

Australian Community Idol Finalist Speech

6 June 2005

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Firstly I will acknowledge the custodians of the land – the Wurundjeri People – Kulin Nations. I would like to show my respects to the Wurundjeri people and all Aboriginal people here today. I thank you for allowing me to be present on your beautiful land and allowing this event also on your land

My name is Debbie Kilroy, and I am the Director of Sisters Inside. Just being able to say that sentence makes me feel like I've won a prize or some huge competition. I want to spend the next 20 minutes or so telling you why I am so proud of this organisation and why you, as Australians, should be proud of it as well.

I am a founding member of Sisters Inside, along with several close friends with whom I was incarcerated in Brisbane's Boggo Road prison in the early 1990s. People are sometimes surprised to hear that this organisation grew and was nurtured in the cells of one this country's most notorious prisons.

But at Sisters Inside, the words 'community' and 'inclusion' have never been used rhetorically. By 'inclusion' we don't just mean that women inside have real power in our management structure, although they do. And by 'community' we don't just mean our local community, or the community of prisoners, or of women, although we strive to serve all these.

Let me tell you what we mean by these two words. First, inclusion. Sisters Inside was founded in the wake of a courageous experiment in prison reform in Queensland, which followed the election of the State's first labour government in 32 years in 1989, just six weeks after I was sentenced to six years inside bongo Road.

The irony of that isn't lost on me: a reforming government comes to power to free the state of its shackles of corruption, and I promptly lose my freedom, locked away where I thought I would never see those historic changes occur.

How wrong I was. You see, just a month after Wayne Goss was elected, one of my closest friends was murdered right beside me as we sat at the lunch table one Sunday afternoon. As she lay in my arms, dying of massive stab wounds, I guess I felt myself break open. But with her murder, it would be the entire prison system that would be broken open, and laid bare for real scrutiny and change.

A bright spotlight was shone on the way prisons worked, their lack of real rehabilitation options, the absence of education or work opportunities, the general treatment of prisoners. The old guard of prison management at Boggo Road was replaced with a new guard, men and women who had a simple and profound approach to reform: treat prisoners with dignity. Treat them like human beings.

One of the best innovations they made was to set up a series of committees inside the prison on which prisoners had a real voice. For the first time ever, we were given

some power – limited, of course – over how the prison was run, over what we needed, what our families needed.

For some of us, that meant education – I enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work which I completed some years later. It also meant work opportunities, both inside and outside the prison. It meant outings – to see our children in their homes, for exercise, for shopping. We were able to voice concerns about the lack of services, about our children.

A net result of all this was that many of us were able at last to see beyond the confines of a prison cell to a world where we might live differently, a world in which we might strive and succeed and see our children do the same.

It showed us what compassion could achieve, it showed us what just a tiny bit of control over our own lives could achieve, what the huge benefits of counselling and education and real work could be. And it proved to me that things could be changed for the good.

After my release, just as soon as I was able to establish myself in a new life, one in which I no longer saw prison as home, I went back into the prison in a different capacity. Because I had the trust of the new prison management, I was able to go in and meet with my old friends and discuss what we needed to do to improve services more, to make a real difference.

Sisters Inside was born from that. Our first discussions established that the most pressing need then was for sexual assault counselling and drug and alcohol counselling. You may not know this, but 89% of women in prison have experienced sexual assault or sexual abuse in their lives. A huge proportion of that number have grown up in poverty, with severe deprivation and disadvantage. In simple terms, they have grown up in places where their lives are not valued.

The effects of poverty and abuse mean most have a low level of education and few skills. The attempts that many make to self-medicate, to deal with the pain of life, mean a great proportion have addictions to drugs or alcohol. Their health is characteristically poor – even corrective services officials concede that – and many have been diagnosed with mental disabilities issues which have often not been addressed.

A too-high proportion, of course, are Indigenous, and for them, all of those things are multiplied. Some are from culturally diverse backgrounds, and for them those things are also multiplied.

So Sisters Inside began with these basic services. And how did we really know these were the services that were needed? Because Sisters Inside **is** women inside. We were not an organisation coming in to the prison and trying to dictate to the women what they needed, what they wanted, what was wrong. From the very beginning, it was enshrined in our constitution that women inside were the decision makers. They constituted the steering committee.

A group of trusted women on the outside made up the rest of the management committee, enacting the decisions and advice of women inside and advocating on their behalf. This is where we differ from many other prisoner advocacy organisations. The women inside are in charge. For many, this is the first time they have been able to exert any control over their lives. They have grown up, gone into relationships, and run foul of the law with very little control over what has happened to them.

People outside talk about consequences: about women who commit crimes facing the consequences of their actions. May I just say to you that for many women, their whole lives are one big consequence. Of so many factors, but as I said, deprivation and abuse being critical among them. Their involvement in Sisters Inside is often the first time they have been treated with any degree of dignity or respect. They don't know what those terms mean.

So at one level, that is what we mean by **inclusion**. We do not try to decide what is best for women; they decide it for themselves. It is essentially a **power with** approach, rather than a **power over**. We walk with the women, right beside them. Not in front, assuming we know better. We don't.

But at another level, we mean something much wider again by the word **inclusion**. We do not believe, as many of our politicians do, that women in prison are any different from any other women. We do not believe women in prison are bad. We do not subscribe to the notion of **the other**.

Let me explain that a bit by recounting a bit of history. Since those reforming days of the Goss government, when women in prison were afforded all the rights and dignities afforded all other human beings, things have changed dramatically, and not for the better.

That great gamble is over. The great gamble to give women some control over their lives, opportunities for education, training, for leaves of absence that helped them stay close to their kids and families, to actually get a running start on getting their lives together on the outside in a way which might prevent them from going back to prison, as most women eventually do. It was by the way a gamble that worked: women did get university degrees, they did reunite with their families, they did get jobs and stay out of the system. And I was one of them. But we have lost all that now.

Since then we have had the phoney war on drugs and the phoney fear campaign about personal safety which forces people to make their homes into fortresses, to not trust anyone, and to retreat to so-called 'gated communities' which are intent on keeping out 'the other'. 'The other' meaning people like me. Because despite what you want to see, despite labels like 'director' and social worker and even 'member in the Order of Australia', I am what many of those people fear – I am one of 'the others'. I have been to prison.

And it is women like me who make up the preposterous numbers of women in prison. Our political system and campaign of fear has seen the numbers of women in prison skyrocket over the past 10 years. You could be excused for not knowing that because

the bumper numbers of prisons built to house these numbers are built of course on the outskirts of towns where they are conveniently invisible.

But this prison industrial complex now ensures that not only is money made out of prisons – from privatising and from the supply of goods and services necessary to prisons – but that our society is conveniently kept at the status quo – that these ‘others’ are kept under control (i.e., locked up) and out of sight, so that the rest can maintain their god-given position and prosperity.

But don’t be fooled: prisons have an economic, social and political purpose that has nothing to do with community safety or rehabilitation, the twin mantras of the prison industry. And that purpose is **exclusive, not inclusive**. It seeks to exclude from society certain groups, who can, when it comes down to it, act as the receptacles of blame for the rest of society. Things going bad? Blame the other. Things not looking rosy and predictable, is crime too high and work too hard and the kids off the rails and the trains vandalised? Or worse, not running on time? Blame the other.

At Sisters, the words **inclusive and community** go together. We don’t ghetto-ise any group. But when one group is treated as appallingly as some women and children are treated, as badly as women prisoners are treated, whole communities suffer. We suffer of course because we lose the beautiful potential of those human beings who our governments would throw on the scrap heap, labelling them **bad**. We all become less compassionate and more angry and in that we suffer too.

But on a more direct level, we all suffer because blaming and punishing do not achieve what people tell us they will achieve. They do not produce good outcomes, better people, safer communities.

Punishing rather than rehabilitating produces, in fact, more crime.

Sisters Inside wants to draw attention to the facts of women’s imprisonment through this challenge – but ultimately we want to expose the over-riding fact that **prisons don’t work**. From this stand-point, although we continue to provide services to women, we are abolitionists. We believe that, not only do prisons fail women and families, they work actively to deepen the disadvantage felt by women and to lock them into a cycle of trauma and deprivation.

How can we say prisons ‘work’ when more than 60 percent of women who go to prison return to prison? That’s an astounding failure rate. If we applied it to any major organisation funded by government, heads would roll.

The prison experience is built on the twin lies of ‘community safety’ and ‘rehabilitation’. That first lie, community safety, seems laughable when the numbers of women imprisoned for violent crime is very low; when the majority are serving less than two years, and when we look at the effects of drug offences and of long histories of continued sexual and physical abuse.

The second, rehabilitation? Without programs, without education, with the re-traumatising effects of strip searching and detention in isolation? What do we expect? That we lock up a woman away from all her support systems, away from her children,

treat her like a lower form of life, remind her daily that she is 'bad', and then release her without money or housing or employment, with her children in care, with her self esteem in tatters, and that she'll somehow magically be a 'better person'?

That is not what they're doing, and that is not what they want. It suits all our present social constructs that certain groups will stay on the merry-go-round of imprisonment and loss, imprisonment and loss. It reinforces all our stereotypes, it keeps our view of the world intact, it keeps the rest of us in our safe places.

This is the world in which Sisters Inside works. Our twin arms cover both the provision of a wide range of services to women inside, way beyond the early sexual assault and drug and alcohol counselling, to transition counselling and reconnection programs to keep mums in touch with their kids; **and** advocating on their behalf. Keeping open a dialogue with the community, to enhance understanding of women's issues, to educate the whole community about women in prison, who they are, why they are there. We have the runs on the board: we are keeping women out of prison. And despite the efforts of the current Queensland government, which has locked us out of the prison following the lodgement of our human rights complaint with the anti-discrimination commission, we are having a positive effect – sometimes a life-saving effect – on women and their families.

If you feel that the community is not greatly enhanced by denying some women their human rights, by excluding them and ensuring they remain seen as the other, please think about two things. The first is what the alternative to prisons for women might be. It isn't such a scary thought. Remember that when the abolition of slavery was first mooted, many Americans predicted horror and mayhem throughout their country. The abolition of prison mirrors that situation. Think about it.

The second thing is to think about the real lives of women who go to prison and about the lives of their children and families, which are bound up with them. It is in all our interests to make sure these women do get the skills and tools necessary to live fulfilling lives outside the institutions they have come to rely on so shockingly as their homes. We all deserve a better world than that and Sisters Inside will not stop working with women in prison at all levels of our organisation just because a government doesn't like what we have to say or do – in fact we will be stronger and louder as they try to silence our voices and state the truth for women who have been criminalised in this country. This is why we are so proud of sisters inside and I hope you feel just as proud to have Sisters Inside here in Australia.

Thank you

After this speech 1500 people who were in attendance at this event voted. They voted to find the winner of the Australian Community Idol 2005. There were 3 finalists. Sisters Inside was voted the winner the next day.