



This month's circle tale comes to us from Joyce Merritt, Safety manager for the Oregon State Department of Corrections. This year all women inmates were moved from the old prison in Salem to the new facility in Wilsonville. Many of the women had been in the old prison for as long as eight to ten years and they were afraid of the change. Joyce's District Superintendent asked her to teach a class on change to 32 honor inmates.

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From the Oregon State Department of Corrections

"The biggest fear facing these women was, of course, the unknown," Joyce explained. "They knew they were moving from a small, homey prison with less than 200 fellow inmates where they had keys to their own cells to a facility with 1400 where large dormitories and controlled locking would be the norm."

Joyce taught two sections of the class (16 women/class) with the aid of an inmate assistant for two sessions a week for four weeks. "You have to understand that women inmates have learned never to trust other women, or anyone for that matter. Most of them have been damaged by those they have trusted, so they are very guarded," explained Joyce.

Joyce decide to run the classes in circle as best she was able. She read from **Calling the Circle** and set up some structure at the first session. She used a format of check-in and check-out and then lectured the rest of the time. "I used a different talking piece each time -- stones, crystals -- things that mattered to me. The inmate assistant was invaluable to me. Because the women had never done anything like this, they were tentative about talking and sharing. My assistant would break the log jam of non-speaking and open everybody up by what she was willing to share."

"The prison allowed me to purchase two sets of 16 books -- **Who Moved My Cheese?** by Spencer Johnson and **Turning to One Another** by Meg Wheatley. The first book deals directly with change. Meg's book is all about communication. One woman read Meg's book cover to cover and underlined many things and sticky noted others. She was stimulated by the questions. These books helped me talk about change and approaching it positively," Joyce continued.

When asked what overall effect the class had, Joyce said, "The main thing women got from the circle was the feeling that they were a part of something instead of just being observers. This was very, very new for all of them and, though they were tentative, it was obvious they loved it. For the closing circle I was allowed to put a table with a cloth and candle in the middle. I would say they were ready to make the move by the end of our session, but it would be far too simplistic to say that one four week class will make it easy for them to make this huge adjustment."

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.

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