

GOODWORKS

The Honor Program

By Kenneth E. Hartman

Several years ago, at the beginning of the worst series of riots and violence in the history of the California prison system, I wrote a proposal for what would become the Honor Program. After five years and numerous political battles to keep the program going, we remain what California State Senator Gloria Romero has called, "the shining star of the prison system."

In its entire existence, there have been no riots, no major incidents, and no mass actions of the type that have gripped this prison system (315 riots in 2005). The racial separation that characterizes most prisons in this state is lessened, if not eradicated. In short, for a prison, things run pretty smoothly, but how do they actually run, on the ground?

The first component of the process is the prisoner signing an agreement to live a different kind of life. "I agree to work to better myself and help in the creation of an environment in which growth is possible." Additionally, all agree to mandatory, random drug testing. There is an assumption that this contract also obligates the state to providing the means in which to realize these higher goals of self-improvement and improvement of our world. This last may be less reliable, but we have patterned ourselves on the approach to serving time described by Nelson Mandela: We will conduct ourselves with more dignity than some of our captors and move them to a higher place along with us, if necessary.

After signing the agreement, the participant creates an "Individual Development Plan," that details his goals, both long and short term, and seeks whatever assistance may be available from the state. For most, this means setting out to alter the course of their lives in their own way, at their own pace, but we strive to provide as many avenues as possible. The primary thrust is on service to the community. Honor Program participants counsel at-risk youth, donate beautiful works of art to be auctioned off for local charities, and build toys for disadvantaged children. We also refurbish eyeglasses for people in Third World countries, and readily participate in charitable giving as the need arises in specific cases.

We still have a long way to go to realizing all of the ideals and aspirations of the Honor Program, but we are moving forward. Our reach still exceeds our grasp, to be sure. However, our connections to the community grow apace with our desires to effect the world for the better.

The fundamental concepts for the day-to-day operation of the Honor Program are individual accountability and positive reinforcement of behavior. This stands in stark contrast to the failed group punishment/negative reinforcement model of most prison systems. The statistics, which show tremendous, double-digit decreases in all forms of illegal and inappropriate conduct, demonstrate the success of the Honor Program Model.

We who have worked to make this reality believe the possibilities are endless; we believe the Honor Program can transform the prison system. More to the point, we believe we can change the world, one heart at a time.

I am currently the Chairman of the Steering Committee for the Honor Program. For contact information go to www.kennethehartman.com, or write to me at:

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Kenneth Hartman, a life prisoner with more than 27 years served, is a nationally recognized, award-winning author who has worked for more than 16 years to effect transformational change inside prison. His essay, A Prisoner's Purpose, was one of the winners of the Templeton Foundation's worldwide essay contest, the 2004 Power of Purpose Awards. He also won a 2005 Maggie Award for his editorial piece on prison reform which was published in California Lawyer. He has an unshakeable faith in the power of personal transformation, and a limitless determination to work for real change within the prison system. -ed.

