

RECORD REVIEW

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ABBY LUBY PHOTO

Sister Elaine Roulet at the Bedford Hills train station.

PULLOUT

‘I’m not leaving the prison ministry, I’m just leaving the building.’

— Sister Elaine Roulet on her retirement from Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

Sister Elaine: Giving a voice to the silence behind bars

By ABBY LUBY

“I’ve picked up so many children over the years here at the Bedford Hills train station to take them over to the prison,” said Sister Elaine Roulet the other day. “I probably won’t be doing that much more.”

The woman with cropped white hair and wearing a light green jumper that highlighted her sparkling blue eyes walked gingerly from her car to pose near the station, a locale where she had gathered youngsters from the city to visit their mothers who were inmates at the prison.

In a few weeks Sister Elaine is retiring. She is retiring after 36 years of creating multiple programs that connected incarcerated parents with their children at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, programs that educated the inmates, and programs that set up several halfway houses for female offenders when they are released.

During those 36 years Sister Elaine’s efforts were crucial in fueling the movement for prison reform, because she fiercely believed that inmates could change their lives. Under her watch inmates could choose to become educated, not only in academics but in the essential lessons of parenting and communication. She grabbed the bull by the horns when the AIDS epidemic struck, demanding inmate counseling and fact-finding when other correctional facilities met the issue with reluctance.

Come August 10, Sister Elaine Roulet will leave the place that put her on the humanitarian map for thousands of inmates and their families.

"I'm going to be 75 in October, and the handwriting is on the wall. It's telling me it's time," she said. "In the autumn of your life you want to be thinking a lot about the spiritual part of your life."

But Sister Elaine doesn't intend to fade out to a reclusive setting to write her memoirs, which is on her agenda. Sister Elaine has a plan. Many plans.

"I'm going to start a new corporation called 'Our Journey,'" she said. "I will give retreats to women and children whose mothers were in prison. I've already given three interfaith retreats for the women leaving prison and their children. The one aspect we don't look at is the spiritual life."

Many former elderly inmates who have left Bedford Hills are now in nursing homes, said Sister Elaine. "I hope to visit inmates who have been released and are in other facilities," she said. "I have a lot of energy, and I want to do this very much. It's been a dream of mine."

Starting new programs for helping people is second nature to Sister Elaine. About 20 years ago she started the Children's Center at the prison, staffed by both inmates and volunteers. The center was a place for children to visit their mothers on a regular basis, and in the early years of the program, Sister Elaine herself taxied children to and from New York City to the prison. One of her oldest friends, prison educator Thea Jackson, remembered one late-night shuttle when an exhausted Sister Elaine forgot one passenger. "Her day was crammed full, and she started around 5 a.m.," said Ms. Jackson. "She was taking a whole carload of kids back home, as she did every evening after work. She would drop kids in every borough before she would return to her home in Brooklyn. As she arrived in front of her house near midnight, she heard a little voice from the back seat saying, 'Sister, are we home yet?' A young boy, still in her car, suddenly woke up. Sister Elaine thought she had delivered everybody! She trekked off to the Bronx to get the child home, but the way Sister Elaine told the story, you were holding your sides in, tears rolling down your cheeks."

Eventually Sister Elaine started an overnight program in which children of inmates could sleep at the homes of local Bedford residents for a week in the summer, spending the daytime with their moms. About 200 children of inmates now participate in a summer program. Also, regular bus service is now provided for inmates' family members between the prison and New York City and upstate New York.

Bedford's supervisor, Lee Roberts, who has housed children from New York City visiting their parents at the prison, has high praise for the program.

"The program helps the mothers stay in touch with their children," said Ms. Roberts. "It's not the most ideal situation over there. Many of the women are in sad situations, and Sister Elaine makes life bearable for them. She's so compassionate toward people; she is what keeps people going. She has a rare gift that I don't think I've ever seen before."

Approximately 80 percent of the inmates are mothers, which means that the Children's Center needs to be open every day of the year. The center has games, art projects, and an outside recreation area for parents and their children.

"When we first began bringing children up to see their mothers, there was nothing to do," said Sister Elaine. "We realized it's not just the visit, but you had to have a summer program with stuff to do. You can't just sit and look at each other in the visiting room."

Sister Elaine said she strongly believes that people weren't meant to be alone, a credo practiced at the Children's Center.

"If you want to have any kind of life, you need other people, and that was the story of the Children's Center," she said. "There were many mothers — everyone says that I was the primary mother — but there were many mothers and many people putting this together. We had wonderful parenting classes that we began at the Children's Center. You have to teach parenting; you're not a born a parent."

Parenting education included a program called "Parenting From a Distance," which encouraged mothers to share the dual frustration of being an inmate and a parent. Involving inmates in the program was key.

Former inmates Kathy Boudin and Rozann Greco wrote a book based on the program, "Parenting From Inside/Out." The dedication was to Sister Elaine, who was the director of the Children's Center at Bedford Hills in 1993 when the book was published. The end of the dedication says, "We thank you and applaud you, Sister Elaine, for 25 years of unconditional love and for your inspirational words: 'I believe in miracles.'" The book includes revealing journal entries by prison mothers, with pictures of inmates and their children and multitudes of suggestions on coping for incarcerated parents. The book has since seen the inside of many prisons nationwide.

Getting programs up and running means breaking through the maze of red tape in any bureaucracy. Sister Elaine said she always had the full cooperation from the Department of Corrections in Albany. "That's important because prisons are very complex organizations and you could have someone from the top say 'Stop,' and you would have to stop."

One of the closest and more important administrators from the "top" was former Bedford Hills Correctional Facility superintendent Elaine Lord, who first met Sister Elaine in 1979.

"Sister Elaine was living in a convent in the city, and she talked the nuns into taking in newly released women inmates on work relief," said Ms. Lord. "She started a prerelease program before the women went home to reunite with their kids. Up until then, there was no opportunity to do that."

Programs that eased incarcerated women back into society was an idea that impressed Ms. Lord, and she knew Sister Elaine would be a great social force inside the prison. "Elaine was so creative, she always had new ideas," said Ms. Lord. "Any real stress that a family was feeling on the outside was really felt on the inside by the women in prison. We depended on social workers to connect with women inmates. Elaine initiated the 'social worker of the month award,' where the ceremony had the inmate and her child thanking the social worker for keeping them connected on a regular basis. It worked so well that the social workers invited their bosses — which was important because it exposed more people to the inside of a prison."

Prisons have terrible reputations for being bad places, said Ms. Lord. She remembers how Sister Elaine worked with one family to dispel that reputation.

"A little boy came up to me one day in the visiting room and said, 'Do you beat my mommy in here?' It made me feel so terrible. Sister Elaine sat the boy and his mother down and they talked about it. She told the boy, 'They don't beat people in here.' Ever since that, the little boy came to see his mom on a regular basis. There truly is an angel that sits on Sister Elaine's shoulder."

Sister Elaine Roulet's accomplishments never went unnoticed. She was selected as the winner of the Westchester County Hall of Fame Award for 2002, and in 1993 she was named to the National Women's Hall of Fame, joining other notables such as Abigail Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Amelia Earhart.

Bedford Hills' current superintendent, Ada Perez, who has been at the facility for one year, said she knew of Sister Elaine's work years before she came to Bedford Hills Correctional.

"Working with her has been phenomenal. She is a woman of vision — has been as far as dealing with female offenders," said Ms. Perez. "It becomes very complex because it's not just the female offenders, it's their children, their siblings. Under Sister Elaine's auspices many of the programs she developed here at the prison and outside of the prison have become model programs for many, many states and countries."

For Ms. Perez, Sister Elaine developed programs that would allow change and could be adjusted according to the needs of the inmates.

"As time goes on, it depends on the type of offender that we get," she said. "We have to change the way we tweak the programs up, like needing more halfway housing and more residences for female offenders. That's a growing trend."

Ms. Perez said Sister Elaine has great compassion for the inmates. "She truly loves the women offenders and their families, and she is absolutely passionate about ensuring the continuity of services for them. When we discuss the program, she is formidable to deal with in a very positive way. As an administrator, she has helped me to understand the things that are important to the service. Sister Elaine has never lost her focus in all of these years. She is a woman of strong spiritual character and integrity. She will be missed."

Looking back on her work for both current and former prisoners, Sister Elaine said, "The programs are not going as good as I had them; they are going much better."

Thea Jackson said Sister Elaine's ability to take the word "correction" very seriously was part of her commitment to making programs work for the inmates.

"She made certain everybody she came in contact with was encouraged to rehabilitate to a new life, a higher plane of living," said Ms. Jackson. "She could teach people how to touch their own remorse for their own misdeeds and then be determined to correct their lives. I've heard hundreds of women inmates in that facility say Sister Elaine is the one responsible for turning their lives around."

Ms. Jackson said Sister Elaine became known as a peacemaker in the prison. "I've been in the middle of situations where people are upset, angry, mistreated, and Sister's manner was always quiet and calm. The prison has been very fortunate to have had her presence all these years. Her absence will leave a gaping hole. But who she is and what she has been, her special energy that she brought there for all these years, will always be there.

"There is a saying that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. Sister Elaine is known by everyone she touches as an angel of mercy because she takes herself lightly. And that is why she can fly."