

A WMD in Her Handbag

Elmwood women's jail chaplain lifts victims of domestic violence

BY KEN YODER REED

Most days Melody McGruder is a round-faced, red-headed, smiley grandma who divides her time between nursing her 91-year-old mother in Berkeley, and spending time with two of her six grandchildren. She picks up the grandsons from preschool. "I bring them home. I cook dinner for them. I throw them in the tub. Then I read them bedtime stories." She beams like Mother Goose.

But two days a week, McGruder becomes an awesome warrior on a mission, carrying her weapon in her book bag. She drives across town to the Elmwood Correctional Facility and parks in front of the Women's Facility. Inside, she goes through a well-rehearsed routine.

She exchanges her California driver's license for a placard with a number, which she loops around her neck.

At the first locked door, she exchanges her car keys for keys to the Chaplain's Office. These days they search her bag.

"What are you looking for?"

"Weapons of mass destruction," the officer says.

Elmwood officers are no-nonsense officials who follow the rules.

"I have WMD in there," she says.

"Oh, what are they?"

She produces a well-used Bible. "That's it. The best WMD I know."

On this day, the officer laughs.

Four more locked doors open electronically and McGruder emerges into the open inmate area, crosses to the Chaplain's Office and looks in her mailbox for request forms. There are always completed requests there. She takes one and finds the prisoner.

"Hi, I'm Chaplain Melody. What can I do for you?"

The prisoner that day was hardened, McGruder remembers.

"The way she talked. The way she sat. The tattoos. Ex-gang

member. 'I'm an addict,' she said. 'Never been anything but an addict. Always gonna be an addict.'"

The statistics are grim: more than half of Elmwood's population is there for drug and alcohol-related problems. All of them are pre-conviction, awaiting a judge's decision on prison, a recovery program, or freedom.

"So why did you ask for me?"

"Because I need encouragement. What can you give me?"

"Well, every day's a choice,"

McGruder said. "Choose life or death. If you keep choosing the drugs you've been using ..."

On a mission now, Melody McGruder added a new, important chapter to her advocacy, mentoring women at the Elmwood Correctional Facility, where she offers the women understanding, compassion and a hope for the future.

"Nobody writes me," the inmate said. "I've been in here 18 months. I really want to hear from somebody."

"OK."

McGruder took her hands and they petitioned God for a letter.

Chaplain Melody started meeting regularly with Francine (a pseudonym).

"I took her a lot of Joyce Meyer (self-help devotions) and T.D. Jakes. We talked about Jesus and prayed at the end."

Two weeks later, the inmate came running from her cell when McGruder arrived. "Chaplain

Melody! I gotta letter! From my sister!" And a week later, "I got another letter. From my daughter. She wants to be like me. I don't want her to be like me."

These days, Francine tells people, "I'm a recovering addict. With the help of Jesus, I'll never go back."

Another inmate, Shelita, is more typical of the women in Elmwood. She's survived brutal domestic violence. Statistics show that roughly 90 percent of Elmwood's women have suffered some type of abuse. Through streaming tears, Shelita told McGruder she couldn't possibly believe there was a God. If there was a God why didn't he stop her abuser?

"Tell me everything about the abuse," Chaplain Melody said. "There's nothing you can say that hasn't happened to me."

There's her secret, out for the town to see. Chaplain Melody is a survivor of domestic violence herself.

"I made a wrong decision in my choice for a husband," she says. "I lived with my abuser 15 years." When she got out of the relationship, she felt she'd been born again. "Isaiah 61," she says. "My life was ashes. He gave me beauty!"

She wanted to give back. After an intense training program, she began assisting women with temporary restraining orders. After that, she turned to community education, telling her story and talking about domestic violence in diverse venues. On a mission now, McGruder added a new, important chapter to her advocacy, mentoring women at the Elmwood Correctional Facility, where "I offer the women understanding, compassion and a hope for the future."

Back in women's jail, McGruder was still mentoring Shelita.

"One day she came running up, biggest smile in the world. 'What's going on, Shelita?'"



Melody McGruder counsels an inmate at Elmwood Correctional Facility. Many of the women she meets with are victims of domestic violence — something McGruder says she has experienced.

Photo by Ken Yoder Reed

"I love the Lord!" Shelita said. It had clicked for her!

She became a whole new person, offering to help prisoners clean their cells, singing praise songs while she was cleaning. Then others starting saying, "I want to be like Shelita."

Pretty soon, she started writing. "Here!" McGruder pulls a sheaf of papers from her handbag. "She said I can read you a couple of her poems; she calls them her Psalms." She read a dark one, full of confession. Then she began one of the upbeat ones:

"My name is Shelita and I am blessed.

I am soaring on the wings of God. Even though I am behind these walls

He has set me free. My name is Shelita and

I am free!"

McGruder can't finish the poem. She clutches the papers against her heart. "I love how the Lord's touched her! This is why I can't stop coming!"

One chaplain can only reach so many people — McGruder ended the interview with a plea: "Tell people we need volunteers at the jail. Tell them to call Rev. Louann or Rev. Dave."

Contact the Rev. Louann at 586-5658 or the Rev. Dave at 586-5643 to volunteer.

Freelance writer Ken Yoder Reed also believes God is the God of the second chance. Read about that in his new novel, "He Flew Too High," or visit his Web site, www.kyreed.com.