

The MU: Supporting families affected by imprisonment

By Fiona Thomas

Fiona is MU Communications Officer at Mary Sumner House and this article was recently published in our publication 'Home and Family'.

In the early 1990s, the governor of Holloway Prison noticed that the babies in the prison's mother and baby unit were developing at a slower rate than his own baby grandchildren. He realised that the lack of a stimulating and baby-friendly environment was the cause.

And then an MU member left copies of *Home & Family* at the prison. The governor saw them, and realised what a fantastic group the MU were – a ready-made support group for women in prison who had no family. He invited the then DP, Mollie Nicholls, to come in and discuss what the MU could do to assist at Holloway.

And so Holloway became the first of 90 prisons around the country where MU members help families sustain and develop their relationships whilst affected by imprisonment.

MU members responded overwhelmingly, from donating toys and making baby clothes and undertaking shopping errands for the mums, to changing the barren exercise yard into a roof garden with play equipment, plants and seating.

The MU's care for the babies in the unit freed the mums' time to do training or to earn money from work within the prison (baby provisions such as nappies have to be paid for by the mums). One day each week members act as 'pram pushers', taking out babies whose mothers want them to gain some experience of life outside the prison walls.

The benefits became so apparent that the prison formalised the care, adopting the MU crèche. The crèche now operates every weekday, and employs two fully trained nursery nurses to provide childcare.

The attractive mother and baby unit has several comfortable communal rooms without locks, and an open door policy to the MU roof-garden, staff office and other facilities. Each mum has a small individual room for them and their baby that remains open from 8am to 8pm, where they can have privacy should they need it, but in which they are confined at night.

Mollie Nicholls still visits regularly to run branch meetings and visit women there. The women are always delighted to see Mollie and Lydia, their regular MU visitors. They greet them warmly and take great care of them, making cups of tea, and offering an arm to Lydia.

One of the mothers, 24 year-old Kerry, spoke about the difference made to the mums by the work of the MU.

'My daughter Rosie (four months) has just started going out with the ladies. It's wonderful for her. She gets experiences I can't give her in here, like hearing the buses, or feeling rain, or going to a shop or a park. She is always excited after she comes back from her walk; much livelier than on other afternoons.'

Kerry feels her decision to keep Rosie with her in prison is selfish in many ways. 'I've got another child, a little boy, who lives with my mum,' she says. 'I miss him so badly that I felt I just had to have Rosie with me, even though she's missing out on so much. But the staff really try to help give the babies as good a life as possible. Our babies are NOT prisoners, and they are never treated as if they are.'

There are very few places in mother and baby units around the country, and each girl who requests a place has to go before a special board. Any disruptive behaviour could lead to a girl losing her place on the unit, so all of them make huge efforts in their work, their conduct and their interaction with each other to maintain the privileges.

The MU is like a breath of fresh air into the unit once a week, and the value the mothers place on this is touching. They bring support, a listening ear, a fresh pair of hands, and vital stimulation into the lives of the mothers and babies, and perhaps, too a fresh experience of extended family care without prejudice or judgement.

'These girls love their babies,' says Mollie Nicholls. 'All of them will one day be people living back in their own communities. If we can support them in parenting, and show that we really do love our neighbours, then we can help them build stable family lives - for the rest of their lives.'

And that parental love is transforming lives.

'I used to be aggressive,' says Kerry. 'But since I've been in here I've worked hard so that I can stay in the unit with Rosie. I know that once I go home I'll be able to count to ten and walk away from aggression because I'd rather do that than have my children see me lose it, and I'd rather do that than lose them.'

'Rachel's' Story

Long-term inmate Rachel moved to Holloway Prison two years ago. She had only attended church twice in her life, but since arriving at Holloway she has become a regular worshipper at services and attends the weekly Bible study group. Her imprisonment has given her the opportunity to explore faith in a way that was unthinkable to her before.

Through visiting the chapel, Rachel became aware of the MU branch meetings within the prison. She became a member in March 2005, having been encouraged in membership by Mollie Nicholls, who remains her key mentor and supporter.

Rachel says that through the fellowship and encouragement of the MU and the chaplaincy team, she has gained self-confidence to participate. She would never have had the courage to stand up in front of a congregation or group to speak, but now she participates in services by reading the lesson or her own poetry.

She describes her membership of both MU and church as 'coming into a new me'. It has literally transformed her. She is calmer, pleasant to talk to, and has more self-discipline. This change has been so dramatic that from being told she had no chance of parole, she has now been offered a parole board in January 2007, and the possibility of her sentence being shortened.

This has also not only seen her through the tough times in prison, but has also made her something of a beacon. Other inmates come to her knowing she will listen to them and pray for them. They ask her about her faith and she encourages others to attend services and MU meetings. Through this ministry to other inmates, and through her prayer life, Rachel feels she is able to participate fully in the fellowship of the MU.

But her new faith has not pleased everyone. Her family is anxious about her change of character. When Rachel is released she will have a hard task to withstand pressure to become what people want her to be.

Prison has not only been a place of punishment, it has been to her a place for growth and reform. Much as she looks forward to the day she can start her life outside prison, she asks for prayer that she can find a supportive church and some work she can do for the church.