

Today's News

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Breaking barriers: At Oregon State Penitentiary, Karen Campbell is part prison guard, part den mother

By KIMBER WILLIAMS
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I am the Mother of the World,

Akin to Kwan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion ...

I also understand Medusa,

Who turned men into stone ...

- Karen Campbell, OSP corrections officer

SALEM - To step through the door, Karen Campbell could feel the change.

An invisible something. Like a drop in barometric pressure. Without thinking, she could feel her posture shift. Shoulders back. Spine straight. Muscles awake, alive.

Entering the Oregon State Penitentiary is a bit like being swallowed whole, as you march down this ramp, that hallway. Past a series of guards and gated checkpoints crafted with the dark, intimidating architecture of a Darth Vader helmet, through metal detectors sensitive enough to be triggered by an underwire bra.

Badges are shown, paperwork exchanged. Walk and wait. With halting progress, you slip down, down into the belly of the state's only maximum security prison.

Once there, you are meant to stay.

It wasn't fear that Campbell felt so much in the early days as a raw assault on her senses. Coming to terms with the physical ugliness of the place. A harsh, clunky world of metal and concrete and old linoleum. Echoes of steel and dreariness. Ghostly vapors of disinfectant and sweat and a faint whiff of laundry bleach.

It smelled of a men's gymnasium. The noise was appalling.

To enter the place took mental preparation. A certain daily girding. Like slipping on a protective jacket of extra-thick skin that she could wriggle back out of at the end of her shift.

Over and over, she ran the words through her head until they became her mantra, until she believed them: I can DO this, I can DO this, damn it, I can DO this.

This was not her.

KAREN CAMPBELL. At 45, a divorced mother of two in need of a good job.

For 14 years, she had worked in day care in Coos Bay. Living the life of so many women who had struggled to cobble together three part-time jobs and shared housing and watched each other's kids in



Karen Campbell's coffee cup reads: "Thank you, God, for providing me with such a lovely job and such charming co-workers."

Photos: **BRIAN DAVIES** / The Register-Guard



Karen Campbell greets an inmate as he comes into the activities center. Campbell's rapport with inmates has

order to get by.

earned her the respect of both prisoners and co-workers.

Her entire life, Campbell had worked largely on behalf of women and children. Some crisis work. Always small businesses. Mostly, women bosses. Prisons weren't her world.

She was herb gardens and women's literature, long, flowing skirts and '70s consciousness-raising. Her passion was for the natural world, hiking through coastal redwoods and living beside the ocean. She had a quiet flair for poetry.

Back in her criminal justice class at Southwestern Oregon Community College, she had aced the course because the overwhelming number of prisoners in the United States so shocked her that she never forgot her statistics.

Daughter of Quakers. Pacifist who wouldn't let her son play war games.

That was Karen Campbell.

Student. Nurturer. Advocate. Mom.

And suddenly, here she was. October 1989. Being interviewed and outfitted to begin work as a corrections officer the following Monday - barely a weekend to absorb the metamorphosis that would be required.

When the bottom dropped out of the Coos Bay economy, she had blanketed the state with applications.

This wasn't the job offer she had anticipated.

Not the nod from the welfare office or children's services, but Oregon's only maximum security prison and home to some of its most famous criminals. Death row and razor wire and towering concrete walls that eclipsed a heartswelling view of the Cascade Range - it looked every inch a prison.

But it was a job, on the table, and a salary that tripled anything she'd ever earned.

Karen Campbell was hungry.

Today, she reflects back. About how life is a test. And what you find when you aren't looking.

"Here," Campbell said recently, fishing out a prison photo ID taken her very first day.

The image is a woman almost 10 years younger. Shorter hair, slimmer face. Big, owlsh glasses. Neck muscles corded as tightly as a sailor's knot. Lips drawn into a flat, tense line. Eyes glowing with an intensity that is hard to read.

"From the get-go, I was not at all sure," Campbell recalled. "We're not talking a wholehearted grin there.

"I had always been active in women's lives," she explained with a half-smile. "So the gods deemed it necessary to get me past my prejudices. They put me in an all-male institution."

"To this day," she added, "I hear them snickering."

TODAY, HER office - her inside world - is on the prison activities floor. To reach it, Campbell must pass through at least five locked gates each day.

At the final gate on a recent afternoon, a co-worker, Officer O'Leary, questions her about the sharp odor driving down the stairwell toward them.

"What's the smell? Like pine. Are they whoofing or something? Coming down a little lightheaded?"

"If they are, it has very little to do with chemicals and more to do with personalities," Campbell assures.

Up she walks, entering a central activities floor that has the casual ambience of a high school gymnasium. A platform stage ringed with a



Oregon State Penitentiary the state's only maximum security prison.

bank of phones dominates one end of the room. Wooden bleachers collapse against the walls. Inmates are everywhere - roaming, talking, working, shooting the breeze.

This is clearly not the most dangerous place in the prison.

Inmates earn the right to be here. Some call them honor prisoners. Compared with the rest of the institution, the atmosphere feels vibrant, creative, purposeful - a chemistry that inmates like. A small slice of normal that few want to jeopardize.



Campbell heads to lunch during a shift at the prison, where a sense of humor and an ability to be firm help her deal with a difficult job.

Temporary partitions bisect the floor space - in one makeshift meeting space, inmates assemble bug catchers for an orchard. A handful of Native American inmates squire a nearby corner, preparing for the evening's mini powwow that will celebrate, of all things, mothers. Posters define the office for an HIV/AIDS project. Down the hall, an audiovisual production lab and offices for inmate clubs, from Uhuru Sa Sa (Freedom Now), an African- American culture club, to the OSP Toastmasters chapter.

You almost forget the steel bars. Then your eyes crawl upward. A caged catwalk rims the ceiling, an easy perch for guards. A reminder of where you are.

Puffing up a final flight of stairs, Campbell finally passes through the steel-mesh door to reach her office, which she shares with the activities program staff. They are gray, dismal quarters.

Furniture is functional and worn - with the feel of government office hand-me-downs. Towering filing cabinets lock with huge steel rods. Weak southern light filters in through a window that overlooks a small patch of grass, the wall and the world just beyond. In the summer, it's a toaster oven in here.

Her first year, she worked all over this prison, trained for about every staff position. And yet this is where she wants to be, work she especially enjoys. Part counselor, part den mother, part prison guard.

"Penthouse with a view," Campbell muses, strolling to a desk that stands out, cheerful against the grubby starkness.

On the wall above her chair, a bright Mary Englebreit poster and a Chinese Zodiac placemat from a restaurant. On her desk, a small lending library of books, from "The Celestine Prophecy" to "Many Roads, One Journey." Writings by Alice Walker and a self-help book for sex addicts.

"I bring books to be borrowed," says Campbell, still proud that she was able to smuggle in one of the office's first bits of whimsy, a poster featuring the Three Stooges.

She grabs her well-stained coffee cup.

A chirpy 1950s woman smiles from the side of it wearing a hysterically happy grin.

"Thank you, God, for providing me with such a lovely job and such charming co-workers," reads her cartoon bubble.

THE TALL INMATE with the Snoop Dogg hair saunters past in prison-issue blues, chin tipped skyward.

He glances down, sends the slightest nod.

"Hello, boss," he offers, his baritone a soft rumble beneath the constant prison clatter.

Campbell returns the greeting. Her manner is even. Not too warm, not too tough. But somewhere, somewhere in the middle. Normal. Pleasant. Unremarkable.

You wouldn't want to play poker with her. Too hard to read.

At 5-foot-3 inches tall, Campbell isn't physically imposing. She's small, solid, wearing a bright orange activities program shirt and pants that bestow all the boxy glamour of a postman's uniform. Her size makes her less of a threat.

"Hey, nobody gets points for beating up this cop," she explains, laughing a little at the pure truth of it.

Her long, blondish hair is plaited into a heavy braid, twisted loosely up onto the back of her head, and fixed with a large, silver clasp. Glasses frame a face that refuses to worship at the altar of L'Oreal.

The effect is slightly old-fashioned. The look of a determined, no-nonsense schoolmarm.

A flat buzzer goes off somewhere, and they're running the lines - moving one cell block of prisoners at a time. On the activities floor, the hive of activity buzzes on. Inmates stop to ask her to approve a club thank-you letter - she has to OK correspondence - and advise her that a cake has been ordered for an upcoming event.

Another inmate brushes past her in the hallway - just a little too close. An accident or a challenge?

"Be good," she warns him. "Don't make me be a cop."

Her calm blue eyes are constantly observing this world-within-a-world. The habit, perhaps, of time spent as a caregiver. As a mom. Her voice is soft, words carefully chosen. People often lean in to catch them. But they listen.

And always, her silver rings. "Very '60s," she concedes. "People would look at me right away and know who I was."

That was important.

For Campbell, crafting an identity on the inside - deciding how much of your outside self to reveal - wasn't easy. In almost every way, she just didn't fit the stereotype of a prison guard.

Not for Campbell, the woman who once thought our overcrowded prisons mostly showed society's lack of imagination and interest in problem solving. Who suspected that most criminal behavior could have been circumvented through proper parenting skills. Ten years later, she knows better. If anything, the solutions are even more elusive.

"The attitude I came in the door with is my own," she now says. "Knowing yourself as you walk in the doors is really important."

Much like her years working in child care, Campbell quickly found herself tested, boundaries pressed, consequences measured. Children, she understood. With convicts, "acting out" was a whole different ballgame.

"When you're new in the institution, until you have established a line that nobody goes across and built a reputation for yourself, some of the inmates will be very ..." she pauses, considers, smiles.

"... Overt in their nastiness," she explains. "You have to learn to draw the line."

Full-frontal exposures. The time someone smeared feces on the bar box, the very place that she always grabbed to open a gate. The day she was ordered to report to the men's shower room - not the typical post for a female guard. Half practical joke, half test. Just to see if she would obey a direct order.

She did. But first, she looked her superior square in the eye and calmly explained why his order, his ethics, were inappropriate. No tantrums, no threats. Rather, falling back on the simple language of day care - firmly pointing out a "bad choice."

It never happened again.

Drawing the line was tough. Especially learning how to do it on your own.

Campbell could feel many eyes upon her - inmates and co-workers alike. It was a necessary proving ground.

They needed to know her, how she would respond in an emergency. "By the time we're mothers, we know whether we're the type who's going to call for help when our kids get hurt or if we're the first one on the scene to take care of things," she said. "Others need to know that too."

Convicts judged her in different ways. Like the guards, their respect had to be earned.

SHE GREW EARS in the back of her head. They would serve her well, revealing voices of hurt, anger and fear - emotions that percolate just below the surface among inmates. Revealing the obscene whispers behind the smiles.

The first time an inmate exposed himself to her, she ignored it. Didn't work.

"Then I'd say something snotty back and that didn't work either," she recalled. "Finally, I came to a point where I just said, 'You know, that's a weapon. It must be a weapon, or you wouldn't be showing it to me. And we don't allow weapons in here. So if you want to keep it, you'd better tuck it away.'"

"It was a combination of getting straightforward, looking them in the face when I said it, and standing my ground and not losing my sense of humor.

"You have to put some barriers up. If you're a real open person who walks in with ... well, let's just say if all your chakras are wide open, you're gonna get slam-dunked, you're going to get hurt."

That's the way Campbell talks, thinks. Chakras, Buddha, holistic medicine, self-growth - these are the topics likely to seep into her conversations. A spiritual surprise. But inmates and co-workers have come to expect it, even anticipate it.

On the inside, it seems everyone has a nickname. It's the culture of the place.

Campbell was Earth Mama. Miss Cosmo.

"But she's well respected by the inmate population and the staffers alike," stressed OSP inmate Jeffrey Stevens. "She's down to earth, real. And she doesn't have an agenda. She's approachable, can soothe the angriest person. She just starts to speak and they calm down. That's rare."

Campbell shrugs. Earth Mama? It beats other names they could call her.

TO MOST INMATES, she is MIZ Campbell. A few call her Karen. She doesn't mind.

Either label is usually delivered with a measure of respect - an elusive currency inside. Especially for the women who now work here, no longer only as clerks, nurses and cooks, but increasingly as guards, or as they prefer to be called, corrections officers. Each has her own experience, her own story.

Out of the 380-member security staff that watches close to 2,000 prisoners at OSP, 43 are women - about 12 percent. Nationally, the average is closer to 20 percent, a few prisons as high as 30 percent, said Joann Morton, associate criminal justice professor at South Carolina University. "It's opened a tremendous employment opportunity to women," said Morton, who has surveyed women prison employees for the last 20 years.

The demographic shift has meant big changes at prisons across the country, as more women have found careers guarding men - among the last job to be considered off-limits.

Initially, male corrections officers resisted, complaining that it would mean double duty, watching inmates and protecting female co-workers. Some insisted that women would never win respect, wouldn't be seen as authority figures. And it just wasn't safe.

"When I did my first surveys in 1978, the predominant reason corrections agencies were hiring women was that they had to under the Civil Rights Act," Morton said. "Ten years later, the predominant reason was they needed the work force."

When Morton entered the field, "I can remember people being aghast that we were putting 300,000 people into state and federal prisons nationwide," she said. "Now, the states of Texas and California alone have more than we once had in whole system. Today, we have 1.5 million or more - a tremendous influx."

Nudged by lawsuits, security work in male prisons finally began to open to women in the late '70s and early '80s, said Lynn Zimmer, a sociology professor at Queens College in Flushing, N.Y., and author of "Women Guarding Men," which explores those early years.

"What I found interesting was the way women performed (as guards)," Zimmer recalled. "Back then, it appeared quite different, in part because they're different, coming to the job with different skills."

"It was almost as if the regular way of doing the job wasn't open to them, because they weren't insiders ... and that was both an obstacle and an opportunity," she added. "They got to create the job from scratch."

Twenty years ago, it wasn't unheard of to find prison guards recruited in bars. Today, they often report to work armed with a college degree,

creating an interesting chemistry of attitudes, old and new.

Hawks and doves. Ex-marines and sociology majors. Some believe the polar extremes in temperament and philosophies now evident create a necessary tension, a healthy balance.

"I probably walked in the door with the same preconceived prejudices that most inmates have about guards being ... well, 'knuckledraggers,' " Campbell admitted. "Then I realized that I appreciate the 'knuckledraggers.' A, they save me a lot of pain and, B, most of them have a heart of gold anyway.

"If you last five years at an institution, you're there because you care about doing the job, you know? If you don't care, you don't make it through."

TO HER, THE reality is plain. "I don't get to go in there and be me doing the job without someone big and strong and willing to back me up, because face it, I'm not brawny. If we can't work as a team and if I can't feel like I'm supported by someone who's got more muscles than I have, I don't get to have a job."

Wherever Campbell goes, the static crackle of a Motorola radio rides with her. Two wads of keys make her sound like a walking wind chime. The only guns are in the towers. Her brain and wit remain her best weapons.

Mostly, she feels safe, grateful that she's "never been in a position to be hurt."

Curiously, the number of lifers at OSP - about 555 - help keep the peace. Most are in here for murder, but they're invested in keeping privileges, and have become skilled at internal peer pressure.

Still, Campbell's radar is always up. Attention, she insists, is the coin of the realm.

"If I had to describe this work, I would call it long periods of boredom interlaced with periods of hysteria," she said.

"But there's a level of awareness required that's hard to define - like, if all of your children were under 10 and you took them to a river," she explained.

"By and large, nothing happens for hours and hours and hours on end. But then, a fight may break out, or someone has a seizure. We put people in prison for life. They may have a heart attack and die in front of you."

Just as some men can't have a conversation without sports metaphors, it isn't uncommon to hear the language of motherhood trickle into Campbell's stories. She makes no apologies.

"Being a mom, a grandmother, is probably a role I fall into easily," she said. "In many ways, it's a saving grace."

Consider the time she was assigned to watch a makeshift cell block - cots set up off a recreation room back in the early 1990s to accommodate the spillover prison population.

"I almost had a race riot breaking out over what they were going to watch on TV," she recalled.

Campbell stepped swiftly into the middle of it, snapped off the TV and said, "NOBODY is watching TV, you're all going to bed NOW!"

"Basically, I sent the whole dorm to bed without TV," she said, laughing. "They joked for a long time about me acting like a mom, but if that's the voice that works ..."

The reality remains: This can be a dangerous job.

"It's like working in a big warehouse with 3 billion gallons of gasoline," said Phil Olson, an OSP administrator. "As long as no one lights a match, it's fine. But every day can be your last."

There have been six riots in the prison's history, including a 1968 ordeal in which four prison guards were held hostage. One out of every four inmates here is a lifer. Even inside, there are weapons, assaults, an occasional murder.

Escapes are part of the lore. Like the two inmates who made it out one Halloween by hiding in furniture. Their story made the National Enquirer: "Two inmates masquerade as a couch."

Tensions can sprout in many places. Linda Hamilton, a Lane County parole officer and former corrections officer at OSP, charged that she had

been discriminated against while at the prison after she reported misconduct on the part of other officers, and that she was denied promotions based on her gender and the fact she was African- American. In 1997, she sued and won.

That's just the way it is inside. An uneven playing field, at best.

Early on, Campbell chose her own position. She wasn't into perpetuating cruelty and abuse.

"That's what brought a lot of these guys here in the first place," she said. "What I'm into is modeling normal behavior."

In some prisons, corrections officers do their job from a distance, from a catwalk. At OSP, Campbell literally walks shoulder-to-shoulder among her charges. She knows these men, knows their stories.

"It's part of the pleasure and part of the danger," Campbell said. "You have to face the temptation to get hooked in and care too much, or start believing stories that aren't quite believable."

"But I also think that's the most valuable part of our prison system - the opportunity to be a normal human being in an abnormal setting. If we can't do that, how is anybody going to get the picture of what 'normal' is?"

WALKING DOWN dim corridors, Campbell shot a beam of light into each cell, counting sleeping bodies.

In prison, midnight bed checks are a spooky chore, and Campbell moved with brisk efficiency. Suddenly, her flashlight beam rolled over the shape of a man sitting, slumped but upright, on the edge of his bed. What was it about him?

Something made Campbell go back. A slight glint of light that her eye nearly missed.

"I realized my light was reflecting in his blood," she said.

The inmate had used a tiny fragment of razor blade to open the inside of both arms - her first real emergency.

Medical staff responded in minutes. The inmate lived. But the image also

lived on in her head, so haunting that she began working it out in the pages of her journal. Writing the scene, describing it, even sketching a picture of it.

"I kept drawing it, seeing it with, like a mother birthing him," she recalled, shaking her head. "You know, it was like, 'God, you work so hard to get these babies out here.' I could just see that pain in him. So I'd draw it again, couldn't get it to look quite right. It was like I had this picture in my mind that I had to get out.

"Once I did, I was OK with it," she said. "I was OK."

The situation was one of the extremes. Not a constant, but "an occasional."

It's just important "that you be up to the gig of facing your occasional," said Campbell, who believes her journal helps.

"At work I might get stuck on something, and it's the place I can write it out, dump it out, draw it again and again until it's clear," she said. "It's a tool I use to acquire forgiveness, learning to forgive - like a physical act of prayer."

There are other coping tools. Walking. Gardening. Reading. Anything that immerses her in the natural world.

Often, she'll whittle away her vacations by taking three-day weekends. Or work a swing shift, so mornings are her own. Before, when she worked a 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift, Campbell would come home and collapse into what she came to call her "combat nap."

Only once did Campbell lose her temper on the job. "I was at the end of a cell block having a great conversation with someone and an inmate kept interrupting and for some reason it just drove me nuts," she said. "Finally, I yelled, 'SHUT UP!' " From the tier of nearby cells, she could hear a mournful reply, "Ooooooh, Mizzz Campbell ..."

"I felt terrible," she now admits, chuckling a bit.

But tonight, Campbell is listening.

Listening to inmates as they participate in a cognitive development program called Breaking Barriers. It's been developed by a convict for

convicts and presented by convicts - OSP is one of only a handful of prisons nationwide that permits inmates to teach inmates.

Tonight's facilitator is Bear, a man whose Wrestlemania build hardly fits his down-to-business demeanor and small, round reading glasses. But tonight, Bear is all business. His program outline is timed down to the minute.

As the meeting gets under way, you realize that this could be any meeting almost anywhere. Promise Keepers. A fraternity. An IBM skills development course. It's the small things that remind you where you are.

Telltale blue prison tattoos. The occasional zebra-stripe scars on the inside of arms. The mess-hall humor.

Campbell calls roll, reads the class objective out loud. Inmates follow along, chanting underlined words with her.

"Habits and SKILLS are very helpful to HAVE, but when OLD HABITS AND SKILLS no longer fit new situations, THEY CAN BE OUR ENEMIES."

Campbell looks around the room. There is laughter, animated conversation. Eyes connect, voices rise as inmates divided into tables and teams try on a new vocabulary of personal responsibility and self-awareness.

It takes her way back, to the old days of '70s consciousness raising. And she feels joy in their witnessing their discoveries.

"You know, I've got unlimited connections and limited potential," one inmate mutters. "I got shot at point-blank range and it made me 100 percent disabled. And that gave me an excuse to sell dope, which I always fall back on."

Another inmate cracks a joke. "But what are you trying to say?" the inmate running the group presses. "Even when you're joking, you're trying to say something. ... Remember, a display of anger is a display of fear."

"Hey, let's hear it for the Barracudas, they got deep on that one," Bear announces. "That's a heckuva' issue, let's give the Pandas a hand. ..."

Campbell has fought to bring this program in, and to keep it going. To watch the changes, the growth that can emerge in the men here has been profoundly satisfying. Another small slice of normal.

"This isn't a contest," she said later, after the meeting. "No win, lose or draw. It's just doing a job as best we know how."

There are no guarantees, Campbell accepts that. "If I wanted to work on a conveyer belt I wouldn't be here," she added. "I think we're ahead if we reach half of them."

It's a strange job. Success means that she'll never see these guys again. Some, she's destined to work with for the rest of their lives. A workplace that never changes. But is their progress real? How do you know when a con is conning you?

"Nobody gets to know that but them," Campbell said.

"What was that fable about the raven and a pitcher of water?" she mused. "Something about how he put one pebble in at a time until the water level got high enough to drink."

By the end of each day, Campbell has put her pebble in the pitcher.

At 8:30 p.m., the floodlights have flickered on in the yard and on the walls. And a Trail Blazers game is about to start.

Campbell begins the long, slow journey back to the outside. Waiting by locked gates as the prison runs its lines - moving one cell block at a time. All a slow, nightly routine, a process of "unencasing" herself.

Gathering her bulging briefcase, she checks doorknobs, peeks into rooms, begins the ascent back to her own world. A lifting of the cosmic weight that has settled with her. Up, up.

Stop and go. Paperwork is passed. Waiting for gates.

Leaving behind the crying babies at the visitors center and the bureaucratic maze of memos and a handful of men who are just starting to explore the realm of normal, responsible behavior. And that's the hook, really.

Seeing guys someday leave. Knowing they can wind up back here.
Secretly praying that they don't.

In a dark parking lot, she locates her yellow Datsun pickup parked in the Employee of the Quarter parking spot that she earned. The truck sputters to life with the rattling gargle of metal on metal. Bumper stickers on it hawk such virtues as wisdom and kindness. Inside, a witch doll sits on her front seat wearing a "Peace Through Disarmament" button.

Inside, a feathered dreamcatcher dangles from her rearview mirror.

As Campbell trades one world for another, it dances in the cool night air.

Looking for dreams in the wind.

