

# Probation officer helps build full, stable lives

In a scandal-scarred agency, Edith Alexander helps probationers under her watch



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Probation officer Edith Alexander (left) visited Kiana Bishop-Londy and her son, Khyel.

**By Alexa Mills**

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Roxbury District Court Probation Officer Edith Alexander rushed to the hospital when she got the midnight call that one of her probationers, eight months pregnant, was bleeding profusely.

It was the Saturday after Christmas. Kiana Bishop-Londy, age 20 and in labor for the first time, had listed her probation officer as her emergency contact. Alexander stayed by the bed, held Bishop-Londy's hand, and spoke encouragements during the birth of a baby boy. Hospital staff mistook the probation officer for a grandmother.

The 54-year-old Alexander, known to all as Edee, is a 16-year veteran of the Massachusetts Probation Department, an agency famously embroiled in recent years in a criminal patronage scheme that funneled jobs and promotions to the politically connected. But while former probation commissioner John O'Brien and others ran the department like a criminal enterprise, Alexander, like many of her colleagues, worked through all that, trying day after day simply to help the probationers she sees.

She has a constant caseload of nearly 100 men and women. Her job is to make sure that probationers meet the terms of their sentences. But Alexander wants much more for them. She wants them to build full, stable lives.

Some of her probationers read at a third-grade level. Some sleep couch to couch. Many are jobless. One couldn't get a state identification card because he didn't have his birth certificate. He couldn't get his birth certificate because he didn't have a bank account from which to draw the \$80 fee. He couldn't get a bank account because he didn't have identification. He didn't have \$80, either.

### **GLOBE SPOTLIGHT: Patronage in the Probation Department**

One former probationer, Karimah Braithwaite, came to Alexander feeling stuck and hopeless. Braithwaite said she had wanted to finish high school, but her dyslexia was an obstacle. She had begun to see herself as a person who couldn't learn, and she said her teachers had told her as much. When she tried to enroll in summer school, administrators said there was no space for her.

Alexander got up from her desk, took Braithwaite to her car, and drove to the school to discuss the situation. Braithwaite went to school that summer and eventually walked across the stage at graduation, as Alexander photographed the milestone moment from the audience. Alexander produced a photo album of the day for Braithwaite, who now has a job she loves.

“Edee doesn’t give you a chance not to trust her,” said Braithwaite.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Edith Alexander held Kyle Bishop-Londy three weeks after she witnessed his birth.

Judge Robert N. Tochka presided over Braithwaite’s case in Roxbury District Court.

“When you get to know [Braithwaite], she’s not just a person on probation, she’s a human being, and a fantastic person, who just needs the opportunity to shine. And Edee was on top of making sure, yes, we’re going to fight for her,” Tochka said.

She fights for all her probationers, he said. “She can be tough with them, but like a mom.”

Alexander lives in Roxbury and sees her probationers past and present in stores and on the streets. Her work is always with her, “like she’s carrying a weight on her shoulders,” said Tochka. “But she wants to carry the weight. It’s her neighborhood. It’s her community.”

She keeps a copy of her favorite poem, Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," tacked on her office wall. In the poem, the mother tells her child how she keeps on climbing, even though her life "ain't been no crystal stair." Every so often, Alexander takes the poem off the wall and hands it to a probationer. Then she prints another copy and hangs it back in the same spot — ready. Sometimes she finds the copies of her poems littering the floors of the courthouse, but she keeps handing them out.

The first few times Alexander met with Bishop-Londy, the young woman was too angry to see the poem, or any of the many clippings covering Alexander's walls. Bishop-Londy had been charged with breaking and entering and assault, and her cases were continued without a finding. "At first I was negative, rude, and disrespectful," recalls Bishop-Londy.

"Then one day," remembers Alexander, "I saw her come through the door, and I just said, 'OK, here we go again.' And she just came barreling, and just said, 'Hello.' And you could see her eyes. Tears were coming down her eyes. I was shocked."

Bishop-Londy had just learned of her pregnancy. She had no place to live. She wanted to go to college, but had already dropped out of four schools. One school kicked her out, she said in an interview, because of the GPS device she wore as a condition of her probation. She had debt, but no academic credit to show for it. She'd dreamed of a career in law, and now she was on probation.

In moments like that, Alexander thinks of her mother, who died more than three decades ago. How would her mother find a way? Ernestine Alexander was a woman who found ways. She and her husband, James, were from Gainesville, Fla. They left the Jim Crow South for the sake of their children's education, betting on Boston public schools. Her father had no more than a third-grade education. He had harvested fruit as a boy and served in World War II. In Boston, he became a cook. Ernestine became a public school teacher.

Alexander was only 20 when her mother died, but she knew she had to achieve the goals her mother had set. She was to climb higher, to earn at least a master's degree.

Alexander did that, as did all four of her siblings.

With Bishop-Londy before her in tears, Alexander said, she picked up the phone and started making calls: to each of the four schools her probationer had left, to creditors, to Boston social services agencies. She went to Roxbury Community College, Bishop-Londy in tow, to make sure the young woman was properly enrolled for the fall semester.

On the day Bishop-Londy got her first assignment back, she came bounding through Roxbury District Court with her paper in hand. Alexander took a photo of it. "She's giving me wisdom," said Bishop-Londy, who completed a four-class semester this fall, just a few weeks before giving birth.

Alexander's own children are away at college now. She gave every extra moment and dollar to them for two decades, and now she's staring in wonder at the newfound space in her life.

"The cat even meets me at the door," she said. "The cat never met me at the door before." Or maybe, she ponders, he did meet her, but she was too busy to notice.

She thinks in questions. On the way to work: How am I going to make this day better for someone? Looking at a bread line: How endless is hunger? When thinking about broken lives: How many years does it take to break something, and how many to put it back together? When remembering her mother: What did she instill in me?

She has a sure reason: "If I do for you," said Alexander, "you'll do for your children."