

Prisoner rehabilitation—a joke or a promise?

This is the second in a series of articles written by George E. May, an inmate at the Nebraska Penal and Correctional Complex. Today, he writes about rehabilitation programs at the prison.

by George E. May
Number 27571

The time finally arrived. I left the "fish tank" and was assigned a regular home—W-F-3, which means the West Cellhouse, F Gallery and Cell No. 3.

For the first time, my movement outside was without escort, although the guards in the tower followed my every step.

My new home was unbelievable. A bed, wash basin, toilet stool (without a seat—they told us seats make good weapons), a table and me, all crammed into a five by eight-foot cell.

The only other commodity in the cell was a five-hole box mounted on the wall which was the radio outlet, which I could plug into after I purchased a set of earphones. According to the schedule posted on the bulletin board, I would spend thirteen hours a day in my new home that winter. At least the next spring ("will I ever last that long?") would allow us an outside "yard period" in the early evening.

My daily schedule went something like this:

5 a.m.—lights on
6 a.m.—breakfast
7 a.m.—work line
10:45 a.m.—return to cellhouse
11 a.m.—count
11:15 a.m.—lunch
Noon—work line
3:20 p.m.—return to cellhouse
4 p.m.—count
4:30—dinner
5 p.m.—lock-up time
10 p.m.—lights out

The next day I walked to my assignment and was amazed that I wasn't shaken down before leaving the cellblock. The amazement ceased when I walked into the shop area where I was frisked twice before I reached the plate factory. The license plate production was just beginning and I was assigned as a spotter on the paint line. The pay was 35 cents a day. I anticipated a terrible problem budgeting all that money. And, after a little mental gymnastics, I calculated that in about nine working days I would have enough money to buy those earphones. Of course, as they hold back half my earnings until I am

released, I couldn't listen to the radio for about eighteen working days. Oh well, one hundred years from now I would never remember it. Or, I played "Pollyanna" and was glad I didn't have to pay taxes.

Three years later—and things are about the same. The tour would have the same number of doors, a few additional guards, the same quarantine period and the same 35 cents a day. Even the hourly schedule would be about the same, except that a new building housing a gym has been erected, allowing an extra period for exercise in the winter.

How is my rehabilitation program coming along, you say? What rehabilitation program?

To most of my 902 cohorts, or fellow misfits, the word "rehabilitation" is a distasteful one. In fact, it is a joke to most people in prison.

In the literal sense, the word means "to be returned to a former state" or "to restore to good repute." The first is undesirable (if my former state was socially acceptable, why am I here?) and the second is virtually impossible within the framework of any penal setting where the emphasis is still placed on retribution—or getting that pound of flesh each and every day.

Let us assume that one of the causes of imprisonment is irresponsibility, disrespect for law and order, living beyond your means or being unable to remain gainfully employed, which seem to apply partially or wholly to most prisoners. Let us go even further and assume that the necessary prerequisites for release from prison are:

—that you have become a responsible person and can assume the role of a responsible citizen.

—that you have gained a respect for the rights of others.

—that you have become aware of your problem and can now handle it properly.

—that you have acquired a trade, profession or education which will enable you to become a productive citizen upon release.

Lofty goals you say? Not if the correction of faults is the primary purpose of being in prison. Or are we

starting on a faulty premise—that the felon is being incarcerated in an institution that can actually correct his shortcomings.

Responsibility means moral accountability, reliability or trustworthiness. By definition, an individual must be tested or relied upon before he can be judged as a responsible person. From the moment a person begins a prison term, he is never given responsibility—except the 12 times every 24 hours that he must be somewhere to be counted. In fact, all the regulations seem to be aimed at making the institutional employe responsible for anything an inmate does. Several times, I have heard a supervisor reprimanding another employe with remarks like: "You know you never take the word of an inmate, or "You know you cannot hold an inmate responsible."

Is this teaching the inmate responsibility? Is this adhering to the unspoken mandate of the sentencing judge that "You shall remain incarcerated until you can become a responsible citizen?" I think not.

Living beyond one's means in our affluent society today is easy. It becomes a real problem when a person violates the law because of pressures placed upon him in an attempt to keep up with the Joneses. This is the lot of many penitentiary residents. To overcome this deficiency, we apparently must become aware of our problem and budget or abstain accordingly. Simple enough.

I earn 35 cents a day working in the plate factory, or \$7 for an average month. Half of this is set aside for release and the other half is placed in my spending account. Of the \$3.50 that I may spend, 75 cents must go for club dues (or I will never be eligible for a pay raise), 35 cents for toothpaste, 30 cents for hair oil, 15 cents for soap (if I'm real conservative and do not forget it at showertime), \$1 for postage stamps (that's only four letters a week), 60 cents for shampoo (next month is deodorant) and 30 cents for my one-fourth of the coffee bought for use in the shop last month. I guess I'll have to shave with bar soap and use the same blades this month.

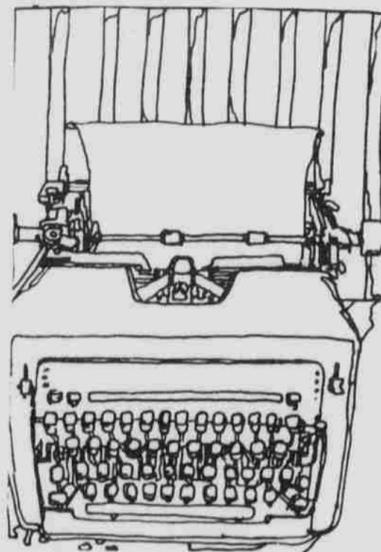
Smoking? If I cut from three packs a day to one pack, I would still need another \$10.45 this month, so I guess I'll join the "I Quit" club. And now I

really have a major decision—what do I do with the nickel I have left when the least expensive store item is a candy bar costing eight cents? Decisions, decisions, decisions.

There is a bright spot on the horizon. It's something new, or at least a new version of something old. It's called Vocational Rehabilitation Services and is an arm of the Nebraska Department of Education. If this program is administered properly, it will be a real boon to the morale of the inmates here. It's three-phase program is: to teach you a trade that you can actually practice after you leave the institution; get you a job before you leave here and counsel you before you leave and during the rough transition after release.

The areas covered are comprehensive. They include woodworking-cabinetmaking, graphic arts, dental prosthetics, electronics and welding. As part of the curriculum, a person also has an audio-visual aids training area and an individual counseling service with two full-time counselors and two part-time psychologists or psychiatrists. And at least part of the people have that one commodity really lacking around here—the "I care" attitude.

If Jimmy the Greek was laying odds today on rehabilitation being a joke or a promise, I think he'd lay it 70 to 30 on being a joke. But just a year ago it probably would have been 90 to 10 on being a joke. The odds, and our chances of making it, are improving.



calendar

Thursday
8:30 a.m.—Student Affairs Staff Nebraska Union.
9 a.m.—Adult Education 921 Union.
10 a.m.—Financial Aids-Omaha Campfire and Girl Scouts Union.
10:45 a.m.—CSL Committee on Student Organizations Union.
11:15 a.m.—Army R.O.T.C. luncheon Union.
12:30 p.m.—Intervarsity Christian Fellowship Union.
3:30 p.m.—Transcendental Meditation Union.
3:30 p.m.—Union Program Council Talks and Topics "John Neihardt"—Union.
4 p.m.—Volunteer Council Union.
5:30 p.m.—Council of American Indian Students Union.
5:30 p.m.—Volunteer Council dinner Union.
5:30 p.m.—Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Union.
5:30 p.m.—Union Board Union.
6 p.m.—Black United Sisters Union.
6 p.m.—Special Services tutoring Union.
6 p.m.—All University Fund executive Union.
6:15 p.m.—Teachers College Advisory Board Union.
6:30 p.m.—A.S.U.N. Orientation Union.
6:30 p.m.—All University Fund Union.
7 p.m.—Council on Student Life Union.
7 p.m.—Christian Science Organization Union.
7 p.m.—A.A.C.S. Cross Talk with Minorities Union.
7 p.m.—Mexican American Student Association Union.
7:30 p.m.—Builders-tour Union.
7:30 p.m.—Math Counselors Union.
7:30 p.m.—University Womens Action Group Union.
8 p.m.—Transcendental Meditation second lecture Union.

thursday, april 26, 1973

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