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The Boston Globe

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Age no bar to new endeavors, Carlisle couple find

Busy in retirement as prison volunteers



Carlisle residents Dick and Carolyn Shohet have found a special niche. (Kathy Richland for The Boston Globe)

By [Nancy Shohet West](#)

Globe Correspondent / May 16, 2010

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During halftime at the soccer field, my 11-year-old son trotted over to the sidelines with a question for me. “Mom, is Grandma going to make it to this game?”

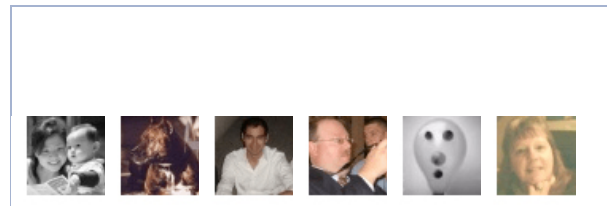
His 7-year-old sister answered before I could, with all the contempt of a younger sibling who keeps track of everyone’s comings and goings. “No, silly! Grandma’s in prison this weekend!”

I’m not sure how that moment would play in other communities, but at the edge of a bucolic soccer field in Carlisle it turns heads fast.

My children don’t see anything unusual about their grandparents spending much of their free time behind bars, though, since it’s been normal for as long as they can remember.

My parents aren’t convicted felons; they are volunteers. My mother, Carolyn Shohet, facilitates weekend-long classes for inmates, and my father, Dick, oversees weekly book discussions. Over the past decade, they’ve covered sessions

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at minimum-, maximum-, and supermax-security facilities across the state.

When I was growing up in town, my father was a high school English teacher, and my mother worked part time and volunteered in the community. She covered library duty at our elementary school, headed up the PTA for a few years, worked at the polls for elections, handed out apple juice at blood drives, taught cooking in the local adult-education program. All this, plus caring for a family of five, kept her schedule full.

And she could still be doing many of those same things, minus the child-rearing, but as the years went on she responded to an urge for something a little weightier.

In her 50s, she underwent training in the Alternatives to Violence Project, a 35-year-old nationwide program that offers workshops in conflict resolution and responses to violence. She now serves as a facilitator for the program several weekends every year at various state correctional facilities.

The thought of my slender, gray-haired mother at 71 years old sharing heartfelt experiences with male prisoners always gives me pause, but to her it's as much a part of her regular routine as her weekly yoga class. In the part of the program where participants reach into their past to describe a violent episode they initiated, my mother tells the men about when she was 4 years old and pushed her sister down the stairs; they counter with tales of armed robbery.

Right around the time that my mother was becoming increasingly involved in the prison outreach program, my father offered to lead a literary discussion group for inmates. It turns out that he's just as popular with hardened criminals as he was during his nearly 40-year career teaching English to affluent suburban teens.

As in the groups my mother leads, enrollment in the book discussions is strictly optional; the inmates are adults and don't receive any kind of formal credit for attending my 73-year-old father's class. He hands out copies of works by Sophocles and Shakespeare, Markandawa and Toni Morrison, Mary Oliver and Stephen King, and the inmates return the next week ready to debate themes and deconstruct characters.

Somewhat to his surprise, my father says, the commentary often isn't all that different from what he heard while teaching at Lexington High (and before that in Concord, Groton and Newton), with jokes, lewd references, and complaints about injustice in their lives mingling with discussions of literary themes. From his perspective, there are two conspicuous differences: the inmates thank him at the end of every class for being there; and, unlike his high school students — whose nonclassroom hours were filled with instrument lessons, private tutoring, sports practices, after-school jobs, and family vacations — the prisoners never complain that they didn't have enough time to finish a reading assignment.

My parents are not unique in taking on volunteer work during their retirement years. Many of their friends are involved in social action as well. But I'm proud of my parents for taking on such a challenging role. And as they've made clear, they love the niche they've found for themselves.

A few years ago, they were considering buying a vacation property in another state. "At first we weren't sure it was really our kind of place," my mother said after one visit. "But then we were driving down the highway just five miles from the house and we passed the county prison, so I knew we'd find plenty to do if we lived there."

(I couldn't resist stating the obvious: "You're not a NIMBY; you're an IMBY!")

Their volunteer work sets a good example for my children, too. When my son was in kindergarten, a classmate who overheard a discussion at our house asked him why his grandparents spend so much time in jail. "Because they're teaching bad guys to be nice," Tim replied as if it were obvious.

It's not exactly how my parents would put it. First of all, they're too humble to believe they can teach anyone to be nice; second, they wouldn't use the expression "bad guys."

But for a 5-year-old, it was a pretty good observation of the role that his grandparents have opted to fill. ■

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