

Removing the Cornerstone

by Pat Hamilton

I write this piece sitting in the visitors' parking lot of one of Oregon's largest correctional institutions. Below several rows of parking, a street, a visitors' office, and what seems to be miles of razor-top fencing, several hundred men are locked up.

Most bothersome is the voting public's advocacy of "just locking them up." Let us examine what this means. Granted, some folks commit hideous crimes and absolutely deserve to be locked up—removed from the opportunity to harm others. There is a very good chance that every inmate deserves the rude awakening of "incarceration" for some period.

But then what? It doesn't matter what status a prisoner has—when his day of departure turns up, he is released. It doesn't matter if he has a history of being a model prisoner or if he has broken every rule in the place. It doesn't matter if he is rated maximum security and sitting in "the hole" or minimal security with a learned-his-lesson attitude. Come D-day, he will be released.

Chances are, when the man was first incarcerated, society locked up an "addict". It matters not what his drug of choice was—cocaine, alcohol, marijuana, heroin, or a list of other ones—most inmates go in as addicts. Once they are in, there is a temporary halt as the inmate "dries out" or physically detoxes. But after a while they learn, as any corrections worker can tell you, that there is a definite underground drug culture inside. The determined addict/inmate will get his drugs.

Until mid-December 1996 there was a highly successful drug treatment program called Cornerstone housed in the Oregon State Hospital. This program was de-funded by the legislature's Emergency Board—why do prisoners deserve any consideration?

Cornerstone was one of the most, if not the most, successful programs in the prison system, with an extremely low rate of recidivism. The men who applied had to have a sincere desire for recovery and rehabilitation. In the months the inmates spent in Cornerstone they were taught hard-core responsibility! They were taught to relate their addiction to their criminal behaviors.

They learned to identify their criminal thinking, then intervene on their own criminal impulses, which were often sparked by anger. They learned empathy for their victims and developed a willingness to make restitution. They quit blaming anyone else but themselves for past or future behavior. The entire onus for the success of the rest of their lives was put on each individual.

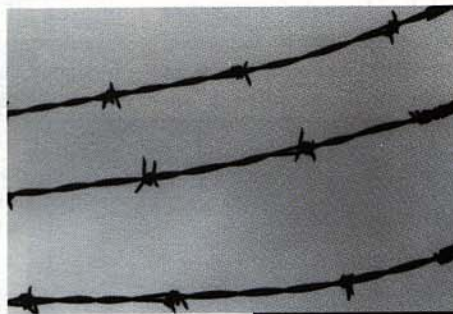
The graduates of Cornerstone came back to society as conscientious men determined to be good citizens: to get jobs, to make restitution, to remain in a recovery program and develop a recovery community. Yet, in December, they were shipped out in ones, twos and threes to different state institutions; hard-core institutions where being a "good citizen" isn't especially respected—where you have to learn how the criminal prison society works. In the "big houses" the

humane rules these men had learned to live by are no longer applicable. There is no room for compassion, fear, regret, or sadness. If you're not one of the tough, cool guys, you become someone's "boy."

It is wrong and short-sighted that this program was closed. When I asked a prison official if there were other rehabilitative programs in corrections, I heard him say "prism". Might be a good name for a program—prisms are lenses to look through and modify what's on the other side. As we talked, I realized he was saying "prison", not prism. As in, "prison is rehabilitation".

Sorry, the statistics don't bear that out. Rules in prison are not the rules we citizens live by. Lock up an addict, teach him how

to survive in prison, add some dehumanization, and you will turn out a man sure to re-offend. Without the rehabilitation Cornerstone provided, I am afraid for our society.



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