

Author explores plight of kids with parents in prison

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In writing "Harry Sue," she develops empathy for growing number of children suffering prison blues

BY ANN BYLE

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Sue Stauffacher has learned a lot more about prison and prisoners, thanks to her new young adult novel, "Harry Sue" (Knopf, \$15.95), released last week. She needed real-life stories to flesh out the details of young Harry Sue's life as the daughter of a mother in prison.



Sue Stauffacher

"Harry Sue herself is a composite of young women I've worked with through the Grand Rapids

John F. Jellema Treatment Center substance abuse recovery program and talked to moms."

Stauffacher also learned about "joint jive," the unique prison lingo that is almost its own language. The book provides a glossary to Harry Sue's collected and much-practiced vocabulary.

"Harry Sue" is the story of 11-year-old Harriet Susan Clotkin, who is left in the care of an abusive grandmother after her mother is sent to prison. Harry Sue struggles to locate her mom, while imagining the reason she has received no word from her since she went to prison.

Stauffacher says a fair number of children locally have parents in the prison system; nationally they number of about 7 million. And the number of women in prisons has grown almost 600 percent between 1977 and 2001, according to experts.

"Pretty much every school has kids with a parent in prison. It's an unknown thing, a shameful thing, so the kids don't talk about it," said Stauffacher.

IF YOU GO

Author visit

Sue Stauffacher will read from and sign copies of her new book, "Harry Sue," at 5:30 p.m. Friday at Pooh's Corner bookstore in Breton Village Mall. Personal-care items will be collected for those recently released from prison.

working on building up her prison vocabulary as well as her status as a juvenile delinquent. But her love for the children in her Granny Clotkin's day-care, as well as her quadriplegic best friend, gets in the way.

"One of the real issues for kids with parents in prison is that they are often put in the care of relatives angry at being given this extra burden," said Stauffacher.

Stauffacher talked with people advocating prisoners' rights, prison wardens and a group of mothers.

"I did three writing workshops with



with them."

Stauffacher says there are few programs available for children with parents in prison.

"I didn't have a goal or mis