This week we return to the prison. Rebecca Lubelczyk, MD, FACC, CCHP-P who worked for many years in the state correctional health system, has written this piece to enlighten us all about the barriers and bridges between prison life and our lives.

You can respond to Rebecca at rebecca@lubelczyk.com or to the listserv directly. Enjoy.

**Hearing “Prison Voices”**

At one of prisons I work at, they have a program called “Prison Voices” whereby high school students from the area have a scheduled day to go to the prison and hear stories that some of our patients tell. The patients are screened, coached by fellow inmate mentors, and chosen to be part of the program which allows them to talk about the choices they made which usually includes ones that led them to prison. The students are allowed to ask questions of the panel which consists of about six inmates, along with a moderator who is also an inmate. The interaction takes place in the visiting room in full view of several correctional staff members and the chaperones.

I’ve never attended a presentation in the past, but I have passed by the high school students waiting in the lobby as their teacher instructs them on all the security protocols they will be expected to follow. The teacher is usually holding open a locker so that all cellphones, jewelry, wallets, keys, etc. can be stored until after the presentation. The chatter is one of nervous giggles and banter as the group gets ready to go to a place that most, if not all, have only seen in the movies.

Recently, I had the opportunity to organize and attend such a presentation. I volunteer with a Boy Scout troop and a handful of scouts were working on their Crime Prevention merit badge. One of the requirements was to get a tour of a prison/jail/detention center. I willingly worked with the prison administration to set up a “Prison Voices” presentation for the troop. Anyone over the age of 13 could attend. Apparently, it was an appealing opportunity for the troop because I had fifteen scouts sign up and more than enough chaperone volunteers. I had to create a waitlist as I was limited by the security measures I had to follow. Apparently, prison is a desirable place to visit when you know you can leave.

As we grouped together in the parking lot to enter the outer control lobby, there was nervous chatter with a dose of excited anticipation. This time, I was the teacher holding the locker door
open, yelling out all the items that had to be secured before we lined up to go through the pedestrian trap.

Their heightened anxiety was almost palpable as they entered the visiting room. From one who is very comfortable behind bars, I could understand how staff and inmates can detect that level of uncomfortableness of those who aren’t. However, once the presentation started, that nervousness quickly dissipated. The moderator was energetic, engaging, personable, and looked like a real person – not the image of a hardened criminal. It took one scout to ask, before everyone in the audience realized he was serving time. He let the panel of 5 other inmates share their stories. Most of them were 20-year-olds serving a range of sentences, one of which was natural life. One older inmate shared his, disclosing how he ended up with a life sentence, but was eligible for parole.

The stories really hit us. How easy it was to make a wrong decision (sometimes even for what appeared to be the right reason at the time) and then go down a path that was hard to veer from. The chaperones were fully engaged, seemed to sympathize with the inmates, and some (yes, I was one) were brought to tears about the regrets that they shared.

Then came questions and answers. The moderator told us we could ask anything….anything. The scouts got that uncomfortable look about them again but the chaperones jumped in with several inquisitions. Finally, one scout raised his hand. When I realized it was my oldest son, my mother’s pride swelled within me – yes, it’s my kid that’s going to ask a thoughtful, insightful question!

“So, what’s the food really like?”

Not quite the academic postulation I was hoping for. The moderator laughed. He admitted that he did say they could ask anything. After the food discussion, my younger son raised his hand. Please redeem me, I thought. Let’s hear a concise, thought-provoking question.

“Can I pet your dog?”

Crestfallen. I was crestfallen. That was until the inmate walked the seeing-eye dog that he was training up to each scout (once the officer nodded to him that it was okay to approach the scouts). Each scout eagerly reached out to pat the dog as he was led down the row. I realized then how my scout single-handedly broke down that invisible wall that kept “us” separated from “them”. Afterall, they are just people, just like the chaperones, and the kids are just kids, and nearly all kids like dogs.

The scouts and the chaperones raved about their experience to the other scouts and adults at the next troop meeting. Someone suggested that I organize a presentation every year since they found it so valuable. A week later, I got an email from two of the chaperones. They had both seen the same story in the news. The older inmate had made parole and would be released within a few days. They were so excited for him and wanted to share the good news with me. It made me wonder how their reaction would have been had they heard the same news without the
context that they now had. Would they have been so happy for him or would their thoughts have
gone to the family of the victim, which is what many of us think of when we hear about parole
and early releases.

Opinions were changed that evening and new perspectives made. The program did what it was
designed to do. Those men have gone through some things no one should ever have to endure
and they talked about it openly without excuses. My troop and I will not soon forget that
experience and hopefully be better for it.