

NON-FICTION STORY (700 + words)

Anthony Tinsman [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Title: I, Intellectual Firing Squad

I wanted my prisoner rehabilitation program "Take a Load Off" to provide a body of positive work and hope for prisoners who were getting ready to leave for the World. There are some glimpses of hope, but progress routinely feels like a muddy canard rather than the champion I designed and put into practice. In a word People are the problem. We think we're the stars of everything, everything except causing our own problems or solving them for that matter. As the Programs Founder I'm allowed a slightly critical perspective, being that prisoners have all the reasons to change but don't and Staff have taken up typical sluggish support. But I'm less of a cynic than you might expect.

Prisoner's attitudes contribute more to their immobilization than concrete and steel. You might think its hard to get them to agree but its easy. Making them act is another thing altogether. I'll use the example of GED completions. In 2012 - 2013 there were over 116 GED completions in Forrest City, the highest in the FBOP. You only need a 455 average score to pass which proves too much for many. The truth, however, is about 12 of those 116 Diploma holders would have done it voluntarily. That's right, they were compelled by punishments like phone and commissary

restriction for not attending Pre-GED classes. When I put this question to participants in my classes, TLO or otherwise, most nod and conceded that yes, they too, are only in it to get their Case Managers off their backs.

Its easy to get overly cynical at this point. Most Instructors I've trained certainly fall into that mood, unable to accept their poor performance or overcome the fear of their peers paranoid suspicions like "Why is he asking us all these questions? So he can tell the Case Manger or what?!" Like I said, its easy, cynicism makes accepting less-than-excellent okay.

When I put students on the spot, say by asking "Do you actually care about life and amounting to shit?" they morally, emphatically state that yes they do. And yet getting homework out of them is an exercise in accepting anything. I mean anything they do is amazing because most do nothing. They don't even try to pretty up a little and make an excuse, they just say no I didn't do the f-ing homework. So I repeat the importance of it and guilt them into doing it in front of the entire class. I dog them out if I have to.

Occasionally I get wrapped up in their test answers. An odd one may answer honestly, figuring the Case Manager won't see it, which he won't because he doesn't really worry about what I teach. They answer "I don't need to change," or "I regret nothing." What they all share is a fear of getting told on and magically thinking that they can control their lives after they get out. The cycle repeats since very few are doing anything to build a foundation or to educate themselves...ahem, forced GED completions aside.

Most guys don't like the courses I teach because I actually expect them to do stuff: Make realistic 5 year strategic plans, explain a budget, convince me to hire them in mock interviews. They make excuses like "I don't need this right now, I've still got some time to do," and its not hard for their buddies to pursued them against it. Plenty of statistics from the Bureau Of Justice and the Urban Institute paint a bleak picture that I use in my arsenal against ignorance. 60% of ex-offenders are unemployed one year after release, for instance. There's a scary correlation to the 67.5% of ex-offender who return to prison just three years after release, don't you think? Do these numbers sync up coincidentally?

The obvious answer hits prisoners too, just with a little help, okay sometimes a lot of help. It can be tough pointing out that its not just keeping a job or tucking your horns up under your hat that make a difference. Positivity, preparation, planning, blah blah blah... they've all heard that in at last a dozen happy-thought classes the Case Managers like to see them complete from time to time. And it hasn't ignited much reinvention. So how does it happen to begin with?

What I do, and what TLO does best, is take the next step. Look I'm a prisoner, I'm volunteering, I seem to enjoy this most of the time. So we work out a purpose, a mission, make education about finding their passions so they can plan accordingly rather than to please guards. Its small but its constructive.

In the end a successful class is where one or two guys

move off the fence and forward to becoming better people. Its hard to motivate Instructors and Participants and Staff and myself, but signs exist of the program actually working. Its in each unit in Forrest City, operating, somehow. And despite the compulsion to program some participants are genuinely interested in seeing what its all about. The part of this story where we all walk away with a happy-again shrug is harder to provide. I don't get out until 2034, and I wrote the book on 1:1 prisoner guidance as far as Forrest City is concerned. I've changed, its changed things for the better and it can work for others. Cynics are breathless and raw after they learn that. If for no other reason than pity they lower their head and think "Man I don't want to end up like him." I want to tell them they wont. But, as important as it is, I don't know if I could have motivated myself to do "Take a Load Off" without "2034" and that in a nutshell is part of the challenge with being a person.

Anthony Tinsman

"Practice It Today"