



Dreams from the Monster Factory: A Tale of Prison, Redemption, and One Woman's Fight to Restore Justice to All

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Dreams from the Monster Factory tells the true story of Sunny Schwartz's extraordinary work in the criminal justice system and how her profound belief in people's ability to change is transforming the San Francisco jails and the criminals incarcerated there. With an immediacy made possible by a twenty-seven-year career, Schwartz immerses the reader in the troubling and complex realities of U.S. jails, the monster factories -- places that foster violence, rage and, ultimately, better criminals. But by working in the monster factories, Schwartz also discovered her dream of a criminal justice system that empowers victims and reforms criminals.

Charismatic and deeply compassionate, Sunny Schwartz grew up on Chicago's south side in the 1960s. She fought with her family, struggled through school and floundered as she tried to make something of herself. Bucking expectations of failure, she applied to a law school that didn't require a college degree, passed the bar and began her life's work in the criminal justice system. Eventually she grew disheartened by the broken, inflexible system, but instead of quitting, she reinvented it, making jail a place that could change people for the better.

In 1997, Sunny launched the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP), a groundbreaking program for the San Francisco Sheriff's Department. RSVP, which has cut recidivism for violent rearrests by up to 80 percent, brings together victims and offenders in a unique correctional program that empowers victims and requires offenders to take true responsibility for their actions and eliminate their violent behavior.

Sunny Schwartz's faith in humanity, her compassion and her vision are inspiring. In *Dreams from the Monster Factory* she goes beyond statistics and sensational portrayals of prison life to offer an intimate, harrowing and revelatory chronicle of crime, punishment and, ultimately, redemption.

Dreams from the Monster Factory: A Tale of Prison, Redemption, and One Woman's Fight to Restore Justice to All Details

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From Reader Review Dreams from the Monster Factory: A Tale of Prison, Redemption, and One Woman's Fight to Restore Justice to All for online ebook

Sharon says

Author Sunny Schwartz takes us inside the San Francisco County Jail system in "Dreams from the Monster Factory," detailing her time as a legal intern, an attorney, and ultimately a program director for the jail system.

Schwartz introduces the concept of reparative justice, and violence prevention, to the jail system with a degree of success that both surprised and moved me. She tells the stories of hardened inmates making reparations, and learning from one another ... but also tells of the failures and recidivists (very few).

This book is an interesting look at violence prevention from inside a system that is clearly broken and in dire need of the programs that Schwartz and her colleagues have designed.

Dale says

While not perfect, it is thought-provoking and a quick read

Sunny Schwartz is a Chicago-born lawyer who has worked in the San Francisco jail system for 30+ years. This book is a combination of a personal biography and professional recommendations for our nations over-worked, overcrowded and floundering jail and prison systems.

Schwartz is not a hand-holding, excuse-making prisoner advocate. She notes several times that she wants criminals to be punished. She notes: "I completely understand the objections and utter impatience people have with criminals. They have hurt us, our pocketbooks, our souls." (p. 197)

However, practical experience does offer some hard-won wisdom and Schwartz does have some things to suggest that might very well improve the behavior of our prisoners (remember most will become ex-prisoners some day and it would be nice if they were more in step with the rest of us). She focuses on an anti-violence program that is based on Restorative Justice, a program that's been bandied about for more than a decade. However, the team in the San Francisco jail system seem to have found something that works for some of the men and makes them less likely to return to jail due to violent crime.

This book is a quick read because it does not go into any great detail. Rather it is a general introduction to their program and how they decided to go to it. It is interesting, informative and a great place to start any serious discussion of jail and prison reform.

<http://dwdsreviews.blogspot.com/>

Ensiform says

The author, a criminal defense attorney turned prisoner activist, talks about her rough childhood, her unlikely success in law school, and her 25+ year work in building truly rehabilitative, not punitive, prisons. Her program, the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project, uses vocational classes but also group meetings in which violent inmates confront their feelings and actions, and use jargon such as “can I get an agreement on...” or “this feeling is deadly peril” to control their feelings of anger. Most importantly, the inmates, while acknowledging bad circumstances, focus blame on their own choices.

It may sound like New Age window dressing, but the good results have been documented, and anything is better than the sick gladiator school, or monster factories, that US prisons are now. The book’s writing style is breezy and light, and Schwartz’s passion for her work comes through. It’s a compelling and admirable book, and ought to be required reading for all those who work with criminals.

Kony says

Schwartz tells a candid, no-nonsense story about how she came to work with violent men behind bars, and how she challenged both these men and their captors to be better human beings. In recounting misfortunes, mistakes, mixed motives, and victories, Schwartz is as tough and loving with herself as she is with her family, colleagues, adversaries, and clients/students. Thus her narrative embodies the restorative justice mindset she's brought to SF jails.

Meagan says

An eye-opening glimpse into the American prison system.

Written by a lawyer and coordinator of a prison programs group, Schwartz describes her initial meetings with violent offenders and her motivations behind changing the system. In addition to improving the lives of prisoners, the programs attempt to reduce the high recidivism rate with great success. This, in turn, benefits all of society: including the ex-cons new neighbours and taxpayers who have fewer repeat offenders to support.

Weavre says

Sunny Schwartz grew up in a rough-and-tumble Jewish family in Chicago, escaping both her warehouse-style special ed classroom and her truant officer by ditching school in favor of watching the Cubs at Wrigley Field. Perhaps, then, no one was more surprised than those who knew her as a child when she went on to practice law in California--where her readiness to confront any conflict head-on was a help rather than a barrier to success. In fact, within a few decades Sunny succeeded in building a model prison program that worked with the most hardened of the violent offenders in the state's system, producing an impressive drop in recidivism and an astounding reduction in repeat violence.

Many Americans are quick to say that they don't want "programs" in prisons; they want prison to be such a

terrible experience that incarcerated people, once freed, will do anything to avoid going back. Unfortunately, the numbers have proved this idea an utter failure. Warehousing human beings serving "hard time"--especially while calmly accepting prison violence--creates such seething personalities that, once released, far too many prisoners simply escalate their crimes before returning to prison for still harsher sentences. The effect is so pronounced that Sunny calls such prisons "monster factories."

Borrowing the expertise of leaders from a wide variety of fields, Sunny and her coworkers were able to build something new: a prison in which violent offenders acquired job and life skills, and most unusually, confronted the shame and hatred that led them to commit violence in the first place. The program created ways in which prisoners were held accountable for their actions, past and present, with no room for excuses; "I was hurt as a child," "I was programmed to think that way," "She disrespected me," and a thousand other excuses were set aside in favor of a simple recognition: "I chose to be violent." With that recognition, and the feedback and support of intensive group treatment, violent offenders who participated in the program for sufficient time were returned to the community as self-supporting taxpayers who no longer resorted to violence--including verbal and psychological violence. The numbers weren't perfect, and a few truly mentally-ill sociopaths needed to be sent to a psychiatric facility because they really weren't capable of the kind of change the program required ... but the majority were able to become contributors to society upon their release, rather than draining it.

This is unusual in the United States, where we have 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners, where 1 in every 31 adults is behind bars or under some kind of court supervision (such as parole or probation), where most offenders commit repeat crimes even after being caught and punished. It's clear that we have a crisis situation, and Sunny's book offers one possibility--already being duplicated elsewhere--for making real change.

I was also struck, while reading this, of the links to Quaker history. A few centuries ago, Quakers were the first to challenge the idea of tossing people in jail and throwing away the keys, creating the first "penitentiaries" with the hope that prisoners could, through introspection and more humane treatment, come to regret their crimes and decide to participate in society more appropriately. Unfortunately, such early programs suffered from a lack of understanding of human psychology and the infancy of research in this field, and weren't as successful as what can be done now. They initiated the challenge to create change, however, that has now been taken up by people like Sunny Schwartz. I'm impressed enough by what's being done that I think I'm going to donate this book to my Quaker meeting's library.

One note ... The cover looks like a poster for a horror movie, which completely turned me off, but the mood in the opening pages is hopeful rather than disturbing, and the rest of the book is full of thought-provoking ideas. Slip a bookcover on it and enjoy a great story, well-told and eye-opening.

Audacia Ray says

Dreams from the Monster Factory is a lively, interesting, captivating book that I couldn't put down. Sunny Schwartz has a lot of revolutionary ideas about men, violence, and crime.

So why only two stars?

Though I understand referring to prisons as "monster factories," Sunny refers to imprisoned people as monsters outside of that phrase quite often. There's a clear personal struggle in the book, in which the author

grapples with her perceptions of the inmates she works with, but I don't feel like she went far enough. She paints herself as something of a flawed hero, with references to her own raging temper and fucked up interpersonal relationships - she alludes to this being problematic and verging on violence, but what she describes is actually her being verbally and emotionally abusive to her girlfriends. There are a few moments when she almost connects and puts herself squarely inside the continuum of violence... but not quite.

Mostly, the problem I had with the book and the author's treatment of the inmates is that there is a good amount of underlying prejudice against some of the inmates, particular sex offenders and trans women. Schwartz is entirely unapologetic about the vitriol she hurls in the direction of both of these types of offenders, and she seems to smear them together, which is really troubling. Early in the book there is a chapter about her experience in the "Queen Tank," where trans women and sex offenders are kept because having them in the general population exposes them to violence. She derisively mocks the trans women, misgendering them and referring to them as "pre-ops" and "she-males." This spewing of hateful language continues even after one of the trans women defends Schwartz by beating down a guy who tried to attack the author. Schwartz persists in writing about the trans women with dehumanizing and mocking language after this incident. Just awful stuff.

So, although I totally buy into the notion that restorative justice and anti-violence work with inmates is powerful stuff, I found the personal transformation that the author claims to be lacking.

Katie says

powerful message about dealing with anger and changing the way we think about our justice system.

Candace says

This is an amazing book. It is so real and heartfelt. I enjoyed it from beginning to end. These programs they have set up in SF jails are amazing. This book changed my view on how we treat prisoners and what we need to do as a society to change out justice system. She doesn't ever excuse there behavoir. What they do is help them take responsiblity for there actions so they will stop committing crimes. This in the end helps everyone. All they want to do is give them a conscience. Feel something instead of just hurting people. The stories are very sad but at the same time so uplifting. I hope everyone reads this book!

Jessie says

Seems very true to me, beautiful and realistic about possible change in the prison system.
Tells how Schwartz develops a humanizing program in a San Francisco jail that gets at the root of inmates' violence (great to read this alongside James Gilligan's VIOLENCE).
She's humble about the program and not in love with success stories; she's also honest about her own personal struggles with anger as she develops this restorative justice program.
At root, she really says something about how we deal or don't deal with emotion.

Some excerpts:

p 100: "We were trying to institute a largely untested jail philosophy—create a humane atmosphere, give criminals some opportunities, make them responsible and accountable for their behavior, and some will turn around."

p 126-27: "Most people, I think, believe that prison or jail should be a horrible experience. People don't think of it as a deterrent so much as just deserts. 'They' hurt 'us,' therefore 'we' should hurt 'them.' For years, politicians have on elections by promising to take away cable television and weight rooms and anything seen to make prison cushy. We have a culture where jokes about prison rape are made out in the open. The prevailing wisdom is that prisoners deserve to be treated like animals; they should fear prison and suffer while they are there. Anyone who has spent time working with prisoners knows this has largely come to pass. What most people don't realize is the consequences of making prisons a living nightmare. Most of the inmates I'd worked with...felt punished, but not many of them took responsibility for their crimes, or felt any remorse."

Amy says

This was one of the better books I've read in the past year, and one of my favorite memoirs ever. Sunny Schwartz has spent her career in the San Francisco criminal justice system and helped create a program for violent offenders that really gets to the core causes of their acts, and was proven to decrease repeat offenses. Schwartz has selected great anecdotes from her childhood, her education and her work that make this a compelling read. And it's hard not to be impressed by the overall story of hope and redemption and accountability.

Sven Eberlein says

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful:
5.0 out of 5 stars A true heroine, March 17, 2009

In one of his interviews after landing Flight 1549 safely on the Hudson, Captain Sullenberger said that he didn't consider himself a hero because he didn't choose to be in that situation; he was simply doing his job. He humbly pointed to all the unsung heroes -- our teachers, nurses, and many other unglamorous professionals -- who should get credit for the dedicated work they do every day, giving of themselves so that others can thrive.

There is no one more deserving of Sully's definition of a hero(ine) than Sunny Schwartz. While our natural instincts tell most of us to stay as far away as possible from murderers, rapists, or gangbangers, Ms. Schwartz has dedicated her life to confronting the dark shadow of our society we'd all rather forget about. While no one would blame her if she just punched her time card and lived for retirement, this remarkable woman embarked on a journey into the belly of the beast over twenty years ago to get to the root of a vicious criminal cycle, and by sheer persistence and relentless compassion unearthed the deeper causes of human suffering.

Like the old story about the Buddhist monk who tells his disciples that the way to tame the barking dogs is to run toward them, this is a story about deep healing through confronting our demons. By acknowledging that

we are not separate and that in fact the most hardened criminals are human beings, and thus, a part of all of us, her RSVP program opens up the possibility for healing in a system set up for retribution.

What makes "Dreams from the Monster Factory" so powerful is that it isn't an academic exercise but a deeply authentic personal account. The author's memories of growing up in a rough neighborhood on Chicago's South Side explain her own psychological bruises and invite the reader to go on a journey with her, rather than just taking a fleeting glance at prison life through a peep hole. But somehow her energy and sense of mission feel deeper than even childhood wounds: If you're comfortable with the idea of reincarnation, you wouldn't hesitate to place the author on the other side of the iron gate in a past life, seeing a part of herself through the bars in her current lifetime.

Aside from the transformational quality of the story, it is really well written, so kudos also to her co-author David Boodell. A fiction writer would have a hard time coming up with a more spellbinding, soul-tickling story, and I ate it up in one sitting. Ultimately though, this story is not just about Sunny Schwartz, the criminal justice system, or the particular characters in the book, but a reminder to all of us that in order to find love and forgiveness we cannot lock away anyone's wounded heart, including our own.

Nancy says

Sunny Schwartz grew up in a working class Jewish family on the South Side of Chicago. Her family was ruled by her father's rages, Schwartz barely skated through school, and bailed as soon as she could.

Skipping college, she was accepted to New College's Law School in San Francisco became a lawyer. It was while she was in school that she first became involved with prisoners in the San Francisco County Jails, working as a volunteer prisoner advocate. After passing the bar, she worked briefly in a law firm, but felt like she was spinning her wheels, not helping anyone. When she was recruited to come back to the jails to be in charge of programs for the prisoners, she cautiously agreed. After years of frustrating work, seeing the same prisoners over and over again, Schwartz was open to something new. When she learned about the concept of restorative justice at a conference, she came home convinced that this was what they needed to do: they needed to find the remaining shred of compassion in these prisoners, teach them how to break the cycle of violence in their lives, take responsibility for their acts, and teach them to give back to the communities they had damaged.

San Francisco's Sheriff Hennessey reluctantly agreed to try what he considered to be a dangerous program. She would take a large group of violent prisoners, put them in a dormitory setting, rather than into individual cells, and have them working both on their issues around violence, and in educational programs that would give them a better chance once they hit the streets again. Everyone was terrified of a riot. But the program worked. The rates of recidivism dropped dramatically among the men going through the program, and those who did come back were much less likely to have committed another violent crime.

Wesley Pollard says

Book Review for: Dreams from the Monster Factory

By: Sunny Schwartz

This book is about Sunny Schwartz and how she grew up in a dysfunctional family in the Southside of Chicago in the 1960s, but didn't end up like others. Many others ended up in jail and so did she, but as lawyer. She grew up with two perfect older brothers, her mom and dad. She was the one in the family who cut classes, got bad grades, and never really did what her parents told her.

After she left home to live with her brother she began to get into the criminal justice system. She then moved out to San Francisco and worked for the jails there and began to make a name for herself. She realized the system in which she worked was very inflexible and didn't really change any of the inmates. She could have easily quit her job and found something else to do, but instead she reinvented the system.

In 1997 she created the RSVP, The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project, to help stop violent arrest. The project stopped 80% of the violent arrest, and allows the offenders to rethink their violent crime.

This book is great for those interested in Criminal Justice, because it takes a look into our Justice System and shows you that it isn't impossible to fix some of the many flaws within it.

Sherrill Watson says

I'm sure David Boodell helped write this book, but Sunny certainly deserves a lot of credit. Even if only three people benefited from her programs, she's one up.

She quotes statistics often, for instance, 80% of women inside have drug problems, and I don't doubt that she's correct. She uses existing programs like Sober Treatment Empowered by Recovery (SISTER). For less violent men she uses MANALIVE. Addicts are "cunning, baffling, powerful".

She began the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP). Overall, that is a highly structured program that forces men to confront and realize what impact their violent tendencies have on the families of their victims.

She is inside the jails, herself. She sees, men rolling their eyes, sucking their teeth, folding their arms across their chest, splaying legs as wide as they can, displaying annoyance and disrespect.

She, overall, has found that the prisoners' position is that it's always someone else's fault; there is always someone else, or something else, to blame. Blame, blame. But when is it their responsibility? When?

She's Jewish, Lesbian, with a crazy sister, a father who drank and beat them, and . . . but she does good work. And she's not afraid to give credit to others.
