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Hard Time and Mental Health

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Prison Therapist

Psychologist Lisa Buhs '94 helps inmates turn the corner to a better life after release.

Story by RACHEL HATCH



Lisa Buhs is a clinical psychologist at the Racine Correctional Facility. Working in a prison environment does not faze Lisa, who says she rarely feels unsafe. “It’s not like it is on television.”

some type of a group-home setting. They never would have been in the criminal justice system,” says Lisa, “but now the expense has forced states to close many of those facilities, so a lot of the men end up with us.”

Lisa meets with the inmates one-on-one and in group settings. She also works with sexual offenders who have been diagnosed with mental deficits. “If we can help one person change or turn a corner, then that is helping everyone in the community when they are released,” she says.

Initially, Lisa found the transition to prison psychology came with its own challenges. “As a psychologist you are trained to always believe your client, and that changes quite a bit when you work with offenders,” she says, remembering a case when she asked an inmate why he was in

For Lisa (Beal) Buhs '94, work is a prison, and she would have it no other way.

Lisa is a clinical psychologist at the Racine Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison in Wisconsin, where she works with developmentally disabled and mentally ill inmates. “It’s a very fulfilling job and I know I am helping people,” she says of the 30 offenders she assists at the prison, which houses 1,600 men.

Graduating from Illinois Wesleyan with a degree in psychology, Lisa originally planned for a career working with children. After she earned a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of South Dakota, she decided to join a student-loan repayment program, which sent her to work in the Wisconsin prison system. “I found it more challenging and rewarding than I could have imagined,” she says. “I’ve been here for 12 years.”

According to Lisa, the demand for those who can work with special-needs inmates has grown over the past few decades. “In the past these inmates would have been placed in

prison. “He said, ‘Domestic violence against my girlfriend. But it was mistaken identity!’ I wondered how his girlfriend had mistaken someone else for him.”

Working in a prison environment does not faze Lisa, who says she rarely feels unsafe. “It’s not like it is on television. It’s a lot more like a college campus where everyone has the same uniform,” she says. “People walk around all day and have keys to their own room. There are guards everywhere, and there is lockdown if there is problem, so you always know you are in a secure environment. There is segregation status for offenders who break the rules. Also, I am vigilant about security issues — I don’t let my guard down.”

Another duty Lisa performs is overseeing student interns. This past fall, she hired Keyona Jarrett, a 2006 Illinois Wesleyan alumna who is currently pursuing her doctorate. “It was intriguing to me how many people did not get their mental health needs addressed until they became involved with the criminal justice system,” says Keyona, who applied for the internship after a practicum with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

“I realized that I wanted to help people face their mental health needs,” says Keyona, “so that hopefully they can go back into their communities and be positive, productive, law-abiding citizens.”

Keyona says she feels fortunate to work with Lisa and appreciates the Wesleyan connection. “It has definitely helped us develop a solid working relationship. Because we both graduated from IWU, we can reflect on our similar experiences there,” she says.



The Racine Correctional Facility (above) is a medium-security prison.

Along with Illinois Wesleyan memories, Lisa and Keyona bonded over the recent death of Professor of Psychology James Dougan. “He was one of my favorite professors, and I will always remember the rat class,” Lisa says of “Learning and Behavior.”

“The first day he took us down to the lab where they keep the rats, we were supposed to handle them and get used to working with them. He handed the rat to a girl who moved away at the last second, and the rat hit the floor.”

It was Dougan who helped Lisa consider her opportunities in graduate school. “When I told him I was thinking of graduate school, he suggested the path I could take. Of course, he didn’t think I should go into clinical — he wanted me to work with rats like he did.”

Lisa says she is happy with her choice to pursue clinical psychology, especially when inmates tell her she made a difference in their lives. “They will say to me, ‘I was out there and thought

about using drugs, but I saw your face and thought that Dr. Buhs wouldn't want me to do that," she says.

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