

Inside The Box

A Prisoner Tells His Tale

By Matthew Hattley



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In Search of the Truth

While reading the letters section in the February 13 issue of the Shawangunk Journal, I came across one written by Patricia Mitchell of Lake Katrine that caught my attention: *Problems Within Our Correctional Facilities*. As a

prisoner inside one of those, I feel an obligation to address numerous inaccuracies in that letter.

First, regarding violence — some advice to anyone voicing their opinion about New York correctional facilities. Name the specific prison(s) you are referring to. There are more than sixty operational prisons and many do not experience much violence, especially on a regular basis; Shawangunk, Eastern, Woodbourne and Wallkill to name a few.

If Mrs. Mitchell's allegation that, "Last year there were over 700 assaults on officers and staff" is correct, then you are talking about 11 to 12 incidents per year per facility. Keep in mind there are about 54,000 prisoners so that 700 figure represents 1.3 percent of the prison population being involved in any given year. How many "assaults" are reported from Lake Katrine every month?

Plus, what's almost never mentioned is the fact that a large percentage of said "assaults" are prompted by the correction officers themselves; many of them are more stressed out than we are, and they go home every day. The only reason most even bother to write the unusual incident report is to receive worker's compensation; which if abused can be an easy way to earn a paycheck while never leaving your home for up to six months.

Furthermore, the number of prisoner assaults on staff is actually at an all-time low, not the opposite. The prison population has been decreasing at a rate of about 1,000 prisoners per year for the past decade; and the prisoners are aging. And believe me, older prisoners no longer waste time on such foolishness as assaulting a corrections officer. Our focus is on returning to society. We have no desire to remain incarcerated forever.

Mrs. Mitchell also said, "Our officers provide a community service, they vow and are committed to keeping our community safe." Who are they keeping you safe from? Yourselves? CO's are NOT police officers, and their duties cease the moment they leave the prison grounds.

If she's referring to keeping your communities safe from us, as in preventing escapes, then sure, they're doing a good job. Escapes from New York prisons are very rare. In 2010, three inmates escaped; in 2009 there was one; in 2008, none; while two escaped in 2007.

However — note please — only one prisoner escaped from a maximum security prison between 2006 and 2010. Five of those who escaped between 2006 and 2010 were serving sentences for burglary, three for drug offenses and one for weapons possession. Remember there are 54,000 prisoners. The prisons are secure.

On to Mrs. Mitchell's remarks about prison closings. The reason Governor Cuomo has "closed and is continuing to close many correctional facilities" is because they are no longer full. There are still more than 6,000 empty beds. The cost to taxpayers is no longer feasible. To even suggest that there's "overcrowding" in the NYS prison system is a fabrication.

Also, over 90 percent of the "double bunks" were removed in early 2013, per a court order. The cells were too small for two occupants (6 foot by 8 foot). With the exception of Five Points C.F. there are no double bunks available to the general population. They are found only in "solitary confinement units" — go figure!

The increased "aggravation" amongst prisoners that she reports has nothing to do with double bunking. It comes from the frustration of a parole board that blatantly refuses to grant parole, even to prisoners who've been eligible for years. Some are doing anything from two to fifteen years on top of their minimum sentence. This double bunking scenario is another fabrication.

Now, I agree that NY Corrections is "mixing mentally ill in with general population and cutting mental health staff." The state, it seems, would rather spend \$70,000 a year per mental patient to house them in prisons than the \$200,000 it would cost to adequately care for and treat said individuals. It's all about saving money, at the expense of the mentally ill.

However, you can't blame the governor for, "Reclassifying our more serious and violent inmates and placing them in medium security facilities rather than maximum security." This is the way the system works.

Allow me to explain. When a prisoner has six years or less remaining on their sentence, they are classified as "medium security." And thus they are transferred from a maximum security facility to a medium security facility. Unless, of course, they have constant disciplinary issues, such as fighting, or drugs etc. If that's the case they will stay in maximum security, or be transferred to one if they're in medium security. The reclassification process reflects our growth and potential to change for the better. Not all of us are evil to the core; most simply made some bad decisions.

Now to another fabrication — Prisoners ARE disciplined. If we display violent behavior, we are sent to solitary confinement. This is especially true of violence against a staff member, and confinement there can last years. This is not supposed to occur in this day and age, but it does. So, Mrs. Mitchell, contrary to what you believe, prisoners are punished when we break the rules. A little research will show you that everything I've stated here is factual.

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