RECORD REVIEW

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Photo caption:

COURTESY ROCKLANDERS SUPPORTING PAROLE FOR KATHY BOUDIN
Kathy Boudin with her son, Chesa, in 2001.

CAROLYN SHERWIN PHOTO
Media gathered outside Bedford Hills Correctional Facility on Wednesday, the day of Kathy Boudin's release.

Kathy Boudin's impact

By ABBY LUBY

On the morning of Wednesday, Sept. 17, Kathy Boudin was released on parole from the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. The press were held at bay on the hill overlooking the main gate of the prison by local police and prison personnel.

Ms. Boudin's departure ended a 22-year stay at the prison that left its mark on fellow prisoners and the programs that are available to their health and rehabilitation. "I finished my bachelor of science degree and got a New York Department of Health AIDS certification," said former inmate Veronica Flournoy. "If I was in any other prison in the country, I would not have come out with the such skills. A lot of programs wouldn't be there if there weren't for Kathy."

Ms. Boudin's quick exit was observed as she left the building, waved briefly and was escorted to a nearby car. The car disappeared quickly eastward on Harris Road toward Bedford Village away from the reporters and outstretched zoom lenses of the photographers' cameras, stealing their chance of catching a glimpse of the former inmate.

A month ago, Ms. Boudin, an inmate of 22 years at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, appeared before the New York Parole Board requesting parole for the third time since 2001. Hearing procedures included recounting her crime in detail, turning back the clock and reliving Oct. 20, 1981. On that day, Ms. Boudin served as a decoy in the passenger seat of a U-Haul van in Nyack from which armed men emerged and shot Village of Nyack Police Officer Waverly Brown and Clarkstown Police Sergeant Edward O'Grady. Ms. Boudin was one of 19 people to be convicted of participation in the crime. She was incarcerated after her arrest and pled guilty in 1984 to first-degree robbery and second-degree murder. Her sentence was 20 years to life.

There has been consistent, organized opposition to parole for Ms. Boudin. In 2001, when first up for parole, a coalition of family members and police organizations rallied in Albany seeking to keep Ms. Boudin behind bars. From the minutes of the Aug. 21 State of New York Division of Parole board hearing, commissioners Daizzee D. Bouey and Vernon C. Manley asked Ms. Boudin about her confessed guilt and how her life has changed since then.

At her parole hearing, Ms. Boudin addressed the concerns of the governor and others. "I felt I was horrified that I had grown up wanting to be a doctor and here I am and three people are dead, and I'm responsible for this," said Ms. Boudin at the hearing. "And I just said I don't want to be. I don't want to be. I don't want to in any way defend what I was just part of. I felt that whatever problems there were with the system, there were more problems with what I had been part of and I knew I wanted to plead guilty, because I was guilty."

When Commissioner Bouey asked Ms. Boudin about her part in the crime, she said: "My role was going to be a white person in a truck that would move safely unidentified in the neighborhood. I thought as a white person involved in supporting a struggle, that was essentially a black struggle, that it was wrong for me to know anything else [about the crime]."

"I am thoroughly disappointed and completely disagree with the Parole Board's decision to release Kathy Boudin," said Governor George Pataki on Aug. 22. "It is not a decision that should have been made. It is not a decision that I would have made. "The murder of a police officer is a horrific crime and one that should be punished to the fullest extent of the law," Mr. Pataki said. "Anyone who is involved in the killing of a police officer — a person who makes the daily sacrifice of putting their own life on the line to protect others — must face the most severe penalties for the outrageous crime that has been committed."

"She went through many, many years that were extremely difficult and painful to try to come to some kind of resolution of her guilt," said Thea Jackson, president emeritus of the Center for Redirection Through Education and founder of the college program at the prison.

"She certainly takes full responsibility for having been a party to an event that caused untold tragedy," said Ms. Jackson. "She really was quite naïve, she admits she wasn't that young, but she was very naïve. She was a very confused young woman and she made some powerful choices. In 22 years, she has recognized that she made some very bad choices and has taught everybody over and over and over again that violence is no way to settle anything. I think when she was first incarcerated she got a jolt and realized through that traumatic experience that she was on the wrong path."

In the years following her sentencing, Ms. Boudin reshaped her life as an inmate. Her son, Chesa, was 14 months when she was arrested and she sought to connect with him from a distance. Often she found solace in reading and writing her own poetry.

Ms. Boudin's husband, and Chesa's father, David Gilbert, is currently serving a life sentence for his participation in the 1981 crime.

"I have a lot of time in here where I'm alone and I'm in my cell and I'm reading and I'm learning and I write poetry," she told the parole board commissioners. "My first step in facing the suffering, the suffering in leaving my son, and that was what was closest at the time, and I centered my life and my focus on him."

She audited courses from Mercy College as part of the prison's college program. The courses included child psychology; adolescent psychology; introduction to social work; health psychology; aging and mental health; AIDS: psychology; and social issues. Ms. Boudin started to work at the Children's Center in 1984, three years after she entered the prison and the same year she was finally sentenced. She was the inmate coordinator of the parenting classes and the teen program.

“One of the things that I loved about Kathy is the connection she had with her son,” said Jen Warren, a former Bedford Hills Correctional Facility inmate and friend. “A lot of it came out in her writing.”

Ms. Warren is currently the associate director for the College and Community Fellowship Organization, which provides educational assistance for former women inmates.

“Every year Kathy would make a calendar for her son, Chesa.” said Ms. Warren. “Whatever he was interested in at that time, she would create it and it would be homemade.”

One of the goals of the parenting classes was to strengthen the mother-child bond during the process of incarceration. The class inspired Ms. Boudin to develop the “Parenting From a Distance” program. As the co-facilitator, Ms. Boudin met with women five days a week for about three hours a day. Former inmate Rozann Greco taught some of the parenting classes with Ms. Boudin.

“The ‘Parenting From a Distance’ program was very intense,” said Ms. Greco. “ We would have women sign up and it lasted three months. Each group had its own focus and each group took on a different face.”

Ms. Greco received a master’s degree in gerontology in the prison education program and now works as program coordinator at a drug and alcohol patient facility. “Women would talk about their childhood and about being mothers in prison and how they’d prepare to go home,” she said.

In 1993, Ms. Boudin and Ms. Greco compiled a book for women parents in prison. The 100-page book, “Parenting From Inside/Out: The Voices of Mothers in Prison,” is filled with testimonials of incarcerated mothers, poetry, questions for participants, and group exercises. There are also photos of mothers with their children and a few drawings by children of the inmates.

Part of Ms. Greco’s parenting from prison was particularly painful: “The loss of my only child four years into my 10-to-20-year sentence further propelled me to become more intimately involved with my peers and their children,” she said in the book’s foreword. “I yearned for answers to the many unresolved questions that haunted me.”

Ms. Greco said she remembers the anguish of not being near her child at his untimely death. “It was unbelievable, my only child got hit by a car and died. Kathy was there for me — we were really connected because our sons were about the same age.”

Ms. Warren also said that Ms. Boudin assisted her during times of tragedy. Days before her clemency hearing in 1999, Ms. Warren received news of her ex-husband’s murder. “I got the news that my first husband, the father of my only child, was murdered,” she said. “And I have to say that it was Kathy that helped me and listened to me and understood what I was feeling. It was very painful but here’s this woman that was involved in a terrible, terrible tragedy, but she has enough compassion and understanding to listen to me wail about somebody that was murdered... She was there and was able to understand on a different level. I wanted to rip the murderer’s heart out, and there Kathy was beside me and it was because people have felt that way about her.”

As Chesa Boudin grew older, his mother realized that a different approach was needed to connect with a teenager than one for a younger child. She took some of her ideas and life experiences with her son and decided to start a teen group at the prison called “Teen Time.”

“In the visiting room teenagers could interact with the parents because they had something in common,” said Ms. Warren. “They could talk about more important issues,

and Kathy helped as an inmate coordinator by being there with the teens. She set up the logistics in terms of how they were going to get there, what they were going to do. It was a chance for the teens to talk to each other and find out that they weren't alone. It gave them time and space away from the prison together and to be able to relate to someone who also had a parent in prison and do things that kids do."

Michelle Fine, distinguished professor of psychology at the Graduate Center of City University of New York, worked with Ms. Boudin to develop the prison's college program. But she remembers hearing from some of the teenagers whose parents were inmates.

"I can't tell you how many phone calls from high school kids saying 'Is this Michelle Fine?' in a quiet little whisper. 'My mom was talking to Kathy Boudin and Kathy said you'd help me think about colleges.' I've gotten about eight of those calls, either about colleges or New York high school choices."

In 1994, college-in-prison programs were discontinued throughout the country. At the same time, President Clinton signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law, which denied incarcerated men and women funding for college courses. Many of the women at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility brought their concerns to the prison administration.

"Kathy asked me if I would work with them to and bring together a group to reestablish college [at the prison] in Bedford," said Thea Jackson. "We did it all with private funds. There's no public money for this program. Eventually we got 12 colleges and universities to give faculty pro bono and we raised money for the infrastructure. We put in two staff people who were required to run it on the inside and it worked very well. We're just hoping that it will continue. It's still going right now but we need funds and you do have to raise quite a bit of money."

For the next year, a group of women inmates formed the Advisory Committee College Bound Task Force.

Now Bedford Supervisor Lee Roberts was concerned and at the time, got involved with the education effort. A non-profit group made up of colleges, community members and tutors was founded called the Center for Redirection through Education and Mrs. Roberts, a founding member, became president.

"I was involved until January 2003 with Kathy and other inmates as part of the inmate committee," said Mrs. Roberts. "Kathy was one of women who was on the inmate committee. She formulated the idea and was the impetus behind getting college going again. We would meet for our task force meetings and discuss the program and where we were going. We'd all go around and talk. Kathy's a very bright woman. It's a difficult situation. It's an unusual place. Once you get in there you forget that it is a prison, because when you sit and talk to these women and they could be your neighbors. It's hard to describe."

"All the women on the advisory committee had been in prison for at least five-plus years," said Ms. Jackson. "They were all very passionate about to being able to equip themselves to go out and help other people not to make the same mistakes that they themselves made. They go out very fired up and ready to try help others find a better path and they were so eager to learn. Every single one of the professors that have taught a class [in the prison] has said that it is the most rewarding teaching experience they had ever had in their lives, because they had never met students so hungry to learn and willing to work hard and who have such an appreciation of education."

Veronica Flournoy, one of the former inmates, graduated from the college program at Bedford Hills. She was just released six months ago and was a nursing student prior to her incarceration. She is a spokesperson for the reform of the Rockefeller drug laws. In the prison college program she majored in sociology with a focus on historical social movements.

"I romanticized about being part of social movements a lot and did a papers comparing and contrasting the Salem witch trials and the McCarthy Era," said Ms. Flournoy. "I looked at the 1960's and I had Kathy and Judy [inmate Judith Clark, also convicted in the 1981 incident] there to give me some first-hand knowledge about some of the different things that had been going on in the 60's. Books and Internet supplies were limited [at the prison] but I had Kathy as a resource. It was hard for me to approach her, but she was so willing. I romanticized a lot of it at this point. The times, and the uprising of the people ... it caught my imagination.

"One day, Kathy gave me this piece she wrote which talked about all the loss and the remorse. I just cried, and it brought me back down to earth a little and took a bit of the romanticism out of it. From what I got from it, the intentions were good, but she regretted the way they went about a lot of things and the way things ended up and all the loss everybody suffered. It took a little bit of the radical out of me," she said.

Michelle Fine, the professor, worked on a task force with inmates that studied the impact of college in prison. One of the realized goals of the research was to publish a book detailing the program. Published in September 2001, "Changing Minds" is a volume that bears the credentials of top researchers and the insight of many inmates.

"Kathy is a profoundly deep thinker who is always thinking about the ethical complexities of her work," said Ms. Fine. "She is never not thinking about her crime. But it's also that remorse, guilt and angst carries into every piece of her work, and the funny part is that on our research team, Kathy was always the person who at some point in our meeting would take the position of superintendent."

In her 22 years in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, Ms. Boudin was either involved or initiated more than a dozen programs for inmates. Because of her status in the public eye and persistent pressure from the families of the Rockland County victims and police groups, she had to walk a fine line when working with the administration and working with her fellow inmates.

"Kathy was always very cautious," said Ms. Flournoy. "I remember her saying, 'Wow, I don't know how I should do this. It's like walking on eggshells.' But it didn't stop her. The prison would shift between tighter and looser constraints depending on administration, politics and the press. At one time we were allowed to personalize our cells, somewhat. You were allowed to have patterned sheets and curtains and bedskirts and you were allowed to dress the place up. Then you couldn't have patterns anymore and then you had to get rid of all your patterned colored materials, and then you could only have solid colored sheets.

"Your whole life is in four bags," said Ms. Flournoy. "There was a time when you could wear personal shirts, but you can't do that anymore, everybody has to be solid green all the time now. There are very limited ways to be an individual."

Ms. Boudin is now officially on parole. After 22 years she will live a conditional freedom of a former inmate. Parolees give up their Fourth Amendment right to search and seizure.

"You have to let them know where you are living and they have access to your home 24 hours a day, without a warrant," said Ms. Warren. "What they're telling you is 'you can

go back into the world, into society, but you're not a full member,' and she's going to realize that.

"When you're on parole it means that your life is still not your own. It's much better than being in prison, [but] believe me, it has its moments of frustrations. It depends on the conditions that they impose and they're all different," she said.

Ms. Boudin addressed the pain of the families whose relatives died in the 1981 incident to the parole board. "There's well-intentioned people who think that I would take some consolation from the fact that I didn't personally kill anybody, but I don't feel that way," she said. "I feel that I am responsible, because I felt the robbery was a right thing to do and because I was involved in the escape and I feel it makes me responsible for everything that happened from it.

"I feel that remorse has also given me hope that I don't have to be frozen in the past, and that by feeling remorse, allows me to change and have a dream of being able to go home and take the really hard lesson and be able to just be a normal hard-working person."

Time will tell how and in what manner Ms. Boudin will live that dream. She has accepted a job as an AIDS counselor at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City.

"I worry about the fact that both cops and media seem to keep the families of the victims stirred up so that they are not able to heal," said Ms. Jackson. "It is not healthy for anybody to hold on to hate and anger and vent it for 20 years. That is not a healthy state for anybody to be in. I really worry that this is what goes on, that every time something comes up that people get to the families and they start stirring it up and generating hostility.

"It just hurts me every time I hear those family members spewing out vengeance," said Ms. Jackson. "Forgiving does not mean you condone anything, or that you disrespect anyone. When are they going to heal? It's hurting them more than it's hurting anybody."