

# University Wire

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## Abused Women Speak About Time in Prison at U. Michigan

By Laura Frank, Michigan Daily; SOURCE: U. Michigan

[ANN ARBOR, Mich.] – Mary Heinen was sentenced to life in prison for a robbery in which her husband shot and killed several people 30 years ago.

While serving her sentence, Heinen earned four university degrees, including one from the University of Michigan, and started a law library through which she and other prisoners attempted to find ways to appeal their cases.

The inmates sought to get out of a place where they said they faced constant abuse.

Heinen succeeded in getting out and, along with India Stewart, who also spent time in prison, spoke about abuse within the prisons, both by guards and by other inmates at the Michigan League last night.

Abuse by guards – which included touching female prisoners inappropriately or watching them undress – is widespread, Stewart said.

Both women spoke about the need for increased legal advocacy for battered women in prisons.

Heinen added that while there has been legal action taken in some prisoner abuses cases – one was settled for \$3.8 million – there is still rampant abuse within prisons.

“A case that was settled a few years ago will have no impact on what goes on in the (prisons),” she said.

Heinen also spoke of being threatened with retaliation and intimidation by prison officials who learned of her legal efforts to leave the prison. With her hard work, Heinen was granted clemency and released after serving 30 years in prison.

The event was part of a weeklong campaign sponsored by the Michigan chapter of V-Day, an international organization that works to end violence against women.

According to RC senior Erin Kaplan, one of the event’s organizers, women – especially black women – are the single fastest-growing prison population in the United States.

In addition, Kaplan said that 95 percent of imprisoned women have been abused at one point during their lives, either before or after being incarcerated.

“I don’t know anybody who hasn’t been abused,” Stewart said.

Both women also talked about abusive relationships they had been in. Both were married as teenagers to men who later abused them, and each spoke of the emotional damage and life-changing consequences they suffered during these relationships.

While some laws have been passed to protect women from being prosecuted for crimes against abusers, Heinen said these laws are not retroactive, and there are many women currently in prison who should not be there – either because they were forced to participate in crimes by violent partners or because they killed abusive partners in self-defense.

“I was able to litigate myself out,” she said, “But that’s a real unusual situation.”

Stewart, who said that her abusive boyfriend robbed a bank and forced her to drive him away, served three years in prison.

Two of her daughters still live with the man, and she is currently fighting for custody, but she said that transitional programs for people returning from prison do not do enough to help women regain their families.

“Most of the programs cater to men,” she said.

Heinen said she believes that violence against women is often accepted and that it is promoted by video games, the media and the government.

“Women have been seen traditionally as property,” she said.

Community High School junior Christine Martin-Buck said that while she has heard of some of the issues surrounding female prisoners, the speakers “put things in a whole new perspective.”

Stewart and Heinen also offered advice to others who may be involved in abusive relationships.

“Don’t be afraid to ask for help if you’re a victim,” Stewart said. “I thank God every day that I was able to get away.”

This is the first year V-Day has sponsored this event, and organizers were very pleased with the turnout. LSA senior Kyle Stock said she was especially impressed given the difficulty of advertising and reaching audiences about such a difficult issue.

Heinen and Stewart concluded the dialogue by urging people to support petition drives and the Michigan Battered Women’s Clemency Project.

“You’re more powerful out here than you think you are,” Stewart said.

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