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The story of John and a question for readers

Mary Ann McGivern | Sep. 27, 2012 NCR Today

I recently attended a fundraising dinner for Project COPE, a program that assists men and women released from prison to re-enter society. It was a great evening.

First, there were awards. A couple of volunteers and faith congregations who partner with these men and women were recognized for their faithful service. A man who was released six years ago, back when I was the program director, was honored.

John was a high school junior, 17, on the college track, playing football. He was driving his mother's car, and one of the passengers shot a gun out the window and killed a person. John received a 30-year sentence for accessory to murder. He was released on parole at age 30 and came to Project COPE.

In prison, John met the Muslims. He never became a separatist, but he understood the only way he could build a life would be to own his own business. He had hoped in his youth to become a doctor, but felons can't practice medicine. So he decided to be a mortician.

When he was released the day after Labor Day, he had been accepted at the community college. He got a night-shift job at minimum wage as a welder at a small job shop. He worked his buns off. Today he works two jobs, is married with two children, is close to certification as a mortician, and serves as a board member at Project COPE. In his thank you speech, he described how he is able to help people who are grieving. John deserves to be honored.

I remember asking him, his first morning at COPE, how he had slept the night before in his own apartment. He told me he couldn't sleep, that he just walked the streets all night.

John and the other kids in the car killed a man. The man is dead. A terrible wrong was done. John served 13 years in prison. I think that's enough.

I'm preparing testimony to the Missouri legislature on the revised criminal code, so I'm thinking out loud in this blog about sentence length. I'm interested in your comments.

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