

Prisoners trying to re-enter society via UNL

By Lori Merryman

He is a prisoner sentenced to life. His daily decisions do not even include turning the lights off and on.

After nine years in prison he wants to contribute to society.

He and prison authorities believe he is ready to become a part of society again and an educational release program is to help him. He will become a UNL student.

The man is fictional, but the story is similar to that of about 40 other prisoners who since 1971 have been placed back into everyday life through a UNL educational release program.

There are now three UNL students who are on educational release, Don Payne, assistant director of admissions in Undergraduate Advising, said.

Gene Hruza, education coordinator for the Department of Correctional Service, said work release and educational release programs form what are called post-care programs in the prisons.

'Re-integration'

Post-care programs are part of a trend in prison reform that emphasizes "re-integration," Payne said. The theory behind prison operation has gone from revenge to restraint to reform and now is changing to re-integration, Payne said.

Instead of the eye-for-an-eye principle, importance is placed on what the prisoner can become, Payne said. Payne has worked closely with the prisoners in the program since it started.

"It is beautiful and fantastic," he said of educational release. "It puts a lot of hope in the lives of men who have wasted many years in prison. All these people have a lot to give, and they now have the chance to do it."

Janet Krause, with the Counseling Center in Seaton Hall, was involved with the educational release program during its first three years at UNL.

She said the program is an important turn in prison reform.

"I value the human being and giving them a second chance so they can become productive citizens in the community," she said.

Wrong path

As an example she described one prisoner who wanted "to reach young people who might be going down the wrong path." The prisoner worked with kids who played hooky from school.

"They (prisoners) have done something painful they have to live with," Krause said. "They want to compensate for it, even though they can't repay their debt. They want to be a part."

Money must be available for the program. The participants pay for their room and board, their clothes, tuition and books, Hruza said.

Sometimes it is money the prisoner has saved. In many cases the prisoner receives a grant, and there have been students who have paid costs through work-study arrangements, he said.

Hruza said he believes in "man and his ability to change," and that the Department of Correctional Services is developing programs to go along with that idea.

Road to release

For a prisoner to become eligible for post-care programs he must be under minimum security. His application first goes to his "team classification committee," on which he is an equal and with which he works every day, Hruza said.

The committee makes a recommendation for or against educational release and a prison official denies or approves the recommendation.

The recommendation is then given to the state Parole Board, Hruza said, and the Director of Corrections makes the final decision.

Hruza said educational release prisoners live in centers near their campus. The centers are staffed by people from correctional services.

Payne said the prisoners are treated like any other students on campus, and don't like to be considered different. The release program initially was administered quietly to protect the prisoners from outside criticism, he added.

Not hiding

"They're not trying to hide anything," Payne said. "They just want a fair chance. The prisoners will be the first ones to tell you they're on educational release. And they'll tell you what they did if you ask."

The program has been criticized, Payne told of one mother who complained when she heard her daughter's classmate was a two-time murderer on educational release. Actually, Payne said, the lifers are "the best risks of all."

Adjusting from prison life to university life is eased somewhat by advisers and counselors.

Prisoners have to be accounted for at all times and are limited to certain university activities.

Wants no stigma

Payne said he "would like to see the time come when those in the program could become a part of the university community without any stigma attached."

They (the prisoners) "are not as much a part of the university as I would like to see," he said.

Full integration into the college community, Payne said, would include living in on-campus housing instead of in centers under surveillance.

Letters to the editor

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It seems to me that the only way abortion will ever pass from the scene is if there are enough alternate means of preventing or dealing with the unwanted pregnancies to make it the least desirable option. Right now it too often appears to be the only option for someone confronted with the awesome problem of unwanted pregnancy. A woman with unwanted pregnancy is a woman who needs help, and too few pro-life groups seem to offer any. Only Birthright seems to be taking the commendable positive steps of offering emergency help and counseling for women in this situation.

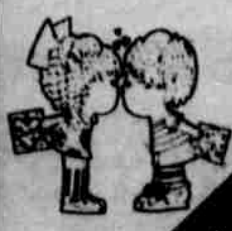
The alternative of having a child and raising it or putting it up for adoption are obviously very difficult options, requiring considerable courage; but as in all things, the moral thing to do is not always the expedient thing. Women facing this awesome decision to take responsibility need our help, love and support. What they most certainly do *not* need is having people chant slogans, wave signs and distribute grisly booklets on abortion.

I would especially like to suggest to those who, like myself, consider themselves Christians, that it is your obligation in love to lend aid to groups such as Birthright, who seek positive steps toward making abortion unnecessary, instead of simply chanting or waving signs. Moreover, the tide of unwanted pregnancies might abate if you had the courage to teach your children an honest, morally sound view of human sexuality and how it works. If you can't hack that, perhaps your church ought to be providing this education.

But if you won't do any of these positive things, then you may just as well keep your silence.

Paul Marxhausen
Senior

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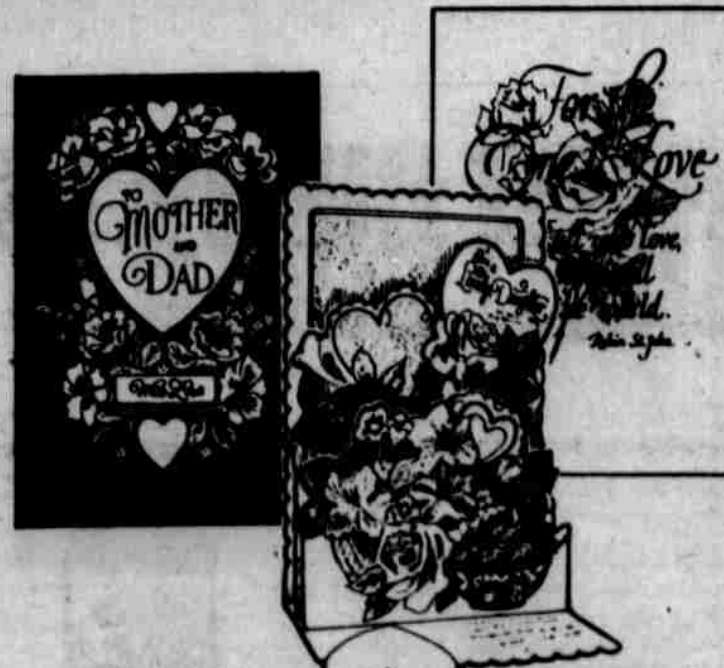
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JOHN COLLINS, SEMINARIAN

"My name is John Collins. I'm a seminarian. I had the idea of being a priest for a long time before I did anything about it. I was too scared of my feelings.

"But I finally took the plunge and it's the best thing I ever did. It wasn't a shot in the dark. Friends helped. Talking to seminarians helped. And prayer was the biggest help."

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