



DON'T RUN OR WE'LL SHOOT!

When the country we were in became Communist, my father lost his job as a University lecturer. Initially my mother, younger sister and my father crossed the border and left me behind with my grandmother as she refused to leave her homeland and couldn't bare to live without me. It wasn't long before my father paid two men to come get us.

I remember having a handkerchief stuffed into my mouth as I had a really bad cough at the time. We crouched with other women and children behind bushes avoiding the soldiers who patrolled the rice paddies along the river bank. The men we were with signalled us to move slowly and quietly.



Name and photo has been changed to protect identity.

Suddenly, we heard men shouting, "Don't run or we'll shoot! Don't run or we will shoot!" One of the men grabbed me and placed me on his back preparing to run but my grandmother grabbed hold of my ankle and pleaded with him to leave me with her. Then, both men ran away and I could see the shadows of the soldiers running after them. I didn't know their fate, but my grandmother and I, along with the other women and children were rounded up.

My grandmother and I were last in line as I looked back knowing that my parents and little sister were just across the border ahead. I saw the end of what I now know was an AK47 rifle pointing directly at my forehead. That was the first attempt to flee from our home.

The second attempt, my father, paying a lot of bribes, got us out. I had never seen or been on a plane before. The day my family left the refugee camp was exciting for me, though I didn't know I was leaving my country for good. I remember sinking back into the seat of the plane excited as I received a toy and meal in a tiny box. The excitement quickly turned to fear when the jet took off. Next thing I knew we were all in Sydney.

My parents didn't waste a minute – they both found jobs while my younger sister and I were left with my grandmother

who cared for us most of our lives. I'm very grateful to my parents and grandmother and will never forget the sacrifice they made to give me a better life.

I settled well at school and got good grades all through High School, despite moving numerous times to different schools as my parents moved houses. When my father disappeared from our lives for 9 years, he left my mother alone with a huge debt and two kids to support. I sacrificed my social life to help my mother sew in our garage to make ends meet. I would soon marry to relieve the financial burden from my mother.

At the age of 40, I committed fraud and found myself in prison serving a 4-1/2 year sentence. It was such a shock to me and to everyone who knew me, especially my mother. What had happened to me? I'm still trying to figure it out. I cannot live with guilt or regret forever. I must learn to forgive myself and become a better person, only this time I must set better boundaries.

The most difficult aspect of being in prison has been the separation from my children. This was the most confronting on my first night. I couldn't stop thinking about my kids. As soon as the cell door slammed and I was locked in for final muster, I felt pain in my chest and I wanted to scratch at the walls and run home to them. I realised that I would not get to kiss them good night on this night or any other night for the next four and a half years! Panic set in and I broke down, sobbing.

Four months into my sentence, I slowly accepted my circumstances and stopped fighting with myself. I had tried so hard to hold on to memories of my life outside. I tried to remember how my home looked, my children's rooms, I worried about my belongings, where I had arranged and placed everything fearing that as time passed by, I would forget. I tried to remember all my appointments and to-do lists in my diary, my children's schedules, everything I could possibly store in my head. I feared that if I lost all these memories, I would lose myself and I wouldn't be the same person I was prior to coming to prison.

Did I really want to be the same person? Couldn't I be better? Why am I trying to remember all this? Nothing stays the same. Time will change everything.

And time certainly did change everything. It changed events which in turned changed me as a person. For the first time in my life, I was able to define the problems that were bothering me: separation from my children and how helpless I felt that I couldn't be there to help or protect them, the loss of my grandmother and the uncertainty of my marriage. The impact of these events soon escalated and became an emotional and mental burden. I experienced helplessness, loneliness, grief, loss, frustration, anger, abandonment and confusion and I wasn't well.

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A note from the CEO



With God's Grace, we are off to a great start for 2016!

We have increased the number of connections with women in our programs, we've welcomed and trained new volunteers and new staff members, upgraded our computers and software, got our database working efficiently (after a few kinks) and continue to work out and implement our marketing and financial strategies for 2016 onwards!

(continued from cover)

I had not previously heard of Prison Network Ministries until another prisoner suggested the assistance they could provide. Initially my pride prevented me from approaching them for help. I had never asked anyone for help before and felt embarrassed and uncomfortable to disclose my problems to strangers. The fact that I was now a prisoner and had only myself to blame for my misfortunes heightened my hesitation to contact them.

But things eventually became too much for me to contain. My grandmother died and I lost all hope. I truly felt God was imposing His punishment on me. I remember going to my room, I knelt down, looked up towards the ceiling and repented; asking God to forgive me.

Shortly afterwards, I met with Lyndel and Virginia from PNM and they helped me sort out my problems. They helped with my children too. They became my angels and provided me with hope. Knowing they were always there, enabled me to build strength in myself. They listened without judgement, respected my thoughts and opinions. They relieved my burden when I was at the lowest point in my life. I am and always will be eternally grateful to them and their tireless commitment to the women in prison and to our children. As long as Prison Network exists, we know that we are not forgotten.

When you are in prison, problems seem to get magnified much more than they really are. Life is mundane and structured so everyday seems the same. Prison Network staff and volunteers helped me see things differently. Now, the days pass quicker and I don't seem to have as many problems any more. They have been replaced by a heightened sense of awareness, peace and acceptance. Ironically, when I was a free person, I felt trapped. Now I'm in prison and I feel such a sense of personal freedom.

I learned that freedom is not defined by physical barriers and that we create barriers for ourselves by the way we think. I found my true self behind these prison walls with the help of some very caring people. I also found a way to let my emotions run free by focusing on my work and using my talent to draw and sketch. I have produced some of the best sketches I've ever done! Instead of focusing on what I lost, I now focus on the possibilities that await me once I reunite with my children.

I've been given a second chance by God and I look forward to the new journey that awaits me. Thank you Prison Network!

Rachel

In the next few weeks, we will be applying for substantial grants (including Pip Wisdom) and begin work on one of our major fund-raising events featuring Silvie Paladino on May 28th at One Community Church in Blackburn (contact 03 8878 2500 for more info).

Mark your calendars, and get tickets early - it is sure to be sold out - tell your family & friends and together, let's provide over and above the finances needed to continue God's work through Prison Network.

With grateful thanks, **Diane Spicer**

OUR FAMILY IS GROWING

Congratulations!

A message from Virginia:

"Hi everyone! Our beautiful baby girl finally arrived at 2pm on Saturday, March 5. Her name is Stella Hope Nelson, weight was 3.65kg and 55cm long. She is feeding ravenously!!!! We are all doing well & very excited; especially her big sister! Thanks so much for your prayers & encouragement in recent weeks. Love, Virginia, Jeff, Maya & Stella"

Welcome Danielle!

Danielle Thompson (Dani) is a dedicated and passionate youth and social worker, nearing completion of her social work honours degree.

She has extensive experience as a lead tenant, working with vulnerable youth across several organisations including ACCESS, Urban Seed, Concern Australia and most recently MacKillop Family Services.

She is a competent educator, has a heart for marginalized people, a quick learner, personable and motivated and has very quickly become part of the PNM family. She is an answer to your prayers and we are grateful that she is quickly engaging with the women at both DPFC and Tarrengower. (Dani is filling in for Virginia who is now on maternity leave and is expected to return to PNM next year.)



OUTSIDE DISCUSSION GROUP

I have often wondered what a challenge it must have been for Rahab the Prostitute, Mary Magdalene and the 'Woman at the Well', to integrate into the "local church". I would love to think that they were totally accepted and welcomed by all and felt fully understood by those they met... but somehow I doubt it. Many times the church welcomes and includes people well however at other times it appears far from a match made in heaven! Often the issue is not the church, but rather insecurities of the newcomer, who struggles to believe that they could fit in, have got something to contribute and could truly befriend 'straight people'.

Understanding this tension, PNM have been facilitating a weekly Christian Discussion Group for the last nine months, in the lounge of Kew Baptist Church - with exactly the same content as Tuesday night's group run in the prison. The group helps provide a safe and familiar space for women who have been released to continue their faith journey in an environment where they are understood and accepted. Most of the women who attend are in recovery from drug and alcohol

dependency, and the group provides a much needed positive environment and alternative community of "clean" and supportive friends. Importantly, there is a strong commitment among the members not to be a stumbling block to another's recovery. In recent times, the group has also invited others who may be seeking to overcome similar issues but haven't necessarily been incarcerated to join the weekly gathering. Our hope and prayer is that God's Word will build each member up, building their confidence and faith and that in time each of the women will become an active member of their local Christian community.

The feedback from the women has been very positive. As one new member of the group commented last week, 'This sort of group is so needed. There is just nothing around like it. It's just so important'.

It is an absolute privilege to be a part of "Outside discussion group" and it is certainly a highlight of my week. A huge thank you to Kew Baptist for enabling us to use their perfectly suited facilities!

Laurel Gore

NEWS FROM THE BOARD

On behalf of the Prison Network Board, I am incredibly excited about the growth and impact we are having in the women's prisons and in women's lives. Each month the Board receives staff reports which describe all the things that have been happening in the delivery of programs in the prison and outside the prison. Each month there are a lot of fantastic stories as well as some tragic ones. We are so proud to be part of an organisation that is changing lives through the power and grace of God.

Our staff are truly inspirational in their commitment, passion and love for the work they are doing. And our volunteers are fabulous, committed and without whom, we could not be the hands and heart of God to so many women and their families.

DID YOU KNOW? A summary report released by Corrections Victoria in February 2016 and prepared by Monash University Criminal Justice Research names Prison Network Ministries as being one of the few post release programs that women found helpful. Most significantly, the Monash Report found that those programs that establish connections with women in prison and continue post release are the most helpful and states that overall, women perceive prison programs as helpful in reducing re-offending.

The Report found there are four factors identified as key in whether a service in prison was helpful:

1. The attitude of the workers providing the service,
2. The practical/material assistance provided,
3. Help with child related issues,
4. Assistance provided with life skills, such as substance abuse.

Importantly, these services were perceived as helpful because those providing the services had established connections with the women pre-release and followed through post release. Characteristics of helpful programs and services are:

- » non-judgemental relationship
- » practical assistance
- » trust
- » active listening
- » accessibility of service
- » reliability of service

Prison Network is on the right track. This report completely validates who we are, what we are doing and why we are doing it. Lets continue to work together and see some amazing things in 2016.

Jane Frawley, Chair

OUR PROGRAMS

Tuesdays:

Christian Discussion Group, Sports, Craft, Visits

Wednesdays:

Talk It Out, Vocal Group

Thursdays:

Dance Group, Sports, Zone Out & visits

Fridays fortnightly:

Tarrengower: Craft and Discussion Group

Saturday:

'Game On Day' – every five weeks

1st & 3rd Sunday of the month:

Fun with Mum

4th Sunday of the month:

'Sunday Live'

DANCE - IT'S SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST A DANCE CLASS

For the women at DPFC, we began a dance class last year which was funded by Dept. of Justice "Smoke Free Prison Project". Two qualified dance instructors from Planetshakers City Church commit their time every Thursday afternoon and take the girls through their paces. They describe how they find working for the very first time in a Corrections setting:

"Every week, Nicky and I, have the privilege of heading into a women's prison to teach a dance class. Our vision is for participants to be able to walk out of class feeling that they can do and achieve something that they may never have tried before. The group invites women of all levels of ability and experience to exercise, increase fitness and build confidence, self-esteem and learn how to keep positive mind sets. Personally, this is one of the most rewarding yet challenging experiences I have ever been a part of and we are already seeing the change in the women attending regularly.

Generally, the class structure starts with a proper warm up (to avoid potential injuries and strains), we then teach some technique skills and head into a fun, upbeat, or quirky routine for the women to learn. We've thrown quite a few challenging moves and routines out there, but the women

are picking it up effortlessly. Especially our star soloist – Lyn Stephens (PNM staff)! The best part of the group however, is the connection and relationships we are making with the women"

Nicky - "I'm thrilled that there is so much joy in the room at the end of every dance class. The women come to us thinking they have two left feet but end up surprising themselves and really enjoy grooving to the music. They enjoy classes so much they want to know how they can continue dance classes when they are released.

I enjoy seeing the women applying themselves to steps they find difficult, encouraging each other and even teaching each other moves that they've only just learnt themselves. It's awesome to see them stepping out of their comfort zone to perform in front of class mates and even to the wider prison community as they did at last year's Christmas party. We sometimes catch them proudly showing their new moves to women outside of class.

I'm delighted to see the women enjoying themselves, being free, getting passionate, committing to classes, achieving hard things, being creative and even getting some exercise. We are all learning together to love life through dance."

YES! I will help women and their families rebuild their lives.

I will donate: \$25 \$50 \$100 \$_____

Sponsor child/camp \$300 (full cost) or \$_____

Frequency of donation: Once Monthly Quarterly

Please print your details

Name _____

Address _____

Suburb/Town _____ Postcode _____

Telephone _____

Email _____

I require a tax deductible receipt
(All donations over \$2 are tax deductible).

Method of payment

Cheque or **Money order** (made payable to Prison Network Ministries)

Direct Debit:

BSB: 013250 Account: 298345342

Account Name: Prison Network Ministries

Credit Card: Visa MasterCard Amex

Name on card _____

Card no.

Expiry date

Signature _____

Please return this form to:

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