Prisoners get the Granny Treatment

VIDEO 3:16 minutes


TRANSCRIPT:

(CBS News) LANSING, Kan.

Grandmas, by their very nature, don't want trouble. They're typically more partial to cookies and Afghans than thugs and thieves.

But 81-year-old SuEllen Fried of Prairie Village, Kan., defies that stereotype, bringing her sweet, soft touch to this razor-wire world.

"I have never had one iota of fear," said Fried.

Fried started coming to Lansing Correctional around 1980 for what she thought would be a little volunteer work, but ended up committed to these guys — for life.

The prisoners say Fried "has that grandmother effect on people," and "just shows that she cares."

Another adds, "By her seeing something in us, it cuts a light on or sparks a kindle within us and tells us maybe we're not that bad."

"You take the time to really listen to each other," she tells participants in the program.

Fried has helped develop, and now runs a program here called "Reaching Out from Within."

The program basically helps prisoners work with one another to be kinder, more empathetic people.

Most admit they really need that help — the question is, what does Fried get from sitting here in this sorry sea of blue?

"I am addicted to personal transformations," said Fried.

When asked if that is possible with the prison population, considering half of these guys go back to prison after they get out, SuEllen responds, "Not our guys."

Fried says over 90 percent of the people who attend her meetings when they leave prison do not return. We checked and she's right.

We checked, and she's right. Although nationally the recidivism rate is about 50 percent — for prisoners who regularly attend her meetings, it drops to less than 10 percent.

For that reason, "Reaching Out From Within" has now spread to every prison in Kansas — and at least one other state is trying to replicate it.

Of course, the problem is there's no replicating SuEllen.

"What's most amazing is that you care about these guys," the interviewer said.

When I look at these guys, I see murderers and robbers and rapists."

SuEllen says she does not see criminals when she works with her prisoners.

"It never occurs to me to look at them that way. I believe that every single human being has an angel and a beast inside of them. And the more that we are willing to look at the beast, the more we are willing to hold onto the angels."

So says this guardian angel who's determined to hold on to the angel and exorcize the beast of the inmates.