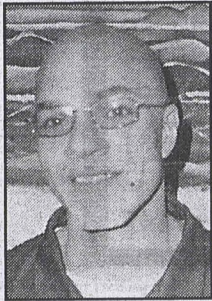


Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley



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Surviving & Growing In The New York State Prison System

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I am currently serving a 25-years-to-life sentence for second degree murder. I was 25 years old at the time of my arrest. I had no prior state prison experience, though I had spent 60 days in Rikers Island back in 1989. Aside from all the stories that I'd heard about prison, I honestly did not know what to expect upon my arrival. However, after 23 years of existing in here, I can assure you it has been life altering! Social detachment was only one aspect of my journey. I will now give you a brief glimpse of my experience.

When I arrived at the maximum security reception facility (Downstate Correctional) in December 1993, my family and community support was still very strong. I had already been off the streets for 16 months by that point. I was transferred to Greenhaven CF in January 1994 and I spent six years there. While I was there I received at least two visits a week, received some form of correspondence 3-4 days a week, and I used the telephone 3-4 days a week. Calls were \$8.50 per half hour then. My appeal process was just about to start at this point, so there was still hope of returning home shortly. According to my trial attorney, "I would be back in court again within 18 months," and would receive a much shorter sentence. That never happened.

As the years passed and the appeals were either affirmed or denied, my support group began to diminish. After my tenth year in prison, I had five people there for me. Today, thirteen years later, I have only three who offer unconditional love and support. I receive about four visits a year, 4-8 letters/cards a month, and I use the telephone once or twice a week. Calls now cost \$1.45 per half hour.

The longer I am incarcerated the more detached I feel — out of sight, out of mind. The anguish I've experienced from this is intense. No one wants to feel alone and forgotten. To survive the madness inside prison requires a heart of stone.

To survive in here without getting physically injured or "catching a new bid" — that is getting a new sentence — there are some essential rules.

1. Under no circumstances should you be inclined to steal anything from another incarcerated individual, regardless of what he/she was convicted of. If you require something, simply ask for it.

2. Avoid gangs, drugs, gambling and homosexuals.

3. Do not live beyond your means. If you do not already have enough money in your facility account, do not attempt to acquire anything from someone else with the promise of returning that item when you go to the commissary. Do not count on receiving money from your family and friends — it does not always arrive. If you don't have the money, do without. Remember that in here all you really have is your word; you will be judged and treated according to such.

4. Mind your own business. This will keep you out of trouble, while avoiding a lot of unnecessary drama.

You must also be extremely conscious of your surroundings. Learn to read other people's body language; it could quite possibly save your life. Mood swings apply to every individual around you, some more severe than others. Everyone has a different breaking point and means of dealing with their predicament; you have to recognize those moments. Always be respectful of others, and expect to be held accountable for your words and actions. This is a "thinking" person's world; the war in here is not always a physical one, but rather it's psychological.

You should work to make your days go by as smoothly as possible but to do this on a daily basis requires plenty of concentration, patience and energy — it's literally a job in itself. You are interacting with hundreds of different personalities. You must learn to adjust to your new surroundings quickly and always think before you react to any new situation. This kind of thinking will also serve you well on

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the day you finally re-enter the wider society beyond the walls. Eventually, most of us in here will get back there.

To alleviate the stress, and the pent-up pain and frustration, exercise is very useful. I used to jog three to five miles and work out with weights five days a week. After up to two hours of this I would take a shower and then walk around the yard to use up the rest of the recreation period. Usually I would do this with one or two associates. This was a good method of clearing my head of negative thoughts so I could focus on what's really important, regaining my freedom and becoming a productive law-abiding citizen. You must guard against letting this place turn you into an angry and bitter individual. Today I relieve some of my stress by doing ten sets of 100-repetition pushups.

Over the years, I've also kept my inner circle extremely small. I socialize with just a few men who are sincere about criminal justice reform and future plans for our success. Plus, I do my best not to get caught up in prison politics; that's a headache I can definitely do without.

Education is the one thing you can work on while in here. You have to put aside negative, criminal ways of thinking. With an open mind you can actually learn much inside. In my own case I've completed just about all of my "required" programs, such as Aggression Replacement Training, Residential Substance Abuse Therapy, and so on. That occurred in my first four years in prison. Then I went on to work on my employability status, with courses in mechanical drafting, general business, general mechanic. I've become a good HVAC technician, and more recently a clerk. That kind of training provides options and a chance of obtaining decent employment upon my release.

So... incarceration becomes an opportunity, of sorts, for growth and development. You can never acquire too much knowledge.

to be continued...

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