

**Not Just another Sex Offender:
How One Man Turned his Life Around**

by Jennifer Schneider M.D.

Published in Gentle Path Focus, Summer 2008, pp 3-5

In April, 2006, Ken Lamberton, a 47-year old nature writer and University of Arizona graduate, was one of several speakers at a well-attended black-tie dinner honoring a writing professor who'd been his mentor for years. In his soon-to-be published book, Time of Grace: Thoughts on Nature, Family, and the Politics of Crime and Punishment, Lamberton writes this about his speech:

After [former University of Arizona President] John Schaefer's very gracious introduction, one in which he did mention the UA biology degree he signed and my John Burroughs Medal for my first book [a prestigious medal for outstanding nature writing that Lamberton won in 2002 for his first book Wilderness and Razor Wire] -- but not the twelve blank years that separated the two -- I took the podium. I said, "Now that you've heard from the ex-president, you get to hear from the ex-con."

In his usual humorous and self-deprecating style, Lamberton was referring to the 12 years he spent in the Arizona State Prison. At age 26, Lamberton was a junior high school science teacher who had just won his school district's 1986 "Teacher of the Year" award. His wife was pregnant with their third child and the stresses were mounting. Lamberton became infatuated with a student in his class. They carried on a clandestine flirtation for a semester, and when summer came he hired her as his family's babysitter. They began having sex shortly after she turned 14. A month later, the burden of secrecy and duplicity got too great and they decided to run away. They drove and camped for two weeks, ending up in Colorado, where his face, publicized on national television, was recognized by a vacationing fellow teacher. He was arrested and charged with seven felony counts: 3 of sexual abuse, 3 of sexual conduct with a

minor, and one of custodial interference. Each charge carried 15 years mandatory; the multiple charges put him in the category of a repeat offender, meaning his sentences would be consecutive, adding up to over a century in prison. Lamberton plea-bargained to 12 years in prison with no parole. The girl initially defended him, agreeing that they were "in love" and planned to spend their life together, but eventually, after discussions with her parents, she came to recognize that she'd been victimized.

Lamberton spent his dozen years in prison working as a teacher's aide, helping inmates obtain their G.E.D. He also had plenty of time to observe and contemplate not only nature within and outside the walls of his prison, but also the fantasy aspect of his past obsession, the stupidity of his conduct, and the consequences for his family. He became determined to spend the rest of his life trying to make it up to his wife Karen.

Karen was a high school graduate, a conservative Baptist raised to believe that the husband was the wife's conduit to God and that marriage was forever. One casualty of Ken's crime was Karen's loss of faith. With Ken in prison and the family income source gone, Karen went on welfare, and provided her friends with trenchant analyses of the welfare system as viewed from the inside by a (formerly) middle-class person.

Having lost her house, Karen and her three daughters moved next door to her parents, into a freestanding two-car garage which her father, a professional carpenter, reconfigured into a tiny dwelling. She and her daughters and/or husband have lived there for 20 years now. When the Department of Economic Security canceled her welfare benefits after her aunt gave Karen an old car to get herself to classes and her children to school, she filed -- and won -- a class-action suit against the D.E.S. She attended university, got a bachelor's degree, and then a master's degree. After finishing her education she obtained a responsible job and medical insurance and said goodbye to her welfare days.

Karen raised her three daughters alone, with babysitting help from her parents. Despite her lost faith she stayed married to Ken and continued her family involvement with her church. Every week for many years she took her daughters with her to the prison to visit their father. In between, he'd talk to the girls by phone and write them letters, correcting their homework, encouraging their interest in nature, and maintaining a relationship with them. Karen obtained a paralegal degree and mounted a successful

effort to get post-conviction relief which led to Ken's release from prison after eight years. But his freedom lasted only 18 months – the State appealed Lamberton's release and obtained a reversal of the court order, sending him back to prison to serve his remaining four years in full. In retrospect, his months at home were crucial in providing him with a window of opportunity to re-establish a parental role and emotional ties with his daughters while they were still young enough for it to count. The oldest graduated in 2007 with a degree in Wildlife Biology and the other two are now attending university. The youngest daughter was admitted to Harvard but chose instead to continue her education locally (with the help of a full scholarship) in order to be with her family. In her spare time Karen still does advocacy work for prison families. Ken writes (in Time of Grace).

Did prison "fix" me? I don't know. . . It certainly punished me. And it certainly punished Karen and my three daughters. Punishment is prison's design, its nature, and at least in our case, prison functioned well. So I suppose in this the public got its money's worth – punishing five people for the price of one.

After his second release from prison in 2000, Ken returned to the University of Arizona where he obtained a Master's degree in creative writing. He wrote numerous articles and two more books about nature. In 2007 he won a Soros Justice Fellowship from the Open Society Institute in New York to complete his latest book, Time of Grace. In this book, interspersed among the detailed observations of prison flora and fauna are eyewitness comments about the problems inmates and their families face and the failures of the criminal justice system. These are accompanied by perceptive suggestions for improvements that, if followed, would likely reduce recidivism and educate and help inmates rather than just warehouse them. His first-hand account about prison life is what attracted the Soros Foundation, which supports efforts for social, legal, and economic reform.

In reflecting on the wreckage of his younger days, Ken wrote to me,

I see my former behavior, at least the emotionally addictive behavior, as a part of me, as something I've learned to be aware of and to think through in terms of its consequences if I should give them rein. I've learned that emotions can be powerful in their desire to be gratified, but that they never will be gratified and that in reality they will lie to you. I guess I've learned not to trust my heart. People still ask me "What were you thinking?" I say, that's the wrong question; I was feeling. If I'd been thinking, I never would have pursued the relationship.

Ken and Karen are still together. Their daughters are out of their (not-so-spacious) home, Karen is employed full time, and Ken is working on his writing. They are close to their daughters, who attend university in their home city. In his latest book, Ken writes,

Karen still insists my writing is "only a hobby," which is her way of reminding me that I already have a job – taking care of her. Because my role is so clear, we have an amazing relationship. Our marriage has all the passion of a newlywed couple, but it's also tempered by the experience of a quarter century together. Karen likes to say that we're actually into our third marriage (the post-prison marriage); I'm expecting a few more marriages to each other yet to come. Just recently. . . I realized that we are going to make it, that we've passed the test, that we're stuck with each other (and probably deserve each other too.).

Lamberton is a registered sex offender, and always will be. Before his release Karen went through the neighborhood, advising everyone there that her sex-offender husband would soon return home. Lamberton's family was victimized by his behavior, and then victimized for many years by his incarceration. The year that he was arrested, a female junior high school librarian in Arizona was also arrested for having sex with a 14-year old; she received a suspended sentence. Was society served by having Lamberton in prison for 12 years for his offending behavior? Is his ongoing label as a sex offender going to protect anyone?

Spurred on by his Soros Fellowship, Ken Lamberton is now writing editorials and op ed pieces about sex offender issues. For example, in an as-yet-unpublished guest opinion, he wrote,

During my time in prison, a climatic shift occurred in this country toward sex offenders. In the late 1980s, mandatory sentencing made judges all but perfunctory and brought longer sentences followed by lifetime probations. In the 1990s, varieties of so-called "Predator Laws" dominoed through the states to create, following incarceration, local and national registries, public disclosure, and, for those of us deemed unredeemable, indefinite civil confinement—all affecting sex offenders past, present, and future.

Today, the frenzy continues. Arizona is copying a spate of sex offender laws now sweeping through many states. . . . Laws barring convicted sex criminals from living within 2000 feet of a school or daycare center have made some offenders homeless, reducing them to sleeping in their cars, if they have cars. Others are simply disappearing. Nearly three times as many registered sex offenders have gone underground since before the law took effect. Officials responsible for keeping track of the offenders say they would rather know where these people are living than have the restriction. . .

Supporting these restrictive laws may seem like the right thing to do, but there's something wrong with a society that demonizes and ostracizes a whole class of people and then continues to punish them based on crimes they haven't yet committed but might.

Knowing Ken Lamberton as a person, not as “just another sex offender” gives one pause. Ideas about what counts as criminal behavior in relation to sex keep changing in relation to age and gender, and also differ in different societies. Sex offenders vary in the severity of their crimes, their underlying psychopathology, and in the treatment they need and punishment they deserve. Twenty years after Lamberton’s crime and lengthy incarceration, his family and his relationships are amazingly functional. But they are the exception. Too many other sex offenders and their families are ground down by a criminal justice system that emphasizes punishment over rehabilitation. Compared to

the general population, children of prisoners are six times more likely than other children to be incarcerated at some point in their lives, and so the cycle continues.

As therapists and health professionals we need to work to change community attitudes so that the goal of dealing with sex offenders becomes to give them appropriate treatment, with support for their families, rather than just put them away for as long as possible and regulate their lives from then on so as to make them pariahs. The laws that are supposed to keep the public safe are now keeping the offender from effective rehabilitation. Most sex offenders are redeemable. With respectful individualized treatment these offenders can become functional members of the community again. Some, like Ken Lamberton, would surely have benefited from receiving therapy rather than a long prison sentence.

Jennifer Schneider is a physician practicing pain medicine and addiction medicine in Tucson, Arizona. She is the author of Back From Betrayal, Sex, Lies, & Forgiveness, Disclosing Secrets (with Deborah Corley), and Untangling the Web (with Robert Weiss). Interviews with members of the Lamberton family appear in several of these books.