

# DesMoinesRegister.com

July 10, 2009

## Basu: Dreamers & Doers series - Nun seeks to free youths destined to die in prison

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Twenty years ago, Sister JoAnne Talarico stepped inside a women's prison to visit someone she didn't know, and embarked on a journey and a relationship that would become driving forces for her life's work.

Talarico, 72, of Des Moines, is a nun with the Sisters of Humility of Mary in Davenport. Her commitment to social justice has taken her to El Salvador, seen her marching and speaking out for civil rights and advocating for homeless veterans.

But the relationship with a young female inmate named Christine Lockheart made her work personal, challenging basic assumptions about crime and punishment and giving her "the daughter I never had."

Talarico met Lockheart when she took over visiting the Mitchellville inmate after a nun who had been doing it moved away. She had never before been in a prison or known a criminal, and assumed whatever the young woman had done warranted the life sentence she got.

Lockheart was convicted of murder four years earlier at age 17. The victim was a man for whom she had cleaned house. Talarico says Lockheart hadn't anticipated the outcome when she accompanied her boyfriend to the victim's house to ask for a loan. They left when he said no, but the boyfriend went back in the house and stabbed him.

Lockheart didn't directly participate but also didn't immediately turn her boyfriend in. Iowa law permits accomplices to be charged and punished the same as the killers. It also requires mandatory life sentences for Class A felonies committed from age 14 on.

Twenty years of weekly visits to Lockheart, now nearly 42, have convinced Talarico that's wrong. People under 18 can't even vote or drink or sign contracts, she notes. "They are children and should be treated as children in the criminal-justice system. They don't always see the consequences of their actions and are highly susceptible to peer pressures." And they can be reformed.

There are 44 people serving life sentences in Iowa who were under 18 when they committed their crimes. That's out of 2,225 in the 42 states with such laws. Amnesty International says 59 percent were first-time offenders. Many of those laws were passed in the 1980s by lawmakers responding to gang violence and wanting to be tough on crime, says Talarico.

She has watched an uncertain young woman mature into an articulate, creative mentor to others, getting scholarships and taking courses through the University of Iowa. "I'm inspired by the fact that she stays so positive. Sometimes I think maybe she does it just for me, but I see all the beautiful things she does ... I don't know that I could be as positive."

She adds, "My heart aches for her that one mistake just ruined her whole life." So Talarico is determined to get the law changed.

Nearly three years ago, she attended an Amnesty International conference in Des Moines and met

others who shared her concerns. They formed the Iowa Coalition to Oppose Life Without the Possibility of Parole for Youth. Talarico spent most of the last session at the Capitol lobbying for a bill (HF 43, SF 74) that would allow work or parole releases for Class A felons who committed their crimes before turning 18. They'd have to serve 15 years before the parole board could consider, among other things, their age, maturity and susceptibility to outside pressures when the crimes were committed.

The bill never made it out of committee. Talarico believes lawmakers fear being seen as soft on crime when they're up for re-election, and 2010 is an election year.

Phyllis Stevens is the coalition's board president. "She's fabulous," she said of Talarico. "She's conversational. She brings a nice personal style to it, but she's also knowledgeable, not just a 'bleeding heart.'"

As a nun who believes in redemption, Talarico offers a compelling dimension to the debate, says Stevens. You wouldn't know it to see her, since she doesn't wear a habit. One legislator discovered it after his rather forceful outburst at a committee meeting, then apologized, red-faced, Stevens said. But Talarico wasn't bothered.

Asked whether her faith drives her to this cause, Talarico says, "It's a justice issue. In a way, I'm acting on my own but in accordance with our laws and beliefs and our mission to the world."

She answered the call to service at a time when people were drawn into lifetime commitments, she says. "I said 'forever' at one time, but I don't know that we live in a society where people want to do things forever."

So, ironically, someone who pledged a lifetime commitment to a calling has found her cause in helping undo a lifetime commitment imposed on someone else.

For Lockheart, the only way out of prison now would be a grant of clemency by the governor. She applied, unsuccessfully, in 2003.

But she's not giving up, and neither will Talarico, who hopes that as the coalition grows broader - especially with neurologists, psychologists and experts in the youthful brain - more lawmakers will listen.

"You just have to keep repeating over and over that we're dealing with children," says the former teacher. "Children sometimes do horrible things, but we cannot dispose of them."

Call it idealism, call it spiritual, call it the instinctive, compassionate response of an older person to a younger one in trouble. Or call it the Lord's work. Whatever you call it, Talarico's message is both profound and profoundly simple: Our youth are our future. We cannot afford to give up on them.

## Additional Facts

Get involved

- Contact your legislator to support reviving the bill introduced last session to eliminate Iowa's mandatory life sentences for youth. Or contact the bill's sponsors, Beth Wessel-Kroeschell, D-Ames, in the House, and Pam Jochum, D-Dubuque, in the Senate.
- Join the Iowa Coalition to Oppose Life Without the Possibility of Parole for Youth. Sign up online through its Web site: <http://www.ia4juvenilejustice.org/>
- Link here to view a video about a state of Missouri program to keep youthful offenders out of prison. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rNo1KDZnuo&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rNo1KDZnuo&feature=channel_page)

Connect with others

Are you an activist or hope to become one and want to connect with other activists? I have a Facebook page dedicated to this series. Go to [DesMoinesRegister.com/rekha](http://DesMoinesRegister.com/rekha) to discuss your latest

project, share tips, recruit volunteers and celebrate successes.

**Suggest subjects**

If you would like to suggest an activist to be profiled, please contact me at [rbasu@dmreg.com](mailto:rbasu@dmreg.com) or (515) 284-8584.

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