

Daily Breeze.com

Originally published Thursday, April 13, 2006

Convict-turned-author is making up for her time on the inside

Donna Ann Smith, a white-collar felon, tells of life behind bars in "Time on the Inside: Behind the Walls In A Maximum Security Women's Prison."

By John Bogert

Donna Ann Smith Marshall is a beautifully turned-out, soft-eyed woman of 40. A happily married mother of four, she runs an upstart publishing company out of her Carson home and has just printed her very first book, one that she also happened to write.

None of this is terribly unusual in a town where every other person I hear from is an author. What's unusual is Donna Ann writing about her prison years in *Time On The Inside: Behind The Walls In A Maximum Security Women's Prison*.

Donna Ann is the real thing, a white-collar felon who used her natural intellect for all the wrong things. But first I had to get past the mom-next-door looks. No hard edges here, just a history, a wrong turn taken when she got pregnant at 15, leaving behind school and dreams of being a lawyer.

"I decided to get ahead by not being honest," said Donna Ann, who got a federal job in L.A. by falsifying an application. This was 1986 and why shouldn't they believe a bright-eyed 19-year-old claiming to have a college degree?

She did OK, too, working hard and kiting checks from one bad bank account to another because, she discovered, if you dress nicely and smile you can get away with far too much.

"My teachers always told me that I was going to be somebody," she said. "Then the elements of darkness took me down another road. I tried to keep up with the other kids and if that meant stealing that's what I'd do."

She was finally caught during a Carson mall spending spree.

"In Sybil Brand for three months I was exposed to the whole degrading process, being locked in a small room with 75 women, with one toilet, limited paper and cavity searches. It was a jungle. Still, I wasn't angry at society for putting people like me in jail. I was mad because there was no rehab. This was a school for criminals. There was no help for the problems inside or out," said Donna Ann, touching on the theme that now guides her life.

Soon enough she was out, then back in, unreformed. Bailed out, she went underground until she was caught and sentenced in 1991 to 2½ years in the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, the big house.

Only here's where the story diverges. In her book she deals with the weirdness of prison sex and all that. But she also mentions something I've heard before, that women on the inside behave differently than men.

Convict-turned-author is making up for her time on the inside

Donna Ann Smith, a white-collar felon, tells of life behind bars in "Time on the Inside: Behind the Walls In A Maximum Security Women's Prison."

By John Bogert • Originally published Thursday, April 13, 2006

"It was a tough place," said this now highly religious wife of an MTA worker. "But it was also a comfortable place. Women don't behave like animals. You put eight men in a room and somebody gets hurt. Do that with women and we mostly get along. There's a real comfort level on the inside, a kind of family. All the societal pressure is gone."

Then one day they hand you \$200 gate money and it's back to the real family, to the bad neighborhoods and everything that put you inside in the first place.

"Women come out with no support and nowhere to find help. I was lucky, I had family and church. I also came out knowing that I had to find a job," said this woman who now counsels in jails and prisons.

And she did, working her way up in a health care organization, then starting her one-woman publishing house, taking on the daunting process that got her new book onto Amazon.com and into Borders, Target and all the others. It is also available directly at www.fmapublishing.com.

The work itself is a fascinating account of a young woman's fall and redemption despite years spent in a ruinously expensive prison system that does, in her view, little to reform anyone.

"I wanted to write a message of hope," she said. "When I went in I was convinced that I wasn't like the others. I was white-collar and smart. But I was humbled. I learned that we are all human beings who need faith and compassion to survive. More than that, we are all obliged to help one another so we can say at the end of our days that we made a difference."

I'd say that she is doing just that.