

"Honey, This Ain't No Country Club": Women Doing Hard Time

CHAPTER 3

"Prison Culture" (Scams; Unspoken Rules; Relationships)

When I first met Wendy Zabel she had already spent more than half of her adult life inside the Broward Correctional Institute in Southern Florida for murder and kidnapping. Considered a "longtermmer" and prison sage at the age of 35, she talked at length about the inmate culture and described her years behind bars as living in a "world within a world" with an inmate social structure that baffled not only new prisoners, but sometimes took veteran inmates considerable guidance to navigate.

Wendy learned early on how to successfully maneuver in the prison population and also protect herself from potentially troublesome inmates and guards. She admits it was also a place where for years she ran money-making schemes that ranged from inmate loan sharking and other scams, to working as a paid "cloaker" or go-between, for prisoners and guards who met for sexual liaisons.

Life inside can mean scraping by with hardly the money to buy essential toiletries, or even stamps to write home. But for others, Wendy explained, "for those willing to play the games and take the risks," prison can be a place where almost anything an inmate desires--from alcohol and drugs to designer perfume or a Big Whopper from Burger King--can be ordered up, and if need be, smuggled inside the walls.

While prison can has its human and even nurturing side, where strong bonds are formed between inmates and "longtermers" sometimes take aside and counsel younger offenders headed for trouble, it is also a training ground for artful manipulation and of "getting over" on weaker, or naive inmates who ultimately learn that convict justice can be both swift and brutal if social norms are violated or promises broken.

Life behind bars, on a day-to-day basis, is surprisingly like the free world in its often numbing routine of eating, sleeping, working and also obeying and clashing with the rules and regulations set down by officials who oversee and enforce this little-known society. But within this closely monitored world also exists a parallel universe, a more subtle and complex subculture that involves a defined set of convict rules, complex social dynamics, money-making scams, and an ingrained and pervasive homosexual culture that is publicly condemned but some say secretly tolerated and even accepted

as a prison way of life.

The culture of a given prison varies depending on the local administrative philosophy, as well as such variables as geography, entrenched inmate and guard behaviors, the accountability of correctional officers (as well as their level of training and education), and the degree to which the women are allowed to interact with each other as well as prison personnel. Even the regulations defining what prisoners are allowed to eat, wear and own, as well as how they may spend their free time, can dramatically impact personal dynamics and shape the way they live.

Contrary to an erroneous public perception, Wendy said, inmates, as a rule, do not use physical violence to force other inmates to act against their will. But the inmate culture is more complex and insidious than it appears at first--at least to a visitor. A veteran inmate, who's been around and knows the cons, can easily live inside without getting involved in what some Broward inmates call "the games", but a new recruit would have trouble accurately reading the signals and could easily go astray.

"From the first day you arrive, you're tested by everyone you meet. You learn very quickly that there are no secrets in prison and no privacy. Even before you get here everyone, the inmates, the staff, the cops (correctional officers), know the crime you've committed, how much time you have, and what kind of support you've got going on the outside.

"You're gossiped about, and constantly tested to see how you'll react to certain situations ...like holding a confidence, or having a relationship with a woman, or whether you'd go to the cops (prison guards) if someone steals your canteen (snacks bought at the prison store), or manipulates you into sharing your personal possessions.

"Like a lot of women coming in, I was terrified. I'd never been to prison before and I didn't understand what it meant to live behind bars with hundreds of women who knew a lot more about doing time than I did. It took me years really to figure things out, like who you can really trust, and the difference between the prison rules and the inmates rules, and how all of that comes together.

"I'm not saying that everyone plays the games. I know women who keep to themselves, look the other way, and live a very private life here. But at least in the beginning, and especially if you are down a long time, and I speak for myself, almost everyone seems to get involved to some degree for reasons as simple as needing to belong, or to keep up appearances, or maybe just out of anger or boredom or loneliness.

"I guess I was a little of all those things at one time or another," she added.

Blonde, blue-eyed and tanned by the Florida sun, Wendy

looks more like a California surfer-girl than a native of her home state of Wisconsin. Raised the only girl in a family of five brothers, she calls her nuclear family and childhood "normal, just like everyone else." A straight-A student during high school, Wendy said she made the mistake of taking time off to travel the country before going to college.

She was just shy of 18 when she committed "a single tragic crime" that began with the kidnapping for ransom of a four-day-old baby, and ended with her shooting to death the child's mother, and the attempted murder of the child's grandmother. The baby was unharmed.

Before and during the planning of the crime, Wendy said, she was under the influence of a physically abusive boyfriend who testified against her and spent only a few weeks in jail. On the advice of her public defender, to avoid the death penalty, she pled guilty and received three consecutive 25-year sentences that included two provisions of no parole. She remains hopeful, but is resigned to spending the rest of her life behind bars.

When I first met Wendy in 1997 she was confined to a wheelchair and recovering from brain surgery that had left her paralyzed from the waist down. On another visit, though, in July of 1999, despite a recent medical setback when seizures left her temporarily unable to speak and paralyzed on one side, she was, to the surprise of her doctors, up and walking, although somewhat unsteadily.

While Broward is a high security prison with very specific rules, permission had been granted from state officials in Tallahassee for me to conduct interviews with selected inmates and to visit the newly renovated "death row" where the state's condemned women lived. The warden also granted me permission to bring both a tape recorder and a camera inside the prison walls and to meet with women outside the public visiting room.

One this day, under the distant watch of a guard, Wendy and I were allowed to walk outdoors and to a wooden picnic table on the edge of the prison yard. Although only mid-morning, stifling humidity had already enveloped the day and around the compound inmates, dressed for the heat in regulation blue or green knee-length cotton shifts, fanned themselves as they moved with effort from their work assignment to their housing units for lock down and one of many head counts of the day.

Every prison has a feel to it and Broward, located on the sprawling edge of the Florida Everglades, and only 20 miles from the beaches and trendy restaurants of Fort Lauderdale, is distinctively Southern with its relentless cacophony of heated-up cicadas, resident tropical birds that fly in and out of the compound, and a warden who calls his charges "the ladies" when he's being especially politically correct.

The prison was designed in the 1970s for male inmates until their numbers grew too large and the men were transferred to a new prison. Today, in an apparent concession to its now all female population, a

thin ribbon of pink has been painted all along the tops of the gray cinder block buildings that comprise the low-slung prison complex.

Inside the fenced perimeter, strung with newly fortified spools of razor wire to discourage over-the-wall escapes, the general population of close to 600 inmates live in doubled-bunked cells inside institutional-looking housing units prison officials call "dormitories". The women are required by state law to work for free in the laundry, cafeteria or at other mostly menial jobs on the compound that maintain the daily operation of the prison. A few, though, usually longtermers, land a handful of "skilled" paid jobs and work for 35 cents an hour in the prison eye glass distribution center, or as a clerk in the law library.

Life has changed at Broward since Wendy arrived in the early 1980s, transitioning from a less secured facility with more inmate privileges, to a stricter, more contemporary model that today is as no-nonsense as a military boot camp. Gone are the weekend inmate carnivals on the prison yard, swimming and catfish angling in a nearby pond, or the concept of inmate input. (At one time inmate leaders met with officials to discuss and even vote on lifestyle issues.)

The most significant recent change, at least to Wendy and other Broward inmates I spoke to, was the banning (in January 1998) of most personal property, including boxes from home containing food and other "luxury" items, clothing and jewelry other than a single watch, a wedding ring, and a religious pendant. Inmates, who in the past could dress in designer clothing sent to them by friends or relatives, or mail-ordered from any number of fashion outlets (Victoria's Secrets has been a favorite among inmates nationwide), are now required to wear state-issued uniforms, including shoes and underwear.

The first time I saw Wendy, a year before the dress code took effect, she was wearing an eyebrow-raising amount of heavy gold jewelry, smart clothes and a popular brand of running shoes, all spoils, she told me, from various money-making schemes she ran inside the prison before "retiring" from this lifestyle some years ago. When the new property rules went into effect, she, and all Broward inmates were given the choice of sending their possessions to friends or family members, or donating the items to charity.

At our interview in 1999, Wendy was dressed down in a regulation green shift and white sneakers. While some women referred to the recent changes as the "cloning of the inmates," Wendy said she has come to support the new policy because it helped diminish the inequity between those who could afford expensive clothing and luxury accessories, and those less fortunate--or less cunning--who have no means of financial help. The new rules had changed the look and feel of the institution, she commented, and had reduced the tension and squabbling between the "haves" and the "have-nots" in the prison.

While some inmates didn't have money for stamps or shampoo, Wendy said her lifestyle, at least in terms of tangible luxuries, was several notches up from the one she lived in the real world.

"I mean, I was hoarding cartons of cigarettes and wearing silk pajamas to bed," she said.

The leveling of the inmate playing field, too, allowed her the rare opportunity to see how she really stood with other prisoners.

"Everyone loves you when you have money, or a big canteen (money to buy snacks from the prison store), or nice clothes to wear. But after awhile, even in here, you've got to know who you can really count on, who is really your friend."

Her life-threatening illness had taken a noticeable toll on her physically by our second visit. Her long blond hair was cut short and blunt; her face was less animated; her overall affect less jocular. They say that time and conscious mellows out most inmates. Wendy had been inside for the better part of two decades.

Observant of her environment, verbal, and articulate well beyond her formal education, she still identified herself as a leader within the mainline population and, whether true or not, she walked with a confident stride (despite her now unsteady gait), and freely spoke with inmates and staff members she encountered even though this was officially against the rules.

Like others imprisoned at a young age, Wendy lived in a world where time had stood still following her incarceration. At least on an emotional level, she said, she was still the adolescent girl who entered state prison as a teenager with a love for childish, "little girl" things.

She was known at Broward for her obsessive collecting of Mickey Mouse paraphernalia and told stories of a Mickey Mouse birthday party, complete with her own set of "ears" that was secretly thrown for her by fellow inmates. During our interview she wore a Mickey Mouse watch, (one of her few personal possessions "grandfathered-in"), and as we talked she revealed a palm-size Mickey Mouse face she had permanently and artfully etched on her upper chest with ink and a needle. A few years back, when her parents made a rare visit to the prison following her brain surgery, she asked that her ashes be spread at Florida's Disney World if she took a turn for the worse.

When she first arrived at Broward, Wendy said she was so naive, "I actually thought they would let me out if I was good and obeyed all the rules." Soon she began acting out, picking fights, disobeying officers. Part of her problem was attitude, Wendy recalled. The other was culture shock.

A difficulty she and other prison novices faced was integrating the "official" rules of the institution with the often unspoken inmate way of conducting business. She said it was a

challenge that left some confused and in trouble.

For Wendy, during her early initiation into prison living, failing to follow what she called the "cop" rules that seemed to change from day to day, or from officer-to-officer, created on-going problems that resulted in repeated discipline reports and frequent trips to isolation or "Ag-Seg" (administrative segregation).

Slowly, she said, primarily through studied observation and advice from longtermers, she was able to make it through days and even weeks without getting "written up" for something as seemingly inconsequential as speaking to another inmate without permission, or questioning an order from an officer, or "just being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Other inmates said that learning the official prison rules was nothing compared to the years it sometimes took to understand the subtle games and manipulation that goes on between inmates for everything from snacks to sexual favors.

Another Broward inmates, Sabrina Thomas, who was 16 when she first arrived at the prison, described herself as naive and open--and the perfect prey for inmates looking for an easy score. During those first few weeks and months inside, she said, she was frequently conned out of her personal possessions--her boxes from home, pajamas and sneakers--by inmates who were experts at "getting over" on other more naive inmates.

"You see, my mom had always taught me to share so when a girl would come by and play sick or hungry or needing something, I was there with coffee or whatever I had. I'd share. It took me years to realize that I was being conned. Then I learned to be selfish."

Another inmate, who asked that her name not be revealed and has since been released, admitted that she was one of the manipulators who financially survived in prison by being a "predator" who befriended lonely inmates for the goods and cash she would receive in payment for sexual favors.

"I was exposed to street life before I came in, I was a predator. Manipulating, doing these things... it wasn't a foreign skill to me. I seduced inmates for favors. The truth is that a lot of women in here just want someone to be there for them, to touch them. And I did that."

Others spoke of the secret gauntlet that new inmates walk without even realizing they are being scrutinized.

Jaime Papa, who spent three years in a Massachusetts prison on a drug charge before her release in 1995, explained how it sometimes worked at MCI-Framingham.

"Some inmates are just there waiting for new inmates to come in. You might be scoped out for different reasons--because you're attractive, naive, or simply to strong-arm you into giving up whatever you might come in with--clothing, connections, canteen (food from the prison store). I've watched girls stand outside the canteen

and scope out who brings out a lot of bags. Then they hit on that inmate. You know, they try to be a friend or lover or whatever it takes to get that person into their confidence.

"But in most cases (the attention) is really not out of love or friendship...or even sexual. It's just to get the groceries."

In some cases, longtermers say they have taken aside especially vulnerable-looking new inmates to explain the rules and otherwise alert them to potential cons or inmate protocol. Or, if they see them socializing with the wrong crowd, they might step forward to offer advice about a better way to do their time.

Although she has been "burned" more than once by reaching out, Wendy said, she still is available to a select few in need of help or support. One such inmate is her current "bunkie" (roommate), "a little girl who I refer to as a little boy, but who actually acts like a little thug," she explained with affection.

Since they've been assigned to live together, Wendy said, and since she is the "elder", she has felt compelled to clearly spell out living rules and organize a structure and routine to aid in sharing chores. Now, she said, when they rise in the morning, they walk to the showers together, return to make the beds, clean the room, and, if needed, wash their clothes and hang them outside their housing units to dry. Occasionally, they also do the laundry for two other inmates considered part of their informal "family" group.

"Some of the really young ones, the little children, they need the most basic help and direction because they've never gotten it in their lives. A few of them, they call me their Mom. 'Mama, will you come in and help me hang up these clothes? Mama, will you help me with this or that.' And, well, yes, I will, because I feel terribly heartbroken that they're here, and because I was that age when I came in and no one did that for me.

"You see, most of them are scared out of their wits and will be scared for a long time. And I don't want them to feel like that. They may be grown up in their minds, because of the life they led before coming in here. But they're still children."

But according to 61-year-old Dee Casteel, who is serving a life sentence at Broward for murder, the kind of offender entering prison today is different, and has changed the population and the way inmates interact.

She too had helped her fair share of new recruits get their bearings, she said, but most inmates today don't want to be taken aside and shown the ropes. In fact, the respect and status once reserved for veteran convicts has diminished due to what she and others identify as a new breed of younger, brasher, and sometimes gang affiliated short-timers now flooding the system, mostly on minor drug charges.

In the recent past, Dee said, women were only sent to high security state prisons like Broward if they committed a serious

violent crime, such as murder. Today "short-timers" dominate the population and have changed the culture that was shaped by veterans of the system who over time had gained status, power, and even an inmate following.

Both Dee and Wendy Zabel, in separate interviews, recalled the last Broward inmate who held such a strong leadership position in the prison. Both identified her as just "The Governor", serving a murder sentence. The Governor had a charismatic and imposing style that allowed her to manipulate the inmate population--and, some said, even the staff.

"She was known as the king of manipulation," recalled Wendy, "and, boy, she was smooth as butter. If she wanted to do something, for example, if she wanted everyone to vote for a fish-fry (an activity that no longer takes place at the prison, when inmates were allowed to angle for catfish at a nearby pond and later serve up the bounty for all to enjoy), she'd start in on you ...'Hey you girls, looking good' and on and on. We were all so suckered, so drawn in. But when she died, years ago now, everyone cried, including the staff."

Today, Dee said, inmates, many serving fewer than six-month sentences on drug charges, don't stay around long enough to become part of the culture. They may be back--they usually are--but it's not the same as learning the rules and living in a community that has stabilized over time. Instead of respecting the old ways and trying to fit in, because that's the way it's always been done, "they come in and want to make their own rules."

Only a few years ago, Dee said, the unspoken inmate code of conduct gave priority to long-termers in small but meaningful ways, such as allowing them to be first in chow line, or to take their places up front when the prison store would open its doors for inmate business. (Those in the back often miss out when popular brands of snack food and toiletries sell out.)

Now, short-timers "buy" priority places in line by paying (with snacks or other favors) other inmates to stand in for them so they don't have to waste their time, or just crowd in front of the long-termers, she said.

"It's rude and that's about all I can say," added Dee who spent three years on death row awaiting her execution date before her sentence was overturned and she was sent to the mainline population on a plea bargain.

"You cuss under your breath, but that's about all. You could call the police, but they never stop to find out what really happened. Instead, you both just get a D (disciplinary) report--so why bother?"

Usually the best anecdotes of prison life, or images, or descriptions of day-to-day living, came not during formal interview

sessions but during more casual time with inmates when they tended to relax and talk among themselves.

During these times I paid attention to the coded language they often among themselves to describe events or people or a recent happening. While some of the terms varied from prison to prison, other were universal: like "cop" for prison guard, "hooch" for homemade alcohol, and for administrative segregation (or isolation), an array of mostly derogatory inmate terms that include "the hole", "prison jail", or "strip status" where, according to one inmate, "it's just you and the mattress."

In Florida, "to turn out" refers to an inmate who has sexually seduced another inmate; the term "flipping" is used to describe an inmate who can't decide whether she wants to be masculine or feminine in a romantic relationship. But in the East, flipping, or "getting flipped," also known as "pancaking" at a women's facility in Massachusetts, usually refers to a newly arrived heterosexual identified inmate who is seduced by a known lesbian inmate. Cellmates are "roomies" in one prison and "bunkies" in another; tough-talking inmates who look like little boys are, not surprisingly, called "little boys" in many prisons.

And if someone informs you, "I'm, not your Hazel," you know you're in Florida and not points West, where manipulating or otherwise strong-arming your girlfriend or cellmate into doing your laundry, running your errands and fetching your dinner, is generally referred to as "getting over"--or as one West Coast inmate put it, "just plain stupid."

The only time I heard the inmate term "cloaking" was in Florida, but the activity it depicts is widespread in most if not all women's prisons across the country. The term, according to inmates, is jargon for acting as a go-between for inmates and prison guards (or other prison staff) who engage in sex inside the walls. Although Broward Prison Warden John Anderson said he was unfamiliar with the term (but would take immediate action if he learned such behavior was occurring under his watch), two inmates from his prison described themselves as "former" paid cloakiers, and talked about their job responsibilities and benefits. The term emerged during a general discussion about prison culture with inmates Sabrina Thomas and Wendy Zabel.

Both women said they acted as cloakiers early on in their prison years to "help out" friends who were having relations with a member of the prison staff. But in most cases they "cloaked" to benefit financially or otherwise improve their lifestyle.

"As a cloaker, you do the trafficking between the inmate and the officer or staff member," explained Sabrina, during a 1997 interview. "You deliver the notes or the gifts. You stand guard, you know, act as the lookout, when they're in there doing their thing."

In payment for cloaking, the women said, the cloaker would

generally receive half of what the inmate was given to her by the officer, or other "fringe benefits."

For her services, Wendy said she would usually choose something difficult to get for herself, like a fresh fruit salad or a fast-food burger, perfume, drugs or hair dye.

The women said that correctional officers or staff members could easily slip food, cosmetics, and even drugs, past the prison's security system. Another means of "gift-giving" for the cloakers, and also payment for the inmates having sex, was for the officer to anonymously place money on the woman's account so she could draw on it to buy supplies from the prison store.

The liaisons, according to the inmates, primarily involved prisoners and both male and female officers. Occasionally, though, the sexual encounters took place between staff members and other prison workers, such as delivery drivers or cafeteria cooks ...anyone, in fact, who had easy access to inmates and something desirable to trade or sell. The sex, they said, would take place in empty offices, staff restrooms, or sometimes in even more public areas if the cloakers were good at their job.

In some cases the inmates had affairs with officers "for love," according to Sabrina and Wendy. But most often destitute women traded sex for money, paying jobs, and other favors.

Those living behind bars have unlimited time and remarkable patience to survey the prison landscape and plot intricate schemes that, especially with men, are most often focused on power, territory, money--or all three. During my days as a crime reporter in California, I once researched a story on the seemingly inconsequential items male inmates used, like toilet paper rolls (that became blow guns) and plastic spoons (that could be melted with matches and molded into spear tips) to make precise and deadly weapons to efficiently kill one another during a game of pick-up basketball in the exercise yard.

And in one of my favorite inmate money-making schemes, a prisoner at San Quentin Prison in California sold squirts of "hooch" (alcohol made from bread and fruit stolen from the cafeteria and "cooked" in his cell) out of a stolen colostomy bag he wore taped to his body under his prison uniform.

Scamming goes on in women's prisons, too, of course. Those who do well are opportunists who understand the demands of the marketplace and benefit from the disempowered status of the less fortunate or less cunning.

Wendy Zabel said she had long since retired from her involvement in prison loan-sharking, and other money-making scams before our interviews in the late 1990s. Growing older and surviving a life threatening illness, she said, tends to mellow out a person. But while she's no longer interested in playing the games, her

respect for the manipulation, and the power that it brings, remains intact.

Survival is the driving force inside in prison, she said, especially for those without a support network in the free world. You do what you need to do to get by, she said. If you see a way to take control, to put yourself in a better vantage point, then you capitalize. Looking back, she said, it is not something she was proud of. But her participation, and the fact that it goes on at all, is a prison reality.

"At first you just do what it takes to make it through the day. Later, because you don't want to find yourself in that situation again," she said, "you try to get ahead of the curve."

"There's a saying in here that you do your time or you let time do you. What I'm saying is that you can make it hard on yourself or you can deal with it. Or if you can't deal with it, you hook up with someone who can. If you're weak, forget it. If you're strong you have a chance. Sure, I could have chosen to give up and take psychotropics and rock my way through these 25-year sentences. But I didn't, and I still don't intend to."

Over the years, Wendy said she accumulated thousands of dollars in cash and goods from loan-sharking and other schemes--enough to afford such luxuries as special foods, nice clothes and gold jewelry. She said she also mailed money to her parents and others to bank "for my legal defense," and to send gifts using mail-order catalogues to friends and relatives in the outside world. She estimated that over several years she "sent out" \$20,000, and spent an estimated \$10,000 on herself.

And such activity still survives, and even thrives today, she said, despite the ban on most personal property, and in particular, a new rule restricting inmates from holding paper money and coins. In fact, the banning of money and personal property has only presented a new challenge for inside profit-makers. For example, she explained, instead of being paid in cash, the money "earned" through loan sharking, or other scams, is now sent out of the institution and later mailed back (by a third party), where it is placed on the inmate's account .

Wendy explained the basics of loan sharking, saying the first order of business is to accumulate enough money and goods to provide a solid foundation to operate.

"Say you're running out of cigarettes and payday (the day each week an inmate is allowed to draw her weekly allotment of money to buy snacks, toiletries and other items from the prison canteen) isn't for a few days. So you come to me and say you're out of cigarettes. I'm willing to loan you a pack, 'cause I have a stash built up, but the charge is the usual two-for-one. In other words, on Tuesday, you give me two packs back, or if you borrowed two packs, you give me back four packs. It goes from there."

Toward the end of the month, Wendy continued, the negotiations start to escalate. "You come to me for just about everything then, and if I have it to loan, I tend to come out pretty well. It just continues to double as we go along, for soup, candy, soap, you name it. Here's another example. Someone will come to me and say, 'Look, I need a \$20 mail-out (\$20 worth of supplies from the prison store or canteen). So I go and buy you \$20 worth of stuff (from her account) and then on a date we decide on, you give me \$40, or rather, you send \$40 to my people (an address outside the prison) who will either save the money for me or deposit it in my account."

A reputation for having inside money connections, and knowing how to play the game, can significantly increase profits--not to speak of one's popularity.

"We're allowed \$45 a week (for canteen), right, so say I still have \$30 left on my card at the end of the month and somebody wants a \$25 mailout. I say I don't have it. I really do, I know I'm going to do it. But I say I'll look around, see what I can come up with. In other words, I make them sweat it out. Maybe the next day I say I can't find anyone anywhere (who has money to loan). Chances are that before I have to do or say anything more, you're back and desperate saying you need it so bad you'll pay triple back. So I pretend that I'm trying to be the good guy. OK, I say, I might be able to do it at triple. So I borrow the money at double, turn around and charge you triple, and make a profit of a third or \$25."

Other more lucrative ways to build up a nest egg is to finance the loan yourself, or maintain hidden banks accounts, Wendy said.

"I'll say, OK, I'll scrimp this week and give you the \$25 out of my canteen, but you have to give me \$75 in return on payday. It's worth it sometimes, and this can be a fast way to accumulate money to start a business. Or I can stash a second or third bank somewhere, in another inmate's account, someone who doesn't have much money and could use some help from me. I have that money to fall back on to loan at a high percentage rate, like a reserve, if I want to make a loan and I don't have money in my own account." (For the latter to work, Wendy would have a third, outside party make a deposit to a designated inmate's account. The inmate officially holding the account would make canteen withdrawals at Wendy's direction. The inmate would be paid an agreed upon fee or in canteen supplies.)

Asked how she and other loan sharkers enforced payback, Wendy said that physical violence was not unheard of, but simple intimidation was usually as effective. Prison, she explained, is a small town where everyone knows everyone's business. Making it public knowledge that a certain inmate was not good for a loan, or threatening to spread a rumor that an inmate had AIDS, exacted the needed amount of pressure and usually motivated the debtor into

paying.

Ultimately, she said, the penalties depend on the individual loan shark and can include the extreme measure of ambushing an inmate in her cell and roughing her up.

More likely in her own business, if an inmate did not pay up on time, "I'd have someone watching at the canteen and as soon as she got her order (of snacks and toiletries) I would have one of my people snatch it and she would be out (of supplies) for another full week."

Like most inmate disputes, Wendy said, "this sort of thing would get dealt with on the inside, between the inmates, because think about it, what would be the point of the girl going to the cops and complaining that someone snatched her canteen or beat her up in her room because she didn't pay off her debt? It's like a lot of rules here. It's always your word against the other girl. And the result is that you both go to jail because the cops aren't going to take the time to figure it out. And hardly anything is worth going to jail for."

Over the years I've heard both male and female inmates from around the country talk about the pen-pal scam, usually in hushed tones and off the record, as a way to supplement their income if they have little or no outside financial support from friends or family, and have no opportunity to hold down a prison job that pays. Infirm women, for example, and women living on death row who are confined to their cells for an average of 23 hours a day and not allowed to hold jobs, often fall into this indigent category.

Supporting oneself in prison, especially for women with long sentences who frequently exhaust the good will of those on the outside, continues to be a challenge as more states require prisoners to pay a part of their health care costs and for other basic needs. While some states do a better than average job of providing basic health care and living essentials--such as soap, a toothbrush and deodorant--many women say the quality of state toiletries is woefully substandard, even for convicts.

Wendy said she had little trouble talking male pen-pals out of thousands of dollars by using a carefully honed method she has since passed down to other inmates. The first step was to carefully craft a personal ad that would appear in a variety of publications ranging from "biker" magazines to more mainstream offerings. Initially, the exchange of letters, and even telephone calls, would address the basics in "getting to know you." Wendy said she always identified herself as an inmate at a state prison, but almost always fudged on her crime and length of sentence.

"Some of the girls, including myself, can put some stories on paper. You have to be able to write, to talk about yourself in a way that is interesting. Usually it would only take a few letters before we were talking about the future. I would write and tell them what I liked,

and they'd write back with the same. Some would go on about sex this and sex that, testing me I guess, and I'd write back and say, 'Hey, I may be in prison, and I may be lonely at times, but I'm not into that kind of stuff. They really loved that. They'd write me back and be all enthused about finding an honest person.'

In no time, Wendy said, the hook would be set and she would starting talk about the future.

"I'd start writing that my sentence was winding down ...and what I really needed was a sturdy relationship to make me make the transition. Usually about this time he would want to know how much longer did I have to be inside, and then I'd come out and say, believe it or not, it's all a matter of money. I could be out now, but I have my restitution to pay. And if they let me out on an early release program, I would have to pay \$50 a month for two years and they want the first year up front. And, then, in order to transfer my probation from here to his state, well, that costs money, too."

Wendy said she would ask for a specific amount of money depending on what she knew about the man's financial picture.

"Depending on the individual, I'd come up with different figures for how much it would take to have me out of here and finally living with him. It was usually around \$1,800 dollars, or sometimes \$2,100. If I knew he didn't have much, I'd say the amount was as little as \$650 or \$800. And that was it. A money order would be on the way.

"I wasn't getting out, of course. But he didn't know it and when he did--what could he do to me? I was in prison for the rest of my life."

As time passed, Wendy said, prison officials became suspicious about the number of outside money orders being deposited into her account, and into the accounts of other inmates. Up until then, individual money orders of up to \$1,000 each were allowed for deposit. Later rules changed, she said, when officials became suspicious of the scams. The new rule only allowed money orders of up to \$300 to be deposited into an inmate's account at any given time. In addition, the person sending the money order was contacted by prison officials to notify them of the inmate's sentence and status.

"So I just started to tell them (pen pals) that the money needed to be sent to my attorney, who wasn't my attorney at all, of course, but a friend on the outside. Whenever I needed the money, that friend would deposit it into my account."

Not only has she worked the scam for herself, but she would help others whose writing abilities, or creative energies, needed help. Being a blue-eyed blonde was a plus in the pen pal market, Wendy said. Sometimes she would lend her photograph to other inmates who needed an especially pretty face to close their deal.

Several factors led to the end of the pen-pal era for her, Wendy said. A few years back she was "outed" on a national television news magazine when her crime was profiled and her life sentence

revealed. A few of her pen-pal clients had apparently watched the show and realized she wasn't coming home to them, she said.

It's impossible to talk about culture inside female institutions and not attempt to understand and even shed light on the intimate relationships that develop between many women living behind bars.

Homosexuality inside women's prisons is a pervasive and intricate part of the inner culture that is publicly condemned but privately tolerated and even condoned in some prisons. The vast majority of women I interviewed over the years, some selected at random, others by prison officials, were either in lesbian relationships or had been intimately involved with one or more partners while in prison. Some identified themselves as lesbians before coming to prison; as many did not. Some remained in lesbian relationships once released; others returned to a heterosexual lifestyle.

But while homosexuality is widespread in women's prisons, it is hardly the Hollywood version of sex-starved, tough-talking lesbians who roam prison corridors at night intent on rounding up new converts. Indeed, most inmates I interviewed over the years said they too came into prison with all sorts of misconceptions and fears about being raped by inmates. But while the use of violent sexual conquest as a dominance tool is common in men's prisons, most female inmates said the intimate, oftentimes sexual bond that forms between women in prison is seldom if ever physically forced. Rather, the lifestyle many women take up inside--whether they identify themselves as homosexual or not--functions for many as a coping mechanism to get them through their sentence.

Most wardens acknowledge that women in prison need to interact and emotionally bond in a way that, in general, is not seen in the male prison culture. Most, too, although usually off the record, say that despite rules against it, homosexuality is an entrenched part of the culture that flourishes inside all female institutions around the country.

No prisons I am aware of, in fact, encourage or condone intimate relationships between women. In fact, most prison officials cite rules and regulations that forbid this kind of behavior and punish even the suggestion of such behavior. For example, even non-sexual touching or hugging another inmate at MCI-Framingham in Massachusetts can earn a verbal reprimand or a more serious disciplinary report. In most prisons, being caught having sexual relations with another inmate can mean days, weeks or even months in isolation.

And while many wardens, speaking off the record, say the fall-out from "relationship problems" between women is often their biggest discipline challenge, such couplings are silently embraced

by some administrators as the great pacifier in a stressful and potentially explosive world. And for those inmates with little chance of ever leaving, such as Wendy Zabel, the relationship can mean the difference between mere existence in captivity and a life that holds some human meaning.

For years Wendy said she kept to herself and easily discouraged sexual advances from other interested inmates. She never believed she would fall in love with a woman in prison--or anywhere else for that matter. But she did.

She described the behind-the-scenes prison courting rules as the same "don't ask, don't tell" policy that exists in the outside world. If an inmate is so inclined, she and others said, it is not that difficult to engage in relationships that range from "dating" (going to dinner, church or a movie together on the compound), to secret trysts and, at one prison, with permission of the officer on duty, even spending the night in your partner's cell.

In her prison, according to Wendy, "officers know and tolerate our relationships as long as there is no aggressive displays of behavior--especially on the compound. Everyone knows what's going on, and in most cases the officers are OK with it as long as you mind your own business and keep it to yourself."

She is now involved in what she calls a committed and long-term relationship with another inmate, Wendy said. And they play by the rules.

"As for me, I try to minimize being seen with her around the prison; in fact, we really don't see each other much at all until the end of the day, after we come home from work. Then we're just like every other couple: we pull down the curtain (on the cell peephole) and roll out the rug (not allowed) and spend some quality time together."

Even if partners are not assigned to the same housing unit, inmates say, there are ways to manipulate the system and circumvent the rules. Some arrange to move their love interests into their cottages. Or they foster relationships with correctional officers assigned to their housing unit who might be willing to OK a sleep-over.

Occasionally, added one inmate, when the behavior and lifestyle of too many inmates becomes too public and disruptive, the administration reshuffles housing assignments, "and it just starts all over."

While it is difficult to accurately determine the number of women behind bars who engage in same-sex relationships, a recent survey of a women's Massachusetts prison estimated that 25 percent of the population were currently involved in a sexually intimate homosexual relationship. (More to come on the study by Cynthia Coll from Brown University) Inmates, though, say the number is much higher--more like 80 to 90 percent. In fact, they say, an inmate not

involved in a prison relationship is more the exception than the rule.

The trysts fall into various categories and fulfill different needs. Some start as friendships and never progress to a sexual relationship. Others may use dating and casual affairs to pass time behind bars. But many of the relationships that sometimes develop between women, especially between those with long sentences, are more complex and can last for years.

"There are those who get more deeply involved than others," said former Massachusetts inmate Jaime Papa. She had her first sexual relationship with a woman while inside and continued a lesbian lifestyle after her release from prison.

"Some of these girls, we call them short-timers, they have affairs, have sex, just to have something to do with their time. They are just there to party--you know? It's like a game. They come in, get paroled, offend, come back in, get going with their girlfriend again ...if she's still there. But for most of us who flip, it starts out as a bond that you build--just like a relationship that you would build with a man on the outside.

"The major percentage aren't in it at all for the sex. They just want a partner, someone to do their time with. When I came in, I had a girlfriend for six months and we never even kissed. We were just special friends. We hung out. We talked. Partly, it (the lack of physical intimacy) was the rules at the prison. If you even touch a girl you get a D (disciplinary) report. There are ways of getting around things, but it's not that easy. Many of the girls try to get their girlfriends into their cottage, or they have an affair with their roommate."

Women not interested in a relationship are not forced into the lifestyle--at least not at her prison, Papa said.

"I think a lot of women feel pressure to experiment inside because it's happening everywhere. It's much more out in the open in prison than what you see in the free world. But a lot of women, too, don't flip. Usually you would be hit on a few times and if nothing ever happens, especially over a long period of time, no one bothers you anymore."

For former Massachusetts inmate Tracey Williams, the mother of two young daughters and a confirmed heterosexual when she arrived in prison, her sexual involvement with women inside couldn't have surprised her more. For years, she said, she turned away all advances until one day she fell in love, got involved, and remained in what she called a long-term partnership that lasted several years.

But whether or not women come together to bond or have sex is hardly the issue, Williams said.

"I don't care who or what you are, or what color, or what you're life was like before you came in. You're going to have some type of intimate contact with another inmate while you serve your time,

Williams said.

"Now it could be a very close relationship that is not sexually based. But every female in there has to make some kind of intimate relationship with another woman. It has a lot more to do with bonding ...with finding someone compatible, and then you help each other do your time," Tracey said.

"Hell, for me, the sexual part was more adrenaline in getting over on the system. You know, being able to have sex and not being caught. But it's really the closeness, the trust that you need inside to survive."

Following her release Williams returned to her before-prison heterosexual lifestyle. She's told her daughters about her prison relationships, she said, because it was the honest thing to do and she had nothing to be embarrassed about.

"I've told my daughters about that part of my prison experience, about me loving women. I think it's important for them to hear this, and hear it from me."

Postscript: In early 2000 Wendy Zabel wrote to say she had transferred out of Broward and was now living in another prison in Dade County. I was surprised. When we'd last met she told me that Broward was known in some inmate circles as the "country club" of female institutions--not because life was easy there, she was quick to point out, but because it was old, settled in its way, and hadn't gotten around to banning certain entrenched privileges for longtermers such as herself.

By the end of the letter I realized why she had uprooted herself. She told me her partner had been transferred and she had followed.

Anticipating my question, she signed off by saying:

"You know, it's all I really have."