



ALUMNI PROFILE

Lela Boykins Hall's Criminal Justice Career took her Out of Lowell Into South Africa

Lela Boykins Hall never expected to have a career in criminal justice. And, she certainly never suspected that she would become a community leader active in domestic-violence prevention, or that she would one day travel to Africa in that role.

The soft-spoken former children's librarian and long-time Lowell resident has indeed accomplished all of these things – and it all started at Middlesex Community College.

Now a Captain at Billerica's Middlesex House of Correction, Hall is working on a master's degree in criminal justice. She is president of Alternative House, a shelter for victims of domestic violence. And, last fall, as part of an MCC-initiated grant, funded by the U.S. State Department, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, she spent three weeks providing domestic-violence training to men and women in South Africa's Limpopo Province.

Hall's life gradually changed direction in 1987, when she left her job in the children's department at Lowell's Pollard Library to work in the library at the Middlesex House of Correction. Over the course of her duties, she became familiar with MCC through classes the college offered prison inmates. When Middlesex began offering criminal justice courses for the correction officers and staff, onsite two nights a week, Hall enrolled.

From the very beginning, she was hooked on criminal justice. "I just thought to myself, 'This is really interesting . . .'" said Hall of that first course. She earned an associate degree in criminal justice at Middlesex, and began working on a bachelor's degree at night at UMASS Lowell – all while working full time in the prison library and raising two daughters as a single parent. She earned her BA in 1996, and as Captain is a supervisor in the House of Correction Treatment Unit. In June, she expects to receive a master's degree from UMASS Lowell.

In addition to her studies and career, Hall has maintained a steady association with Alternative House. The women's shelter provides community training and support for victims of domestic violence and their children. After completing an internship in 1992 as part of her coursework, Hall began volunteering at Alternative House. Losing a close friend to domestic violence in 1997 further strengthened her resolve. "I decided I had to do anything I could to make sure we don't lose another person to domestic violence," she said.

Hall joined the Alternative House Board of Directors, and began taking more domestic-violence awareness and prevention training through the Middlesex Sheriff's Office. "I now provide domestic-violence training to all the new recruits – future corrections officers – at the House of Correction," she said.

It is this blend of professional and personal commitment that brought Hall to the attention of Kent Mitchell, MCC's Dean of International Arts. In 2003, Mitchell was in the process of writing a grant proposal to the U.S. State Department to fund a two-year exchange program between Middlesex and the Marishane Senior Secondary School in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The approved project will establish a community resource center there to promote literacy and counter violence against women and children.

South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women and girls in the world, and there is a well-documented need for safe zones in the region, explained Mitchell. Over the course

of the two-year exchange, teams of Middlesex staff and faculty and local community leaders will travel to South Africa, and teams of South Africans will visit Middlesex and Lowell. He needed someone on his team to "train the trainers" in the village of Marishane in all aspects of domestic violence.

"After I met Lela, I realized she was perfect," said Mitchell. "There is a kind of centered, but sympathetic quality to Lela that is important for this project."

When Mitchell called Hall last June to say the \$94,000 grant had been approved, she was ecstatic. "I've always wanted to go to Africa," she said. "Think about it, people refer to me as an 'African-American,' but, in reality, I know nothing about Africa. I knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime."

With the full support of Middlesex County Sheriff James DiPaola, Hall was able to travel with Mitchell to South Africa in November 2004 to lead three weeks of training. Upon her arrival, it was obvious she faced a situation unlike any she had previously encountered. Limpopo Province is the second poorest province in South Africa and the poverty Hall witnessed was shocking.

"Anything that I might complain about here in the United States – like having to take a bus – would be considered a blessing there," she said. Marishane women walk miles every day to get water for their families. In such an impoverished area, crime and violence are common, as is rape. All these factors, coupled with corruption in law-enforcement circles, can make life in their male-dominated society difficult for South African women.

"In the U.S., I counsel women about how to escape an unsafe domestic situation," said Hall. "I tell them how to call the police, how to file a restraining order. I can give them the phone number of a local shelter."

"In South Africa, the women asked me, 'Where am I going to go?' And I had to admit, I didn't have an answer to that," she said. "They simply don't have the resources we have."

But the Middlesex/Marishane exchange program was conceived as a joint project to help address that situation, and Hall is optimistic. "They were glad to have me there and I was glad to be there," she said.

"I was training the teachers in the school, men and women, and women's groups," said Hall. "I taught them all the same thing – all aspects of domestic violence. It was challenging and overwhelming, but also very fulfilling," she said. "I learned as much from them as they learned from me."

Despite the region's daunting poverty and lack of resources, Hall is adamant that violence and fear are not acceptable – no matter where one lives. "Poverty, AIDS and HIV, domestic violence, crime and corruption are all issues that the South Africans are facing," she said. "I'm aware that all of these very pressing things are happening, but these are not reasons for domestic violence to be taking place in anyone's life," said Hall.

"No one should have to live with fear or grow up in fear -- not in the United States, not in Lowell or Bedford, not in South Africa, not in Marishane, and not in Limpopo Province."

- Kathy Register



Lela Boykins Hall, a Captain at the Middlesex House of Correction, went to the village of Marishane, in South Africa's Limpopo Province, as a trainer as part of an MCC grant.

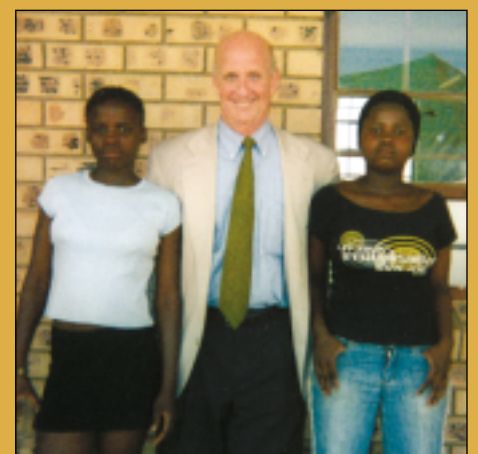
A View of South Africa



Hall, left, with a student from the Marishane Senior Secondary School.



A Marishane women's dance troupe performing at the village's Thanksgiving Celebration.



MCC's Dean of International Arts Kent Mitchell with two students from the Marishane School.