

LOVE IN ACTION FOR ALL

Making  a Difference

JANE DAVIS

WHEN I WAS ASKED TO BE A MEDIA witness at an electric-chair execution in Georgia in 1993, I didn't know that my life would be changed forever. I was a contributing writer to *Prison Life* magazine and, by law, a certain number of media witnesses are required. When they brought Chris Berger into the execution chamber from the adjacent holding cell, the sight of his ashen face and terrified, wide, dark, foreboding eyes seared my soul.

There were approximately twenty witnesses in the stark room with three church-like pews on the other side of a large glass partition that separated us from Chris and the chair. I sat at the edge of my seat, my hand lying on the vomit bag placed beside each witness. I could feel my pulse quicken, my heart race, my mouth go dry as I began reacting to my surroundings. Chris stared through me—into me. Our eyes and souls locked. I felt utterly helpless. “I love you, Chris. Go in peace!” I ➤



mouthed to a man I didn't know. I wanted to bring dignity to moments that had none.

After Chris asked for forgiveness from anyone and everyone he had "ever hurt in any way," the dark brown leather flap was placed over his eyes and face. I looked around the room in quiet desperation. The silence was eerie as we watched a human being killed. The 2,200 volts of electricity burned through him. I gasped for breath, my mouth gaping open. His arms strained against the leather straps holding him tightly to the chair that was his deathbed. His clenched fists and forearms turned deep rolling shades of blue and purple. His body strained and convulsed. While he crossed over from life to death, I, too, transitioned in an inner explosion, an inner "knowing" of the true connection of all of us as human beings. That moment changed the course of my life.

A few months later, I suddenly woke up at 2 AM with a sense of words struggling to come out from inside me. I didn't hear the words. They were just there. You might call it a silent noetic voice. I even wanted to go back to sleep, but somehow I knew I had to pay attention or the words would be lost to me forever. These words included the acronym "HOPE-HOWSE"—Help Other People Evolve through Honest Open Willing Self-Evaluation/Expression.

I felt, "This is your calling, this is your life's purpose

and message." I also saw a logo consisting of an eye, a heart, and a hand. The eye was about rigorous self-honesty, the heart was about faith, and the hand about action or service to others. It was a psychospiritual model that simply said, "We are all one heart."

So I began a walk in the world with this new decree. I didn't really know what I was doing but, at the same time, everything seemed clear. The clarity is about seeing through people, just as Chris had seen through me before he was executed—to their hearts as well as their darkness, knowing both are present.

The work of HOPE-HOWSE, now a nonprofit organization, has taken on many diverse forms. For eight years after witnessing the execution, I was compelled to simply serve. I began traveling around the country visiting prisons and death rows, conducting writing workshops and spiritual coaching. "A client of mine is on death row in Texas," an attorney told me. "Can you visit him?" "Yes," I responded, without hesitation. It was a Jewish inmate who had not had a Jewish visitor in seventeen years. Four hours flew by. When the guard told us we had ten minutes left, I felt panic. How does one end such a visit? Then I turned to the prisoner and asked, "When was the last time you said the Sh'ma (the most important Jewish prayer)?" As his eyes filled with tears—I had my answer.

I put my hands, fingers spread in a fan, on the window sep-

arating us. He put his on the other side. “Sh’ma Yisrael,” I began as tears streamed down his cheeks and his lips mouthed words that had been dormant for too long.

Everyone whose path crossed mine was simply a human being; we were connected by our human struggles. “I’m in a motel downtown somewhere,” the familiar voice on the other end informed me. “I need help.” It was one of the girls who had participated in a HOPE-HOWSE writing program at a residential facility for kids-at-risk. She had been prostituting to keep herself alive. “Of course you can come here,” I said, and took her in for over five months until she got into the Job Corps. Members of the community helped with clothing, food, and support.

On several occasions we brought Jews, Muslims, Christians, Native Americans, Sikhs and others together in prayer and respect. Politics was not the focus. The focus was our “oneness.” We sang, danced, and broke bread together.

We have a program called “Creative Expressions” where artists, writers, musicians, dancers, and poets visit prisons, educating both prisoners and community members.

We never forget anyone who could easily be thrown away by society—not even the kitten who was saved after some children almost killed it. “What” we do is sec-

ondary to “doing.” We express love, not just in words, but in our actions.

Last year, I had to return to work because I had almost exhausted my financial resources. I now work inside a super-maximum penitentiary as a mental health provider, and continue to find the goodness in all of us, even where we least expect to find it. I also find the darkness in those who have the courage to share who they really are. I tell people, “Let’s start with the worst of you and go from there.” I try to create honesty, intimacy, and connection.

The greater vision for HOPE-HOWSE is to have twenty to forty acres of land in New Mexico. It will be a place where all are welcome, if only temporarily. It will be a place where there is always bread baking and simple fare available. There will be a library, an art studio, a meditation/yoga room, and people from the community can donate their time to help others.

I believe that is what Chris Berger taught me in his execution: The true oneness of us all—the need for accountability, for honesty, for caring, through actions intended for all.



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