From Gin Lane To (Visiting) The County Jail

If you ever have the opportunity to visit George and Patty Kraus at their Gin Lane home, Ocean Dream, you can be forgiven for wanting to linger for a while.

There is an immaculately groomed grass tennis court on one side of the driveway. On the other side, leading to the front door, spectacular gardens bloom in every color of the rainbow. Walk through the charming house and you'll end up on an expansive back porch looking down upon more spectacular gardens, a putting green and a lovely pool area, all of which you can enjoy with the soundtrack of the perpetually churning ocean, which is just over the dune, in your ears.

Why anyone would ever leave this, even temporarily, is hard to fathom.

But Patty Kraus did. And it's where she went, and for what reason, that's truly remarkable.

What's more remarkable, though, is that no one had to ask her to do it. Without prompting, she decided to leave the comfort of her home to visit the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverside on a regular basis to mentor incarcerated women, as she put it, had made "bad choices" and lacked basic services to help them get their lives on track. She started mentoring once a week as part of an existing program run by the Catholic Prison Ministry, which focused on themes of forgiveness, self-esteem and parenting.

"I'd say to George, 'Well, I'm going to jail! I don't know when I'll be back,'" she said on a perfect Sunday afternoon on her back porch last weekend, with various family members floating around in anticipation of a family party the next day. "It got tough.

"Each week, I would come home and tell George another sad story about a woman who had made a bad choice and was paying a terrible price for that mistake," she said.

"I was afraid if we didn't help these women, they would go back to the same environment that sent them to jail to begin with.

"So I said, 'George, we have to help these women.'"

And so George, a highly successful "serial entrepreneur" at the peak of his career, according to Patty, jumped right on it, saying he needed the summer to size it up and develop a plan. He did, and New Hour for Women and Children was born soon after.

Three years later, the organization has helped, according to its new executive director, Serena Liguori, more than 100 incarcerated women in Nassau and Suffolk counties, providing a range of services, including personalized plans to help them re-enter society, find housing, find gainful employment, earn an education and reconnect with their children.

Patty estimated that more than 90 percent of the "members," as the organization calls the women it assists, are mothers. And Serena said most of the women were victims of domestic violence.

"These women lose everything," Patty said, adding that the women she mentors are not violent offenders. "They come out of jail with the clothes on their bodies."

She cited an example—a mentee named Laquita who had been incarcerated due to a driving under the influence conviction, was looking for a place to live upon leaving the county jail. She was rejected, by Patty's count, at 31 apartment complexes. So she urged her to change her approach: Tell them you're a changed person, that you've made mistakes but have learned from them and just need a chance to demonstrate that.

"How does that sound?"

"It sounds great—but it doesn't sound like the mentor responded. But she did it. And got the apartment."

"Patty is a blessing in my life," said Laquita, who is doing quite well today. "She always speaks of positivity. New Hour has been in my life since November 2014. The staff is very loving and supportive."

The ultimate goal, according to the Krauses, was to build a "safe house to help women post-incarceration. To get the effort rolling, George Kraus agreed to fund the fledgling organization for two to three years, with the idea that New Hour would become self-sufficient by the end of that time.

According to Serena, after securing a number of grants and planning a number of fundraisers, the organization, like the women it helps, is doing just that. She said New Hour is indeed now "transitioning" toward financial self-sufficiency.

And the Krauses, by the way, are assisting with upcoming fundraisers, too—a garden tour, with New Hour members present, will be held at Ocean Dream on July 22. Attendees are welcome to donate as little or much as they choose.

Having spent most of my life on the South Fork, and yet never once, to my knowledge, having spent time with a Gin Lane resident, suffice to say this is not what I would have expected. But the Krauses, who have a long history of involvement with charitable causes, particularly those that benefit children in their winter home of Naples, Florida, have a philosophy that actually makes a lot of sense.

"George and I learned a long time ago that the person who is giving gets far more than the person who gets," Patty said. "My real life is a fairy tale, so blessed by loving family and friends. Giving back is what it is all about. In helping others, you help yourself."

I play this mental game once in while where I try to envision what the biggest difference between living now and living, say, 500 years from now will be. The conclusion I sometimes come to is that eating animal flesh will be considered barbaric (and note that I say this while preparing to throw a kielbasa on my backyard grill). Sometimes I think it'll be that advances in science will allow virtually every personality trait to be diagnosed, so that the guy at work you think is just a complete ass will, 500 years from now, be a sufferer of Unintentional Jackass Syndrome and be worthy of community empathy.

But, usually, the conclusion I come to is that we as a society will have fully gotten beyond the idiotic and utterly self-defeating drive to enact vengeance on perpetrators of crime by simply depositing them in a cage.

We will have, I imagine, finally figured out that it makes a great deal more sense to get to the root of the cause of why they did what they did and, far more importantly, spend the period of incarceration, and after it if necessary, in helping them not do it again by not judging their actions but helping them overcome them, helping them to learn the real-life skills they need to thrive.

Regarding the latter, New Hour is essentially doing that now.

Or, as Patty put it, more succinctly on her back porch, "It's not on everyone's bucket list to help incarcerated women. But when you help these women, you're helping generations to come."

Tim Motz, of Water Mill, is a former reporter and blogger and currently a communications executive as well as the founder, songwriter and rhythm guitarist for the band Sideshow Rodeo. His website address is timmotz29@gmail.com.