

CHASING REHABILITATION

by

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Years of exposure to racial aggression and daily violence were the source of my nightmares, waking up in sweat and fear. This all, after I left the "cushy" San Mateo County Jail in 2006.

I was headed to prison, San Quentin. Just the name of San Quentin struck fear in me, and it lived up to its notorious name. I think the place should be sold. The mosquitoes, mice and ants were a constant problem. Plus, there were plumbing problems all the time; mainly leaks. It was disgusting.

Walking the corridors reminded me of how ancient the place was. The cells were the worst. They were small, very small -- fifty-square feet -- for two of us. It might have been the conditions that caused so much hate; overcrowded, cold and lots of ugly.

I have never seen such hateful looks until I went to SQ. Looks that sent shivers down my spine. I spent months there in the Reception Center. The

showers were every other day. Along with the intimidating looks, inmates stood and watched at the entrance of the showers on each side. A guard was above us on the catwalk with a gun in his hand at all times.

There were ten shower heads and each race had a certain number. It was like high school all over again. Some men stared at other men's privates. Nothing could have been more uncomfortable. The shy and scared washed themselves in the sink in their cells.

We had yard twice a week. The all-cement area was also divided by race. There was no mixing allowed. I grew up in the racially balanced Bay area, in San Francisco. So this was all a total shock to me.

Fights led to blood, blood led to running guards, running guards led to suffocating tear gas and the burn of pepper spray. It was a scene that was a daily occurrence. Each race has a person in charge of their race. One of the first nights I was there, the white leader jumped into my cell to "talk" to my cellmate and me. He said, "For whites it's mandatory yard. If we didn't participate we would be stabbed." I couldn't believe my ears. He was dead serious! It made me tremble. I was being forced to join ranks and take orders from men I wanted nothing to do with. They were trying to turn me into a racist, something I'd never been before.

Out of nowhere, a guard came through, making his rounds. He saw three of us in the cell. I thought we were in big trouble. I thought I was going to get handcuffed and counseled. But the shotcaller told the guard that we were busy and to come back in fifteen minutes. And the guard did! That's when I realized the severity of the situation.*

On the walk to the messhall, it was almost guaranteed that an incident would happen. Guards would throw inmates against the wall, sometimes for no

reason. If it wasn't the guards messing with inmates, it was the inmates fighting inmates. I can't count how many times my dinner got an extra dose of seasoning: pepper spray.

No programs at all were offered at the Reception Center. Not even chapel services. Finally, I was transferred to Pelican Bay. This prison was newer, the cells were larger and the place was cleaner. But as I learned real fast, the prison politics were the same. I lived near some white supremists. To keep peace with them, every month when I went to the store, I bought them hot cocoa.

My college background made me a candidate to be a tutor. My job was to help other inmates get their G.E.D.s This was very rewarding for me. Some of the inmates appreciated it. My job made me well known around the yard. I earned respect by helping other inmates, not stabbing them. Few programs were offered, except education and religious services. My pasttime was running laps, since my high school and college days. Running in prison gave me something productive to do, it kept me out of trouble and helped me stay in shape. My running at Pelican Bay would frequently be interrupted by some skirmish. The alarms would sound, we'd be ordered to "get down." But not to just sit down, but to lay down flat on the ground with our faces looking in the dirt. An army of guards would respond to break it up. They would close in and toss concussion grenades in the general area. Once a grenade rolled close to me! It exploded and white powder went everywhere. My ears were ringing for hours after that.

On another occasion, while at Pelican Bay Prison, a loose handball rolled over into the Asians' area. I went to receive it and almost caused a riot. Each race must stay in their own area. No exceptions!

When the shot callers at Pelican Bay tried to dictate my program, I paid to move out of there, but the cell I had, had to remain a white cell according to the skinheads. The skinheads also forbid whites from accepting unwanted food off of a black's tray. It was like being in prison, inside of a prison.

It seemed, as much as I tried to avoid trouble, it was always near. I loved going to the yard and running, but even such a harmless desire seemed to result in some type of drama. One of the most heartbreaking scenes I witnessed was after this guy had just finished shopping. A group of other whites approached him, kind of surrounded him, and after a brief exchange, the guys started snatching his bags from him. The bags ripped apart and as his canteen fell out, they started grabbing items and running in every direction. He just stood there, in shock. To this day that scene saddens me.

After four and a half years, my nightmare at Pelican Bay ended. Only to resume at the State Prison at Corcoran. It wasn't by choice. The racial segregation at Corcoran was pretty much a mirror to Pelican Bay. Likewise with the petty prison politics. Again, there were few programs offered, and the religious activities were canceled constantly.

Every race had their claimed areas and every race covered their own if one of theirs had to use the toilet to take a leak.

The typical race riots, the fighting, the destructive cell searches that always came next were enough for me to grow real tired after just two years. I ended up staying in my cell more than I went outside. I felt like I had to walk on eggshells just to survive. I didn't want to be jaded, I definitely wasn't going to be a racist and I didn't want to turn into a recluse. I prayed for something, anything to change.

During my annual committee hearing I was given the option of transferring.

Since I had no disciplinary infractions, my custody had been dropped from maximum-security to medium, and everything was in my favor. I was offered a transfer to Lancaster's Progressive Programming Facility. I chose to go there because of all of the good things I had heard about it. When others heard about my transfer, they called me a "sellout." On the other hand, since I'm not into drugs, alcohol or any of the other vices, Lancaster was right up my alley.

But when I arrived at the PPF, my troubles weren't over. I was told there was no room for me. I was sent to the hole. (They told me I wasn't being punished for anything, they just didn't have any open beds yet. Yet, with no yard, no phone calls, and no dayroom activities, it sure felt like I was being punished.) I had never been to the hole before, and don't ever want to go back!

The good thing was that I was never bothered by having to share cramped space in the hole with a cellmate. Still, it was a horrifying experience. The hole was filled with men who have lost all hope, or who were just down right evil. It was a hodge-podge of misfits. Men on suicide watch, men who dressed -- as best they could -- as women, and men who spent their days and nights constantly masturbating. The guards covered their cell doors with sheets or big yellow towels. And I was right smack in the middle of this madhouse!

After seven long days and eight restless nights, I was finally headed to the PPF. On the yard I ran into old acquaintances from Corcoran and Pelican Bay. These were the few guys I could relate to even back then. These guys were like me, they just wanted to do their time as peacefully and productive as possible. They just wanted to help others if they could, and be left alone. Older, mature men who had either been there and done that or who had enough sense from the beginning to just program and make the best of it. I would

guess that the average age here is fifty. The younger men here are more open to listen, but there are always some who only learn by constantly bumping their heads against the walls.

The first thing I asked was, where are the racial lines drawn? Who has what areas and which side of the dayroom is for what race? To my disbelief, I was told that I could go wherever I wanted. Unheard of in California prisons! There are no racial divisions here. The tables, the phones, everything is open. The only area where the inmates divide themselves is in the cells, and that's not by force, but more for cultural likeness, music and et cetera.

I was leery at first. When I jogged around the track I was on constant watch for anything odd. But it was the same scene each and every day, mixed races playing sports. Not race verse race, but mixed teams, as if race didn't exist. As I relaxed, I noticed that the atmosphere is peaceful. There is no racial or other tension here.

A first for me!

Another first was seeing the Bible study group, consisting of about a dozen men of mixed races, spread out in the grass fellowshiping. I am currently enrolled in the art class, where I'm learning to draw and paint. These are invaluable skills and they are also fun and therapeutic. And since the Lord, Jesus Christ, is a very important part of my life, I attend chapel services regularly. Here, the services are not constantly interrupted by lockdowns, many visitors also come to volunteer. They preach and teach with vigor and give inspirational sermons that I can hold on to.

Recently I felt a little harmless envy when I learned that the sponsor of the Veterans' group is Tony Dow who played (Wally Cleaver) in "Leave it to

Beaver." I grew up with that show! I thought it was fantastic that someone like that was supporting the programs here.

Another highlight for me is the fact that we can go outside at night. Actually, all minimum-security facilities offer night programming, but I have just never had the privilege until now. It used to be a dream. For years I have wished that I could go out and smell the night air, feel the night breeze blow against my face. I used to look out from my small cell window at the moon and the stars and just wish and dream. Now, here at Lancaster, I can finally experience the sky. I get to see the colorful sunsets, wild cloud patterns and all that others so readily take for granted. I go out every chance I get!

The guards are also more respectful here. I haven't seen any of the mental or physical abuse that I've seen at other institutions. I am so thankful to be here. The environment is more open here in every respect. The inmates don't draw racial lines between themselves, the administration is more open-minded, and this is the most peaceful facility I've ever been on. It wasn't easy to remain disciplinary-free at the other places. Provocations come from the guards and other inmates on a regular basis at other institutions. But here, if you're doing what you're supposed to do, no one bothers you. Here, I can finally see the rewards of being disciplinary-free.

I believe the Lord has watched over me all of these years. I advise others who come here to take advantage of these programs and improve their lives.

The Lord works in mysterious ways!

* CDCR and the guards is a lot less tolerant of guards collaborating with inmates.

