

GET ORGANIZED

Are We Missing an Opportunity for Change?

Grace Bauer, a field organizer, joined the Campaign for Youth Justice in 2008. She has worked to unite the parents and allies of children to change laws and practices that result in children being prosecuted and confined as adults.



Each month as the deadline approaches to turn in our newsletter articles, I rack my brain trying to figure out what it is I can say that will be of the most benefit for the readers. Sometimes, I get lucky and hit on something people can use, sometimes, I just ramble and the article serves no one. By far, the most responses I have ever received about any one article came from our January newsletter. For over a month, I have

pondered what that meant. Is it that no one is interested in the pieces I write about doing the work? I don't think so. I think when I send out articles about the work people take what they can from it and do what needs to be done.

The last article was about our personal lives and I believe folks responded in mass because they saw a fellow human being in need and reached out to hold me and my family. I also believe that for the first time feelings that have long been hidden were all of sudden in black and white, for all to see. Folks wanted to say they, too, had felt the loneliness and isolation of having a child incarcerated and to let me know I wasn't alone in my grief. I, never, for one moment believed I was! Over the past 6 weeks, I have received numerous calls and countless emails. I believe we are healing because of the love, support and care that so many of you have provided. There are no words to say how much every card, letter, email, text message and call has meant to me. Please know that it is from your strength that I continue to fight!

I went to see my son, in another jail, in a different state yet I found the same thing I always find in these places. They allowed families and friends in to the visiting area 10 at a time. Not surprising, I was one of two white families, in a state where white folks make up almost 64% of the total population. Many folks in this country choose to ignore the facts and research but for those of us that aren't too afraid to see, disproportionate minority contact and confinement is a problem of huge proportions in the "good ole U.S.A." Sadly most white folks are still blaming it on the people rather than looking at the leadership and policies of this "great nation."

Out of those ten young people, on the other side of the glass, not one appeared to be over 25 years old. I looked and saw babies looking back at me. *You can't cry here, I tell myself. I don't but it takes all I have not to.* For days before this visit, I had to psych myself up. I keep wondering what it is I will say, how he will look and if I have the strength to walk down another hallway to find my son in shackles, chains and the neon orange jump suit. *I have no choice I must find him and I do, another baby in an orange jumpsuit, 3 sizes too large, looking back at me.*

As a mother, you have to force yourself to look closely because you must assess their physical state. Is he clean, is he hurt, is he getting enough to eat, is he O.K. mentally, and is he 24? *In the nights between his arrest and this visit, I dream every night that he is a little boy again, riding his bike with his wild red hair blowing in the wind and then, in the twilight of dreams, he is seven and in a cell.* His usually short hair is already growing shaggy and the prison staple orange jumpsuit swallows his body and the collar hugs the tops of his ears, his shoulders are hunched and in that moment it is hard to believe he is 24.

How are you? My first question for today's visit and for all the phone calls we will exchange in the near future but long before he answers, I always answer it for myself, *"How the hell do you think he is?"* My sarcasm, to ease the blow of his standard answer, "I'm O.K." *"There is nothing, absolutely nothing, O.K. here, not you, not me, not this place, not this world!"* You can't ever say those things because as much as I draw on the strength of all of you, he draws on my strength.

I am hurt but I don't really feel angry, yet when I open my mouth, I say "I don't think you understand the sorrow you have caused your sister and I." Before the words have traversed the phone line, I am sorry. I see him sink even further down into the jumpsuit and I see his

face fall. That's what most people can believe about Corey but I gave birth to him, have watched him grow, have watched him try and fail and on too many days I have watched him cry, I know better. This is a part of what we have been taught in this country, if you are in jail you deserve to be there and the rest of us can turn our heads and hearts and ignore what happens to you. But I know better, I know him and I know what caused this awful mess that we are now in, together. I will not turn my back on him and I will not turn my head or heart from his suffering.

He would rather see me angry than hurt. He says, "You didn't support me." I know that I have in every way possible. He says, "You didn't hear me when I told you I was struggling." I know that I did. *How much longer can this 30 minute visit last?* We lapse into conversation, not really saying anything but for today it's O.K. because we are both still here, to sit on our respective sides of the glass. Mothers have to be thankful for the opportunity to sit next to a child who has been down this long and extremely dangerous road and I am.

I leave the facility, head down, tears flowing. I can't see to drive so I sit in the darkened underground garage and cry. *Why did you say that? He is in enough pain, why did I do like the others and add to it? Why is this, our lives?* When I get my emotions under control, I drive home to cry more on my partner's shoulder. This day is gone.

This day may be gone but there are others ahead, ones filled with hope. I always love the quote "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." A quote from Arundhati Roy, a well-known Indian novelist and activist. I leave you with one other thought: Today Egypt is a free democracy, yesterday it wasn't. Egypt didn't change because we cried, it changed because many were willing to step up and challenge! Are you willing?
