



Troubled teen beaten down by system

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ROSIE DIMANNO

Most people are scared to die. It can't be any worse than living a life like mine. Being dead I think would just suit me fine ...

People say there's nothing wrong with me. Honestly, I think they need to f--- off because they don't know what goes on in my head. When I used to try to hang myself I was just messing around trying to make them care and pay attention. Now it's different ...

I went to court yesterday and I thought he was going to send me to adult! Time is running out. My chances are getting fewer and fewer. F---. I give up! I'm done trying.

– Excerpt from Ashley Smith's journal, Sept. 4, 2006

A month later, the 18-year-old was indeed transferred to an adult closed security facility. That's prison, in plain language, despite her youth status.

She would be repeatedly Tasered (seven times in 26 days), pepper sprayed, locked down in solitary for 23 hours a day, forcibly medicated and placed in the hideous WRAP restraint: bound head to toe, unable to budge, hockey helmet jammed over her head lest she topple over or try to bite.

New Brunswick's Ombudsman and Child and Youth Advocate would later write: "I challenge anyone with a sane mind to live in conditions similar to the ones described ... for half the time Ashley had to endure ..." And: "Surely, there is a better way."

If so, not in time to save Ashley Smith, who committed suicide – whether she actually meant to die or not – before the review of custodial conditions in N.B., and her own specific case, was completed.

On Oct. 18, 2007 – having been transferred 17 times in the previous 11 1/2 months between three federal penitentiaries, two treatment facilities, two external hospitals and one provincial correctional facility – the teenager tied a ligature around her neck while on suicide watch at Grand Valley Institution for Women, near Kitchener.

Correctional staff, who had been watching, did not intervene for nearly 30 minutes – and "this failure cost Ms. Smith her life," as stated in a report released last week, "A Preventable Death," by the Correctional Investigator of Canada.

In the days after the report was publicized, attention and misgivings were focused on systemic problems, the lack of mental health services for youth – Ashley was never sent for a formal psychological evaluation while in federal custody – and poor co-ordination among correctional authorities. But a closer reading of the file, the reviews of her early custodial years in N.B., suggest strongly that, while Ashley was an angry young girl from the age of 12, it was the rigid and punitive correctional system that made her *nuts* – despairing, endlessly confrontational and ultimately self-destructive, even as she clearly called out for help with acts of self-harm.

In page after page of analysis, she is described as defiant, combative, unyielding to rules, refusing to conform; an obstinate and powerful personality, the proverbial square peg being forced to fit into a round hole, a juvenile iconoclast who fought tooth and nail in hanging on to a personality others deemed "oppositional" and "narcissistic" and "disrespectful."

Ashley would probably have been better off if all those who did intervene, who sought to alter her behaviour, so often in cruel ways, had just left the girl alone, said: Go. Fend for yourself. You've heard of "black while driving" or "Muslim while flying" – externally imposed perceptions that pre-emptively stigmatize, even criminalize, behaviour. Ashley was incorrigible while incarcerated.

But the more she resisted, the further she was restricted and punished, caught in a crazy Catch-22 that had disaster written all over it. One size does not fit all in correcting bad behaviour.

Eventually, the girl who had first crossed the correctional system for throwing crab apples at a postal worker was a full-fledged federal inmate. Every reprimand or new charge – within and without jail – was tacked onto her sentence so that, at 18, despite being a minor, she was sent to an adult prison.

It is obvious that Ashley could never get on top of it, ahead of the jailers

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and tormentors – from her perspective – because she was singularly incapable of submitting.

Her "crimes," the acts that provoked ever more punitive discipline, included an aversion to strip-searches, refusal to hand over a pencil, verbal abuse of staff, smearing feces on the wall, biting and spitting and constantly tacking toilet paper or bits of cloth over her cell window. It was this defiance that apparently needed crushing.

However disturbed, rebellious, as an adolescent, Ashley Smith was sane. It was the adults – screws and jailers and clipboard clods – who made her crazy.

But she never did surrender.

Rosie DiManno usually appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday.