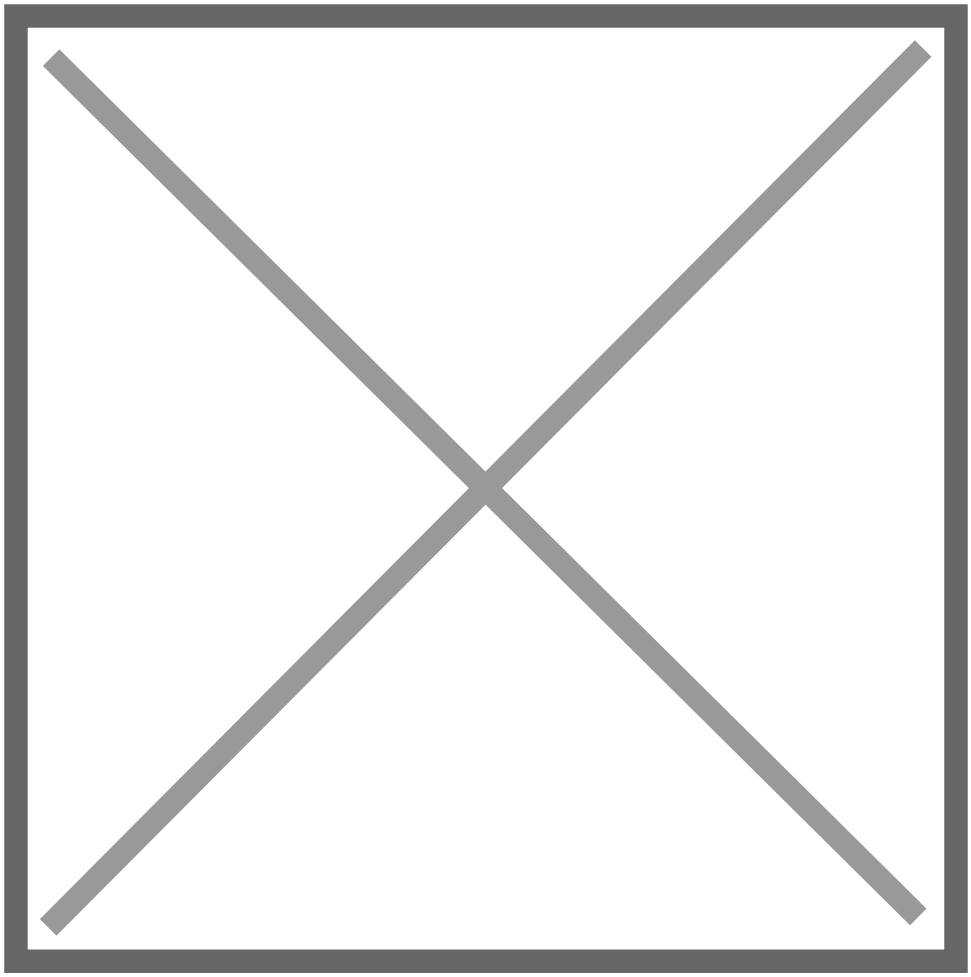
News



Linda and Andy Polk at home (Patricia Lefevere)



by Patricia Lefevere

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

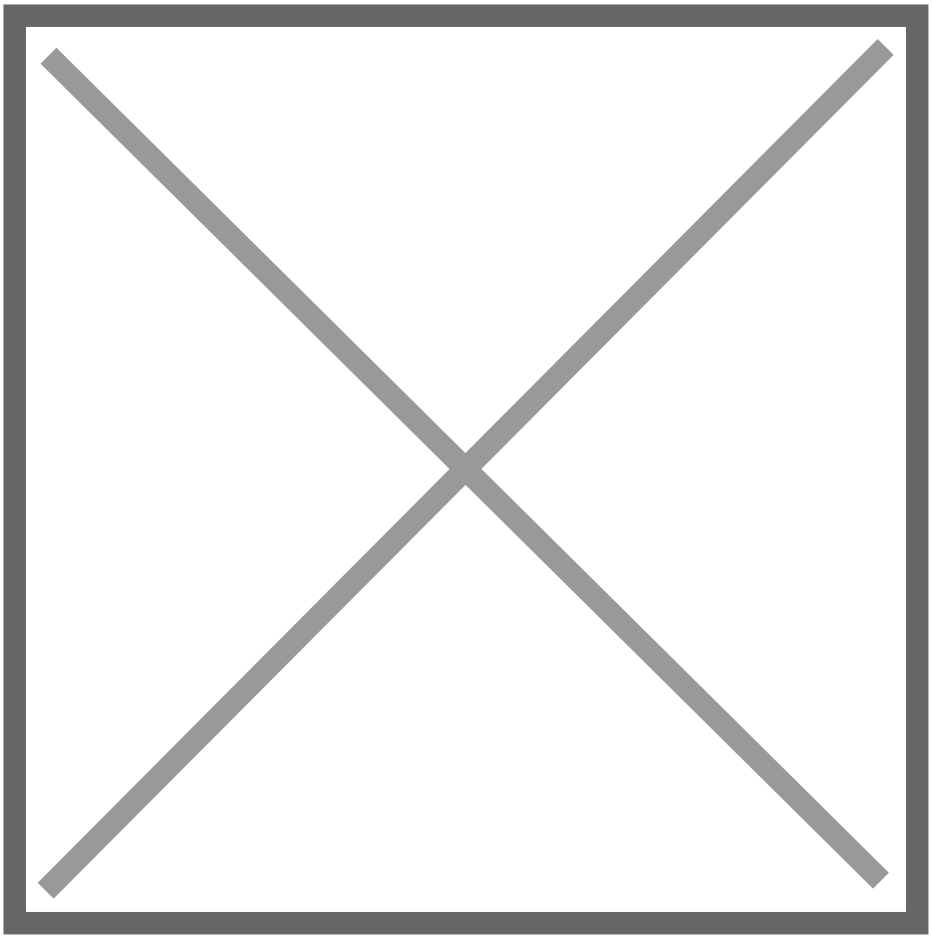
Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Nashville, Tenn. — July 20, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Linda Polk does not expect "felonism," the word she coined in 2011, to be designated the most used new word in 2019. But could it hurt? She thinks not.

Problems are rarely fixed until they are given a name, the author and energetic manager of a trucking firm told NCR at her home here. And felonism, she maintains, is "a dangerous extension of racism."



Linda and Andy Polk at home (Patricia Lefevere)

Polk, a retired teacher, social worker and longtime advocate of prison reform, calls felonism any "prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed against someone who has been suspected or convicted of a felony in the belief that they are inferior."

It is really "hating in plain sight," she said, which is also the subtitle of a book she and her husband, Andy, wrote, titled *Felonism: Hating in Plain Sight*. The 300-page volume contains reports from correction officers, prisoners, sex offenders, ex-cons

and children of prisoners, as well as the Polks.

Indeed, the book's most captivating story is that of the Polks themselves, who met and fell in love while Linda was completing her practicum in social work at a Tennessee state prison hospital, and Andy, a convicted felon serving a life sentence, also had a prison job as an inmate adviser.

For several years, Andy had defended to tribunals men and women who had received write-ups from correction officers. He had helped inmates file appeals and even argued cases before judges in the "free world." Linda, impressed with Andy's intelligence, was told by one corrections officer that Andy was "a regular Johnny Cochran." She found his spiritual and creative nature deeply attractive, too.

The couple's struggle to be allowed visitation rights in prison and eventually to marry in the prison chapel in 2000 took several years and persistent legal action on Linda's part. It demonstrated the "felonistic forces" arrayed against prisoners and those who try to get close to them, Linda said.

It would take another five years before Andy would be freed from jail, having served 27 years for adult kidnapping for ransom and use of a firearm in the commission of a felony. In an interview at his home here, Andy told NCR that the crimes were "violent and unacceptable."

He said they were committed by "a younger version of myself" who had been raised by a gangster father and uncle in Chicago. "All I wanted was the love and praise of my mentors, who were all gangsters." Andy offered an analysis of his childhood not as an excuse for his behavior, but as one explanation for it.

"It took years of self-work to understand my own mind and actions," he said, adding that it's difficult to look into a mirror and realize "you are the monster of your own story." But he recalled a Catholic brother, who later became a priest, who visited him in prison and helped Andy discover himself.

When Andy told Dominican Br. Art Kirwin that he could not change into a good person, Kirwin refused to argue. His acceptance that Andy was the way he was caused him to question his belief system and to later decide that he *could* change.

"Br. Kirwin, told me: ‘Christ knew you and yet he died for you anyway; don't waste such a precious gift that was freely given to you.' "

Today, Andy attends The Revival, an unofficial but organized group of musicians who gather in Nashville to praise God and hear a sermon. Linda claims herself as "a closeted Quaker."

In *Felonism,* the Polks describe how prison policies dehumanize staff members and threaten pension revocation for behavior deemed "inmate friendly." It shows how loved ones of prisoners are publicly berated or socially isolated, how many who are released from jail are barred from mainstream housing, careers and support.

Linda writes of how a "for-profit system" targets the poor. "As long as private prisons profit from warehousing prisoners, they will have a strong motivation to lobby for laws that increase their clientele," she writes.

Huge numbers of ex-felons are still disenfranchised, she said, and others lack job prospects and face pay differentials. More than 2.7 million children have incarcerated parents, she said.

"If we can stop this destructive pattern, we can heal our nation," she said, adding that if prisons could be seen as centers of healing rather than as extensions of racial injustice and inequality, inmates — when released — would have much more to contribute to society.

Advertisement

She hopes church groups and others can organize around abuses in the prison system. Among those she cited were the absence of bail, the shortness of appeal time and the way the media reports on crime. She also pointed to the high costs of telephone calls made to prisoners, which net "huge profits" for the phone companies and make regular conversations with loved ones prohibitive.

The best avenue toward peace and justice inside prisons emerges when prisoners learn to be kind to one another and to help where they can, said Andy. "Educating each other and supporting healing and change while inside, prepares inmates to help society when they are released," he added.

Andy continues to work with prisoners, counseling several, hiring some in his trucking business and "supporting them in their path toward freedom from chains — both physical and metaphorical," he said.

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime NCR contributor.]

A version of this story appeared in the **July 26-Aug 8, 2019** print issue under the headline: Nashville couple writes book to shine light on 'felonism'.