

“Working in prison set me free”

After 15 years in advertising, Sophie decided to change career and become a Sophrologist. She made her debut in prison and, in spite of her fears and that of her friends, was rewarded with a beautiful life lesson...

And here I am, walking across the thinning grass, about to get in the concrete building. It's crazy, I thought I would never come back. I had not set foot at Fleury-Merogis prison for 4 years. I already know it is going to be tough work: a 6 month psychology internship at the regional medical and psychological unit of the prison. And yet, I am happy, really, to be going through security, to show the guards my pass. Yes, happy to be here again, in this place that is different, scary of course, but that was for me the place of the most beautiful of experiences.

For 15 years, I worked in advertising. I never felt at ease there, with the impression that, in fact, it wasn't my thing. And the stress was there all the time. When they made me redundant, it was a relief. I had to change life. I was doing Sophrology at the time, a method coming from Eastern meditation and yoga as well as Western relaxation. I decided to make it my profession. I studied for 3 years, and had to write a report on a practical experience. To write it, I had to find an internship and, very quickly, I knew where I wanted to go. Sophrology had always been for me a way to find freedom when you feel imprisoned. And the image that kept cropping up was prison. “Sophie, have you really thought about it?” kept asking my husband. “It will be an experience”. “Do you realise you are going to meet people nobody wants to meet? You do not realise who these prisoners are.”

I was certainly naïve. But I had this idea that working in an environment different from mine could only mean a wealth of experience. I wouldn't let it go. Very quickly, the head of the medical and psychological unit of Fleury accepted my request of internship: I was ecstatic! He put me in touch with psychologists from the centres for youth detention and short sentences. He probably thought it would be less of a shock for me who did not know anything about prison. I talked to the psychologists and we got on straight away. One of them just warned me: “it is no trifle to work here. Many, even very well prepared, cannot bear it. So be careful, will you?”

The first time I arrived at Fleury, I wasn't scared. I arrived straight and tall, feeling very confident. Anyway, I had no idea what it was going to be like so I would just go for it. When I saw the building, I thought I was back in the 70's. Everything seemed, well... ageless. I was expecting to see infamous criminals at every turn. There, the screaming never stops. I could still hear them back home.

I had my pass and I all the paperwork to access the youth detention centre. A psychologist had chosen some for me, those he thought could do Sophrology. He told me: “your first patient is a 17 year old boy. He is a bit of a case. But you should be alright.” I will never forget how that doctor helped me. How professional, how composed, how he accepted me immediately... And the most amazingly devoted nurses I had ever seen. I did not want to disappoint them.

My first session was in a gym. I was to be there twice a week. Security was limited. A small window, a bell to ring in case of problem and... that's it. The “kid” arrived. He was huge. Skin-head, tattoos all over the

place... He was impressive but I did not want to look intimidated. I tried to look at ease in front of this mountain of a boy who was fidgeting all the time, smiling when I was trying to get serious and who answered me when I tried to explain what Sophrology was: "right, yeah, it is like having a bang." When I got out of that first session, I had lost my confidence somewhat. But the psychologist was very reassuring: "He will need you, Sophie. You know, nobody ever looked after him." "I am certain he won't come back. He couldn't care less."

But there he was, each time. The following weeks, I had more patients. I met a man who had a car accident while drunk and killed two people. This cultured executive could not understand what he was doing there. He did not even feel guilty. The guilty ones were those who had put him there, not him. Sophrology helped; he was very motivated. I knew though that they were not all here to relax. For them, it was time off, for others, wanting to see a woman. I knew it and was careful what I looked like. Nothing provocative but I wanted to look good. They deserved it. My attitude was enough to get respect. They understood straight away who they were dealing with and there never was any problem. Some were even real gentlemen.

Those 6 months were a very positive experience. So much so that they offered to open a Sophrology workshop in the main prison, in the men's quarters. I first felt fear. In that prison, you find it all: murderers, paedophiles, gangsters. The lot. Once more, my husband told me I was crazy. What if he were right?

Why help them? But I had to try it. For 4 years, I spent time in a 9 m² cell with prisoners and they were the best of my life. I sometimes felt frightened, sometimes desperate. I laughed with them too. I mainly changed the way I was looking at them. I know now that anyone can end up behind bars. That many of these men never see anyone, that they are alone and abandoned. I saw some of them reach out, learn to relax, become again, for a session, men like others.

Then they had to close my workshop. Like philosophy and art therapy. No more budget, impossible to go on. I told all my patients. They were so sad. Some cried, others said: "But are you going to come back?" What could I tell them? My last day was hell. I had this terrible feeling I was letting them down. I have never been able to forget them.

I went back to studying, psychology this time. Once more, an internship to do, once more, one idea: Fleury prison. I am at the moment assistant to a psychologist in his sessions. I haven't lost the passion, I have never felt disappointment. All those years, you could say I have outdone myself. I am very proud of what I have done, me, the middle-class girl from advertising. But that is not all. I am certain I was of some use. All the anxiety, the bad dreams, the moments of doubt, despair, sometimes, all the questions without answers I have asked myself on these people will never tarnish this victory.

Elle - January 2012