



11-22-2010

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Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Alumna Assisting Special Needs Inmates" (2010). *News and Events*. 1521.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/1521>

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Alumna Assisting Special Needs Inmates

November 22, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For Illinois Wesleyan University alumna Lisa (Beal) Buhs '94, work is a prison, and she would have it no other way.

Buhs is a clinical psychologist at 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 said of the 30 offenders she assists at the prison, that houses 1,600 men.

Graduating Illinois Wesleyan with a degree in psychology, Buhs 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 said. "I've been here for 11 years."

According to Buhs, the demand for those who can work with special needs inmates has grown over the last few decades. "In the past these inmates would have been placed in some type of a group home setting. They never would have been in the criminal justice system," said Buhs, "but now the expense has forced states to close many of those facilities, so a lot of the men end up with us."

Buhs 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 said.

Initially, Buhs 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 said, remembering a case when she asked the inmate why he was in prison. "He said, 'domestic violence against my girlfriend. But it was for mistaken identity!' I wondered how his girlfriend had mistaken someone else for him."

Working in a prison environment does not phase Buhs, who said 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 said. "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."

Another duty Buhs performs is overseeing student interns. This fall, she hired Keyone 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," said Jarrett, 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, so that hopefully they can go back into their communities and be positive, productive, law-abiding citizens."

Jarrett said she feels fortunate to work with Buhs, and appreciates the Illinois 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 said.

Along with Illinois Wesleyan memories, both Buhs and Jarrett 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,” Buhs said 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 Buhs 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,” she said.

Buhs said she is happy with her choice to pursue clinical psychology, especially when inmates tell her that 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 said.

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960