Rational, Compassionate Justice in Wisconsin's North Woods

Ryan Stone
Wisconsin HealthCorps
Marinette County Public Health
8th U.S. Congressional District
89th State Assembly District
30th State Senate District

If the word 'Marinette' conjures up any images at all for most people in the state of Wisconsin, they're likely the pleasant, bucolic sort that color the county's tourism page: sunset over rippling water, silhouette of a boat, bluejay set off by the snow, park path studded with the reds and gold of fall—that sort of thing. Having had a similarly composed sense of the place myself, while signing my name on my agreement to serve this year as an AmeriCorps member at Marinette County Public Health, is likely why I was so shocked, after settling in to my new home in the North Woods, to discover another element integral to the mix that makes Marinette what it is, but that didn't make the pages of any of its brochures. It does, however, threaten to blot out the beauty with which those pages are filled, and which filled my mind before I arrived. That element is heroin.

There's no other way to say it: my county—the county I now regard as my home—is being ravaged by an alcohol and drug-abuse epidemic that has far outstripped the containing capacity of the traditional tools of law enforcement. The statistics reflect this: it has been Marinette, and not the urban center that most would expect, that has led the state in heroin seizures per capita from 2008-2012, by more than double. Heroin mortality was similarly, egregiously, high. But statistics don't, of course, tell the whole story. To get that, you need to see the human effects that those statistics reflect. You need to see it in the twisted metal and broken glass mess of a drunk driver's wrecked car. You need to see it on the rolls of employers, rendered conspicuously sparse. You need to see it on the faces, red and wet with tears and scarred with neglect, of the users themselves. And to do that, you've often had to visit a prison.

Not so, though, in Marinette County. Not anymore. Mustering, among the innumerable other resources needed to convert justice from a merely punitive to a transformative model, the empathetic acumen of presiding Judge Morrison, the array of therapeutic resources available at ADAPT, Marinette's public outpatient mental health clinic, and the tirelessly vigilant shepherding of the Program Coordinator, Sara Plansky-Pecor, Marinette has, as of July 2014, placed itself on the national vanguard in the struggle against substance abuse. Because July 2014 was when, thanks to a generous grant, the county made its addition to the over 40 Treatment Drug Courts in existence all over the state. I've alluded above to 'transformative justice'; I mean to say that, with every single session, a Treatment Drug Court is a legal tool put to use to save lives. So far, Planksy-Pecor, Morrison, and their partners have kept nearly 20 offenders from the cells—or worse—that would've otherwise awaited them. In the words, spoken this February, of the program's first graduate: without the treatment, discipline, and direction provided him by the program, "I probably wouldn't be standing here today."

Shadowing Sara Planksy-Pecor briefly, that is the sort of story I had the honor of watching the Drug Court shape. Sadly, however the demands of my schedule have so far mostly frustrated my great desire to participate personally in that shaping: Public Health needs all of me. Seeing the vast hope the Court inspires, and the comparable vastness of the need it's working with near-alarming vigor to fulfill, makes me wish I could clone myself to contribute. And while I'm reconciled to my inability to produce another me, I do wonder whether, if the right eyes fell on the things I've seen with mine, AmeriCorps wouldn't produce for Marinette another member.

Ryan, when not protecting and promoting the health of the public with Wisconsin HealthCorps, with great success passionately reads Victorian fiction, with some success writes poetry, and, with sadly very little success as yet, plays the violin. He hopes that the seed of social justice public health has planted in him will bear fruit as he heads this fall to medical school.