

Prison wives try to overcome outsider status

Women married to inmates must deal with stigma

BEAUMONT
By Kalyn Belsha
LocalNews@BeaumontEnterprise.com
(409) 838-2859

Cheryl Engelke knows every time her television episode of "Prison Wives," an Investigation Discovery series that followed 13 couples while one spouse was in prison, reruns.

The e-mails start flooding her inbox. Sometimes it's women looking for support. Sometimes it's hate mail.

A mother of two who lives north of The Woodlands, the 34-year-old Engelke was featured on the documentary series last April. Cameras followed Engelke and her family for 10 days and taped a prison interview with her husband, Randy, who has spent much of his nearly 12-year marriage behind bars. He now is serving time at Huntsville for theft and burglary — crimes he committed to support his crack addiction, Engelke said. He since has been to rehab.

Since the show aired, there have been ups and downs for Engelke. Randy was denied parole, but has been placed on the waiting list for a program that assists with gang renouncement and disassociation. Once he gets in and severs ties from a prison gang — which he joined for protection, Engelke said — he'll make a better candidate for parole.

Watching the show has helped more women come forward to discuss being a "prison wife," Engelke says, and she notices increased advocacy for couples separated by a prison sentence. Looking at the numbers — about one-quarter of all inmates in state prisons are married, and even more are in intimate or co-parenting relationships — you know you're not alone, Engelke says.

For those reasons, some of the stigma attached to being a prison wife is changing, Engelke says — though not completely.

"I actually had a woman telling me how horrible of a mother I was and my husband doesn't love me," Engelke said, recalling one negative message she received after the show aired. She tries not to let it bother her.

"Prison Wives" was lauded in the press for fair treatment of its featured couples and a lack of prison culture cliches, but Engelke and other prison wives say the show still played into many existing misconceptions and stereotypes. To combat that, some prison wives, like Engelke, who started a support website called Prison Without Walls, are working to help other women new to the role.

"It was groundbreaking in that it existed," Reesy Floyd-Thompson, 39, said of the show. "But it didn't go far enough."

In 2009, Floyd-Thompson founded the group Prisoners' Wives, Girlfriends and Partners, which has a meet-up in Houston. "It should be a story about a complete life. We work, we go to school, we're getting degrees, we volunteer. It's not all about that one piece that everyone seems to think is important."

The stereotypes

Floyd-Thompson, whose husband is serving from 12½ to 25 years in a Pennsylvania prison for third-degree murder, founded her group to provide support for other women in her situation — her husband has been in prison for seven years and it is an 8- to 10-hour drive from her home in Virginia.

CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS

To help ensure its accuracy, The Enterprise encourages readers to report factual errors to the Reader Representative at (409) 880-0748 or ReaderRep@BeaumontEnterprise.com.

Separated by bars

Texas Department of Criminal Justice partners with volunteer organizations to hold marriage seminars at prisons across the state. In the last 18 months, there have been 337 classes held at 35 different units (both male and female) with the goal of helping couples while one spouse is incarcerated. The LeBlanc and Stiles units in Beaumont both have hosted classes.

Source: Michelle Lyons, TDCJ spokeswoman

Floyd-Thompson now blogs and hosts a weekly online talk radio show, exploring issues that come up when someone is in a relationship with an inmate.

In November, she hosted a show that frankly discussed common misconceptions about prison wives.

"We're unattractive, we're desperate, we're uneducated, we have low self-esteem," Floyd-Thompson read from her list. "We are abusing drugs. We have a commitment issue. We can't hold a 'real' relationship. We are advocates for crime. We are being played. We have no morals, no values and we are on welfare."

"Ladies, how many of those do you meet?" she asked her callers, who told her which, if any, applied to them and

why they thought these stereotypes existed. Callers suggested television and the media were to blame.

Floyd-Thompson says these ideas take hold partly because popular culture sensationalizes prison life and because people often lump offenders in with the women who love them, assuming all prison wives are criminals. But every woman has her own unique circumstances, and it's hard to generalize about the life of a prison wife, Floyd-Thompson said.

"It's easier for people to jump to conclusions about a lifestyle they don't understand and they don't accept," Floyd-Thompson said. "We just have to be aware that it's OK to allow people to have those fears. But then give them something on the flip side that combats that."

The difficulties

Engelke says most people's reaction when they find out her husband is in prison is "either shock, disbelief or 'Oh my God, this woman's a lunatic.'"

But as more women come forward about their status as a prison wife, there is growing awareness about the issues they face and why they stay with their spouses.

Engelke says it's about keeping her children in contact with their father and honoring a commitment.

"I take marriage very seriously," she said. "You say, 'For better or for worse.' A lot of

people count on better, but they don't count on worse."

One of the hardest adjustments Engelke had to make was learning not to take on too much at home, and to allow her husband to be a part of the parenting and decision-making process.

"At first it was 'I'm responsible, I have to (take care of everything),' she said. But she learned, "You cannot shut an inmate out of your life completely if you're going to make it work. You just have to learn to talk to them."

'Chaos to peace'

Counselors agree anger management, communication and problem-solving skills are among the most necessary abilities couples separated by a prison sentence need to work on.

Alvin Williams, the community education director at Family Services of Southeast Texas, does group counseling for victims of domestic violence and women court-ordered to undergo anger management classes. He says many of the women he works with have a spouse or partner in prison.

Williams said he encourages the wives to hold their partner accountable for wrongdoings and to develop verbal communication skills for use on prison visits or when their partner is released.

"You're trying to get them to move from chaos to peace," he said. "It's really being able to recognize that there's an-

other way to engage. (We teach) them to understand (anger) is a natural emotion and it's about how you express it and resolve it."

Waldine Small, who founded and directs the non-profit Family Help Systems in Beaumont, says about one-third of her clients are dealing with prison-related issues. She said she often counsels women with incarcerated partners to ignore negative outside voices — perhaps from disapproving parents or grandparents — and to do what's best for the family unit.

"That's where building the self-esteem and the confidence comes in," Small said of having the strength to stand up to family members. "A lot of times they just need somebody to talk to ... to listen to their side of it, and in turn encourage them."

Of all the prison wife stereotypes on her list, Floyd-Thompson says occasional low self-esteem is the only one she fits. She says some days she's flying high; on others she wants to give up.

So she tells herself: "I've made it seven years, I can make it five more."

"Make Our Home Your Home"
Sabine Oaks
409-833-1989
Assisted Living for the Elderly
LIC 0000418
1945 Pennsylvania Ave. • Beaumont • 409-833-1989

OFFICE SPACE FOR LEASE
In Ridgewood Center \$200 & UP
RETAIL SPACE FOR LEASE
Across Baptist Hosp \$1,200 & UP
CALL Mike 409.728.1184

General Skin Examination For Cancer & Pre-Cancer
Baylor (Ben) Kurtis, M.D.
(Board Certified)
General Dermatology • Skin Cancer
NOW ACCEPTING PATIENTS
Timely Appointments Available
2300 Hwy 365, Suite 670
Nederland, TX 77627
(Located in the Atrium Building)
409-729-2262

Dillard's

JOHNSTON & MURPHY®

WALK TEST

Experience the comfort of these shoes for 10 days.
If you are not completely satisfied, the walk is on us.

Purchase these and other select Johnston & Murphy styles March 1-31, and we will give you 10 days to see just how comfortable they feel. We guarantee your satisfaction or you will receive a full refund*.

Super-soft sheepskin lining for a comfortable fit and feel



Multi-layered footbed for added cushioning

Padded collar for cushioned comfort



Molded latex rubber outsole for flexibility



HAYES TASSEL
In black or burgundy, sizes 8-12M, 13M. **\$99.99**
Hayes Penny also available.



SHULER BICYCLE
In dark brown or black, sizes 7-12M, 13M, 14M, 15M, 16M & 8.5-11W, 12W. **\$125**



NEW!
HEMBREE VENETIAN
In brown, sizes 8-12M & 13M. **\$125**

*To receive a full refund, simply return the shoes with your original receipt within 10 days from the date of purchase.

Earn rewards on every purchase to get 10% Off All-Day Shopping Passes.

Not a Dillard's Cardmember? Open a new account today and receive a 10% Off All-Day Welcome Shopping Pass in your 1st statement when you spend \$100 the day you open your account (maximum discount \$100). ** See Rewards Program terms for details. ** Subject to credit approval. To qualify for this offer, you must open a Dillard's Credit Card or Dillard's American Express® Card account and make \$100 of net purchases (merchandise less tax, adjustments and returns) with your Dillard's Credit Card or Dillard's American Express Card at Dillard's stores or dillard.com the same day you open your account. The 10% Welcome Shopping Pass will be sent to you in your first statement and is valid for 10% off all merchandise purchases up to \$1,000 (maximum discount \$100) made in-store or online at dillard.com on the day of your choice. Shopping Pass must be used by the expiration date printed on the pass. Employees, officers and directors of Dillard's Inc. are not eligible for this offer. The Dillard's American Express® Card is issued and administered by GE Money Bank. American Express is a federally registered service mark of American Express and is used by GE Money Bank pursuant to a license.