

# Work experience provided better start for inmate, baby

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, June 19, 2015 9:41 am

LA CROSSE — Cadi Ryan would be the first to admit she's made some mistakes in her life, but should they forever sideline her from being a contributing member of society?

Ryan, 33, of La Crosse, wound up in the Jefferson County Jail last year after being pulled over on Interstate 94 for driving while under the influence of legally prescribed medications she was taking for sleeping difficulties.

A teacher, she had racked up three prior OWI offenses several years before. While she says she hadn't taken an alcoholic drink for five or six years, those prior offenses were enough to ensure a jail stay.

Complicating matters, Ryan was pregnant with her first child.

A lengthy jail stay could have derailed her life and denied her the opportunity to raise her own child. But thanks to Jefferson County's anti-recidivism efforts and the generosity of Jefferson County Veterans Services Officer Yvonne Duesterhoeft, Ryan was able to work off part of her sentence and return home for the birth of her child.

She is now raising her daughter, working as a waitress and working toward re-entering society as fully as possible.

Following her fourth-offense OWI, Ryan was sentenced to nine months in jail. With good behavior and work-release, she was able to cut that time down while remaining gainfully employed.

Unlike many members of the jail population, Ryan had a good education, having achieved a master's degree in teaching English as a Second Language. Certified to work with students from kindergarten through high school, she had taught at the middle-school level prior to her arrest.

Ryan credits her work experience through the jail and Duesterhoeft as her mentor with saving her life and her sanity during her incarceration.

On top of her former substance abuse issues, Ryan said, she also suffered from an eating disorder and the boredom and depression of being locked up would have threatened her life and that of her baby had she not had the opportunity to do meaningful work.

Because she already was five months pregnant, Ryan said, her opportunities to work at an outside job were limited. The deputies at the jail helped to find an alternative work assignment for her at the Veterans Services Office, she said.

Ryan said her days in the jail started with a wake-up call around 4:30 or 5 a.m., breakfast, then a little bit more time to sleep before she started working at 8 a.m. Although the Veterans Services Office technically was only



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open until 5 p.m., Duesterhoeft often was there until 8 p.m., and Ryan willingly worked all the extra hours she could, preferring that to sitting around in her cell thinking about all of the mistakes she had made that led to her incarceration.

“I started out just kind of doing odd jobs at the Veterans Services Office,” Ryan said. “I helped decorate the bulletin board there, checked addresses from mail that was returned to the office, and converted records from paper to electronic files. I had to check and double-check to make sure all of the records were entered correctly, then scan the information into the database.”

Ryan said that she hadn’t worked in data entry before, and this work gave her a new skillset, since she still is unsure whether she’ll be able to re-enter the field of education with a criminal record.

But what was most important was forming relationships with the people at the Veterans Services Office and those who helped with the anti-recidivism program at the jail.

“The people I worked with were really great,” she said. “I felt like the attitude of the guards was great, too. They treated us like real people, not just prisoners.”

Duesterhoeft helped even further by treating Ryan to lunch at the Veterans Services Office, making sure she had all of the fresh vegetables and fruit and nutrition she needed as a pregnant woman.

“Suffering from an eating disorder, that really helped,” Ryan said. “I’m not sure whether I would have been eating without her support.”

Meanwhile, Ryan took advantage of other intervention opportunities at the jail. When she first arrived there, a county representative talked to her about her future plans, resources available to her and where to go from here.

Over the course of her jailtime, she took advantage of the in-house church services brought in by community groups, and that too meant a lot to her.

“That helped me through some tough times,” Ryan said. “The volunteers were really amazing people.”

Ryan spent several months in jail, from Oct. 2-March 15.

Her baby arrived a week earlier than expected. She would still have been in jail had it not been for the early release facilitated through her work at the Veterans Services Office.

“For every hour I worked, I got an hour off my sentence,” she said.

This made all of the difference in the world to the new mom.

“I am able to bond with my baby, to breastfeed her and to give her the best possible start in the world,” Ryan said. “Otherwise, I would have had to give her up for adoption or give her to my (elderly) parents to raise.”

When the Daily Union talked to Ryan in early April, she still was on medical leave with her daughter, but she was expected to return to work as a waitress within two weeks.

The La Crosse woman said her future plans are centered on raising her daughter and giving her the healthiest possible start on life.

“I don’t know if I can re-enter the field of education with this on my record, but I want to do more than waitress,” she said. “I hope I can help others overcome addiction, and for now I am spending time writing about my experiences. I’d really like to publish a book that would help others.”

Ryan said she hopes that anti-recidivism efforts like Jefferson County’s spread throughout the nation, giving inmates like herself a chance at redeeming themselves.

“A lot of drug addicts get put into jail rather than treatment,” Ryan said. “There has to be some kind of treatment.”

She differentiated between addicts and other “criminals,” saying that addicts do not intend to go out and commit crimes. Addiction is a disease for which they need treatment, and like all inmates, they need opportunities for rehabilitation.

For if an addict receives no treatment or targeted intervention, they are eventually released into the same environment that caused their initial problems, with no alternative ways to deal with challenges, Ryan said.