

# Chains of Love

Words By [Siobhan OConnor](#)

**Nearly half a million women are married to men in prison. Maintaining these relationships involves a constant struggle with an often unsupportive penal system, despite growing evidence that a healthy marriage is one of the best tools for rehabilitation. Welcome to the intersection of prisons, love and politics.**

Every Friday afternoon, after she gets out of nursing school, Carole Santos hits the bank. There, she gets two rolls of quarters and 20 singles, which she divides in two, 10 for Saturday and 10 for Sunday. By 9 p.m., she's nodding off to sleep, but she'll be up before the Lompoc, California, sun to prepare for the big day ahead of her.

At 6:30 a.m., she packs her money, driver's license, and a pen into a clear zippered bag and begins her beauty ritual. "During the week, I don't dress up or spend much time with makeup and hairstyle," she says, "but weekends are for my husband, so I always spend that extra time."

Carole's husband of four years, a childhood friend, is in the nineteenth year of a 45-year prison term for cocaine distribution, spending the better part of his years writing books about prison. He received his B.A. and M.A. while behind bars. Michael is set for release in 2013, and the couple says they're more in love than ever. Carole has been with him through two sudden transfers, and they agree that the prison in Lompoc, a scenic 10-minute drive from where Carole has moved, is leaps and bounds more peaceful than the other prisons in which Michael has been. From 8:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, they sit at picnic benches shaded by eucalyptus trees, and talk about Carole's progress in school; her daughter, Nichole; their future together; his writing; the singles she has with her are the maximum amount she can bring in when she goes—none of which she can give to Michael—and the quarters afford them snacks from the vending machines, which he is not allowed to touch. "Each visiting day is a blessing," she says, "because we know that at any moment the administration can move Michael, change visiting policies, or make arbitrary decisions that could impact our ability to visit freely."

Carole, though eternally upbeat, still grapples with countless external obstacles that make her marriage—and the roughly 450,000 other marriages between prisoners and civilians—a challenge. There is almost no institutional support for these unconventional marriages, though that may soon change. As policymakers begin to reexamine the rehabilitative potential of stable marriages they are also finding that there may be other political and economic benefits to helping preserve these unions. How this plays out on a national scale remains to be seen.

As it stands, most facilities are far less idyllic than Lompoc, spouses struggle with the cost of trying to move around as their partners are suddenly transferred, and the financial

obstacles of being a single-income family are prohibitive, to say nothing of the psychological toll. In fact, one of the biggest hurdles inmates' wives face is the stigma they say they encounter everywhere they go. It's unknown how many of these marriages are the result of healthy couples who knew each other or dated prior to incarceration, and how many are the result of pathologically low self-esteem or a bad-boy fetish paired with a prison pen-pal service.

“There will always be people who ... define me as one those girls who, you know, goes after someone on death row,” says Carole, referring to what some people unkindly call “inmate groupies,” a small number of women who seek out relationships with high-profile convicts (Scott Peterson, who received marriage proposals and bagfuls of love letters, comes to mind). “We should stop stereotyping these women—they are not all the same,” says the Northeastern University\* criminologist Jack Levin, who has written a book about “killer groupies.”

In a national climate where the promotion of marriage is prioritized and new incarceration initiatives are being introduced across the country, the intersection of prisoners and matrimony appears to be a political blind spot. The wives of inmates are still largely without resources or assistance, grappling with often exorbitant phone rates, long distances to be travelled for visits, hypervigilant visitation rules, and restricted access to information about their husbands' well-being. Right now, according to a report by a leading scholar named Creasie Finney Hairston, “The correctional policies and practices that govern contact between prisoners and their families often impede, rather than support, the maintenance of family ties.”

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As it stands, the only major institutional assistance for these couples is an unlikely offshoot of government support for marriage. In 1996, Bill Clinton signed into law a welfare-reform act that supported the idea that marriage is a tool for overcoming poverty, calling “marriage ... the foundation of a successful society.” President Bush recently upped the ante with the Healthy Marriage Initiative, committing \$750 million over five years to marriage promotion, some of which is going to marital programs in prisons. Marriage, the argument goes, has been shown time and again to benefit the country in measurable ways: married couples have markedly lower instances of poverty and crime. For prisoners, it also helps lower rates of recidivism, a big deal in a country with a soaring prison population that recently passed the two million mark and where 67 percent of ex-convicts end up back in prison. According to a recent study, a steady marriage was

the number one factor preventing recidivism. Now, 24 states are teaching prisoners and their spouses how to listen, express their feelings, and resolve conflict.

Faith-based groups have been doing similar work in prisons for decades. Sometimes called Marriage Encounters, these weekend marriage seminars are hosted by several guards, the prison chaplain, and volunteer instructors, like Wayne and Marcia Kessler in Las Vegas. “The first thing we do,” says Marcia, “is teach about talking on a feeling level and how feelings are different from thoughts and judgments. That no feeling is right or wrong. Anger isn’t wrong, but smacking someone is.”

The programs implemented in Oklahoma, a pioneering state for prison marriage classes, are a different animal altogether. Based on curricula co-created by Howard Markman, a researcher at the University of Denver, these classes are by and large the same as marriage classes offered to non-inmates. In five years, more than 1,000 Oklahoma inmates have voluntarily participated, many of them with their wives. “Inmates tell me they love the program because it actually allows them to do something for their marriage,” says JoAnne Eason, the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative’s vice president of special projects. “There is so little they can do for the marriage while they are incarcerated. They look at it like, I want my relationship to last. I know most relationships do not last through incarceration, and so if there is something I can do to make this last and if my partner is really willing, then I want to do this.” Some studies cite a prison divorce rate as high as 80 percent within the first year.

While data is still being evaluated, Markman says, “So far, [inmates] are happier with their relationships, handle conflict better, and are seemingly extending some of those conflict-management skills to other aspects of their life inside prison. ... I certainly think overall the goal is that we will be able to reduce the recidivism rate if we do this on a large scale.”

“We are not out there encouraging people to go out and get married,” says Eason. “If we can help people who were married when they came in or want to get married, and this is the most important thing to an inmate to avoid recidivism, that sounds like a good thing.” Few would disagree that reducing the country’s recidivism rate should be a national priority; the issue, rather, is how the government attempts to do that. For the marriage initiative’s critics, the issue isn’t Should inmates get married, but Should the government be spending taxpayer dollars teaching them, and tens of thousands of non-incarcerated men, to listen and talk better? A recent report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicated that marriage classes in prison are still a contentious issue, and many women feel there are more immediate changes—cheaper phone calls, longer visits, better access to information—that would make their lives and marriages a whole lot easier.

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“It’s really hard on the drive home,” says Diane Ferranti, a pretty, soft-spoken brunette who two years ago married her boyfriend of 12 years, Seth, in a federal prison. She met him through her sister, while he was on the lam facing drug charges. “On my wedding day I could see him for an hour. He was in West Virginia then. So afterward I had to drive 10 hours [to St. Peters, Missouri] by myself.” Now, every couple of months, when Diane can afford it, she makes the 11-hour drive to the low-security Federal Correctional Institution Loretto in southwest Pennsylvania to see her husband. Visiting rules are strict—no skirts, no tank tops, no lace anything, no tight pants (including stretch pants unless worn with an oversized shirt)—and the hours are limited. She makes sure to get there by 8 o’clock, but by the time she gets through the metal detector, her paperwork is processed, and her coat is searched, she has already lost about an hour.

“When I see him there are so many eyes on [us],” she says of the guarded visiting area. “It’s really uncomfortable.” The room is small and gray, with no tables and a few surveillance cameras. After a quick kiss hello, Diane and Seth sit opposite each other, where they’ll be for the next five hours, talking, laughing, and holding hands, surrounded on either side by other visitors, inmates, and guards. “It’s 11 hours for her to come visit me,” says Seth. “It’s really rough for her, but she is strong.” At 2 p.m., it’s another quick kiss good-bye, and she hits the road.

Visiting conditions vary from prison to prison, but the bus-station-like visiting area at Loretto is a good example of the “norm”—nothing like the visiting environment where Carole and her husband meet. A lifelong Bronx resident, who asked that she not be named, meets with her husband of nine years in a room like the one at Loretto. She visits him secretly, every other weekend if she can get away, though she likes to keep her visits under two hours. “I have trouble keeping track of the lies,” she says. “Some of the family knows but we don’t talk about it. I know what people think of women who stay [married to prisoners].” Though she thinks her husband’s sentence, a mandatory minimum of 15 years for buying drugs, is preposterous, she feels stigmatized by his crime. “Not an option,” she says of divorce, not that she’s religiously opposed to it. “I love that man.”

Living what is, in essence, a double life, her personal relationships face particular strain. She would like to find a discreet local support chapter for inmates’ wives but can’t find one, and she doesn’t know where to look.

“Questions are now being raised about the impact of imprisonment on children and families,” writes Finney Hairston, “and the extent to which prisoners’ families might be resources and assets, rather than liabilities, in promoting safer, resourceful communities.” Last spring, she was on a panel at a government symposium on incarceration and marriage held by the Department of Health and Human Services, the first of its kind. The symposium produced a report determining, among other things, that there is little to no support for families who want to stay together through incarceration, and that wives are “in essence ‘doing time’ themselves.”

Indeed, Carole and Diane have both dedicated their lives to educating themselves about the prison system, through their husbands' writings and through the management of their websites. "I have made it a point to learn as much as I can about his world," says Carole, "because it's upside-down backwards from this one. You can't be close unless you know what they are living through in there." Trolling on anonymous support sites reveals elaborate networks of women who help each other navigate the legal system ("Do D.A.s usually get the sentences they ask for?"), trade practical advice ("What do you tell your coworkers?"), and offer emotional support, assuring each other they are not alone.

In 1987, the Supreme Court ruled against restrictions on inmate-civilian marriages, which is why, almost 20 years later, Diane and Carole were able to marry their boyfriends inside federal prisons. Carole, too, knew her husband before his incarceration, and was going through an amicable separation with another man when she reconnected with Michael. Carole's sister had stayed good friends with him through the early years of his sentence, but it wasn't until the approach of Carole's high school reunion prompted her to google him that she saw what he was up to. "I found a static website that had some of his writings posted and I was just completely enthralled. So I wrote to him." An old-fashioned courtship ensued, letters getting longer by the day. She estimates that they have thousands of pages between them from that period, and before long she started seeing him in her future. "I had been enough in the world and had experienced enough love and disappointment to know [a marriage] is not about being able to sleep with someone," she says. Carole doesn't bellyache about the challenges she signed up for. Instead, she understands it's up to them to do what they can to make their marriage work.

These days, Diane spends most of her time running Gorilla Convict Publications, which publishes her husband's books, and picking up freelance work as a court reporter when she can. "She facilitates my career," says Seth. "Guys tell me I am so lucky—99 times out of 100 the girl leaves." She and Seth talk on the phone about three times a day, and he writes her epic love letters—which is enough to keep her hopeful. "I guess I am really just hoping they bring back [federal] parole," she says quietly. "I just wonder what it will be like when he walks through those doors."

Seth says he does what he can to comfort Diane. "I know she gets lonely without me there. The hardest thing is that there isn't much I can do for her from in here," he says. "I write to her every day and I try to stay on the right track. If I'm in the hole [solitary confinement], I can't call her and she'll worry, so she keeps me from doing things I otherwise might do. I think all the time about how my decisions will affect her."

If there's a through-line here, it's sacrifice for love, not that they would call it that. Carole, for her part, says she's often tired. In addition to being a mother and in school full time, she also manages her husband's writing projects. Still, she says, she's always excited to see him. "When I first see him I breathe a sigh of relief, because when I see him walk through that door I know all is right in our world for another day. Though logically I know Michael has mastered the prison environment ... my emotional response comes with anxiety and fear for his safety, as well as loneliness and a yearning to be with him." She's grateful, she says, to spend his last few years of confinement visiting in the

peaceful farm-like setting at Lompoc, but more than anything, she wants him home. “I start missing him on Sundays at 3:01 p.m. and then we begin to count the wake-ups until our next kiss. Six more wake-ups, five more wake-ups, four more wake-ups.”

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## **What now?**

### **Justeen Cosar, the wife of a current inmate, prepares for her husbands parole hearing, and possible release.**

*Aaron is serving a life sentence, with a parole hearing in August. How do you feel about it?*

There is a rollercoaster of emotions, some good, some uncomfortable. I did at one point go through some trepidation about having someone move in with me. [But] recently we stepped up our contact—one Saturday we stayed on the phone for 13 and a half hours! The more contact I had with him the more happy and emotionally stable and fulfilled I felt. So that concern since then has dramatically lessened.

*Do you worry about readjusting to a life where you are no longer the sole head of household?*

Our personal beliefs are that the husband is the head of the household. I thought for many years that aspect of our marriage was put on hold, but as I have grown closer to Aaron, I’ve learned that he is a source of advice and comfort to me already. I expect that to grow once he is home. Honestly, I am tired of fighting my own battles.

*What do you think it will be like to be together on the outside?*

We can only speculate what it will feel like to finally be together after 10 years. We don’t naively think there won’t be any problems. We talk about losing the sense of gratitude that all married couples deal with, and that kind of makes me sad. I don’t want to lose my gratitude for my husband or the appreciation of what we have been through to be together.

*Conjugal visits are not permitted in Oklahoma. How have you expressed intimacy while he’s in prison?*

Saying to someone don’t be sexual is like saying live but don’t breathe. I am very sexually experienced and have explored my own sexuality to a high degree [and] have had more sheer physically pleasurable orgasms with my husband on the telephone than I have ever had with another human being. There is a world of exploration here that I don’t know if it can be conveyed in words, but I intend to try.

*\*Correction: We had incorrectly identified Jack Levin as a professor at Northwestern University. He is a professor at Northeastern University in Boston*