



Thursday, March 17, 1977

(F11B)

Social worker believes:

Women prisoners are products of their deprived backgrounds

By LYNN ORR

Although the majority of prisoners in Michigan correctional institutions come out of economically deprived backgrounds, occasionally someone from Farmington may end up in prison, according to Sister Joannett Nitz.

Those individuals have usually entered a subculture, like drugs, says Sister Nitz. "The prison system works very selectively for lower class people."

Sister Nitz spoke at Oakland Community College's Orchard Ridge Campus in Farmington Hills last week in conjunction with the International Women's Day program sponsored by OCC's Women's Center.

A social worker for Legal Aid and Defender's Association, a Detroit-based attorneys' group which represents indigents in court, Sister Nitz is also a member of the Team for Justice, an organization of 13 people dedicated to the cause of socialism.

"I am committed to socialism, a new heaven on earth as well as afterwards," she says, adding that her awareness of oppressed social conditions developed from working with persons accused of crimes against the state.

"THE OPPRESSED are helping us understand what Christianity is all about," she says.

Sister Nitz spoke on some of the issues raised by the presentation of "We're Alive," a film made by UCLA students and women incarcerated in

the California Institution of Corrections. She encouraged about 40 audience members to view the film from the perspective of being in prison.

"Any one of us could have been selected out if we belonged to the right minority and class," she claims.

The film was videotaped during six months of Sunday afternoon workshops conducted by UCLA's Women's Film Workshop at the women's prison. Prisoners held the cameras as well as presented the inside view of prisons.

Topics covered included the need for the so-called determinate sentences, or jail terms which exclude the discretion of the parole board, or, as some people call it, the "punishment," more programs aimed at educating and training prisoners for jobs other than secretarial and beautician vocations, and the prisoner's explanations for why they were incarcerated.

Economic conditions dictated their behavior, they claimed, although the prisoners' actual offenses that resulted in their convictions were never stated in the movie.

Sister Nitz's discussion following the film emphasized her commitment to socialism and her view of the real oppressors in society.

One particular target of her wrath was the local media.

"ONE OF THE MOST oppressive and reprehensible institutions is prisons, but right up there next to it I

would put the media," she says. "We are a city that is oppressed by big business or capitalists."

"They are making money out of us, the working class, but the television and news media are constantly feeding us myths about the inner city."

Sister Nitz claims to have documentation that the media receive orders to distort the news to perpetrate such myths as street crime and unemployment figures. She said she didn't have enough time to present documentation of her allegations.

She also believes racism destroys the city, but that racism is encouraged by those seeking profits.

"We've got to keep blacks and whites divided," she says. "How do you expect large factories to keep people on the job?" she added facetiously.

Her discussion of prisons centered on the proposed construction of jails in Wayne County. She is opposed to the plans underway for the county's new jail, and she says both the State of Michigan and the federal government are planning to build correctional institutions in Detroit.

"We are not a city of criminals," she says. "Detroit has become for me a framework of people with whom I

can relate, people in a struggle with institutions which repress."

ALTHOUGH A QUESTION and answer period was scheduled to follow the discussion, Sister Nitz answered only two questions, both requesting further information on her talk.

Several members of the audience questioned the accuracy of both the film's and Sister Nitz's presentation.

"I'd like to know why those women were committed to prison," said one woman.

"Isn't this all a little one-sided?" asked a student.

Mary White, OCC faculty member who organized the International Women's Day program, explained that Sister Nitz usually encouraged a question-and-answer period but that time considerations forced the close of the presentation.

Editor's note: turn to editorial page for an opinion of this seminar.



SISTER JOANNETT NITZ

Women's Day reflections:

Women's movement needs help from cross section of country

It's been said that Eve's creation from Adam's rib symbolizes that women are equal partners to men.

But Judith McCombs, of Farmington, believes that only a minority have taken the story to heart.

"In our culture, ideas which are pro-woman are still a minority thing," she said, during a break in Oakland Community College's recent Women's Day on the Orchard Ridge Campus, Farmington Hills.

Admitting that an unjust situation exists brings criticism, according to Ms. McCombs.

"It's scary to admit that something is basically wrong with the system," she said. "You're called a crazy embittered woman, if you do."

Ms. McCombs, a published poet and a creative writing teacher at Wayne State University, limits voicing her criticism before general audiences.

"You can be more open with a feminist audience about the status of women, and my sympathy for women," she said.

SOCIETY'S BENIGN NEGLECT of women is reflected in smaller paychecks and one-dimensional figures in popular fiction, according to Ms. McCombs.

"Women make less money than men. Among academics, they make 80 per cent of the pay that men do. In other jobs, women are paid 60 per cent of what men make," she said.

"I'm lucky. At least in the academic world, my children can eat the same kind of food that men's children do," she said.

Women have a less equal chance at upper echelon jobs which carry higher wages, she said.

"Most women don't get into positions of power, and those who do are either feminine company men or figureheads and tokens," she said.

In certain situations, though, you do get women in power who are pro-women and pro-person, but that's rare," she added.

A condescending attitude toward women carries over from the business

world to the realm of art.

"The arts are patriarchal. Women who make it in the arts learn to play the same games as the men to stay in power," she said.

"MEN DO THE JUDGING. And not nearly so many people who are on the bottom of the social scale receive grants or get published," she said.

"My women students in my creative writing class at Wayne were just as good as the men. But their stories were rejected. Publications preferred honcho motorcycle poems," she recalled.

Bias against women in the arts is illustrated by the type of subject matter that is considered suitable for general readership.

Poetry about backpacking is considered suitable for general audiences but lines about children growing up are limited by mass opinion to women listeners, she said.

One dimensional characterizations of women in popular fiction also re-

flects the prevailing attitude toward women, she said.

"If you're a writer, you deal in human character. And, naturally, you want to do the strongest and fullest character you can, not Barbie dolls," she said.

"If you read about a full woman character in 'Women's Day,' it's all right. But if you try to write about such a character for a general audience, then lots of people will reject it or be hostile and uptight."

IN SPITE OF PRESENT conditions, Ms. McCombs is sure that the Equal Rights Amendment will pass.

"I certainly hope it will make it," she said. It's a sad commentary on our country that equal rights is an issue. In an equal country, you don't have to pass a law for equal rights—you already have them.

"We've been fighting for 100 years for equal rights. I'd like to have the same opportunities my husband and my brother have," she said.



JUDITH MCCOMBS

Women become aware of legal rights through seminar

Story by CYNTHIA PRIES
Photos by CYNTHIA ARATT

We'll call her Jane Doe. She has four children, doesn't work and depends on her husband for support. When he dies unexpectedly at age 27, she finds he hadn't gotten around to making out a will.

All the property is in both their names, but, suddenly it is inaccessible until the court decides probate.

The joint savings and checking accounts she shared with her husband are also temporarily frozen. So is their joint safe deposit box.

Until the red tape concerning the estate is cleared up, she has no reliable source of income.

OR TAKE A LOOK at Mary X. She's in the process of divorce. During eight years of marriage, she and her husband accumulated substantial property.

She contributed significantly to its purchase from money of her own, but she has no proof because she shared a joint bank accounts with her husband.

As a result, when the time comes to divide their property, her husband may get more than his fair share.

Theoretically, women have legal rights in many areas. But how does the law really work?

What happens when a married woman applies for a credit card in her own name or uses a combination of her maiden and married names?

What happens when a woman attempts to sit alone in a bar or restaurant or get permanent relief from wife abuse?

MORE THAN 150 women of all ages attended a day-long seminar at the Community House in Birmingham Saturday to hear these and other questions explained by members of the Oakland County Women's Bar Association.

"Women have been treated as if they are dummies or incapable of handling their own affairs," said Evelyn Forrest, a Troy attorney.

"In the past, the law stated that a man and woman became one person in marriage and that one person was the husband.

"Things may have changed somewhat over the years, but sex discrimination is still surprisingly prevalent," said Ms. Forrest.

The women attorneys at the seminar discussed in depth the legal rights of women in real estate, social security, estate planning, name changes, rape, employment discrimination, wife abuse, prenuptial agreements, medical problems, divorce law and the role of women in the legal system.

THE KEY THING to remember in any case, the attorneys advised the women, is to know where you stand.

Other pointers are:

•Find out what recourse you have and the time constraints for acting on

your grievance if you feel you've been discriminated against on the job or denied credit for an insubstantial reason.

•Know your own financial position at all times. Be aware of your assets and your husband's, including group life insurance, all joint property and stock dividends.

•Know who legally owns what. Is your name on the property deed along with your husband's?

•If your money is being managed by someone else, do you know exactly what is being done with it? Do you know how well your bank is doing?

"BOTH HUSBAND and wife should know what's going on," said Pamela Hartwig Benya, a Southfield lawyer who spoke on estate planning. "So

often I get the feeling the wife has never read the documents, has no idea what the financial provisions are."

"Many people don't want to handle their own money, but they should have the choice."

"Whatever you do," cautioned Ms. Benya, "educate yourself. Learn about investments. Read the Wall Street Journal. Sylvia Porter's 'Money Book,' and don't be afraid to ask questions."

"Be sure to get good legal help with it," Ms. Benya advised. "To find a good lawyer, talk with your friends or your accountant and check their suggestions in 'Martindale-Huggell,' which lists lawyers practicing in the United States."

IN THE EVENT of divorce, Mar-

jory Epstein, a Birmingham attorney, emphasized "it's vital to know the figures and the locations of your financial documents."

Birmingham attorney Jo Ann Russu talked about "preventive law—the pre-nuptial agreement."

Drawn up prior to marriage, the man and woman state the object of entering into the contract, list their assets and set down provisions for the disposal of property should the mar-

riage be terminated.

During divorce proceedings, such an agreement can save the couple considerable expense and emotional strain, said Ms. Russu.

MEMBERS of the women's bar plan to teach courses on topics discussed at Saturday's seminar. Interested persons should contact the Oakland County Women's Bar Association at 649-1415.



Pamela Hartwig Benya, whose law office is in Southfield, discussed estate planning. "Both husband and wife should know what's going on," she said. "So often I get the feeling the wife has never read the documents, has no idea what's going on."

Basketball game to help raise \$\$ for dystrophy

A basketball game with teams representing Clarenceville School District teachers and Livonia Mall employees will be played Saturday to raise money for muscular dystrophy victims and research.

The game will be in the Clarenceville High School gym, 20155 Middle

Belt north of Seven Mile. An estimated 1,200 tickets are printed and available for \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children under 12 at the high school and Livonia Mall stores.

The charity game is sponsored by the Livonia Mall Merchants Association.