



Victim's advocate now helps rehabilitate offenders

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NASHVILLE, TN (WSMV) - One of Tennessee's most outspoken victims' rights advocates has formed a new group with a startling new premise: protect victims by helping to reform criminals.

Verna Wyatt, executive director of Tennessee Voices for Victims, now takes a victim's point of view into every Tennessee Department of Corrections prison in the state, where inmates sit at attention and hear stories of the lives they've shattered.

They are people no one wants to hire and no one wants to live near. They are men who find themselves unwanted, but it's here in a faith-based prison program where they face the truth.

"This class is about accountability, and it's about understanding the impact of our actions on other people and also connecting the dots of our behavior," Wyatt said, addressing a recent group of inmates. "You didn't just fall out of the sky and land in those seats today. When you were born, your slate was completely clean and fresh."

For nearly two decades, Wyatt has been a staunch advocate for locking up offenders and throwing away the key, but she said her attitude changed when a prison official challenged her viewpoint.

"Ninety-five percent who have been incarcerated are coming back [into society]. He said to me, 'How do you want them coming back?' And that was very sobering. I thought, 'How do I want them coming back?' I want them coming back reformed. I want them coming back accountable. I want them coming back with new skill sets," Wyatt said.

And so the inmates to whom Wyatt speaks sit beneath Bible verses that promise new hope, and they are told what a real man really does.

"Little girls need their daddies. They need a man to be there to tuck them in. And they need their daddies, not a father. Every single one of you can be that person, but you're going to need to do the work behind it," said Valerie Craig, with Tennessee Voices for Victims.

Eric Gross is set to be released in 30 days, and he knows to stay out, everything must change.

"For a lot of us, spirituality is going to be the key to succeed in life and being around guys that walk the walk and are still walking it," Gross said.

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