

Hard times

Nothing's nice in women's prison

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Late February in the Midwest is a hard time.

The ripping of a long winter's winds leaves tattered resolves ready for the light of a spring tunnel. Despite desires, there is only more gray.

While refueling our auto in York, I took some time to think about what I would soon see and experience. Gang violence and heroin addicts, life's washouts and lost causes flashing before us in a circus jamboree of societal rejection and mass rebellion.

All thoughts of well honed cynicism, but there was still a reason for them being out there.

The answer lays only miles away:

The town now left behind us, a group of us on a tour rode out onto a flat strip of road. There before us, on the highest rise in the countryside, was our destination: the Women's Correctional Center.

There is only one prison for women in this state, a common theme in this country. Most states house all of their female inmates in one location.

The ground crunched as we made our way down the thin path toward the one and only passageway leading to the external world. Towering skyward and enclosing the tight path stood the great reminders and dividers: the fences.

Stacked three deep, looped with razor wire, and as cold and indolent as the ripping wind, they begged the question of human nature: Think you can jump me?

The floodgate

After identifying ourselves, we stood shivering there before the "open door" buzzer echoed off.

With a scrape and clank, the security bolt drew back. We stepped through the door into a holding hallway beside security headquarters: Control One. Tight packed and defrosting in the small sealed-off room, we deposited all of our pocket's contents.

Another buzzer sounded and in walked a large woman and man. The crisp heel-toe slap that only heavy boots can make finished with a tiny jingle of the various metal-made devices hanging off their belts.

A series of commands: "Arms out. Hands against the wall. Take off your shoes. Spread your legs." A flurry of patting whirled around me and revealed a pair of keys.

"You forgot to check these. No problem, no, but think next time. They're not keys - they're weapons."

Another buzzer sounded and we passed through the next dead brown door into the quiet, yellow walled visitors room. There we met Rudy, a well-spoken minister of business-like demeanor and mild mannerism. We received our first brief. There are always briefs. The answer to all requests was no, or I'll ask about it. No gum. No bags. No cash. No change. No jewelry. No nothing.

"We have a minor drug problem filtering into the system. That's why there are no hats or braids in your hair either."

Standing in the middle of the vacant room, a series of statistics. There were 157 prisoners in the facility. The prison was overcrowded in 1995 when there was 125 prisoners.

Sentences for women ranged

from an average minimum of four years, three months, to the upper average of eight years, seven and a half months. Some prisoners were just in holding for extradition or serving partial sentencing in Nebraska. That's important to understand. The population is always being mixed - fluid and stagnant at the same time.

I would learn prisons cherish order and routines more than any other single thing. The mix of prisoners and their varied sentences challenge that. But there is no way around it. No matter how long or how many, the corrections center had to accommodate. It's the only show in town.

Of the inmates at the women's prison, 47 percent are in for forgery or fraud, 45 percent for crimes against people, 32 percent for drug related offenses and 11 percent on weapons charges. Of all convictions, 45 percent are violent offenses and only 27 percent of inmates are multiple offenders - percentages far less than expected.

Even though the facility has maximum security capabilities, 56 percent of prisoners are in on minimum security levels, and 33 percent in medium security.

"In the event of a riot and assault or other outbreak, stay out of the way," our guide told us. "Let us take care of it. We are all trained in how to control these situations."

While all this was said, focus rested on the rack of shotguns and the guard seen through the window who was monitoring the waiting room. Everything gets monitored.

I joined the group in another hall, just managing to catch the heavy door (every room has a heavy brown door). Rudy just kept giving the tour, telling us not to hold open doors. I let it go and it automatically sealed shut. Everything around here gets sealed shut.

Health and fitness

The next room we came to was the mess hall. Over time, I would come to know that the bulk of prisoner complaints came from dietary concerns, and I would hear of health problems emanating from the provisions.

"This over here is the rock pile," Rudy continued, pointing to the weight room. "Not as much use as in men's facilities."

Prisons, after debating allowing their inmates to get bigger and stronger, decided to allow their prisoners to exercise to focus tensions and prevent health problems. They also could use it as a reward/punishment tool.

Revoking it would be a source of great angst to a male prisoner. Here, silence.

Robin Ogle, a criminal justice professor at UNL, said the lack of exercise was troubling, and said aerobics would work better.

Poor diets and poor fitness are a good combination. If you've ever been really bored and walked around the house snacking on things, picture that - for six or seven years. Marshall Lux, from the state's ombudsman office, the governmental agency that handles complaints, said medical service complaints were common.

Ogle said that often, hospitals were not located in the prisons, and staffing was second-rate most times. These factors, added to low preparation for health problems and inadequate

evaluation means, put inmates on a thin line for disaster.

No matter what though, the prison has to accommodate.

Living quarters

In another building, the critical issues of prison life were explained. We were in the barracks now, and we were told that the prison is a fluid place. It is a small vacuum by design. Untainted by outside air, and unable to decompress, pressure shifts the balance in every corner. For every action, there is another - but in here, nothing is equal.

The prison has no money for additional housing. No money for better beds. It means prisoners share a military style bunk room that houses too many in too little. It means they toss and you turn. They sneeze and you sniffle. All one can do is sit - and absorb pressure.

Time is boundless, and it must be spent. Kick, scream, push and pull, and it doesn't end. These women must sit - and think.

The hope is that over time, if forced to sit and think enough, these women will change.

There are programs and therapy groups, but time is the real tool here.

Without "proper progress," state funds are withheld. The GED is as much for the prison as for the prisoner. The number who have taken the GED, their scores and just about everything else are stored in records, ready to answer state inquiries.

In the other room is a more formal cubical sectioned classroom. In a place where time is everything, one would assume the prisoners' minds would be so hungry for use they would gorge themselves on every lesson around. The truth is they are eager, and incredibly appreciative of volunteer help, but troubled with focus. They haven't had to concentrate before - thus, the cubes.

While tutoring, that lack of concentration would come out, and if you let it, it would sing a song. A sad song. About a scar. About a husband drunk or high, raged or horny, storming in. About him swinging and them fighting. Her head goes through a glass table, and now the scar lives from that day on.

The next tune is sung from the scar on a murderer's hand. The stitches tell of the time her husband fell prey to post-traumatic stress disorder. He stalked around the house, hostile fire all around, and she was the enemy. He bears in, she dives for

they want then?

Tigers, cubs and solitude

Nebraska has a feature shared only with New York: a nursery in the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women. Even though only 29.5 percent of these women were in legally recognized relationships, the average number of children per inmate is 2.

Many come in with their own families, or are pregnant on arrival. It's been shown that the initial mother-infant contact is very important to bonding. The prison is attempting to help these mothers when they leave.

The nursery is the only cozy room in the complex: - softer lights, throw blankets and soft chairs were jumbled around the little sanctuary. In it sat a woman and a small infant. Her crime held no weight with the small child. Women have periodic visitation rights with their families and newborns. It is the understanding that life must go on, despite the fences.

Outside

Walking out of the building, I saw it then, in my mind's eye, but it might as well have been real. Huddled by the fence, frenzied eyes



MATT HANEY/DN

a blade, fends him off, but the scar is born.

The images fade. She sits before you, and the tune ends.

In my life, I have met five women who've murdered. All were abused. All killed to survive.

Teachers were just as much guards as mentors. Prisoners had to ask for permission to go to the restroom and for other tasks. It wasn't the asking I found odd - it was the administering.

Some women are capable of total concentration. The whole room, staff and system wants the goal to be reached. There in the front of the prisoner rests desire and purpose, maybe in the way never known to her before.

But for how long? I left there my last day feeling as I did the first day I was there.

Saddened that processes crumble by the wayside. Answers, results and all things tangible rule that world. The pursuit of knowledge is valued in so far as \$.62 will go. When the \$.62 is gone, when the pressures of esoteric pursuits no longer exist, what will

Learning curve

Our next room was the first time we would see the education center for the prison - a place I would spend a lot of time in during the following months as a GED tutor.

With yellow walls and lime green tiles, the two rooms look like a second-grade classroom. Pictures of historical figures, old and tattered, are haphazardly fastened to the wall.

In one room were the thin-legged brown tables used for open discussion groups and a television for educational programming. It was here I would spend many hours with one particular inmate. I helped her prepare for her GED, and I saw again all the frustrations that I went through with grammar.

She cared very little about what she was studying. To her, it was just a job. Women are paid \$.62 a day to come take the GED course. But it is not an easy wage. Every assignment is graded. Every aspect is measured. Learning is reduced to a number.

darting in every direction, crouched a prisoner.

Bleeding, sweat-glistening hands worked furiously with a tool at the so-hated links of the fence.

With an opening, she shimmies through, and starts to run.

Oh freedom. Lonely, delicious freedom.

It was then that I finally saw what I had been looking at all along: the struggle for these women's lives.

This is the metaphor of life - day after day, their whole life, before outside, now in here. Always there are fences, and guards, and fear.

And what they wouldn't do to break free. Free to hope for a better life. Free from oppression. Free from the fences.

"So how was it?" Rudy asks me. "Cold. All of it."

We took our belongings from tin boxes and stepped to another heavy steel door. A buzzer sounded, and the door opened.

And then I stepped outside. Out into the cold.