

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley



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Q&A 3

Neither presidential candidate has much to say about prison or prisoners. Are prisoners aware of how the country is dividing? Are prisoners also divided? How do these debates play out in a men's prison today?

Yes, we are aware that the country is divided; however, this has been the norm for a very long time now, it

did not just occur and took decades to get to this point. No, we are not divided ourselves — it's not taken that seriously in here. We are not allowed to vote while incarcerated, and even upon our release many of us will not have the option to vote until we are taken off of parole supervision, usually three years after our release. So our voices are basically silenced, void of any political power. Therefore we have no desire to push these issues too far. Again, everyone has his or her own opinions. We merely express such opinions among ourselves then go about our regular daily activities. Very rarely are there any bad feelings between us where politics are concerned. Yet, we are abreast of what is occurring in the outside communities. We watch the news on TV every day and have access to newspapers and magazines. However, for most of us, our primary focus is on returning to society, not debating politics.

Can you recall the mental stages you went through as your long sentence progressed? How long did each stage last? Depression, acceptance of fate, learning to just gut it out, thinking of release, etc.

Yes, I can recall the mental stages I went through over the past 24 years because I continue to experience them today. Depression, loneliness, a sense of failure (both to my family and my community), acceptance and remorse for all my past wrongdoings, happiness, hope, finding the strength to continue moving forward, and a strong desire to succeed upon my release... I slip in and out of these various stages on a regular basis, depending on the events occurring in my life at any particular time, the weather (high humidity causes me discomfort), news from home, etc. These stages can last a few minutes or several weeks, depending on the circumstances. Plus I've never allowed my crime or sentence to define me, but rather refine me into the man I am today. For the past several months my focus has been on returning to society. My family, specifically

my children, provide me with the incentive and motivation to never give up hope.

When your sentence began were you hopeless? Feeling doomed? In those days, months, years, did the system do anything at all to assist you (or others) in coping with the psychologically devastating thought of 25 years or more ahead of you cooped up in prison?

When my sentence began I was angry and rebellious; I blamed everyone except myself for my incarceration. I also pushed a lot of people away from me, including my wife. After some long overdue introspection, I came to accept responsibility for my actions; this was a very painful and emotional process, yet extremely necessary. Although there was always a glimmer of hope that one of my many appeals would be granted and I would return home sooner rather than later — this never happened. Back then, and even today, the system was not designed or equipped to deal with the psychological effects of serving an extended sentence. It would cost too much to provide the staff required. The primary objective has always been focused on punishment, not rehabilitation. I had to cope with the devastating thought of being locked in a cage for 25 years to the best of my own ability; this was my burden to carry. One that I would not wish another human being to experience. I also sincerely pray that the youth take this opportunity to learn from the poor choices I've made in the past... prison is NOT the place you want to be.

Long term prisoners... do you ever get out on work release or outside work? Do you ever see anything other than the inside of the prison and prison yard?

Yes and no. If you have a "non-violent" crime there is the possibility of participating in the work release program once you get within two years of your release date. Those with a "violent" crime are not eligible, unless of course Governor Cuomo chooses to reinstate that option. His father implemented it when he was in office, but Governor Pataki took it away. However, depending upon your institutional record, individuals with violent and non-violent crimes can be approved for outside clearance, which requires them to work outside of the prison — cutting grass, shoveling snow, cleaning the visiting rooms in maximum security facilities. The same two year criterion applies. I personally have said clearance. Unfortunately, the majority of the prison population will only see the outside community again when they are being transferred to another facility, going on a medical trip or actually being released. Only a small percentage of the population qualifies for work release and/or outside clearance.

Note to readers: If you have any questions about what goes on in the world behind the prison walls that dot our area, send them to Q&A/Matthew Hattley care of the Shawangunk Journal, PO Box 669, Ellenville, NY 12428.

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