



# "I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU VISITED ME"

*Marianist Lay Communities in  
Honolulu respond to Jesus' call  
for compassion.*

BY JAN D. DIXON

**"I** was 29 years old," says Kimmy Takata, recalling her first day of prison at a women's correctional facility in Honolulu, a reality that became painfully clear when she was handed a new inmate kit: a box containing a trash bag, three uniforms, three pairs of underwear, two bras, a rain coat, a towel, a face cloth, a sheet, a blanket and a used pillow.

Kimmy faced a 20-year prison sentence for drug-related offenses. "I was a meth addict," she says. She also is the mother of six children. According to a 2015 report by the Prison Policy Initiative, nearly two-thirds of women in prison are moms with kids under 18. "As an addict, I wasn't thinking about my kids," says Kimmy. "It was all about getting drugs and numbing my pain."

Having attended a Marianist-sponsored workshop on social justice in 2013, the group felt compelled to "do something," says Grissel Benitez-Hodge, a community member and dean of students at Chaminade University of Honolulu. Several months passed, however, while they prayed and discussed whether they should get involved with incarcerated women. "Some of us grew up with the belief that incarcerated people are 'bad.' They had done something bad and deserved to be in prison. So it was a bit scary, mainly because we had to combat our own negative beliefs," says Grissel.

With the enthusiastic support of Marianist Brother Dennis Schmitz, "it's amazing what has happened," says Grissel. The work has been transformative, not just for former inmates, but for nearly everyone involved. "I believe it's the work of the Holy Spirit," she says.

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**– Kimmy Takata**



PHOTO: DERREK MIYAHARA

*Kimmy Takata, former inmate of the Women's Community Correction Center, Honolulu*

Women are the fastest growing population of inmates in the United States, nearly double the rate of men, although men account for 90 percent of people behind bars. The vast majority of women are convicted of low-level drug or property crimes. A disproportionate number are women of color and from low-income communities. In Hawai'i, although Native Hawaiians comprise 20 percent of the population, they make up 40 percent of the prison population. Kimmy is Native Hawaiian.

Hidden beneath these grim statistics are broken families, shattered lives and deep pockets of shame. "I remember feeling so lost and broken," says Joanne Liupaona, a mother of three who also served time for drug-related crimes.

Yet here at the crossroads of brokenness and pain is where the Faith of Heart Marianist Lay Community (*Ka Mana'o 'i'o o ka na'au*) felt called to make a difference.

### **"The path to prison is paved with trauma"**

The road to prison is different for women than men. "Women often have suffered from abuse," says Brother Dennis, who along with the lay community has worked closely with the Oahu Going Home Consortium, a faith-based group representing several ministries that help women transition from prison.

One of these organizations is the Pū'ā Foundation, which helped conduct a pilot study in 2012 in cooperation with the Women's Community Correction Center — the only women's prison in Hawai'i. "You'd be surprised by what we documented," says Toni Bissen, executive director of the foundation. "One hundred percent of the women in that study were trauma victims. Within the family and at a very early age, women were molested, sexually abused and traumatized by domestic violence. This trauma often leads to prostitution, drugs and criminal activity, but





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they are not the cause of incarceration. They are related to the underlying brokenness caused by trauma. The path to prison is paved with trauma.”

From the onset of Kimmy’s life, trauma was all she knew. “I grew up in an abusive home,” she says. “I remember thinking ‘no one cares for me, so why should I?’”

### Can prison be a place of healing?

Shortly after Mark Patterson, former warden at the WCCC, took charge of the women’s facility in 2006, he discovered that most women were drug offenders, many suffered from psychiatric disorders and a significant number were victims of trauma. They didn’t need punishment, he concluded. They needed a safe place where they could heal — a *pu’uhonua* — the Hawaiian word for sanctuary. Together with the Pū’ū Foundation and others, the prison launched an initiative that offers education, substance abuse treatment, PTSD counseling, and other spiritual and therapeutic support — a prison model that has received national attention. Under this model, healing begins the moment

a woman walks through the prison gates. “Warden Patterson told us, ‘You are forgiven. Leave it behind and start your healing journey here,’” says Joanne.

But these words can be hard to accept. “You wonder, ‘what does it mean to be forgiven?’” asks Kimmy. “Most of us think we’re good-for-nothing, that nobody likes or wants us. So how can we forgive ourselves?”

On the prison grounds, forgiveness is often a topic of conversation. “Working with these women brings the Gospel to life,” says Toni. “When I think about judging them, I wonder: ‘Who is going to cast the first stone?’ We’ve all made mistakes.”

For Grissel and her husband, Vincent, who has worked alongside her in the prison ministry, “Listening to these women’s stories has touched our hearts. We’ve learned to see them for who they are, not what they did,” she says.

### Reentry: An overwhelming gauntlet

Transitioning back to civilian life poses many challenges.

“Imagine trying to find a job and coming across this question on a job application: ‘Have you ever been convicted of a crime?’” asks RaeDeen Keahiolalo-

Karasuda, director for the Office of Native Hawaiian Partnerships at Chaminade University. “I know someone who went through 95 job applications until he got a job,” she says. “Most employers don’t want to hire a convicted felon.”

Besides a job, women must find affordable housing. “Some have families to return to, but many do not,” says Joanne, who was released in 2013 and worked for two years at the Pū’ā Foundation. “There are women still in prison because they have nowhere to go.”

Finding healthy, supportive relationships is another challenge. “Reconciling with family is important,” says RaeDeen. “But many have burned those bridges.”

The Marianist Lay Community, comprised of 12 to 15 members, has assisted these



*Grissel Benitez-Hodge, member of the Faith of Heart Marianist Lay Community and dean of students at Chaminade University of Honolulu, with Marianist Brother Dennis Schmitz*





PHOTO: DERREK MIYAHARA

Joanne Liupaono, a former inmate who served as a volunteer at the Marianist family retreat, takes a selfie with teen participants; Faith Leasiolagi and Martin Moore, Chaminade students (far right) also helped lead teen breakout sessions.

women in a myriad of ways. Some visit a particular woman throughout her incarceration. Others teach life skills courses. Some help find suitable clothing for job interviews or attend family picnics and celebrations at the prison.

But helping with family reintegration “was where we felt most called,” says Brother Dennis. “Our sense of family spirit is something these families badly need.”

## Blessings all around

Last fall the Marianist Lay Communities in Honolulu, including a new student community called Sacred Light (*La’a Kea*), sponsored a family retreat for formerly incarcerated women and their families at Chaminade University. The retreat offered two days of activities designed to help women communicate and celebrate with their kids — “to be together as a family,” says Toni, who helped organize the retreat.

The need for healing was evident. “Many mothers are away from their families for so long. There is a lot of hurt and guilt,” says Kimmy.

Some women never reconnect with their children. “But the Lay Marianists make us feel like family,” says Kimmy. “I’ve never felt this much love in my whole life. You need to feel loved — that’s what people

need most when they transition out of prison.”

RaeDeen sees the Marianist work as part of a larger social justice movement, one that “involves taking a stand for people at the bottom rung of society,” she says.

Brother Dennis agrees. “We are not doing this in isolation. We are part of a seamless garment of efforts from Catholic and ecumenical groups across the islands. The possibilities are exciting.”

The future is brighter for Kimmy, too. She was released in 2013 after serving 13 years of her sentence. Today she is a forensic peer specialist at the Pū’ā Foundation. Part of her job is educating young people about the slide into criminal life. Through a performing ensemble called “Voices from the Inside,” she and other former inmates share their stories through “prison monologues” — poems they hope will educate and inspire audiences.

“When I look at an audience with kids, I also see my kids,” says Kimmy. “This is my passion: to let them know they are not alone and that they can make better choices.” ■

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**If your Marianist Lay Community is interested in learning more about Marianist social justice initiatives, please contact Jim Vogt at [jimvogt2@yahoo.com](mailto:jimvogt2@yahoo.com).**