

Students in Family and Sexual Violence Course Moved to Action After Visit to Women's Prison

STUDENTS IN THE FAMILY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE course taught by Dr. Susan Sorenson, professor of community health sciences, had learned about the consequences of domestic violence and how the violence sometimes becomes lethal. But a field trip to a women's prison brought the classroom discussions home – and moved many of the students to action.

Sorenson has arranged to have students in her Family and Sexual Violence course visit the California Institute for Women each year since 1992 to attend a meeting of Convicted Women Against Abuse, which was started by women convicted of killing their abuser. Last spring, for the first time, members of Sorenson's class received a tour of the Corona, Calif., prison before breaking into small groups and spending time talking with the imprisoned women.

"It was an eye-opening experience," says Marcia Suzuki, who graduated with her M.P.H. and is now a program officer for First 5 LA. "They described in graphic detail the abuse they had faced in their lives. You could tell they had given a lot of thought to the factors that had brought them to this point."

Once they returned to UCLA, the students, deeply moved, gathered to discuss what they had just experienced, and decided they wanted to follow up with assistance.

One of the things they had learned was that the inmates went through lengthy periods without access to notary services – and that when they did have access, many lacked the means to pay the \$10 fee. This was a particular problem for the women who wanted to have a say in what would happen to their children, since notary services are required for certain forms, particularly those pertaining to custody.

"They kept referring over and over again to their children," says Armine Kourouyan, a second-year M.P.H. student. "They were so sad that they had to leave their children and didn't know where they were. Our feeling was that their children shouldn't be made to suffer any more than they already had."

So the students began collecting donations for notary services, and several – led by Kourouyan, Talia Baruth and Ingrid Dries-Dafner – initiated contacts with legislative offices in an effort to effect policy changes. In the meantime, Suzuki began training as a notary with plans to volunteer her services where possible.

Three other students, Bridget Brownell, Mel Sage and Lidia Carlton, coordinated a book drive, collecting both from students at the school and through a larger drive at Taft High School in Woodland Hills, Calif., where Brownell teaches health. More than 200 books and approximately 75 CDs and cassette tapes were donated to the prison library, which has been unable to purchase many new items due to budget cuts.

"It's one thing to read about the situation these women find themselves in, but it's another to have a woman sitting in front of you telling you these things herself – how she had gone to the police for help on several occasions and nothing had changed," says Brownell. "This experience brought the textbook to life."

"They were so sad that they had to leave their children and didn't know where they were. Our feeling was that their children shouldn't be made to suffer any more than they already had."

— Armine Kourouyan (right)

