

How one lawyer proves her faith in criminal rehabilitation

written by Sandy | February 25, 2018



By Sandy . . . Any criminal justice system has two purposes. The first is to punish those who have broken the law. The second is to bring about rehabilitation in the lawbreaker so that he will turn his back on a life of crime and embrace a law-abiding life in society.

The first is accomplished largely within the closed ranks of the legal system, through courts, convictions, punishments, and time served, either behind bars or under community supervision.

The second can only take place within the broader system of society and the community.

When it comes to those whose convictions have been for a sexual crime, why are we so good at accomplishing the former

and so lacking in bringing about the later?

Our society has been conditioned to regard those who have committed a sexual crime as irredeemable. This is largely, if not totally, due to the proliferation of public sex offender registries. There is something about putting one's name on such a registry that sets them aside and marks them as belonging outside – outside of redemption, outside of consideration, outside of civilized society.

But they are not. The vast, vast majority of registered sexual offenders living in the community are law-abiding, decent human beings. They are no more a threat to their fellow citizens than those citizens are to each other. Yet even when this is shown by decades of their living law-abiding, productive lives, and in spite of decades of evidence attesting to it, the prejudice against our registered citizens is overwhelming.

A political candidate or legislator who dares to support legislation that is based solidly on research but is seen to “make life easier” for sexual offenders does so at the risk of being pilloried by his or her opponent, even when such legislation is clearly shown to make society safer.

A political candidate who dares to employ a person listed on a sexual offense registry risks the same.

Chantal Eldridge, a challenger for the judicial seat in the 331st District Court in Travis County, in 2016 hired a person as her legal assistant. She is so satisfied with his work ethic and job performance that she intends to keep him as her judicial assistant if her bid for the seat is successful.

Thirty years ago he had a conviction for a sexual offense and remains on Texas' sex offender registry. Ms. Eldridge believes that refusing employment to a past felon would run counter to her faith in criminal justice rehabilitation. Believing as she

does, she feels that if she were not willing to offer an ex-felon a second chance, an opportunity to show he was rehabilitated, then she would be a hypocrite.

This is a stance that requires courage, integrity, and commitment. These are qualities that are desirable for every person. They are especially to be valued in those we elect as our public officials.

Rather than condemning Ms. Eldridge for her faith in the system she has sworn to uphold and for having the courage to stand by her convictions, we need to closely examine the motives of those who attack her for that faith and that courage.

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