

“I’VE GONE SO FAR DOWN THIS ROAD THERE CAN BE NO TURNING BACK.”

Since her daughter suffered a self-inflicted death in Styal prison five years ago, Pauline Campbell has been a tireless campaigner for penal reform. She has her education and professional background on her side. But as Ciara Leeming finds, she also has the fearlessness of one for whom the worst has already happened.

Photos: Howard Barlow



For Pauline Campbell, there can be no turning back. Five years after her daughter Sarah swallowed a fatal dose of anti-depressants – a day after arriving at Styal women's jail in Cheshire – the former college lecturer has become one of the country's most outspoken penal campaigners.

Sarah's passing marked a turning point in Campbell's life. She had lost her only child in tragic – and preventable – circumstances, leaving her alone. And her eyes had been opened to a crisis unfolding in Britain's female jails, where drug addiction, mental illness and self-harm are endemic.

Most of her time and energy is now spent campaigning about unjust sentencing and inhumane conditions in prisons. This month, charges following her arrest at a demonstration outside Styal – where she stood between a prison van and the gate – were dropped before trial, but not before she was dragged through several preliminary hearings.

"In a way I feel I've locked horns with the establishment – and by that I mean the prison service, the police, the Crown Prosecution

the NHS, and going on to teach health service administration for 14 years at a college. She had Sarah when she was 36, after suffering four miscarriages, and took early retirement on health grounds aged 44.

She believes the odds were stacked against her daughter from the start. During the pregnancy she was on medication which she later discovered should not be taken during the first trimester – drugs she now believes damaged the developing foetus. Almost from birth there were signs that things were wrong with Sarah. Diagnoses were mooted: minimal cerebral dysfunction; mild atypical Aspergers' Syndrome; biologically-determined behavioural disorder; the clumsy child.

Campbell and her husband split up when Sarah was a toddler and she saw her dad for the last time when she was four. This was just the start of her problems.

"In my opinion she had a longstanding and unresolved grief about the loss of her father. She was sexually abused for several years when she was a little girl. She was bullied at school. She was raped aged 15 and developed clinical

heart attack. Assuming he had fainted, the pair made off with his briefcase. They were charged with theft of credit cards and murder, and Sarah ended up on remand. The charge was later reduced to manslaughter.

At Styal, Sarah managed to kick heroin for good – something Campbell is proud of. But it was then that her mother discovered the realities of prison life. During her time in custody, Sarah was often locked in her cell for 23 hours a day. Self-harm was a way of life.

"I'll never forget some of my conversations with her during my visits," says Campbell. "I remember sitting in the visiting hall and she said to me: 'You know, mummy, Styal Prison needs closing down.' And I looked at her with a very heavy heart and said something to the effect of: 'Yes, Sarah, I think you are right.'

"If you want to find out the reality and how to put things right you need to speak to those who know – and top of the list is the prisoners. But they don't have a voice."

Records show Sarah's self-harming increased sharply in custody, with 27 recorded incidents including seven attempted hangings. So when she was sent back to prison to serve a three-year sentence in January 2003, Campbell was under no illusion about what could happen.

"It was clear to me she probably would die in prison – in fact, it's fair to say I went into a state of anticipatory grief," she says. Campbell was informed of her daughter's death by phone, hours after the event. It did not take long for her to channel her sense of outrage into a powerful personal campaign.

"Other grieving parents seem to descend into depression, or take to the drink or become nervous wrecks. Not me," she says. "It takes a lot of energy to keep someone depressed. Sometimes I am depressed but at the appropriate times I rechannel that energy."

Just seven weeks after Sarah's death, she travelled to London to speak at the annual general meeting of Inquest, a group that campaigns against deaths in custody. As the deaths continued at Styal – on average one every eight weeks throughout 2003 – and other women's prisons in England, she became a fixture on the campaign trail. By June she was demanding an independent public inquiry into the Cheshire prison – a call that she repeated many times as the months went on.

Sarah's death came during a terrible year for the prison service. In 2003, there were 14 self-inflicted deaths in women's prisons – a record high. The following year there were 13, after which the numbers began to drop, although last year they began to climb again, with a rise of 166 per cent.

It didn't take long for Campbell to strike on the idea of direct action. By spring 2004, she and her supporters, including former prisoners and relatives of inmates, were holding vigils outside prisons each time a woman died a self-inflicted death. So far they have held 28.

At those, Campbell has been arrested 15 times and charged on five occasions but each time the case has been dropped.

She knows she is at an advantage to many prisoners' parents when it comes to getting her message across. She is educated and her teaching background enables to put her views across clearly. She has a computer, a car and is

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Service and the court service," she tells *The Big Issue in the North* when we meet in a bland Chester hotel.

"It would be wrong for me to ignore what happened to Sarah. This campaign is the biggest challenge I've faced in my life. And if they think I'm going to go away, they are sorely mistaken. I've gone so far down this road that there can be no turning back."

An engaging speaker, Campbell holds steady eye contact and makes her points powerfully, using our first names for effect in the way that teachers do so well. The long leather coat she's wearing for our interview belonged to her late daughter, and the suit was bought for her funeral. It's a poignant way of holding her memory close – as is the campaigning.

Campbell, from the leafy Cheshire village of Malpas, had a feeling that Sarah would die in prison. Just three days before her 19th birthday, the teenager – who had a history of self-harm – was returned to Styal after a tough six months spent there on remand.

Now considered a "grass", having given evidence against her co-accused, she was terrified. Less than 24 hours after arriving at the jail, she took a quantity of tablets – despite being on suicide watch. She died several hours after slipping into a coma – the third and youngest of six women to die from self-inflicted injuries at Styal in just 12 months.

Sarah's inquest later heard that she told staff what she had done but was left alone and dying in her cell while they decided what to do. Time was lost while officers argued over who should call an ambulance and looked for handcuffs, and paramedics were held up for eight crucial minutes at the prison gate.

Before her daughter ended up inside, Campbell, now 60, had little interest in prisons. Born and bred in Cheshire, she had worked in local government before moving to

depression. There were all kinds of other issues, and as an unsupported mother I was constantly overwhelmed with what I was having to deal with."

Despite this, Sarah was intelligent. A talented artist, she excelled at karate and was an LTA-rated tennis player. But at 16 she began smoking cannabis and quickly moved on to heroin, becoming physically dependent before her 17th birthday.

She had an abortion and moved out of home. It was during these dark days that she and an older woman, Kim Woolley, hassled pensioner Amrit Bhandari for money on a Chester street, only for him to suffer a fatal

Campbell (left) wearing her daughter's leather coat and the suit she bought for her funeral. Sarah (below) died less than 24 hours after being returned to Styal





Campbell says she was pushed with "considerable" force when protesting outside HMP Holloway last year. Photo: Peter Marshall

cut him short as he was replying to her to correct his figures about the number of women who died in jail.

The idea behind the protests is that no

retired. As a single woman she is answerable only to herself. And in Sarah's death she has found reserves of strength even she didn't know were there.

"I'm now fearless because that which I feared – the death of my only child, as I did when Sarah was on the heroin – happened five years ago," she explains. "I've dealt with it, albeit with great difficulty, and am still here.

"I can hold my argument with anybody, at any level, without being fazed by them. I'm well aware that many parents are not articulate and can feel out of their depth.

"And God help them if they have a criminal record, because they definitely won't be listened to. In a way, I suppose I'm speaking up for these people and for women in prison who don't have a voice."

A number of current and former ministers she's buttonholed are in no doubt she can hold her own, including Harriet Harman, Lord Goldsmith, Charles Clarke and Jack Straw. At a press conference in 2006 she forced Clarke, then home secretary, to admit that "prison doesn't work" and last year Straw, justice secretary, was put on the back foot at the Howard League's annual general meeting. She

civilised society should be sending women – or men for that matter – to a place that drives them to kill themselves. Campbell believes an overhaul of the system could tackle the problem once and for all.

"Governor Steve Hall, who runs Styal, openly says that further deaths are inevitable – and is not challenged about it. How dare he say that – what message is that giving to the staff at his prison?" she asks.

"Next time someone's found dead in their cell, will they say: 'Very sad but it was inevitable?' It's just not good enough. There have been six dead women at Styal since my daughter died in January 2003.

"Following Sarah's inquests the prison service said lessons would be learned. But I feel I have been duped. I'm angry because those words were clearly meaningless rhetoric. I'm sick of hearing that lessons will be learned – when will something actually be done?"

For Campbell and others in this campaign, the lack of accountability within the prison service is a major stumbling block to change. Inquest co-director Deborah Coles describes deaths such as Sarah's as "clear cases of corporate manslaughter" and calls for the

prison service to take responsibility. Former chief inspector of prisons, Lord David Ramsbottom, says it would only take one prison governor to be jailed for corporate manslaughter for the whole ethos to change.

Accountability alone wouldn't solve the crisis though. Campbell wants the penal system to become fairer and more humane – treating those who need psychiatric or drug support and punishing those who do wrong.

Around 90 percent of women prisoners were sentenced for a non-violent crime. The 4,300 women who are in prison at any time make up just 6 per cent of the penal population, so the system is skewed towards the male majority. There are fewer jails catering for women – with only HMP Styal in Cheshire and HMP New Hall in Wakefield in the north – meaning inmates can end up a long way from home.

Campbell supports last year's Corston report, commissioned by the Home Office in response to the six deaths at Styal. Labour peer Baroness Jean Corston advised the closure of all 15 women's jails within a decade. She saw little point in spending huge sums of money to lock up vulnerable women who pose no risk to the public and urged the government to set up small units for dangerous criminals and a network of support and supervision centres.

But ministers dismissed her ideas as too costly – days after £1.2 billion of extra funding was earmarked for the building of three new "titan" jails. Campbell says: "For a start, there are far too many women sent on remand at a time when they are legally innocent. That needs to stop. Seventy per cent of women in prison have two or more diagnosable psychiatric problems. There's something cruel about sending sick people to a place of punishment – surely they are entitled to treatment in the 21st century.

"If we sorted these issues out, I'm certain that deaths of women prisoners would become a thing of the past. So I don't share Governor Hall's view that further deaths are inevitable."

Another complaint is the number of mothers sent to jail, and the impact on their families. Two-thirds of female inmates are mothers, and most are the sole carer of their children.

"We in Britain like to call ourselves a civilised society. We have one of the finest legal systems in the world but I would argue that our criminal justice system is rather backward-looking when it comes to how it treats women.

"There are examples of other countries where women with young children are not sent to prison. In Russia, mums of children aged under 14 convicted of all but the most serious offences are routinely given a suspended sentence until the children reach that age.

"It's incredible that I'm even saying this, but perhaps we in this country ought to take a leaf out of Russia's book, because they seem to have this one right.

"What's happening here is medieval and barbaric, but our criminal justice policy appears to be led by the tabloid press and politicians who are falling over themselves to appear tough on crime.

"The prison service can behave in a dysfunctional way if it chooses but I'm not going to go along with it. This dysfunctional system is what caused my daughter's death."