

PAUL KOESTER

Youth prisons breed criminals

In 1980, I accidentally took my first mission into investigative journalism, straight into the foster care and youth prison system of the state of Nebraska.

It all started in 1980 when I ran away from my physically and emotionally abusive home. The first time I ran away, a police officer sent me back, quoting a Bible passage: "Spare the rod, spoil the child." I was again severely beaten. The second time, I refused to return and was placed in an overcrowded foster home, where I was treated poorly and used as a handy free labor source. I soon ran away from there also. My caseworker treated me like I was a criminal and did nothing when the people refused to return my valued belongings. I was then placed in a group home.

Depression set in, and concentrating on school became very difficult. Escape from reality became priority one, and before I knew it I was in prison at age 17. I was arrested for possession of a controlled substance, Valium, which my friend had taken from his father's cabinet.

I met my public defender five minutes before my hearing. This overworked state employee was little help. Although I had a previously clean criminal record, good grades and even dedicated involvement in high school sports, I was sent to the "big house." I feel I was dealt an extreme injustice.

Yes, I broke the law, and yes, I needed help. No, I did not need further abuse, which I soon received from the Youth Development Center in Kearney.

I was quickly stripped of my dignity. I spent nine months with zero privacy and was not allowed to go anywhere without my group of 13 peers. The system is set up so that group members constantly are against each other, scrutinizing each other for flaws so they can look good by comparison and go home. The toilets had no stalls, and we were expected to wear only underwear — state-owned



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Fruit of the Looms — the last two hours of each evening. The bedroom had 40 uncomfortable beds lined up for the three groups in our "cottage."

The system, used by most states, is based on 12 "problems." Group members were required to watch other members and confront them if they showed a problem. Any sign of being upset became a "casilyangered" problem. A "fronting" problem consisted of clowning around or trying to gain another group member's acceptance. Any show of insecurity was a "feels inferior" problem. I even had to watch my voice tone and wording so as not to show an "aggravates others" problem. I quickly learned to suppress all feelings.

Repeat offenders who had learned to play the game were usually treated with favoritism by the staff, as were the more violent, aggressive residents who were often able to intimidate the entire group. We were required to show "care" to group members by giving "face sessions." All 13 of us would pin the member showing a lot of problems to the floor and scream in his face at the top of our lungs, often for hours on end. Receiving this treatment was terror, especially when some peers would deliver cheap shots. Anger and hatred were encouraged in these "care" sessions. If I had refused to partake in this act of violence, I would never have gone home and would have been next in line for the treatment.

Once, I was held down for two

hours while an intimidating group member pinched the back of my arms. The pain was excruciating, and the back of my arms later became one large bruise. I was then taken into the bathroom, backed up against a wall by four peers and punched in the face. My future foster parents wrote to express their concern. The superintendent did nothing. My mail was read from that time on, and I was forced to write an apologetic letter to my foster parents for "lying."

If a group member escaped, the group was punished severely. The group would be required to be within arm's length of each other at all times — sometimes elbow's length — even in the bathroom. State clothes were required, and the group would have to sit around a large table all day. One group in my cottage spent 45 days in this situation.

Staff members often encouraged violence, even punching, and they fed on our fear. One day a staff member beat a resident's head against a locker for a half hour. Humiliation was another tactic. They often told me what a low life I was and said I would undoubtedly go to the penitentiary. I could go on and on.

I have reason to believe nothing has improved in recent years. Breeding criminals is not in our state's best interest, nor is punishing, rather than helping, victims of abuse.

Koester is a senior soil science major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

PAULA LAVIGNE

Whining only weighs you down

One down and at least three more to go.

Well, I guess that depends on my senility and vitamin intake for the rest of this week, but I plan on finishing my finals before I go crazy and run down the interstate ramp in flames and a yellow polyester jumpsuit.

All right, so it wasn't as bad as having a root canal on a soggy July afternoon; actually, in some quasi-matic fluffy sort of way, it was "fun." And, hey, I learned a lot ... a lot.

Thoughts of the French Revolution, soil moisture balance, dead salesmen and the elastic clause drift aimlessly in the nebulous gray protoplasm gushing about in my skull. They drift and wait, drift and wait.

While they're drifting and waiting to be brought up later on in this little adventure, I'd like to say I'm sick and revolted with people who whine and pout about their education here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

At almost any university, your education is what you make of it. You can spend your days as a drooling sloth or get out of bed before noon and do something with your life.

Now, I'm not going to be one of the little Herbie Husker groupies and surrender my talents as a cheerleader for UNL. However, it is one of the finest universities in the nation, and its graduates of the non-sloth variety have excelled in their fields.

These whiny little dweebs seem to think their university life revolves around their academic success, and if they fail to pass "Rubber Balloon Animals 101," it's not their fault; it's the university's.

My "rich and influential" brother, Mike, bestowed upon me a nice little piece of knowledge. Well, I think he stole it from a quote somewhere, but the sentiment still stands.

Mike said, "It's your attitude, not your aptitude, that will determine your altitude," meaning your Cliffs Notes and sonic calculators won't allow you to succeed in life if you have the



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No one here cares if you were the "big man" in high school, and you can't rely on that philosophy. You must start over.

You have to possess a certain attitude about your life here and stop complaining about sculptures you find silly or grading policies you just can't cut because you don't have the motivation to do so.

Case in point. I went into my physical geography class with a hellish loathing for any type of science-related phenomena. I figured, what does a news-editorial major have to know about dirt or soil or whatever the brown gunk is on the side of the road? Despite all my agony, I kept an open mind.

As a weather freak and one still mystified by the Nebraska nonconformity of storms and cyclones, I found the whole meteorological aspect to this whole subject fascinating and useful.

Furthermore, if I ever plan on building a house some day, I should know what the soil moisture balance and compactability of the soil in my area is so my home doesn't fall off a cliff or sink into the ground in the first rain-storm.

So, even if I didn't solve the mystery to life on this planet, I learned some useful geographical trivia and watched neat-o videos to boot.

There were and will be classes that hold less than one iota of relevance to my life, and the information I learn there will be as useful as what I pick up on the back of a Cheerios box, but I can just chalk it up to experience and move on.

I'm not about to curse every administrator, professor, janitor and student at this university because I didn't like this or that class, and it was too hot in the building I was in.

So, stop whining! This means you, yes you — all you pathetic people who write and complain about some sniveling, menial English class that forced you to think.

If some aspect of your academic life relies on your own creativity and not some mathematical equation, you think it's worthless.

I'll be the first to admit there are a few bad eggs in the university hierarchy, but that doesn't mean you should go off half-cocked and make an omelet out of the entire UNL system if something displeases you.

As for me, I'm sitting here in the basement of the student union at 11 p.m., and, admittedly, I'm happy — pleased even. I have enough final exam stress to trigger a small seismic tremor (more geography), but I'm happy to be here.

I even like those sculptures.

Lavigne is a freshman news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan senior reporter.

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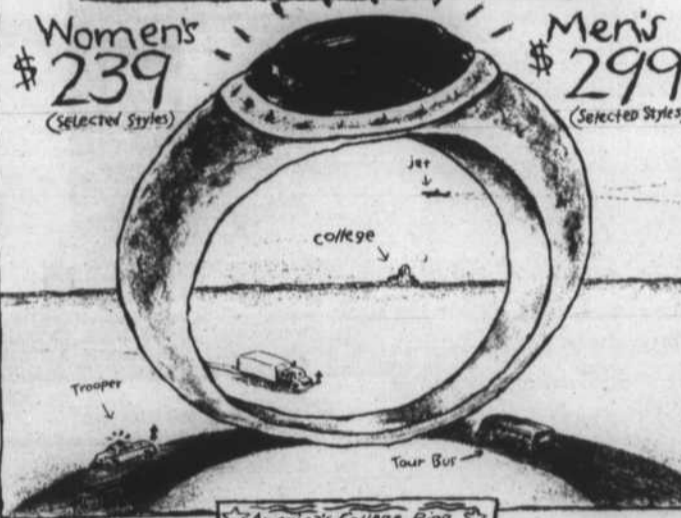
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