Sparks in the Dark:
The Prison Project

By

Denise Harrison
and
Jubilee Wing

By Denise Harrison and Jubilee Wing HMP Guys Marsh: AM, AW, Beazeley, BK, Birdy, Caleb, CB, FS, Gadsby, HP, JD, JWA, LS

Printed edition:
Also available in multiple e-book formats.

Published by:
Unheard Voices
An imprint of The Endless Bookcase Ltd
Suite 14 STANTA Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring,
St Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 6PF, UK.

More information can be found at:
www.theendlessbookcase.com

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Print ISBN: 978-1-917061-73-5
eBook ISBN: 978-1-917061-72-8

The creation of the Unheard Voices imprint was supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Sparks In The Dark is a series supported by Unheard Voices, designed to showcase stories from people who often do not have a voice – for example people in prison, people who are homeless, people in recovery or those still struggling with addiction. WARNING: some works in this series contain harrowing, explicit or sexually offensive words or images that may disturb or shock some readers.

For

Tony, Rockstar and Ralf –

My three musketeers

x

Forward: Sparks in the dark

I had the profound privilege of attending a session of *Finding Rat Park* (the project that inspired this book) at Guys Marsh, a programme that, from the moment I stepped into the room, proved to be nothing short of transformational. Having worked closely with many of the prisoners involved, I was deeply familiar with their stories, their struggles, and their journey toward healing and recovery. Yet, seeing them engage in this session was something altogether different, raw, moving, and deeply human.

The session unfolded as an open forum, a space where prisoners were invited to share their pasts and reflect on how their experiences had shaped the course of their lives. Some spoke with confidence, while others hesitated, grappling with the weight of their own history. This dynamic created an incredible balance, those more assured set the tone, opening the door for others to step forward in their own time. As stories poured out, some heartbreaking and others laced with resilience, Denise listened with a level of attentiveness that was remarkable. Her responses were thoughtful and compassionate, ensuring that each voice was not only heard but validated in a way that made it safe to continue speaking.

As the conversation deepened, something truly powerful began to happen. Those who had initially hesitated, prisoners who had rarely shared their feelings before, started to find their own voices. Their words were tentative at first, but with each nod of encouragement and each moment of understanding, they grew bolder, opening up in ways that I had not previously seen before. Denise fostered an atmosphere of trust and security, never pressing too far, never making anyone feel exposed beyond their comfort. The room became somewhere which was a sanctuary where vulnerability was met not with judgment, but with understanding.

Then came a pivotal moment, the group watched a YouTube video created by Denise herself, detailing her own hardships and struggles in life. The room was silent. Every single person was engrossed, absorbing not just the words but the emotion behind them. It felt like more than watching, it was feeling, connecting, understanding. Seeing prisoners, many of whom have long been guarded, hesitant to trust, sit so fully engaged, so openly moved, was extraordinary. The video sparked a conversation that ran deep; we discussed its themes, examined its relevance to our own lives and broke down barriers that had existed for far too long. Prisoners asked questions, some cautious, others searching for hope, and Denise answered with unwavering honesty, offering perspectives that gave light to a future they could believe in.

As the session came to a close, we stepped outside, transitioning from the heavy emotion of the room to a more relaxed space where everyone could reflect on what had just transpired. There was an ease in the air, a newfound openness between prisoners as they processed what they had learned, what they had felt and what they were beginning to understand about themselves.

Finding Rat Park is more than just a session, it's a movement within these walls, a rare and vital opportunity for prisoners to express themselves in ways they never have before. It is a space where honesty flourishes, where healing begins, and where the possibility of change feels real. To witness this was extraordinary. To see these men embrace their vulnerability and support one another in such an honest, human way was, truly, an experience I will never forget.

Staff member – HMP Guys Marsh

Contents

Forward: Sparks in the dark
Introduction **1**
Reflections from Prison

My Recovery Journey – JD 4
Witnessing Abuse – LS 9
Home – JW 13
Drugs – AM 16
Caleb 17
Poem 1 – Caleb 18
Poem 2 – Caleb 19

If I Had A Magic Wand (Creative writing class) **21**

The Stuff of Dreams – AB 22
Gadsby's Rap 25
CB 26
FS 27
AW 27

Our Stories **29**

For Every Death There is New Life – AW 30
Addiction – BK 31
Blue Steel Door – LS 34
CB's Story 35
HP's Story 36
Care To Cursed – AW 39
Basic Boy Beazeley 41
Lifer – Birdy 43

Reviews **45**

Introduction

Earlier this year I was invited to spend 12 weeks behind the walls of HMP Guys Marsh with 9 men I've never met and who I knew next to nothing about.

The idea was simple; Take these men, with their wounds and their grief and their unresolved trauma and create a community rooted in addiction recovery, sustainable amidst the chaos and the craziness of daily prison life.

It was a pilot, a punt – it could have landed badly, and I and everyone involved could have been left wiping egg off our faces…only it didn't land badly – it was incredible, and what those 12 weeks have taught me (and hopefully them!) has been life changing.

My name is Denise. Today I'm an award-winning writer, filmmaker and published author which is all kinds of cool, because nine years ago I was an end stage alcoholic, sleeping on a borrowed sofa.

Detox saved my life back then – at least that's what I thought at the time.

It took a traumatised, six stone scrap of a woman and it made me look like a human again. It got rid of all the nasties in my system and it gave me the time and space that I needed to breathe and begin to process how it felt to be sober for the first time in years.

What treatment didn't give me though was even a basic understanding of addiction or any of the tools that I needed to actually "do" recovery by myself, and after walking out of rehab and seeing good friends start to drop like flies, I realised very quickly that without these tools I'd probably be joining them.

So, I made it my mission to understand addiction, and I've spent the last nine years digging into trauma. Along the way I made my own recovery tools, and gradually this knowledge morphed into a book 'Finding Rat Park - A Handbook for Recovery'. A book that has found its way into hostels and half-way houses, refuges and recovery groups.

And now HMP Guys Marsh…

To avoid the mountains of paperwork and the obligatory jumping through bureaucratic hoops needed to get this book piloted in prison we decided simply to call it a reading group (I use the term loosely here given that many people in prison struggle to actually read).

I agreed to design and facilitate twelve weekly sessions (one for every chapter of the book) then I caught a train, nine men I've never met before decided to take a chance on me, and the rest, as they say, is history.

To get the ball rolling I read a poem and talked about curveballs...things that knock us off track and steer us off course. I ask if anyone else has an example. One of the guys shares that his dad collapsed and died in front of him after a heated argument and then 10 hours later his daughter was born, leaving him with a million conflicting emotions that literally had nowhere to go. Three months later his girlfriend left him, taking said baby as he struggled to come to terms with his grief, meaning that in a matter of months he'd pretty much lost everything- now I think that you'll agree that that's a fucking curveball…

We talk about trust issues. One of the group talks about childhood abuse resulting in him being taken into care. He thought it would be respite from the sexual assaults - until his social worker picked up where his family left off - a move that absolutely decimated him.

We talk people and relationships, and the importance of choosing the people around you wisely, and 'A' decides to share his story. Meeting a woman he liked while on day release from D-cat. going back to hers and having "first night nerves"...which started with a Vodka and coke, and ended with him waking the next morning in a virtual strangers bed to find fifteen years of recovery in tatters and a message on his phone advising him to report to the nearest police station as he was now on recall and going back to C-cat.

We watch social impact films and Ted Talks (one of which we have to watch sideways, which is par for the course when you don't have any Wi-Fi). We discuss and debate. We drink tea and eat kit kats and week by week we read a new chapter, share our stories and lay ourselves bare.

Incredible things start to happen in this room.

Walls come down and masks are left outside the door, as one by one, these men with all of their banter and their bravado, start to strip away the layers and begin to find out who they really are. Some for the first time ever. And sitting in this room, bearing witness to all of their hopes and their haunts, seeing how hard they work on their recovery in this place, their bravery and resilience knocks me sideways.

We had no idea what to expect when we started this project. I was just hoping that these guys showed up…

But boy did they show up. For me, for the staff, for themselves and for each other.

These are their stories, in their own words.

With huge, grateful thanks to the men on Jubilee wing and to all of the staff at HMP Guys Marsh. This book couldn't have happened without you.

Denise x

CONVICTED PRISONER

REG. No	AGE	LOCATION

NAME

Date of Conviction and Details of Sentence

APPELLANT — From / To

CLASS — *STAR / ORD

*Delete and/or insert other class as appropriate

WORK for which fit or any restrictions

PARTY to which allocated

DINING OUT DIET, etc.

SPECIAL NOTES

BC007 (F50) Printed on behalf of Public Sector Prison Industries by HMP Isle of Wight

CONVICTED PRISONER

REG. No	AGE	LOCATION
MC0460	9	C-303

NAME: SYKES DAVID

Date of Conviction and Details of Sentence: 15.05.76 THEFT SICLE BREAD AND MILK

APPELLANT — From: BIRTH To: DEATH

CLASS — *STAR / ORD: LOWER

*Delete and/or insert other class as appropriate

WORK for which fit or any restrictions: ASTHMA MEDICAL

PARTY to which allocated: PBT WASH

DINING OUT DIET, etc.: N/A

SPECIAL NOTES: HABITUAL THIEF. TO BE WATCHED CONSTANTLY. DEFECTS OF CHARACTER INCLUDED MANIPULATION, DECEIT AND IRRESPONSIBILITY. KNOWN DRUG USER BITES WHEN CORNERED

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Reflections from Prison