to her one year old, and making her fingers walk "up the water spout" even though he couldn't see them through the telephone.

You would hear all about the boy who travelled to Vermont from New York City to see his mom for the first time in over a year and a half. Four or five times that week he came to see her here, to drink soda and eat chips and spend time with his "Chubby Mama".

You would hear about the mom whose tears ran silently down her face while her son told her that grandma couldn't pay the rent any more and so they were going to live in a relative's garage.

You would also hear about the moms who said goodbye to their children, knowing that when they walked out that door, it would be to a new family, a new woman to call Mom. You'd hear a story of one of these new parents

who came to DALE to meet the birth mom. They sat on the couch and she sat across from them as they assured her that her two children would be loved and cared for and told about how much she loved them.

The walls could talk they would laugh and tell you about a mom who demonstrated strip search positions to her two daughters - her 13 year old *mortified* by the mention of nakedness and her 17 year old howling with laughter.

These walls have heard so, so, so many phone calls, most of them filled with Moms asking children about homework, and tooth brushing, and what was for dinner, such simple everyday things. Often they heard a mom struggle to find the right words to tell her children that she was back in jail, the place that she had promised with all her heart that she wouldn't be returning to ever again. They also heard the children whose hearts were broken but found themselves saying "its okay...." because they loved her too much to say anything else.

If these walls could count the number of tears shed here, they would tell you they could have filled one ocean or two, but they would also tell you about the faces that lit up like brilliant rays of sunshine when their mom walked into the room and they could throw their arms around her and hold tight, even if it was only for an hour or two.

If these walls could talk they would tell you stories of mothers giving birth while incarnated. You would hear of children being born substance free and healthy. You'd hear a story of an 18 year old young woman, sitting on the couch in the Mother/Child room, who was incarcerated, pregnant, and had no idea how holding that baby boy in her arms a few months later was going to change every single thing about her, and open her heart in ways she couldn't possibly have imagined. Another thing she couldn't have imagined was how many people were going to pull together so that she and her new baby could spend time together. The staff, and in particular Theresa Stone, made it possible for her to have extended visits to breast feed and bond with her baby several times a week,

If these walls could talk, you would hear stories of how staff and most of the inmates always took to heart separating the crime from the person. You would hear stories of staff and inmates supporting each other through the

losses of Tabby, Jess and Eva. You'd hear stories of staff and inmates playing Pictionary together when the power went out. You'd see, one hot summer day, the DALE Summer Olympics, when Gillete carried the torch and when women did synchronized swimming routines on their backs on the lawn in the tiny little yard. You'd hear staff tell you to this day that that hot summer day was one of the most satisfying and rewarding days of their careers. You'd hear stories of talent shows that both inmates and staff participated in. Shows that were not only very entertaining and fun for the audience, but also gave the women an opportunity to show their talents in front of others, and the respect and applause of each performance was awesome. You'd hear stories of visits with therapy dogs.

If these walls could talk, you would hear stories of amazing staff – staff who had patience dealing with the women. Staff who took a lot of time to talk with and listen to the women. You'd hear of staff taking women out after dark to watch the fireworks. You'd hear about Carol – the Rec Coordinator – who had a ridiculous amount of energy; she tops the record for who has gone up and down the 4 flights of stairs the most. You'd also hear stories of staff having to run up those stairs in emergencies. You'd hear stories of the scores of them who fell.

If these walls could talk you'd hear the story of when Brett took the time to sit down with an inmate who had a lot of conflict and distrust of male staff and as a result of working through their conflict she began to see the officers and men in a different light.

If these walls could talk, you would hear stories of how all staff, no matter who they were, when they needed help, whether with work or something personal, were always supported by their coworkers – who were always there and willing to help. You'd hear stories of how Dale staff welcomed and partnered with contractual staff. The staff at DALE was such a Great team –

If these walls could talk you'd hear about Sally's impressions in treatment team, or Michael's miracle ear, or how Jim doesn't say much, but when he does he comes up with some good ones. You'd hear how if you have a question just asks Penny, she always has the answer, or how Dawn would always help staff with the application process. You'd hear about the

astronomical amount of cakes that Dale has had how for any occasion, someone always brought in a cake, for staff and inmates.

If these walls could talk you'd hear stories of staff saddened by women being very mentally ill on Dale 2. You'd hear about staff's efforts, particularly Bill and Kim, to respond compassionately to these women's needs and to keep mh informed.

If these walls could talk you'd hear about A woman with an assaultive history who spent 2 years at DALE before she finally began talking about a 14 year eating disorder history, but only after developing a trusting relationship with one of the officers - Jansen. He convinced her give MH a chance – and she did. she was released 2 years ago and has not been back.

If these walls could talk you'd hear about how DOC staff, and in particular the superintendent mike belizi, would take the time to listen to contract staff, and be influenced by what they had to say in terms of decisions around inmates.

You'd hear stories of the nurses; Jackie and Bobbie, helping a young woman who was incarcerated stay invested in her pregnancy and give her a lot of emotional support throughout her pregnancy and after.

You'd hear how Donna negotiated with Green Mountain coffee roasters to engage in a pilot where a women would get up every morning at dale for 90 days and walk down the road to work there, to work towards her release. She has not come back.

If these walls could talk you'd hear about Jen in a pink Easter bunny suit at Halloween, or The Christmas feasts put together by casework and admin staff, particularly Jeannie, for the officers who had to work on the holiday and the women who were there.

If these walls could talk you'd hear about the ghost who lives on Dale III. You'd hear about all the trips Clark had to make to the Superintendent's office. You'd hear about Ron pulling people aside to give the the "scoop", or just a good laugh.

If these walls could talk, they might tell you the names of the CO's who would sneak into the Parenting room during regular visiting to find some toys for a child to play with. Or about the CO who brought a mom and her infant into the parenting room to find a quiet space away from the crowded visiting room during one of the last visits held at Dale.

If these walls could talk you'd hear stories of an atmosphere of working together - of being able to laugh on both the good and bad days. You'd hear about how sometimes the job could be hard and thankless at times, but how all the staff, contract and doc, wanted to be there. You'd hear how people who worked at Dale in any capacity were treated like family. Dale was a family. You'd hear staff saying that Dale was the best facility to have ever worked at. How it has been the best experience for many in all their years in corrections.

If these walls could talk, oh what stories they would tell.