

Awaiting TRIAL: 'Feeling sorry for myself wasn't good.'

Editors note: The following story was written by an 18-year-old woman who spent a lengthy time at the Jennie B. Harrel Attention Center for Youth which opened in January 1976. It is a first-person account of that stay and an inside look at Nebraska's juvenile court system and legal process. The young woman has since been granted probation.

Last October '76 I got busted for burglary and was taken down to the county jail until I had my arraignment two days later. They set bond and took me out to the Juvenile Attention Center where I stayed until Jan. 21 waiting for the courts.

I went through county court to try to get the adult charges (changed) to a juvenile charge—which proved useless.

While out at the attention center I went through a lot of changes. I knew I'd be incarcerated for a while so I sat back... thinking about my state of mind.

First, I decided that I would ignore everyone except for the people that I thought were on the same level that I was. You know, had my same viewpoints about things. Naturally there weren't many people that could or wanted to comprehend things that I was saying. I was alone in the way that I couldn't understand why people couldn't understand me.

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Then after awhile of doing nothing but reading and watching TV I realized that if people couldn't understand what I was saying I'd try to listen to what they were saying. Either way it was totally one-sided. Or I was being selfish sitting around and being depressed. Just feeling sorry for myself wasn't too good for me.

I soon realized after that, that you can have your own choice of attitudes. You can be any way you want. It's not different than being on the outside. But when I was on the outs I never had any need to think about things like attitudes. I had them or I didn't. Everything was depressing until I got to the point of knowing that I did have a choice. I started being real optimistic and I was 100 per cent happier.

It was a good thing that I realized it there. On the outs I had 17 years to figure it out but I never did. It helped me to relate to everyone a whole lot better.

Meanwhile, I was still going to court and they denied the motion for it to be put back into juvenile court. It was bound to District Court One. On the first day of appearance my lawyer was going to put up another motion for it to be put back in juvenile court and all I had to do was stand there and not say anything. When I go to court I usually get pretty nervous. (I mean I'd never been to criminal court before and it freaked me out. I really couldn't believe it!) So usually I have hard candy to chew on and right when I was called up I had just stuck a new piece of candy in my mouth. Then the judge, to my surprise, asked me my age and I answered in a sort of garbled (voice), "17." He then asks me to empty

my mouth and I did with a smile on my face. I mean it was kind of humorous. So then he gets all hot and asks me what's so funny and all I could do was laguh. Judge's are people too, right. They must have a sense of humor somewhere. That upset him and with the advise from my lawyer I was going to plead not guilty to this judge so that trial would be set in January.

The courts at the end of every year change all the judges around to different courts. So in the early part of January I went up to the same courtroom to plead guilty in front of a different judge. Hopefully a nice and lenient one.

Then (there is) pre-sentence investigation which is supposed to last four weeks. I was still at the juvenile home but my 18th birthday was getting closer and when it did come in late January, they brought me down to the county jail—to wait some more. Being down at county jail is such a contrast to the juvenile home.

Out at the juvenile home you are being put into a more perplexing position of dealing with the other residents. It's constantly changing. The kids are all on these higher and lower levels of their individual brain thoughts. It's strange. It turns into this thing about how strong your state of mind is. You've got to realize and understand your own philosophies and try to live by them or you'll literally go crazy trying to understand things that aren't on your level of understanding.

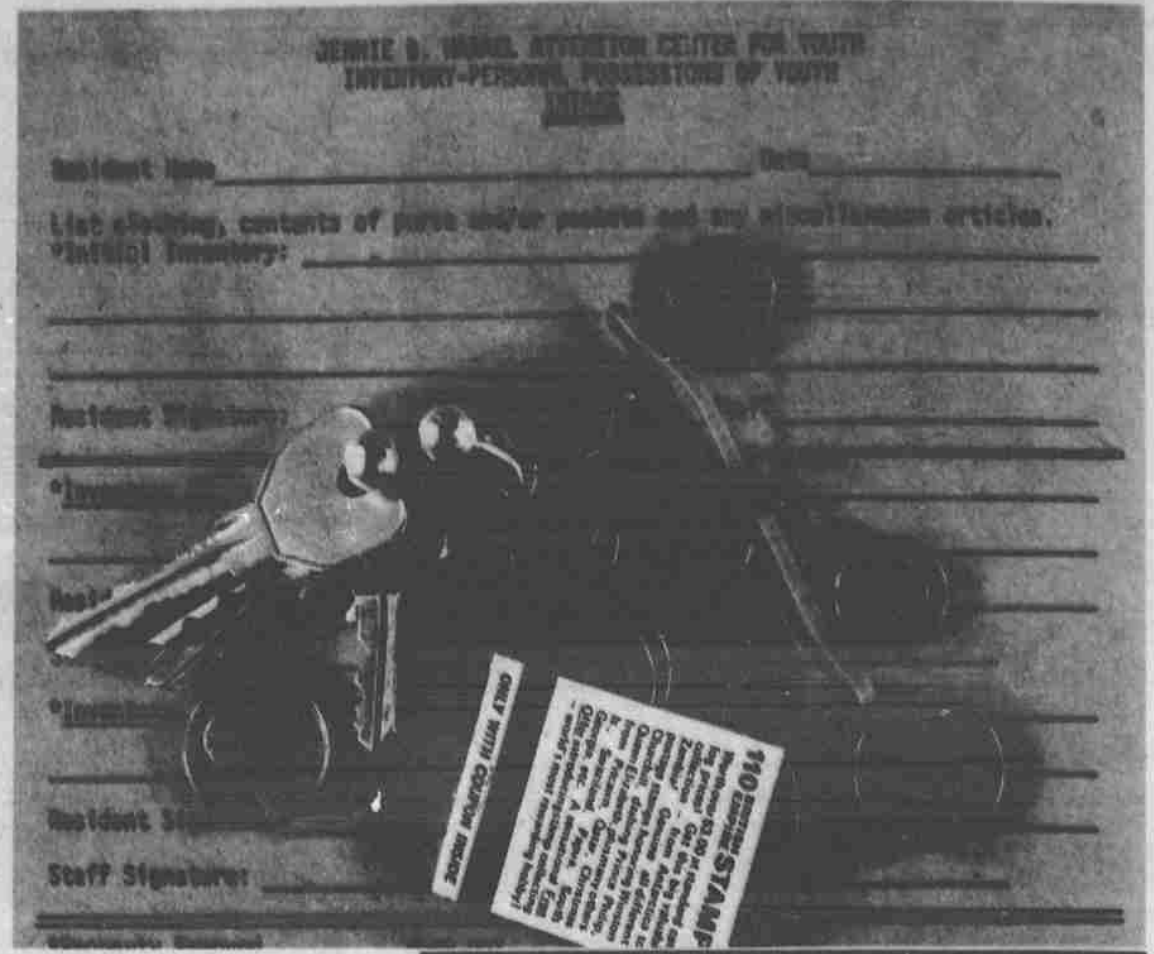
Many of the kids you come into contact with while you're out at the juvenile home are in a frequently uncontrolled and ever changing emotional state and seem unthinking. To others—observing their emotional response (it) is consistently bewildering—half the kids don't know their own minds and therefore it makes it extremely difficult to relate to them. It starts getting to the point where they're not the same people you spoke to a few hours back. If you sit back and start thinking about what they're doing it'll weird you out simply because it's not on your level to understand. You'll learn soon enough to not dwell on things, kids, or staff who aren't worth it.

The staff become a totally different situation. Most of

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the interactions that you have with the staff are shallow and superficial. It's possible to have a friend who is on staff, though the staff (members) are not meant to be anything more than that. You start coming into difficulties with this, solely because residents can't understand that staff is people too. And the kids aren't their whole life. It's a job.

Then some of the staff think being in there is nothing but a joke. And evidently you're going to run into problems because they won't take any of the kids seriously. They don't feel obligated to do anything in terms of helping their emotional situation. The kids are lumped together into a whole without any individual characteristics that can be seen as long as the kids are seen as a whole. They're still under age, but juveniles have rights.

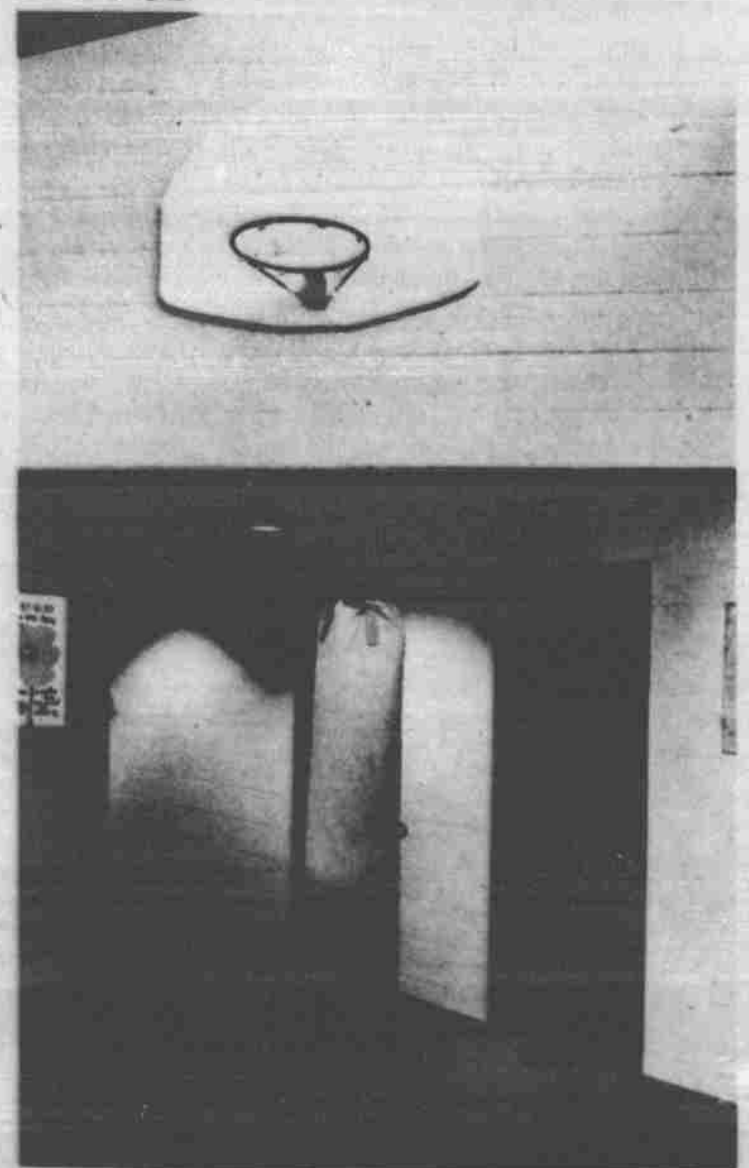


"Down at the jail it's so confining. I didn't do much of anything but sleep and dream of getting out."

And so does everyone else. But the juveniles get run over by somebody else's rule.

Down at the jail it's so confining. I didn't do much of anything but sleep and dream of getting out.

Either one of these places isn't any different concerning the personal contacts than is a job or school where you see the same people everyday. Except for the fact that everything is so intense—constant pressure that usually isn't experienced. I try to put myself into a high level of oblivion. Even if you do care about someone or something in the situation it's better not to worry about it. People are people. You can't change them but you can have fun with them under any circumstances. It's a challenge when you're locked up to be a happy person and think of everything for the better and not take too much seriously. **3D**



Youths at Jennie B. Harrel attention center get daily exercise by using punching bag and playing indoor basketball.