

UpClose with Donna Hamm UpClose with Donna Hamm

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Donna Hamm has been lobbying on behalf of prisoners and their families for nearly three decades.

She became a justice of the peace in 1981, shortly after moving to Arizona from Ohio. During a tour of one of the state's prisons, she realized the state wasn't doing a good job of preparing prisoners for re-integration into society.

It was during the same tour that she met her future husband James Hamm, who was serving time in prison for murder.

In 1983, Donna Hamm formed the all-volunteer Middle Ground Prison Reform, a group that defends the rights of prisoners and their families.

Donna, a criminal justice consultant for executive clemency releases, is also a licensed pilot. In her free time, she goes sailing with her husband, who was released from prison more than 17 years ago.

What childhood event left the most lasting impression on you?

Well, I wasn't a child chronologically. But my father, just 10 days after my 21st birthday, was killed in a plane crash. His body was burned beyond recognition. He was a corporate pilot for Mead paper company.

That was a turning point for me in my life. I had gotten married at age 19. I had a two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. That was really a turning point for me in the sense that I knew I couldn't stay tethered to a small town. I wanted to see more. I wanted to do more. And I took the position that you just don't know how much time you have. My dad was 48.

Fast forwarding to what I do now, I think it gives me some empathy and understanding for what it feels like to be the victim of a violent crime, because although my father's death was not a crime, it was a sudden, violent, too-soon death that devastated our family. So I think I have an understanding of what it's like to lose someone in a sudden, unfair way.

What did you want when you were growing up?

I grew up in a very traditional Italian-Irish family. My father was Italian, my mother was Irish. And so honestly, back in the '50s and '60s, I was only really expected to go school and find a husband.

My parents always felt that I had artistic ability, and they always wanted me to go to art

school. But for some reason, I got turned away from that because I'm left-handed. I went to one of those career day things at high school, and someone told me that when you're left-handed it's hard to be an artist because your hand drags across the page and smears everything. I was very susceptible to that influence, so I kind of put that aside.

Then I ended up getting pregnant very young, and that kind of changed the course of things.

From wanting to be an artist to litigation and the courts?

I did have an epiphany, which I will be glad to tell you about in terms of the prison thing.

When I moved to Flagstaff, I began working for county government there, and I sort of quickly got my legs on government jobs. Two years after I arrived there as a newcomer, I was appointed as a justice of the peace because I got active in local politics and got to know some of the political leaders there.

One of my first decisions was that I needed to understand what I was doing to people by sentencing them to jail or prison. And I arranged with a fellow justice of the peace, Dick Ortiz, who is now deceased, and Warren Lucas, who was a professor at Northern Arizona University in the sociology department, to go on a tour of the Arizona State Prison.

I know it sounds melodramatic, but that was an epiphany for me. That was just a life-altering event to walk into cell block two of the Arizona State Prison and look up at the three tiers of cages with human beings clinging to the bars and recognize that this is what we were doing to prepare these people to come back to the community.

I didn't know anything about corrections. I didn't know anything about prisons. I just inherently knew that caging people and not doing anything else with them was not a good plan for community reintegration.

Did it occur to you that they deserved to be caged?

Absolutely, they deserved to be in prison. But to me, I already knew that the vast majority get out of prison. So you can ignore a couple of them in the cages and not worry about what they are thinking or what's happening to them. But (for) 98 percent (of them) - you better be concerned about it.

One school of thought is that the prison conditions are a form of a deterrent. What do you think of that?

That assumes an awful lot of rational, intelligent, cohesive thought - and that isn't what crime is based on. And there is certainly no evidence that treating people like dogs and locking them in cages and beating them every day keeps them from biting people when they get out.

Tell me about how you met your husband James.

On that tour - it was April 10, 1981. I remember the day.

In the afternoon, we met with a group of prisoners who were in a college degree program. It was being offered by Northern Arizona University at the time - a marvelous program, the only one in the country, where the staff and the prisoners attended classes together in order to matriculate in a bachelor's degree program in applied sociology, with an emphasis in corrections.

James happened to be one of the students in that class. I had been sort of conditioned to meet him and a couple of other prisoners in that class by the professor, by Warren Lucas, because James was far advanced of any bachelor's level student in terms of his understanding of sociology.

He is an extremely intelligent man. And I was very impressed, though, by the fact that he was tutoring others. This is a life-term prisoner. No family in the state. Probably at that time no hope of getting out of prison. And he was tutoring other prisoners and staff to help them get sufficient grades to pass the program. And there was no gain in it for him obviously.

When did you start Middle Ground?

I started Middle Ground in 1983. I think what triggered it was every time, as a visitor, I asked a question or tried to get information, I got a different answer depending upon the guard I was speaking to, or the shift that I was on. There was nothing consistent, nothing valid, and it just seemed to be sort of a mess.

I wanted to standardize the information that was going to families of prisoners. And then as I began to learn from James about the bureaucratic workings of the prison and how little it had really to do with corrections, I was stunned. My husband spent 17-and-a half-years in prison altogether for murder, and no one on staff had ever asked him "Why did you commit your crime? How do you feel about what you did to your victims?"

I asked him those questions, but I shouldn't have had to do that. That should have been part of the correctional experience. So I felt like there needed to be a way to educate legislators, to have a voice for the families of prisoners who want corrections to happen to their loved ones.

How would you sum up the Legislature's attitude toward the prison system and the prisoners?

I have the most difficult constituency to represent, with the exception (of) if I were a lobbyist for al-Qaeda.

There is no more unpopular cause than prisoners and, unfortunately, by association, their families. With some exceptions - I am not saying every legislator - but the vast majority are simply not interested in what prisoners or their families have to say.

