

Reader Views

Book reviews, for readers, by readers.

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Interview with Jan Walker

Author of *An Inmate's Daughter*

Prison parent/family educator, Jan Walker, is speaking with us today about her newly published book. Jan is trained in child and family studies and has spent the past 18 years as a correctional educator for adult felons in medium custody prisons. Welcome to Reader Views Jan.

Irene: Jan, your book, “An Inmate’s Daughter,” is being launched now. Your book speaks out for children who cope with a parent’s prison term. Tell us the gist of your book.

Jan: The protagonist, Jenna MacDonald and her mother and younger brother, have moved into Jenna’s grandparents home in Tacoma, WA, to be near McNeil Island Corrections Center, the prison where her father was transferred. Jenna is the new girl in a middle grade school, and wants to get into the “in group,” a multi-racial group of girls.

The girls are curious about her heritage (she’s part Native American Indian) and the reason she lives with her grandparents. They follow her home from school and peek in her bedroom window. She dubs them The Snoops.

Jenna’s mother enforces a “Don’t Tell” rule about prison. Jenna loves her dad and would like to talk about him and his artistic talent. Keeping a secret is difficult in the best of circumstances. It gets harder when Jenna calls attention to herself and the family when they are family are leaving a visit to McNeil Island. A small child trips and falls into Puget Sound, and Jenna jumps in to rescue her. It’s an automatic reaction, borne of many rescues of her younger brother at a trailer park swimming pool where they used to live.

Irene: What inspired you to write it?

Jan: During the 18 years I taught incarcerated parents, wrote curriculum and text books, and worked with women and men to remain involved in positive ways with their children, I invested energy above and beyond my contract-responsibilities out of concern for my students’ children. They are innocent victims of their parents’ choices. The children broke no laws, yet they are often abused or shunned in their communities, schools, and sometimes in their own extended families.

After leaving correctional education to write full time, a friend and writing mentor encouraged to write a book for children from about age 9 or 10 to about age 15. She said it should be classified as a middle grade novel. Children who fall in the age group 9 to 15 are often the most hurt and confused about incarceration. I didn't know how to write for that age, so I had to learn some parameters as I went along. My friend listened to the entire first draft, offered good suggestions, and encouraged me to get it published. She died before I found a publisher. The book is dedicated to her, but it is in fact my effort to let children of incarcerated parents know that I understand a bit of their struggle, and that I value them enough to spend considerable time and energy writing a story about one of them that is for all of them.

Irene: You have been teaching parenting and family relationship classes to adult felons for 18 years. Tell us how and why you chose this career.

Jan: The career chose me. I was teaching similar courses on a community college campus in Tacoma, WA, when the state legislature mandated prison education would fall under the community college system. I agreed to set up programs and teach at the women's prison for one year. The population and their need for courses tailored to them hooked me.

Irene: What types of programs did you set up?

Jan: It was a Home and Family Life Program that had been high school level. I taught standard clothing construction classes in a sewing lab and some food and nutrition courses, but my real energies went into Positive Parenting, Child Development, and Family Relationships classes. The prison had a cooperative preschool called Pooh's Corner inside the education building. Children and parents came in from the community. A preschool teacher came from a voc-tech school and ran the preschool program. Inmate students who were in parenting or child development classes and who were cleared to be around the children, worked as the teacher's assistant. They interacted with the children and kept anecdotal information that we discussed in class. That program was in place when I started teaching there. I started writing new curriculum that fit incarcerated parents needs and profiles, and "retired" the high school text books. My first published book was named MY RELATIONSHIPS, MY SELF. It's out of print. I worked on and taught the PARENTING FROM A DISTANCE concept prior to that book's publication. All the courses I taught fell under Home and Family, and focused on preparing women to return home.

When I transferred from the women's prison to McNeil Island, a medium custody male facility, it was to coordinate an orientation program called "Project Social Responsibility." Every man who came to the island had to spend his first full week in that program. We had 29 facilitators who assisted with the presentations, but I did 8 hours of the 20 hour week with them men and wrote specific parenting and family materials for that. The project is discussed in my memoir.

Irene: Who were the main participants in your programs?

Jan: Most of the women were moms. Many of them were in touch with their children and had regular visits. Some of them were unable to see their children due to abuse, usually by a man the mother was involved with, though sometimes the woman was the

perpetrator. Most took classes because they wanted to be positively involved with their children. Some attended because they were court-ordered to do so. Some faced termination of parental rights. I was often subpoenaed to those cases. A few lost their children but won the right to receive information or photos through the years. A few (maybe three where I went to court) lost all rights and contact.

When I transferred to McNeil Island, I had similar situations – dad’s who wanted to learn, dad’s who were court ordered to get parenting classes, and dad’s who came to what I called “Open Door,” a lab sort of setting where they could create items to send to their children. I named my memoir DANCING TO THE CONCERTINA’S TUNE, and said I danced as fast as I could. I held discussion groups during lab time so even men who were educationally low level achievers learned by listening. I wrote letters to courts and the office of support enforcement (I made and kept templates on my computer to speed things up) for men who couldn’t read or write, and had never signed a business letter. I learned to point to where their signature should go, and to praise them when they managed a “signature” that was really joined printing they were learning in an adult basic education classroom.

In addition, at both prisons, I gave parenting and family handouts I created and assorted craft items to any who asked for them, though the office staff sometimes had to help me run copies because I overused my copying budget.

Irene: You have written “Parenting From a Distance” a number of years ago. How different are the two books from each other?

Jan: I wrote Parenting From A Distance for a class I was teaching at the women’s prison. It is a text book geared to the needs of incarcerated parents. I revised and reissued that book in December 2005. It’s a text book focused on the rights and responsibilities of parents who are separated from their children. An Inmate’s Daughter is fiction written from the view point of the child. The incarcerated dad in An Inmate’s Daughter is a man who has taken parenting classes while inside, and who understands the difficulties children of incarcerated parents face.

Irene: Have any of the inmates that you teach read any of your books? If they did, what were their reactions?

Jan: MY RELATIONSHIPS, MY SELF was a text for a family class at the women’s prison so all who enrolled read it and completed the worksheets. Far more read PARENTING FROM A DISTANCE. Many many students read snippets of other things I wrote since I created scenarios for “Writing to Clarify Thinking” assignments. I used writing in every class I taught, and even taught Creative Writing classes as McNeil.

Let me say this about the parenting book especially: My students, men more so than women, were surprised, amazed, awed that someone cared enough about inmates to write such a book for their use. The reason I went out on a limb, financially, to reissue the parenting book is because I know it makes a difference. There are no formal measures to demonstrate that. It’s just something I know. I hope AN INMATE’S DAUGHTER, helps some of the general population stop for a moment to think about men and women inside prison and their reality.

Irene: Keeping family secrets has been a script that has been passed down for generations. You are encouraging to break this script. Tell us the benefits of “talking” about family issues.

Jan: It’s simply this: When children are not told the truth, they make up stories that they believe are the truth and substitute them. Secrets are destructive to all. When incarcerated parents keep the truth of prison from their children, they close all doors to communication. When children are forced to keep a secret, it festers inside. I use that analogy in *An Inmate’s Daughter with Zeke*, Jenna’s younger brother, picking up on a comment from Grandpa who says, “Peel off the scab, let out the pus,” and Zeke answers, “Pussss. Ooooooze,” in typical 9 year old fashion.

Irene: Quite often children of felons are ostracized by society, especially their peers. How do you encourage children to cope?

Jan: They need to remember their parents’ choices are not their fault, their parents still love them (this is questioned in cases of child abuse; therefore, individual situations must be considered), and they can make healthier choices themselves. They need permission to love the adults who are caring for them, to talk about their worries and concerns, to go on with their lives while their parents are away, and to find strength to ignore meanness in others. They need teachers in their schools who help all the students understand some of the realities of incarceration.

Irene: What are your methods of facing these difficulties?

Jan: When I talk with children, I make eye contact and ask them how they feel about their parents being in prison. I help them state and restate their feelings. I talk about feelings at the very basic “Five Feelings” level – mad, sad, glad, lonely and afraid. I like to use “You” statements. “You look sad.” “I think you’re mad at your mom for doing something that took her away from you.” There are signs you can read in children ... nail biting, leg jiggling, looking down or away, shrugging, pulling hoods of sweatshirts down over their eyes. Good teachers know how to read the signs and talk with the children one to one. However, we have overloaded our teachers with requirements that leave them little time for such interaction. How can one teacher be everything for 30 or 35 students? There’s a reason such a large percentage of children with a parent in prison will end up doing time, too.

Irene: You spend much time teaching adults in prisons on effective parenting. How receptive are your students?

Jan: Of the hundreds I met, two or three who were angry (possibly emotionally disturbed) wanted to discount my teaching. The rest were appreciative, very receptive, and worked hard to regain or maintain contact with their children. I wrote about some of the special work I did and the successes and struggles in my memoir, *Dancing to the Concertina’s Tune*. (Concertina is the razor wire that tops prison fences.)

Irene: It’s very difficult to change. Many of your students learned from their parents on how to parent. When they go back into their own family surroundings, how hard is it for them to adjust to the new parenting styles?

Jan: It's never easy to change. It's never easy to return to a family that has learned to go on without you. In *Parenting From A Distance*, I wrote a good bit about "Contracts for Forgiveness" and urged students to use them with their parents, spouses and children. That concept should be adapted by all of us when we are in relationship struggles.

Irene: What are some of those "contracts"?

Jan: We made them simple and practiced before students left prison. It could be reading a book to a child every night for a specified length of time, trips to a park, playing catch, helping with homework, going out for an ice cream cone. It could be more complicated with older children ... delving into personal and family history, telling the truth about past behavior (only appropriate for the child's age), assisting with coaching a team or just attending sports, saving enough money for extracurricular activities.

One woman had to contract with her mom, where she would live for a time, to clean all the paneled walls with Liquid Gold once a week (a little obsessive?), limit her use of hot water in the shower to her mother's specified time, and other similar behaviors. At the end of a set contracted time, the woman was to be forgiven and the mother wasn't to bring up past mistakes again. We practiced how to communicate, how to use reminders.

Irene: What percentage are successful in the changes?

Jan: Recidivism rates remain high all for all felons. There are no statistics that relate to specific classes or educational programs, though generally the higher the education level, the less likely recidivism. Students who worked on personal and social responsibility, and who learned both life and job skills while inside are generally known to have higher chances of staying out of prison. Age is also a factor. Maturity helps.

Irene: Thank you Jan. Is there anything else you would like to add about your or your book?

Jan: Please see my website, www.janwalker-writer.com I have posted some downloadable curriculum in Parenting, Family History and Patterns, and Child Development on the site. It is set up for instructors to use with students, with easy to read information and work sheets.