

7-21-2013

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Recommended Citation

Cooper, Kenneth J. (2013) "The Personal and Family Challenges of Reentry: Interview with Helen Credle," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol21/iss1/6

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The Personal and Family Challenges of Reentry

Interview with Helen Credle

Kenneth J. Cooper

For 40 years, Helen Credle has worked with prison inmates and ex-offenders in Massachusetts, from inside or outside the state corrections system. The Boston native, who grew up in Roxbury, did not set out to become an advocate for prisoners and their families. Oddly, it was music that first took her inside prison walls and into that role. As director of community services for the New England Conservatory of Music, Credle organized concerts by bluesman B.B. King and balladeer Bobby Womack in state prisons. Her involvement grew deeper when the conservatory's administrators and faculty members decided to teach inmates to play jazz, and the inmates then would perform in the auditoriums at maximum-security Walpole State Prison and medium-security Norfolk State Prison nearby. The conservatory's foray into altruistic music education came during a socially conscious era when compassionate white churchgoers and black activists volunteered in prisons, teaching classes and providing other services to inmates.

An unanticipated reception awaited Credle, sporting a big Afro in the style of Angela Davis, as she approached the community services building at what is now known as the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Norfolk (MCI-Norfolk), to talk about the conservatory's jazz initiative. Unbeknownst to her, word of her arrival with a well-known prisoner advocate had spread through the prison population. Many black inmates assembled on the steps to greet the visitors.



Expert Witness on Reentry

Helen Credle has a long history of engagement with the Massachusetts corrections system, both as an insider and an outsider. John Boone, the nation's first black corrections commissioner, appointed her in the early 1970s as director of volunteer and community services in the state's prisons. She remained at the Department of Correction until the 1980s, rising to the position of associate commissioner of diversity and human resources. Since her departure, Credle has helped ex-offenders find jobs, counseled their family members, and appeared in public forums as an impassioned advocate for a more systematic approach to helping released offenders, along with their relatives, adjust to reentering society. Reprinted by permission of Tony Irving.

One by one, a number of them shouted her name to get her attention, then their own name to identify themselves. “All these guys who I grew up with and didn’t know what happened to them, they’re yelling and screaming my name out, because we’re from Roxbury,” Credle recalled. “We start talking, and I’m saying, ‘I thought you went to college down South.’ They were all there. It just blew me away.” She was astonished because the incarceration of black men was not yet as massive as it was to become in the succeeding decades.

Before long, Credle was making official visits to prisons as an administrator in the Massachusetts Department of Correction. In 1971, Governor Francis W. Sargent, a liberal Republican who believed in the rehabilitation of criminal offenders, hired John O. Boone as the first black corrections commissioner in the country. Boone, in turn, tapped



A Boone to Walpole

Massachusetts Correction Commissioner John O. Boone and Joseph Higgins, acting superintendent of what was then known as Walpole State Prison, standing in front of the entrance to the since-renamed Massachusetts Correctional Institution-Cedar Junction on September 6, 1972, during a strike there by guards. Helen Credle, then director of volunteer and community services at the Correction Department, was among central office personnel that Boone reassigned to fill in for the striking officers. She served food to inmates. Dixon/Rogers Photo Archive.

Credle as the department's first systemwide director of volunteer and community services, reporting directly to him. She expanded the number of volunteers working in the prisons sevenfold, from 500 to 3,500. They led courses, organized drug rehabilitation and Alcoholics Anonymous programs, and brought other services to Walpole (now MCI-Cedar Junction), Norfolk, Concord, and Framingham, the last being the women's prison in Massachusetts. The nighttime sessions took place from Monday through Thursday. The regular presence of volunteers curbed and monitored abuses by correctional officers, suggested Credle, explaining that volunteers acted as "watchdogs in prison, so a lot of stuff would cease or be done differently because the guards knew the volunteer groups were going to meet."

A black woman working as an administrator inside prisons was an unfamiliar presence in Massachusetts, one not always welcomed by correctional officers, who were overwhelmingly white. "I heard them in the control room, 'Who is that black bitch? Who does she think she is.' It wasn't even that they would hide it," Credle recounted. Boone had to order that she be allowed to walk through Walpole's Ten Block, where inmates who were judged to be very difficult to control were held in solitary confinement. Her visit upset the guards, but Credle did find her presence welcome among black inmates formerly on Walpole's death row, which Boone shut down after the U. S. Supreme Court temporarily halted executions in 1972. Those men called themselves the "Bantu" and Credle "Fareeda," which in Arabic and Swahili means unique or exceptional. "The Bantu and I were very, very close," she said. They were her teachers, tutors, and mentors when it came to the corrections system. Out of concern for Credle's well-being, the Bantu insisted she meet with them once a week for updates on how she was faring in the central office in Boston.

Boone's implementation of Sargent's reformist agenda, including opening halfway houses and giving weekend furloughs to lifers, rankled correctional officers, who went on strike a total of four times at Walpole, Norfolk, Concord, and Framingham. Boone dispatched central office personnel to fill in for the guards during the work stoppages. She was working in Walpole's food serving line during a strike when members of the Bantu approached her. "They said, 'Sister Helen,

you just served the Boston Strangler.' I had and I fainted," Credle recalled. "When I woke up, I was at the nurse's station." Albert DeSalvo, who was identified as the notorious Boston Strangler but convicted of unrelated rapes, used to create paintings and sell them in Walpole's visiting room. After that shocking first meeting, DeSalvo made a pastel drawing of Credle with a rose in her hand and gave the art to her. "Sweetest guy in the world," she said. "It's a funny thing, because when I met him and talked to him, the first thing that popped into my head was: 'There's no way in hell you're the Boston Strangler.'" After DNA tests in July 2013 conclusively proved that DeSalvo killed the last of the Boston Strangler's 13 victims, Credle conceded she had been fooled by his gentlemanly act.

In 1973, Boone, besieged by his critics in the prison guards union and media, was forced to resign after 18 months as commissioner. Credle stayed at the Correction Department through the next two commissioners. She served on the central office's Classification Board, which determines which inmates appeared suitable for furlough privileges, based on reviews done in the prisons by the Institutional Classification Board. They also make recommendations on the security level at which inmates should be housed and the rehab programs they must participate in. Commissioner Michael V. Fair appointed her director of diversity and then associate commissioner of diversity and human resources. She authored the department's first approved affirmative action plan. Thirty-two times she shut down and restarted hiring searches because the interviewing panels were not diverse enough. Fair backed her each time. He also authorized the department to pay for her to earn a master's degree in human resource development at Brandeis University. She left the Correction Department not long after Fair resigned in 1989.

Since then, Credle has remained active as an advocate for prisoners and their families. In addition, she has directed job placement programs for senior workers at the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts and La Alianza Hispana in Roxbury under a U.S. Labor Department program. In both positions, ex-offenders formed a large percentage of the workers whom she had trained and placed in jobs.

She currently is a consultant and serves on the board of the Center for Church and Prison in Roxbury.

The preceding summary of her involvement with the Massachusetts Correction Department is based on comments that Credle made during an interview in her Roxbury home conducted by *Review* editor Kenneth J. Cooper. In this edited and abridged transcript of a portion of that interview, Credle hones in on two lessons she learned from Boone (who died at 93 in November 2012): the importance of family and community engagement in prisoner reentry and in inmate classification. She makes several recommendations for changes in Correction Department policy, such as the restoration of her former position as director of volunteer services reporting to the commissioner and the inclusion of family members in prerelease classification review hearings.

Credle argues that the Correction Department needs a “workforce development department” to train returning inmates in “soft skills” and place them in jobs. She endorses the establishment of social enterprises whose mission is to hire ex-offenders, like Goodwill for the disabled, and notes some former prisoners form their own small businesses because their criminal records make it difficult to find other employment. Under revisions made in 2010, those records are available for up to ten years to potential employers under the state’s Criminal Offender Record Information Act, popularly called CORI.

Credle also believes some entity should provide intensive training to families on the difficult adjustments surrounding prisoner reentry and also psychotherapy for returnees, whom she says suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when imprisoned five years or longer. In compelling language and with acute insight, she relates her observations about the emotional and psychological challenges that returning inmates and their families face, usually without adequate preparation. At times, she mimics the salty language common among many inmates and former prisoners.

Trotter Review (TR): In your remarks to the Cambridge Democratic City Committee in September 2011, you said that no role has been given to the family or community in the reentry of inmates. What should that role be, and how would you accomplish that?

Helen Credle (HC): I would look at engaging family members in classification reviews conducted at the institutional level. The respective institutions, prisons, submit to the Parole Board all classification reports on inmates seeking parole. The Institutional Classification Boards tell Parole what the inmate has got to do after his release. I've read those reports and listened at parole hearings. There's never anything in those reports that says, "When we met with you and your wife or you and your family, there was an agreement made that you wouldn't act out" or whatever. It could be anything. The family is not involved in that process.

For instance, let's say Classification says, "Every quarter, we're going to sit down with you and your family, or whoever you designate as your significant support system when you get out, and we're going to go over with the family what it is we feel you have to do"—because 90 percent of those incarcerated come home. Let's say four times a year, Institutional Classification Board members sit down with the family and say, "You want to tell your family what you're doing, what's keeping you from going to the Parole Board, or do you want us to tell them?"

TR: So you would recommend meetings with the family before the Classification Boards?

HC: Yeah, at the prison level with the inmate and family present, so that the family gets a chance to see and hear the attitude of the classification staff. That's number one. The family gets a chance to see how the inmate reacts in front of the classification people. The family has only seen how the inmate reacts in the visiting room, so the family hears only certain things during visiting hours that they know may be or may not be on point, because this is a person they know. It could be a built-in thing that the inmate starts thinking, "I'm not trying to prove to the motherfucking Department of Correction that I'm all that and a bag of chips. Fuck them. But I've got to prove to my family that I am. So if I got to act or eat crow, I can't disappoint them after they came up here and sat through this." See what the psychological impact would be?

TR: It would give the inmate, in a personal and respectful way, an opportunity to demonstrate a sense of accountability to his family.

HC: Exactly. Be a man. Because they all walk around, “I’m a man. I’m a man.” This mantra is better understood when you look at the internal reason for this outcry. They are thinking, “I just need one day without anyone telling me who, what, when, and how I “must” do “exactly” what I’m told to do. When you perceive this internal thinking you can understand their reasonable reality of being a man. What they say when they come out is, “You don’t know what I went through. I’m still in transition.” That’s all true.

I think the inmates don’t want their families involved. They want the families to be involved once they get out, for all the reasons they should be involved. Many of them fantasize about the true reality of being out. Unfortunately, too many of their fantasies are just not doable.

The families are not prepared for the emotional impact and engagement that they’re going to have to go through the first five years; too many families and returnees don’t even make it for five years. If you’ve done five years in prison or more, and most of them have, that family is not prepared at all for who this personality is, because the returnees don’t tell the family. Why? Because they don’t know themselves.

For instance, a family member tells a released inmate, “I called you at twelve o’clock and I said for you to be ready because I’d be there at 1:30 for us to go. Why is it at four o’clock, and you’re still getting dressed to go out, when you knew we were leaving?” They won’t let you know they’re terrified to go outside.

TR: Why are they terrified?

HC: They haven’t been outside in a long time. The noise, the car lights, little things. Where are the stop lights? I’m making some of this up although I lived it. It took some people I know two years until I walked in and said, “Are you ready?” and they said, “Yes.” Two years.

We take it for granted. Families are like, “We love you. We’re so glad you’re home.” Parties and so on. He’s home. He’s a king, a hero. He came back from the war, won the war. “But in six months I want you to get a job, and I want you—.” The family has all these rules, not even realizing that the returnee is emotionally and intellectually incapable of complying. Not that they don’t want to do it. They are incapable. They

are frightened of being in the house alone. Never been alone in prison. Even in solitary, they knew there was somebody next to them who was also in solitary.

TR: Those are tough things for any family to deal with. It sounds like there's a need for therapeutic intervention.

HC: I don't know. Here's the pattern. What happens is the family gives up because they don't really have a clue what they're dealing with, because the person isn't going to tell them. But if the family were allowed to get a glimpse, certain things would come out in classification hearings.

TR: In other words, the family could anticipate what they have to deal with.

HC: Right. Or go away saying, "Oh, no one is ever in the dark unless they're in solitary confinement." Or, "They don't see colors unless they go into visiting room." Or, "They've never heard a car honk in prison." Or, "They've never heard a baby crying, people yelling in the street, the TV on and the radio with music going, all at the same time."

And, as a returnee, you're told to go to the corner store and pick up a loaf of bread. You've got to cross a busy street like Blue Hill Avenue with the buses and the taxis and the bikes and cell phones and all that. I'm not saying returnees don't adjust. I'm not sure if they adjust. They may learn to handle it but never make the same kind of adjustment that we've made, because we've had a chance to grow into it while we were here. Then the tone of voice and the way a family member or anyone else moves their hand could be considered totally disrespectful to the returnee, because he had a code and a law and a rule that you didn't do those kinds of things in prison, and did it that way for fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty years. Similar to the military in a lot of ways. But you're not confined in the military. It's a lot like what happens in war. Soldiers come back and go berserk.

TR: Posttraumatic stress disorder, as you said in Cambridge.

HC: Right. I think people who are incarcerated for five or more years in medium security in the Department of Correction suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. That's exactly what it is. I'm not so sure that the guards don't go through it, too. They're locked up, too.

The reason I know this is my husband, Larry Dreher, who died from an aneurysm from shrapnel lodged in his brain, had some of the same kind of behavior when he came from Vietnam as I see in these men. It was identical, and he suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder. He had a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, and a Silver Star. He was wounded twice.

TR: PTSD is a mental health disorder that usually requires, in its extreme forms, therapy. Would these tough men's men just out of prison actually agree to go to therapy, if some institution, private or public, provided funding?

HC: Yeah. If you said posttraumatic stress disorder, similar to what affects somebody fighting a war. It's the way you present it. Anybody will do anything based on how you present it. A lot of inmates don't go after their GED because they're told, "You're illiterate." They don't want people to know they can't read and write, so they don't go.

If you presented the GED in a different light, they would go. For instance, one returnee had a brilliant idea that most inmates have TVs sitting in their cell even though there are no stations out there. So have a mandatory time, two hours a day, when Teleprompters are put in certain areas throughout the compound, and inmates are actually being taught so they can take the GED. It would be like being in the waiting room in community health centers. Their TVs are tuned into anything that's about health. While you're in the waiting room, that's all you get. You get educated whether you want to or not. People could be taught to spell or write using that kind of process.

Another thing, and we could do this as an experiment, and you'll see exactly where I'm coming from. Take these five guys [she names ex-offenders she knows]. Tell them you want to sit around the table and talk to them about their experiences in prison. They would all try to outdo each other in controlling the conversation, and not in saying, "I had a worst time than you." Not that kind of outdo. It's their viewpoint of criminal justice in the community.

TR: Each former prisoner wants to be dominant.

HC: Each wants to be the dominant, but they've got unrealistic things that they want family and the community to do, unrealistic because

they don't realize that they're traumatized. They're talking from the point of trauma. Back in John Boone's day, we in the Department of Correction didn't know that. The armed services didn't even know it then.

TR: What kind of unrealistic expectations do ex-offenders have?

HC: They have an ideology of freedom that causes them not to see how they affect the emotions of people around them. I would call it *emotional abuse*. They feel as though you're supposed to understand that they don't know how to talk or act in a social situation. Now they're without borders and correctional officers, so they may say whatever they want in front of you, to you, in front of other people, that [is] embarrassing, and they won't take ownership of it because they have not been prepared to do so.

It's one of the reasons why men in leadership in our community—let's say CEOs and so forth—are challenged by forming relationships with ex-offenders. It's because they tell you: "Don't talk to me like that." It gets so you don't know how to act around them. It wears off them. But it doesn't wear off in a year, but it doesn't wear off in two years. I've been around these guys on the inside. One of the reasons I'm so successful with many of them on the outside is because I learned how to act in accordance with the behavior that's deemed respectable on the inside. I had twenty years of training, and I got beat up pretty bad by these inmates thinking I was disrespecting them. I really didn't have a clue at first.

TR: Of what parts of the prison code should the family of a returning ex-offender be most aware?

HC: Here's something that's very, very simple. Now he's been out three months, somebody who has done more than five years and never had a furlough. The novelty for the family has worn off. Now there's a grown man at home who's not helping with the rent and eating up all the food. He's eating up all the food because he's not had good food to eat for a while. He went to a canteen and stole an orange and thought it was a steak. Now there's ice cream and bread and fruit and everything all over the place. They go ballistic. Many others still eat like they're in the canteen. They'll go out and buy a bag of candy, a small bag of popcorn and all this kind of stuff. I've seen it out here.

TR: So you're saying two things: Some are staying in the house and eating up all the food because they're not used to that, and others are going to the store and eating like a teenager, as they did in the canteen—snacks, junk food.

HC: Yes. And they'll be eating in their room. Let's go back to something very elementary, which I don't think Parole understands, or the families. You're two months home, and you're dressing like you've assimilated to a large degree. You're beginning to look like the way people dress and you have picked up certain little things that people say, do and act like, but you haven't incorporated it 100 percent because you're still with the behavior that you had behind the walls. "I thought you said you were going to look for a job today. I mean, we talked about this last night, and I asked you to call so-and-so and such-and-such." They don't even know how to call so-and-so and such-and-such.

TR: Because they don't know how to use a cell phone or—

HC: They don't know what to say. "Hi, my name is Joe Blow, and I understand that you've got..." They don't know how to do that.

TR: They don't know how to call an employer or someone who could help them find a job?

HC: They don't know how to do that. But they aren't going to tell you that. They know how to call their family from prison and ask if you would accept a collect call, and then the conversations are the same conversations that they've had for five, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty years. "Hi. How you doing? Is everything all right? Do you need some money? So and so had this in school, bang-bang, bang-bang." No one trained them how to talk on the phone. When they get out, they don't even know they don't know. But now they find out they don't know how to talk on the phone—grown men who are supposed to be among the baddest on the planet. How do they tell someone that they are afraid to pick up the phone and call somebody? That's number one.

Number two. How are you going to tell somebody that you are afraid to go out of your front door, walk down the street, cross the street, and get on a bus? How are you going to tell somebody that

you're afraid to go to the theater, buy a ticket, walk into a dark room, and sit down? I've seen them. They'll park, go into a theater, and try to act all big and bad. But the whole time they're going like this [looking from side to side warily].

Let's say you spend five years at MCI-Norfolk. That's where you are every day. You learn every building. You know where every crack in the floor is. You know what every noise is. You know what every bell is. You know whose voice is who. You learn the personalities of those people from five years at MCI-Norfolk and, 99.5 percent of the time, it does not change from day to day. You come out to a world where Monday it's like this, and Tuesday it's 80 percent different. "But what's that noise? You hear that noise?" But the person with him hasn't heard that noise. They don't look in the direction of the sound. You, the returnee, are speaking with women or people you're trying to impress and you're doing everything in your power to keep from jumping out of your skin because you are terrified. They'll talk and get so frustrated and so mad because they can't tell you they're scared. They get mad. "Fuck this. I don't want to talk about this anymore." Anything they can do to get away from the sound. Go in their room, slam the door, mad, but it's quiet. But they kept their dignity. That comes home to us.

TR: That also sounds tough for families to deal with. You can't always accompany returnees outside to the store, treat them like children.

HC: But if you know it, that helps. If you don't realize that that human being in your house is feeling like this, you can't even begin to understand. You don't understand that they come with these dynamics. If the family somehow gets that understanding, maybe from some kind of training...

TR: You talked about families, together with the inmate, meeting with the Classification Board.

HC: I also talk about families engaging in intensive training.

TR: Before the inmates come out?

HC: That's right.

TR: Who would do the training?

HC: I don't know. I'm speaking from actual, practical, applied experience. I've learned to read the b.s. in a formerly incarcerated person. I know the body language and all of that. It came through trial and error. Let's say you go to a meeting. Let's say you go to attend the State of Black Boston conference. Ex-offenders are at the table, giving input. Their incarceration is everybody's fault but theirs. The reason they can't say, "I had a role in this," is because there are other things that they are afraid of, or don't know how to do, or don't know how to position, and if they say that, it might trigger something else. So they keep the weight off themselves. However, it does get to a point where if they know you know, they'll stand up to it, their role in the crime. But as long as they know you don't know, you could never in your wildest dreams conceive of it.

TR: Of course the other big issue, when someone gets out of prison, is getting a job. On that same State of Black Boston panel that you mention, there was a young man who created a business whose mission is to hire ex-offenders, in his case, to provide janitorial services. Michael Curry, president of the Boston NAACP, has also talked about this concept, businesses whose mission is to employ ex-offenders. What do you think of that idea?

HC: I don't have a problem with that. I know ex-offenders who have started their own successful businesses, because they said—pardon the expression—"Fuck CORI. CORI ain't stopping me. I'll start my own business." They are very few and far between, because those men, whether they went to prison or not, would have been successful. They were born that way. But most individuals who are in prison are illiterate. Secondly, they're in prison because they're rebellious. Thirdly, they're in prison because nobody loved them. That's all of them, really. In some form or fashion, they felt abandoned and/or left. Isn't the goal more than just having a job or having a career—to have a balanced life? If you don't have the other emotional things on tack, you aren't going to keep a job. You're going to have an attitude on your job. You're going to fight. How do I know? Personal experience. The last six years, I dealt with 45 percent of my market being formerly incarcerated men [at the Urban League job placement program for senior workers].

On every street in Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan—this is why we've got to do something—there are five to ten ex-offenders on every street. Black men. Men of color. Whether you know it or not. CEOs, ex-offenders. People in the governor's office, ex-offenders. State. City. There's so many of them that the rule that an ex-offender can't socialize with another ex-offender has been thrown out the window because you'd go to the grocery store, and the owner is an ex-offender. The only rule that they have now is you can't socialize with a co-defendant. But back in the day, you couldn't hang out with another ex-offender, but now you can't get away from it because your father might be one.

TR: Why do former prisoners get angry when you tell them what to do? It treads on their macho ego?

HC: You could be their boss, and you're having a bad day. You've got a lot on your plate, and you offhandedly say to him, "Look, I need you to do this and I need you to do this, right away." The ex-offender says, "He disrespected me." If you say "How is that disrespectful?" they'll say, "You don't talk to me like that." They all do this, all of them.

The other thing is they come from an environment where the only people around that they have to talk to are each other. The only outlet, social activity, emotional involvement they have is to talk. That's all they got, talk. They will talk you crazy. They will talk about the same thing—I don't care what it is—three or four hours every single day for six months. I've been around enough of them. Let's say 15 out of 17 who I know have the behavior that I'm describing, even if they're polished, even if they've got it down pat. It gets to a point where people in "the city of lights"—I call prison "gray city," and I call outside of prison "the city of lights"—who would like to help and support them, do not have the energy to be around returnees anymore because those people have been completely drained.

TR: Are there particular subjects that provoke these long conversations or does it matter?

HC: It doesn't matter. And you'd better know what you're talking about because, if not, that opens the floor for debate. "How can you say that and you can't document it, you can't prove it?" They came from the emotional structure inside that teaches: "Don't be telling us stuff that

isn't true because our lives depend on it." So it's not foolishness. But you don't know that, and you're a family living in a house with that person.

Every woman who has a relationship with an ex-offender within that serving time of five years or more and who comes to see me, sits at that table, with tears down her face and says, "He won't stop talking. He says the same thing over and over. Love him. Support him. But I don't understand it. I don't get it." These women are in love with these guys, want to support them. But the women haven't been trained or know why returnees are the way they are. The women haven't seen the cell. They don't know what the prison's quad looks like. They only see correctional officers when they go through the front gate and when they're in the visitors' room. There, behind bars, all the inmates are acting exactly the same way, and all the guards are acting exactly the same way as each other.

In the visitors' room, inmates who are respectful and courteous will not look at your guest because they do not want you to think they're trying to hit on the woman who's come to visit you. They look straight ahead. Coming out, it takes them a while to adjust. They may want to look—and now they are free. But they don't know if the woman belongs to the man. They haven't learned that. When they learn it, they go to the other extreme. [laughs]

TR: Well, they have been locked up.

HC: I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm just saying you can see them sitting in a club or something, looking straight ahead as some beautiful woman walks by. They're with a woman, and looking is not disrespectful because even she's looking. The woman he's with is saying, "Look at that, she's bad." All the women who come to me, married to ex-offenders, their significant others, living with them, have their kids, all have the same story. Is it good stuff that comes out of it? Yeah.

TR: Comes out of?

HC: The families and the women who go far beyond what are emotionally supportive expectations. These are extraordinary people. They're the ones who save these guys. They save them.