

A Dope Fiend, But Not a Liar

Sandra, now in her early 30's, has been a hellion at Loaves & Fishes for more than eight years. She is the mother of four children, all of whom have been taken away from her by the county. She draws a monthly Social Security stipend because of a mental disability.

Sandra is a very likable person.

She is model thin and very attractive when she is released from jail with enough weight to give her body some figure. She lives on the extreme edge of her uncontrollable emotions and will rage out of control to get her way or to show her displeasure. But she is smart as a whip and knows how to work the angles. I like Sandra. Everyone at Loaves & Fishes likes Sandra because she has come to represent the quintessential guest, and our hoped-for response to such a guest. Oh my, she can be such a pain.

Even the city police try to keep her from being incarcerated because she roils and agitates her fellow prisoners, rubbing them raw to the point of jail riot. She does not cower from the guards and knows how to make their on-duty lives miserable. As a result, she receives special treatment. She is housed in the "psych" section of the downtown jail, where she is isolated and has a cell all to herself. She is frequently visited by mental health professionals who medicate her more frequently than their other clients.

Sandra has been in and out of jail throughout the eight years I have known her. I have come to believe that her time in jail is what keeps her alive. Her primary offense is the use of crack cocaine and dealing pissant amounts of crack to others or prostituting herself in exchange for small doses. Although she is reluctant to admit it, she is a dope fiend. But she can be one of the nicest dope fiends you will ever meet.

The Loaves & Fishes jail visitation program was sparked by my three visits to Sandra in jail several years ago. I was determined to find out what made this talented young woman tick, and even though I still haven't a clue about that aspect of Sandra, it set in motion the first visit we made to Loaves & Fishes guests who were incarcerated. From these first visits to Sandra, the jail

visitation program has grown to be a major part of our mission of feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless in Sacramento.

The only success I've had in controlling Sandra's temper tantrums is to experiment with the yellow card system. The staff member who serves as Sandra's payee and budgets her monthly check is instructed not to speak to Sandra if she begins to rant and rave, but instead to pull a yellow card out of the drawer and put in on the counter. This gives a nonverbal, non-confrontational signal to Sandra that unless she calms down, the conversation will be terminated. For some reason, this strategy actually works.

My own judgment is that because of her rages, crack use, and her periodic jail time, Sandra is slowing down. And if she doesn't end up slain on the street, she will calm down and lead a more normal and satisfying life.

The last time Sandra was in jail, she wrote me a letter. I responded on the feast day of Martin Luther King, Jr.:

"Dear Sandra,

Thank you for thinking of me and taking the time to write a letter. I very much appreciate receiving it, and I have read it many times. Your letter was thoughtful, well written, and above all, honest. As you say, you might be a dope fiend, but you are not a liar. You tell the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

I am sorry if you believe I am disappointed in you. How could I be disappointed in a person who tries and tries and tries again? And, you are so right! One day your trying will pay off for you, for your health, and for all those who care about you. You have so much to offer others, your honesty, your sense of humor, and your ability to hang in there. When I heard you had turned yourself in so that you could clean up your record, I said, "This woman is taking care of business. This woman wants to get things right. This woman wants to move on."

I hope that you will be released soon, but then again, you don't have to worry about being flooded out like the rest of us. So perhaps you had better wait

until this storm system has moved on, and then you can make your glorious exit out into the sunshine and the warmth of freedom.

You know that I have been concerned about your health and your physical well being. After you spend some time recuperating in jail, the real Sandra emerges, looking fit, trim, and attractive. But later, sometimes many months later, when I see you looking so thin, so wan, and so spent, I wonder whether you will live another day, another week. I believe that if you get to the point where you are able to take care of your own health and your own well being, then you will have the energy and the patience to be helpful to others – others who need your help.

I don't mean to give you a lecture. None of us like to be lectured, especially me. And after many years of experience, I have found that lecturing a grown woman doesn't accomplish very much. Only she can do for herself.

We are happy, but sad, too, that Sister Judy is leaving Loaves & Fishes to live in a refugee camp in Tanzania. What a brave thing for her to do! Having the courage to leave her mother, her brother, her friends and relatives, her community of sisters, and her guests at Loaves & Fishes to live halfway around the world so that she can be of help to refugees who have been driven out of their country by war and discrimination. I have to admit I would not be able to do that. I hope you will be able to say goodbye to her before she leaves and to wish her well!

Keep up your good work, Sandra, and remember, I am not disappointed in you.”