

THE BIG INTERVIEW

‘I don’t regret being a whistleblower’



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Danielle Left chats to Faith Spear FRSA, who defied all odds and bravely rallied against injustices the prison system



Faith Spear FRSA
Image: Charlotte Bond,
Newsquest

It takes a lot of courage to speak out against wrongdoings, injustice, and unfairness. Suffolk woman Faith Spear FRSA knew this but it didn't stop her from using her voice to make a difference in the world.

You may recognise Faith's name. She has become known for voicing her concerns about prison reform and the way monitoring boards operated. The criminologist was working as the chairman on Hollesley Bay prison's Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) when she courageously blew the whistle.

And while the ramifications for doing so impacted her at the time, she doesn't regret a thing.

I sat down with Faith to find out more about her career and what life has been like since her bold move.

Originally from Lincolnshire, Faith came to the region aged 19. "I followed my heart rather than my head," she says.

"Turning down a place to study for a degree, I moved to Essex and got married. We then moved to Suffolk in 1990 when we were expecting our first child."

When living in Essex, Faith got her first taste of working in the field of criminology with Nacro the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

"We provided work placements for men who had just come out of prison. They would do painting, decorating and gardening, to prepare them to find longer term jobs afterwards."

While working with Nacro, Faith got to know the offenders - and what she saw and heard soon ignited a passion within her for criminology and reform.

"Although I only worked there for a year, it really planted a seed," she says.

Faith and her family soon moved to France but returned to Suffolk in 2006.

"Things had changed so much by the time we came back. I remember sitting in a café at the waterfront in Ipswich, and I used to watch this building development rise and I didn't realise it was going to be a university. At 45, I thought I'd missed my opportunity for that, but when the building was complete, a brochure for the University of Suffolk dropped through the letterbox. I had a look at it, and criminology really stood out to me."

Unsure if she'd be accepted, Faith attended an opening day that following weekend and within half an hour she was offered a place to study for a BSc.(Hons) Criminology.

Juggling raising a family, Faith

successfully completed her degree and graduated in 2011.

"I was told that because I was a mature student, which brought its own challenges, I would need to have voluntary work on my CV. I'd been volunteering for years, but it had to be more applicable to criminology, so I worked with Citizens' Advice for a year and trained as a gateway assessor. This really opened my eyes to not just the problems within the local authority, but at a national level, too."

And it was while she was working for Citizens's Advice that she came across an advert in the East Anglian Daily Times, calling for people to join the independent monitoring board at Hollesley Bay. She applied, and was successful, taking up the position in January 2013.

Faith's role granted her 24/7 access to the prison, where she monitored various aspects of life there including the quality of healthcare, education, accommodation, and food.

"It was incredibly interesting. We were the eyes and ears of the public for what was going on in prison. I had to write a weekly report, which went to the governor, and every year I wrote an annual report for the Secretary of State for Justice. It's a statutory role within the prisons, meaning the governor can't stop you visiting, as they have no jurisdiction over that."

During her time on the IMB, Faith visited various prisons across the country, ranging from category A to D.

"What shocked me the most was the waste of human life. I often refer to prisons as 'warehouses of the vulnerable' because that's how I saw it. Not enough was being done with the men while they were in there, and there was a lack of purposeful activity."

Faith witness first hand all the mind-numbing things the men had to do, under the guise of 'work' - including separating CDs from their cases for hours on end in one prison, and sewing washbags in another.

"The problem is that when people are in prison, you need to do something with them so when they're released, they can get an education or a job. But I saw very little of that."

"And not just that, but many people who are mentally ill are not able to get the appropriate help in prison, or have their issues dealt with. And some of the accommodation I saw was terrible. Even now in some prisons, men have buckets in their rooms overnight because they have no in-cell sanitation

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and there are not enough staff to take them to the toilet.

“In this day and age, it’s shocking. It gets to a point where you think ‘yes, it’s a prison, but these are people.’ That could be someone you know, such as a member of your family. It was a real eye-opener.”

Countless times, Faith tried to tackle the issues but to no avail.

“You write reports, go to board meetings, talk to governors, report things to the national council, and go to area meetings yet nothing changes. I had exhausted all avenues, and it was like hitting your head against a brick wall.

“I wanted the IMB to actually fulfil its remit, and all I could see was a toothless organisation that was stagnating.”

Frustrated at the situation, Faith found herself presented with the perfect opportunity and in 2016 decided to write about her experiences in the Prisons Handbook under a pseudonym.

“I just went for it. I didn’t want my name to be put there as I didn’t want it to be a distraction because I felt what was important were the issues raised and not who raised them.

“But all hell broke loose when I was identified as the author. I was contacted by one of my board members, as another member had seen part of the article in a magazine. By that point, it hadn’t been officially published, so I was very confused about that. In the end, it was sent to the president of the IMB.

“He sent it to every IMB member throughout the country, every member of the national council, and anyone to do with the IMB. He sent it along with a covering letter, saying that he was going to be taking it to the Ministry of Justice lawyers. I then had to read a statement to my board acknowledging I was the author.”

Faith realised there would be a campaign waged against her as soon as she was identified.

“It came at a personal cost. I was confronted with a prejudicial character assassination, and I had to fight to clear my name. I was investigated twice by the Ministry of Justice, and called in front of a disciplinary hearing that involved two prison ministers. All because I had the courage to speak the truth about what was really going on.”

To this day, Faith still doesn’t know how her identity was uncovered.

“Those in the prison and the prisoners themselves didn’t trust the IMB, yet it was supposed to be independent. I also think I hit a nerve when I spoke about the people that were monitors. It wasn’t a personal attack on them, but I felt that we had the wrong kind of people on the boards. A lot of them were doing it as something for them to do when they were retired, and they couldn’t relate to the prisoners in any way, so they had no confidence in them. I wanted the monitoring board to do what it’s



Faith Spear FRSA Image
Charlotte Bond, Newsquest

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Faith Spear FRSA
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Bond, Newsquest

there to do, and for people to have a voice.”

This came at a cost.

“My whole board turned against me.

“And I was unable to talk about it because I was gagged by the Ministry of Justice.

“Once you’re investigated, it’s hard to know who you can trust and what you can say. The process was very lengthy, and I didn’t know if I was going to come out the other side.”

Faith was suspended from her role, then dismissed and eventually banned for five years.

“The ban is now up but I’d never go back into a norganisation that treats its members so badly.”

In the subsequent years, Faith has noticed a greater awareness when it comes to what is going on in prisons in England and Wales.

“People are more willing to speak out, and you see more coverage in the papers.

“More IMB members are not hiding their role in the same way that they used to.

“It’s important there’s more transparency and accountability within the Ministry of Justice. You have to hold people to account.

“It does take strength and courage, which we don’t always have, but I do believe things have changed and are continuing to.”

Faith’s courageous act hit national headlines, and in April 2017 she was nominated for The Contrarian Prize - an award for people who stand up for what they believe in.

“If I can encourage other people to do that, even if it’s just one person, it’s been worth it. Every voice is important, and if you

want change to happen, you have to know the facts and what’s going on. With the prison population increasing and conditions failing, it’s more important than ever to speak out.”

Despite all that she went through, she has not been deterred from making a difference. To this day, Faith is still trying to better the prison system by working on reform and humanitarian issues surrounding prisoners and the staff who work in them.

“One of the issues I work on is improving the accuracy for reporting discrimination incidents within the prison estate.

“I’ve delivered training to custodial managers and governors of London prisoners in dealing with discrimination reporting issues.

“While it doesn’t make headline news, it’s very important because when things do go wrong, that does make headline news.”

And in 2018, Faith joined Clean Sheet - a charity which helps those with convictions find permanent employment.

“I was responsible for raising awareness of Clean Sheet by engaging ambassadors.

“Because it’s a national network, they’re able to help by contacting other organisations, industries, and businesses, while preparing people for interviews and getting them back into the routine of having a job.”

While working for Clean Sheet, Faith found her belief in humanity restored.

“They were lovely people and the work they did was to be applauded.

“It was a really important step over the last few years to be a part of that, and they were all like-minded people who had the same hopes and vision that I did.”

In 2018, Faith was also named one of Suffolk’s 100 Inspirational Women by Archant.

“I was voted alongside many other public figures and well-known personalities, and it was a very proud day for me.

“As a result, it brought recognition to not just me personally but the work I do here in Suffolk and in a wider context on the national and international stage.”

In addition, Faith works as a criminal justice columnist for New York-based online magazine New Thinking, and also has her own blog, The Criminal Justice Blog.

And at the moment, she is in the process of writing her own book.

“I’m more than a third of the way through, and I hope it’s published next year.

“It will focus on my experiences working in the criminal justice system, and will include some of the revelations and things I haven’t written about before.”

To find out more about Faith,
visit faithspear.wordpress.com

