

once you're in, you're in

sandra willson

FREE SANDRA WILLSON



•The vigil begins at Chifley Square.

The Department of Corrective Services released me from custody after eighteen years, in October 1977. The actions of Women Behind Bars, going into the street and angling for newspaper and T.V. coverage, embarrassed the Department into letting me go - for they were holding me without sufficient warrant. If I had been a violent, dangerous person, I could have understood their reasoning. As it was, I was merely a person whom the world outside had forgotten. And the Department was quite content to leave the issue that way.

My experiences in jail and with the Department, have caused me to go running to W.B.B. and P.A.G. to enlist. For I wonder just how many other people exist, doing an indeterminate G.P. sentence whom the Department has likewise forgotten about. It is so easy! Not being sentenced, we do not get released automatically in five, ten, fifteen years. We do not have remissions nor parole periods. 'Full' time can therefore literally be the term of our natural lives.

People sentenced at the Governor's Pleasure are sentenced under section 29 of the Mental Health Act. This amiably covers quite adequately how many doctors

must sign Schedule certificates, what procedures to follow in case of escape and then a vague comment that release is dependent upon the Governor's "pleasure". No word about what happens when doctors certify the inmate as being sane. Does the prisoner remain at the psychiatric hospital? Why are most prisoners automatically returned to jail once they are certified sane? After all, they were not guilty of a criminal offence since their reasoning ability at the time of the crime was impaired, due to insanity. And yet, these prisoners are returned to jail where in effect, they recommence their sentence.

Why don't the regulations cover these matters and spell out, beyond a doubt, the principles governing sanity, and housing - a jail or a psychiatric centre. Some inmates are returned to jail, in fact, the majority are. But some, like Peter Kocan, are released without reentering jail. Why? Once a person returns to jail they are forgotten and over-looked by the Department entrusted with caring for them. And they are held without reasonable cause, for unreasonable lengths of time.

I was not the only one. There are men in jail, whose time served far outweighs mine. How can the Department get away with this behaviour? It can because release is dependent upon jail officials, upon psychologists and the Governor's Pleasure Review Committee. Without their recommendation, the Governor will not release anyone. But, as Mr McGeechan reports in the Royal Commission into Prisons (Day 5), the Life and G.P. Review Committee "would not see .. every G.P. because of the spread of the people. It could evolve that they ultimately will see them."

The Department has the last word on the matter of release. Just say the prisoner has been declared sane. Mr McGeechan says in the R.C. Transcript that "the person may not be certifiable .. but still not be perfectly well, in the sense that he or she can be released into the community". It is this last, indefinite "could be" that holds the G.P. prisoner in jail, long after other offenders for the same type of crime have been released.

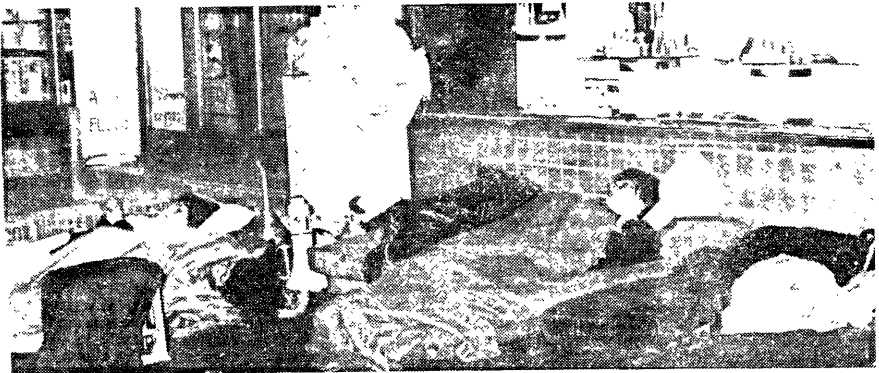
The fact that one woman G.P. was released within nine weeks of her admission to jail, is a rarity. The usual case is long sentences, in maximum security prisons where

the prisoner has no hope of being 'rehabilitated' or prepared for release. Then the Department says we cannot release this person; they would not be able to cope in the free world, they would get lost in Woolworths.

This happened to me. The Department did absolutely nothing to prepare me for release. If I had not prepared myself so that when Women Behind Bars came along and met me, I certainly would not have coped. And thus I would have justified the Department's stand in refusing my release, when I did fail to cope and crashed to the ground.

Wendy Bacon came into jail voluntarily, to meet the female prisoners and to acquaint herself with their problems and thus, was introduced to me. From that time on, my star ascended. The Department had done nothing, and were to do nothing. Women Behind Bars had my case published in an international journal - Hapotec. Our poems and short stories were smuggled out of prison and published in the feminist magazine, Mabel.

I took hope at all this activity. Then Wendy came up with the idea of conducting a court case against the Department, charging them with holding me without proper cause. This action was delayed by the Parole Board withholding news of my future release or deferral until February, the next year.



Sandra Willson protesters camped in Chifley Square early today.

In fact, the Parole Board had procrastinated so long that Women Behind Bars took to the streets early in February. They published full pamphlets, outlining my case. They made up petitions and gained over 1000 signatures supporting my release which they then sent on to the Parole Board.

They demonstrated at the opening of the Supreme Court building which Mr Wran was opening. They wrote letters to the Premier, Mr Wran, and to the Minister for Services, Mr Haigh, demanding my freedom. And then, they camped in Chifley Square, outside Goodsell Building, and quite near the State Office Block.

The cops and park rangers moved in. There were many arrests and much harrassment. The cops tore down the tents and make-shift shelters. The group then visited the Minister for Justice, Mr Mulock. Eleven were arrested. The police tried to turn boiling water on the women but female reporters present prevented this action. But the women were still hosed down from fire hoses afterwards.

There followed more letters. Always promises were obtained from the Department, but no action. The Ministers said the responsibility for my release lay with the Parole Board. The Parole Board said it lay with the Governor. No one was willing to claim responsibility for doing a decent act. They had no proven offence laid against me except my long term of imprisonment; they feared I could not cope. None saw it as the responsibility of the Department to have already done something about preparing me for release. Until February.

The Parole Board finally announced, assisted by the public demonstrations and newly-generated public support of Women Behind Bars, that it would give me this chance to prove myself. No doubt hoping and expecting me to fail miserably and therefore justify continued detention by the Department. The decision was to allow me to go to a half-way house (which did not exist at that time) and go out to work by day, in a jail environment - at Parramatta Linen Service.

The Department hastily kicked the parole staff out of Newington House, to make room for me and another woman who shared the 'half-way' with me. The staff at Silverwater Work Release Centre and at Mulawa Women's Prison went out on strike even before we moved in there. Publicly, they reported we had access to parole files which had not yet been removed. Privately, they assured us they wanted a better deal for us.

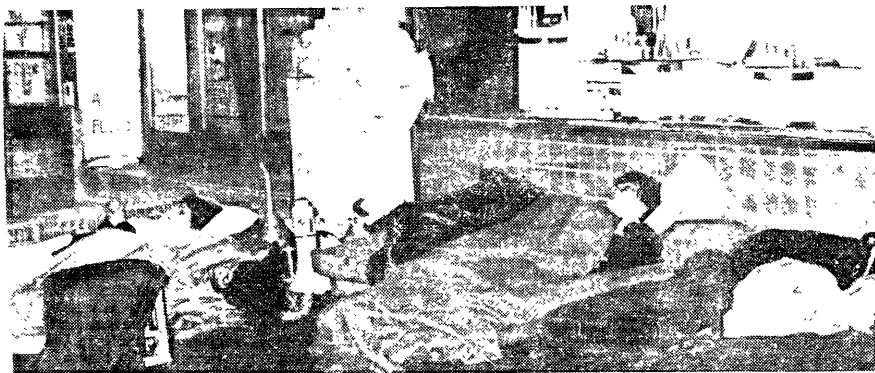
Within two days, the ex-Superintendent's cottage at

the prisoner has no hope of being 'rehabilitated' or prepared for release. Then the Department says we cannot release this person; they would not be able to cope in the free world, they would get lost in Woolworths.

This happened to me. The Department did absolutely nothing to prepare me for release. If I had not prepared myself so that when Women Behind Bars came along and met me, I certainly would not have coped. And thus I would have justified the Department's stand in refusing my release, when I did fail to cope and crashed to the ground.

Wendy Bacon came into jail voluntarily, to meet the female prisoners and to acquaint herself with their problems and thus, was introduced to me. From that time on, my star ascended. The Department had done nothing, and were to do nothing. Women Behind Bars had my case published in an international journal - Hapotec. Our poems and short stories were smuggled out of prison and published in the feminist magazine, Mabel.

I took hope at all this activity. Then Wendy came up with the idea of conducting a court case against the Department, charging them with holding me without proper cause. This action was delayed by the Parole Board withholding news of my future release or deferral until February, the next year.



Sandra Willson protesters camped in Chifley Square early today.

In fact, the Parole Board had procrastinated so long that Women Behind Bars took to the streets early in February. They published full pamphlets, outlining my case. They made up petitions and gained over 1000 signatures supporting my release which they then sent on to the Parole Board.

They demonstrated at the opening of the Supreme Court building which Mr Wran was opening. They wrote letters to the Premier, Mr Wran, and to the Minister for Services, Mr Haigh, demanding my freedom. And then, they camped in Chifley Square, outside Goodsell Building, and quite near the State Office Block.

The cops and park rangers moved in. There were many arrests and much harrassment. The cops tore down the tents and make-shift shelters. The group then visited the Minister for Justice, Mr Mulock. Eleven were arrested. The police tried to turn boiling water on the women but female reporters present prevented this action. But the women were still hosed down from fire hoses afterwards.

There followed more letters. Always promises were obtained from the Department, but no action. The Ministers said the responsibility for my release lay with the Parole Board. The Parole Board said it lay with the Governor. No one was willing to claim responsibility for doing a decent act. They had no proven offence laid against me except my long term of imprisonment; they feared I could not cope. None saw it as the responsibility of the Department to have already done something about preparing me for release. Until February.

The Parole Board finally announced, assisted by the public demonstrations and newly-generated public support of Women Behind Bars, that it would give me this chance to prove myself. No doubt hoping and expecting me to fail miserably and therefore justify continued detention by the Department. The decision was to allow me to go to a half-way house (which did not exist at that time) and go out to work by day, in a jail environment - at Parramatta Linen Service.

The Department hastily kicked the parole staff out of Newington House, to make room for me and another woman who shared the 'half-way' with me. The staff at Silverwater Work Release Centre and at Mulawa Women's Prison went out on strike even before we moved in there. Publicly, they reported we had access to parole files which had not yet been removed. Privately, they assured us they wanted a better deal for us.

Within two days, the ex-Superintendent's cottage at

Silverwater was carpeted and made available to us. We moved in to what later became Haigh House. Now I could prove myself.

But prove myself within a jail environment like Parramatta Linen Service? Where custodial staff escorted us to meals, lest we caught sight of convicted prisoners? Where I could not prove my ability to get a job or work under normal, competitive conditions? After 4½ months, I requested permission to try for a normal job. After all, the Parole Board had stated it would review my position after six months and yet, that time was almost gone and I was proving almost nothing.

I got a job, on my own bat. The jail did not provide one for me. But here, I did fail to meet the competitive standards of outside work. The management could fault nothing but my speed at the job. So many years of casual labouring, taking my time and not busting my guts, cost me my job. But I got another one and held it until the time I had to start writing my book. But first, I had proven other things - that I could be trusted to return every night from work. I came home sober - they had put a no-drinking clause on me even though I was not in jail for a drinking problem. And of course, I reacted to the no-drinking clause as every good prisoner should - I signed it and then forgot it.

During all this time, Women Behind Bars were visiting me and my friend at Haigh House, every week. They took me on my day leaves; Anne Summers arranged my visit to the Nimrod Theatre to see Jim McNeil's play, Jack. These women started helping me prepare for my eventual release, bringing me literature, talking to me about conditions in the world outside and generally supporting me in every possible way. Contrary to staff opinion, they did not desert me nor treat me like a nine-day wonder whom they would soon forget. They proved to me they did not talk idly. If they were feminists, then feminism was a good idea. I became the latest member of the feminist cause.

Then came the day the Parole Officer told me my release was on Friday, 14 October 1977. Members of Women Behind Bars came and collected my luggage and drove me off to a temporary dwelling. Parole requirements were that I

state a forwarding address - three months earlier. Rather than rent a room for someone who might not be released for years, one of the women gave me her own room and slept with friends whilst I sorted out accommodation with my parole officer.

Since then, I have been active in Prison Groups, fighting for recognition of the injustices of prison. Fighting to alleviate the atrocious conditions of the men's jails and to keep an eye on the future of Haigh House. For as soon as I had left there, there was rumour that the only work-release facility for women would be effectively closed. The place would be left empty. No other women would follow in my shoes, to work in the outside environment, earn an adult wage and thus be able to save some money toward their release.

Any jail system which purports to punish a person for a crime by committing another crime against that person is doomed to fail. The person sent to jail for assault will not learn that s/he has done wrong if s/he is bashed by the jail staff. People in jail for stealing will not learn that stealing is wrong and punishable whilst the jail staff steal their food rations and leave them short and hungry. Such people will only learn one thing from their experience... how not to get caught the next time. They will not learn their offence was wrong, they will merely learn that it depends upon the way you do it.

Men and women in jail will not realise that their crime was wrong whilst other people can be charged with the same offence and then be given two months while others serve two years. No one in jail will learn to respect the law whilst the law and legal rights are denied them while they are in jail. For they do not become any the less human whilst serving time. And no one should be expected to be sub-human in jail and then, upon release, to become upright and law-abiding citizens.

Moreover, once a person has served time, the chances of then coming out into society and taking their place again as law-abiding citizens, is greatly diminished. They can't get jobs. They are harrassed by the police. They are picked up on false charges so the police can

close a case. I have known many prisoners who, sent in for two robberies, had in fact only committed one. The other has been closed and the real offender will never be brought to justice.

In other words, jails will reform no one whilst the police force and the prison staff are corruptable and immune from prosecution. Whilst ever these departments conduct their own investigations. Whilst ever they cover up their mistakes and the crimes of those who are caught but never put on trial. For only a drastic upheaval of the whole system of courts and prosecution, of Public Service Regulations and of the criteria for employing prison staff will repair the damage already done to our penal institutions. Otherwise, there is no hope of modern prisons reforming or rehabilitating offenders who pass through the courts. We may as well raze all the jails and let the criminals run free than to educate them in the present crime schools that are our jails.

JAIL NEWS

THE PRISONERS PAPER

Gives the truth behind the Department of
Corrective Services BULLSHIT.

NATIONAL

FORTNIGHTLY

RATES

\$5.20 posted
Free to all prisoners
Air mail rates on request

Send cheque, name and address to

PRISONERS ACTION GROUP
P.O. Box 64 Surry Hills N.S.W. 2010