



Jewish Herald-Voice

The Texas Gulf Coast's Jewish Newspaper Since 1908

February 14, 2013 - 4 ADAR 5773

Volume CV - Number 50

Houston, Texas

jhvonline.com

\$2 Per Copy

RED & BLACK ... Are In Prison?

Coming up with this month's topic and title was easy. Figuring out how to explain it may be a little more complicated.



DISCLAIMER: We are real people. We are not claiming to be experts in any given field, but rather are becoming experts of our own lives.

No kidding. Every time we meet with Chaplain Watkins and she tells us about the men she works with and how they've reacted to our book, I'm left speechless.

That, in itself, is fairly amazing.

Cute. But if anyone had told us when we wrote our book that it would end up in a men's prison and that offenders would not only be reading the book, but enjoying it, learning from it, and sharing the lessons in it with their families, I'd have said they were crazy.

I believe that is what you called me when I told you that we were going to be speakers at the National Prisoner's Family Conference last February.

No. I thought you were kidding. Remember, YOUR business plan was that the book would be the basis of a sitcom. Not a Texas-approved textbook.

That might not have been our plan but, as you know, life rarely goes according to plan.

There's an understatement. But at the time, I thought it was just another one of your "outside the box" ideas. Way outside the box. However, once we spoke at the conference, and started learning more about the prison world, I realized there was a huge need for this information.

You are conveniently forgetting that initially you were fairly negative about it.

Yes, I was. My attitude was that prisoners had done something wrong, so they deserved to be in prison. I had no desire to help them. My heart was with the students, and trying to get our book and its "real life" lessons into the schools.

I understand. I would venture to guess that most people feel that way. On the surface, it seems logical.

Of course, you saw it differently.

Maybe more pragmatically. And then I started doing research. What really got my attention was the Children's Defense Fund's, "Cradle To

Prison Pipeline" report. It explains all the contributing factors that feed that pipeline. And how education is a critical key to changing the trajectory of these lives.

What got my attention was the concept that you can calculate how many prison beds will be needed in the future based on children who can't read on grade level by the fourth grade.

It makes perfect sense ... once you stop and think about it.

But it's not something you would typically think about. But then again, you rarely do the typical thing. Like the time you asked me what I was doing on a Friday night, and I thought you wanted to go to a movie. It never dawned on me that you were inviting me to "go to prison" with you and the founder of Wings Ministry.

And you found every excuse in the book not to go.

I'm a single mom. Heading off to a prison is not something I'd feel safe doing. And I wondered about your logic, but didn't want to ask.

There is only one way to get first-hand knowledge. I wanted to see what I had only read about. However, I was not prepared for what I discovered.

I remember you telling me that it was like a scene out of the old "Get Smart" TV series, with the long corridor and the locking doors.

Architecturally, it was built in 1908 and is beautiful. Although initially intimidating, once I met some of the men it became very "human." They were truly appreciative of my being there, as so many of them feel the outside world has forgotten them. And once the chaplain heard about our book she was anxious to read it.

What I still find hard to believe was that she mentioned that Stringfellow Unit is the only prison in Texas that has a kosher kitchen! I remember telling you that in this instance, G-d was not being subtle. There was clearly a reason that this was the first prison you ever visited.

I believe the word is *beschert*.

Well, a lot has happened since then. Chaplain Watkins not only had our book/program "approved," but also completed two pilot book clubs with 50+ men, and has already started a third. Even Sawyer, who is only 10, was surprised by the feedback from the men who have completed the program. Her exact quote was, "Wow!"

What I find fascinating is how many of these men are connecting the dots between how not understanding personal finance causes stress, and then realizing how it can lead to drugs and/or alcohol. And how "all of the above" contributes to bad decisions.

Obviously, they're finding the "life lessons" I learned as a 40+ year-old to be extremely important as they're saying they want to share the book with their families. I'm moved by their statements that they want their wives, their children, to learn what they're learning.

Well, according to Chaplain Watkins, their actions are matching their words. They are writing home about it, and a few even said they were going to send the book home.

I know. But my favorite story is the man who now turns off the water when he brushes his teeth. It sounds like such a small thing, but it says so much - once you learn that he's doing it because he recognizes he'll be living with someone when he gets out and doesn't want to waste their money. He wants to start today to make it a good habit for the future.

It is all about taking control of your life, versus letting your life control you. It is what I told you when Nick got fired. And it is what we tell students.

But in this case, I can't help but wonder how many lives are being touched - not only the offenders, but their families, their friends, their communities. Not to mention, what if some of the men who have read our book now start making better decisions. And once released, don't return to prison.

Exactly. Just imagine the money that would save taxpayers. The cost of Texas state prisons is about \$22,000 per person per year, which works out to \$60 a day. Our book costs less than half a day in prison. So if it has the potential to actually



Tina "Red" Pennington and Mandy "Black" Williams are sisters and co-authors of "What I Learned About Life When My Husband Got Fired!" The informative, entertaining book discusses values, priorities, relationships, financial literacy and much more.

UPCOMING APPEARANCES

Feb. 20-22 - Prisoner's Family Conference

March 3 - Phi Delta Kappa

For an up-to-date listing of all upcoming public appearances, as well as details on these, please go to "Future Appearances" at www.redandblackbooks.com.

make a difference in their lives and their future decisions, it seems like a small investment ... with huge upside potential. To me, it is a no-brainer.

I was thinking more about the family environment, but your numbers make perfect sense. Unfortunately, just because something makes sense, doesn't mean it's going to happen. Just take a look at the education system. And what we've been trying to do for over three years now with limited success.

I know. It is extremely frustrating. But one day it will be ironic.

What do you mean? Besides the fact it is much cheaper to educate than incarcerate (average cost for a year of public education in Texas is about \$8,700 per student compared to the \$22,000 cited above; nationally, the numbers are around \$11,000 and \$31,000, respectively), one day I expect to ask the question, "Why is it that these critical life lessons are being taught in prisons, but not in our schools?"

Well, that should get Austin's attention. Austin? I was thinking Washington, D.C. And, it needs to do more than that. It needs to get everyone's attention. Especially voters. □