

San Quentin News

THE PULSE OF SAN QUENTIN

VOL. 2010 NO. 5

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010

SAN QUENTIN, CALIFORNIA 94964

POPULATION: 5184

from pg. 3

The Enduring Problem of Over-Familiarity

By COLE M. BIENEK
Journalism Guild Writer

San Quentin State Prison boasts the highest number of community volunteers and staff sponsorships in the entire state, if not the nation. Every day a veritable army of dedicated, altruistic men and women pass through San Quentin's iron gates, bringing much-needed hope and compassion to the men imprisoned within the walls.

"There is a different mood in San Quentin, compared to other prisons," says Jason, a young man who attends Patten University, chapel services, and plays tennis on the weekends with members of the Maria Tennis Club. "The number of volunteers creates an atmosphere of wanting to change."

Vast Array of People

Volunteers range from state employees who sponsor various activity groups and programs, to people from the community who receive substantial training, to those who apply for, and receive clearance to conduct workshops, seminars, or participate in athletic programs alongside prisoners.

These vast arrays of people face a number of challenges during the course of their activities. The Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation provides training in recognizing and preventing the flow of contraband in and out of the institution.

"I found the training to be realistic and valuable," says Peter Ainsworth, a teacher's assistant. "Every person who works with inmates must create boundaries that cannot be broken; you have to decide what your own parameters are."

Look to Title 15

One of the most difficult subjects to deal with, for prisoners, full-time staff, and volunteers alike, is that of over-familiarity. When approached regarding the official departmental definition of over-familiarity, members of the administration said that the definition is found in the Title 15 Code of Regulations, which states, "Employees must not en-

gage in undue familiarity with inmates..." However, there is a particular lack of precision in the formal, legal language. Ascertaining exactly what "familiar" means is difficult.

What Volunteers Learn

Staff members discuss the issue during the annual three-hour classes that volunteers must complete in order to renew their security passes, known as "Beige Cards." One volunteer who attended a September training session reported a member of the Investigative Services Unit (ISU) offered a series of prohibitions.

The officer said hand shakes are OK but no hugs, no friendly taps on the shoulder, no use of first names, no sharing of food, no disclosing of personal information such as addresses or family situation, never loan money, transport correspondence, or make phone calls for inmates.

Some inmates prey on volunteers with low self-esteem, especially women, the officer reported. At the conclusion, the officer stated that volunteers should adopt a professional attitude, with conservative dress and behavior.

Lots of Prison Lore

Most people connected to the department agree that over-familiarity is a valid concern. Prison lore abounds with tales of staff and prisoners who fall in love and cross the boundaries; other staff resign their positions and begin visiting a particular inmate. California newspapers report occasional instances of staff or volunteers caught trafficking drugs, tobacco, money, and cell phones.

There are also accounts of prisoners' lives being drastically changed due to an ethical, yet profound relationship with a volunteer or staff member working with inmates.

Some inmate groups deal with very emotional, traumatic, and life-altering experiences. Participants in the Victim Offender Education Group, VOEG, share their deepest secrets and bare their souls in a group set-

ting facilitated by one or more community volunteers. In order for the facilitators to provide the atmosphere needed for change to occur, they must, by necessity possess a level of empathy consistent with the work being accomplished. In situations such as this, volunteers and staff must maintain limits in order to continue the work.

Jack Dixon, an experienced VOEG volunteer facilitator, recognizes the challenges that come with the territory, and notes that the programs and the work are the most important thing. "It would be tragic," he says, emotion clearly thickening his voice, "if I ever did anything to harm the program."

Maintaining Integrity

Prisoners understand that the success or failure of a program depends largely upon the relationships among the members, and how well everyone involved is able to focus on positive group and personal goals. Prisoners also understand that they must sometimes be the ones to maintain the line between allowable and prohibited behavior.

"We have to be proactive in maintaining the integrity of our groups," says David Cowan, president of the Alliance for Change. "In the Alliance, we give an orientation workshop to new volunteers, and we have a written volunteer policy."

Cowan notes that San Quentin provides fertile ground for positive personal change, and a large part of this comes from contributions made by the volunteers. "Understanding the importance of the San Quentin program is the responsibility of everyone who participates in them," says a North Block lifer. "We have to realize that the future welfare of our programs, and the ability to leave a legacy for other prisoners to benefit from, depends on how ethically we conduct ourselves now."

Correctional officers are on the front lines of the struggle to maintain the security of the institution, and most agree that over-familiarity is an ongoing and unique problem.

"Some inmates will manipulate friendships and coax staff into improper behavior," points out one veteran officer. "And sometimes volunteers will join groups just to set up a means to funnel contraband in."

No Easy Solution

However, the officer suggests that there is perhaps too much emphasis placed upon some of the trivial, yet banned behaviors. He admits that bringing in even a harmless, trivial thing, such as a bottle of water or piece of fruit specifically for an inmate, can lead to more serious security breaches. "This issue will probably never be resolved," adds the officer, "There is simply no easy solution, if it can be solved at all."

Many San Quentin staff and inmates are hesitant to speak about the over-familiarity issue. "This subject needs to be talked about openly, and the stakeholders need to work together," counsels one long-time staff volunteer. "People are complicated, and relationships are the most complex of all human interactions," she states, noting that the inmate-staff relationship model is unlike any other.

Sports Volunteers

Recreation Coordinator Don DeNevi deals with a large volume of volunteers each week, and has to remain consistently vigilant. "I constantly have to remind my Beige Card holders that they are here to compete, that's it."

On Sept. 18 and 19, San Quentin CARES, in conjunction with Avon, sponsored its annual Breast Cancer Walk-a-Thon. A diverse variety of inmates, staff, and volunteers walked thousands of collective laps together, raising thousands of dollars for research and support.

A female volunteer, who wishes to remain anonymous, stated that there was nothing unusual or particularly noteworthy about a Breast Cancer Walk-a-Thon, but the fact that it occurred behind San Quentin's walls made it so. "I could have been walking down the street in my neighbor-

hood with these men," she said, "the only difference is that I can't hug them."

One long-term inmate, having served over 30 years, reveals the sadness and pain that develops after decades without compassionate human contact. "I can shake hands with the men I see every day, and I can hug my friend. I can even shake hands with some of the staff and volunteers, but God forbid that I hug the woman who had been my mentor, adviser, and sobriety counselor for several years."

He reflects upon the psychological impact that the deprivation of human contact has on an inmate. "When the officer I work with every day, eight hours a day, for six years straight has to put on a pair of rubber gloves before touching me, it reminds me to never forget that I am no longer human."

U.S. Judge Is Facing Impeachment

WASHINGTON - A Louisiana federal judge is facing impeachment on corruption charges. The case against Judge G. Thomas Porteous is scheduled to go before the full Senate by mid-November.

If convicted, he would become just the eighth federal judge removed from the bench. A two-thirds vote is required for conviction. Federal judges are appointed for life.

In March the House voted unanimously to bring four articles of impeachment against Porteous.

He is accused of accepting cash, meals, trips and other favors from persons with business in his court.

A panel of 12 senators recently concluded hearing the case. Porteous has been suspended from hearing cases. He also is accused of filing a fraudulent bankruptcy and lying to Congress when the Senate confirmed him as a federal judge in 1994.