

Hyde Park

Ex-con works for prison reform

The number of young people imprisoned for draft resistance and drug abuse is causing a change in the U.S. prison system, according to ex-convict Virgil Keels.

Talking about prison reform at Thursday's Hyde Park, Keels said, "The youth getting into prisons are politically oriented, and they're talking to the older prisoners about reform."

He cited as evidence of this change the recent prison riots and holding of hostages to demand reform.

Society has ignored prisoners because "there are no voters in prisons," Keels said. Prison administrators have not had to be responsible to anyone for their human product, he added.

He would like to see community resources used to help the criminal. Sending men under sentence for a crime to a "community correctional center under supervision" would be preferable to sending men to "vegetate" in prison.

Drawing on his own experience of 22 years in 7 penal institutions, Keels described the bitterness and frustration nourished in prison. "Ignorance is never replaced by knowledge in prison," so the man returns

to crime when he is released.

Keels spoke of the guards' brutality, adding that "both the prisoner and guard are equal in mentality, the only difference is that one goes home at night."

Once imprisoned in Alcatraz, Keels spoke with knowledge of conditions there. Prisoners were not allowed reading material or radios and were only allowed to talk for one hour a week, he said.

"These dudes are sharp." If their ingenuity is remotivated, if they are given an opportunity, prisoners will not be alienated from society when they leave prison," he said.

While in Alcatraz, Keels talked with the late Robert Kennedy, who inspected the prison in his capacity as U.S. Attorney General.

Keels said he has received "a lot of inspiration from people who have helped me. The only way I'll go back to prison will be a case of mistaken identity."

Keels is currently on a 55-college campus tour to "inform and recruit people for a change in the prison system."

His book, *The Other Side of the Desk*, outlines his ideas on prison reform. Keels also serves as a program consultant for the National Coordinating

Council on Drug Abuse Information and Education.

He also received an award from former President Johnson for services rendered to the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

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