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MAIL CALL

by

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You can feel the tension increase on 6-North every evening around six p.m. The after-dinner cleanup is finished, cribbage and Scrabble games begin, and a soft murmur of the evening news escapes from the TV room, but does not mask the electricity in the air. Resolute chess players periodically lift their heads and peer nonchalantly toward the entrance door to the module. Tiny beads of sweat appear on upper lips and brows and you can almost hear the thumping of increased heartbeats. What elicits such pronounced change in these inmates? Fear of the lieutenant who distributes extra duty slips like business cards flying around a gentleman's club? The pending arrival of the attractive brunette who picks up the sick call list? Well, maybe she is partially responsible, but the reality is the wait for mail call.

Letters, magazines, greeting cards, and even legal mail are treasured. When the familiar blue mesh bag finally appears, all are drawn to it as if a huge magnet suddenly activated. Inmates are sucked out of their cells and TV rooms, swept along to the correctional officer's desk with a homing instinct more powerful than a reformed addict drawn to the methadone clinic. Even the hardest veteran inmate has to fight to keep the edges of his mouth from curling into a tiny smile.

Card games and chess skirmishes may continue but each time a name is called out, eyes raise discreetly, and heads roll toward the pile of envelopes; silent hope someone has remembered. For those in the system for some time, or who remember the years away from home in the military, mail call is the focal point of our dreary existence. A goal, something to look forward to in the desert of time we survive in seven days a week; the oasis on the horizon, breaking up the vast wasteland.

There are few things an inmate looks forward to in jail and mail call is like Christmas morning to a child; the potential of gifts of written communication from the outside. Unfortunately, for many, there is seldom anything in the blue mesh bag. We walk away with shoulders slumped, silently mumbling about our loved ones not knowing what it is like on the inside, how outside contact elevates us. This sensitivity adds to the overall feeling of rejection. Many times this affect results in our saying to ourselves, "Why do I bother to send letters? Nobody cares enough to write back."

How do we overcome this cycle of hopelessness and still encourage our friends and relatives to write? Easy. Send quality letters and you will receive more responses. Write positive letters, with upbeat content, instead of dwelling on negativism.

Granted, many of us do not write well and are a little embarrassed by spelling and grammatical errors. In reality, do your relatives really pay any attention to errors in your letter? Probably not. They are our loved ones, not middle-school English teachers. Our correspondents, finding one of our letters in their mailbox, are as excited as our own mail call. However, when they find our communications filled with complaints about the system, hatred, anger and frustration, who can blame them for not feeling upset themselves? There is little our correspondents can do to make an inmate's frustrations go away. So your letters go unanswered until our people deal with their own feelings of despair.

How do you feel when your mother writes you about an intimidating and harrassing neighbor? There is nothing you can do to help her and you are depressed and angry at the predicament. Mom is in the same boat when you send a letter airing your problems with a corrections officer, counselor or other inmate. Your communications stagnate or deteriorate to a requiem of complaints.

Our people on the outside do not want to hear about unpalatable food, long lines or the lack of useful activities. Unless you present the difficulties in a humorous manner. They

want to hear positive aspects of your life, however few.

Think about the last letter you received from home. One that brought a smile to your face. The communication was filled with information about family, friends, new babies, relatives and changes taking place around your home. A letter like this might cause a little homesickness briefly, maybe a tear or two, but overall, the information invigorates you. We are assured our families are safe and secure when a letter expresses contentment.

Try writing your letters in a similar vein. Include positive information. Relate a new friend you have made or simply state you have lost a little weight but are staying healthy, working out, or you finally beat a certain guy in a handball game. Such small talk shows there are some positive aspects to your life.

Family and friends at home feel badly about your situation and if you show them your strength at dealing with the inside life, they, in turn, are encouraged. Remember, the recipients of your cards and letters absorb your disappointment and frustrations. Their responses to your letters come easier if they do not first have to sort out their own depression. Be upbeat and positive in your communications.

When answering letters, re-read the lines and pen a few of your own in response to each topic covered. Answer the questions asked and add a reminiscence of your own about the same subject. If you are told Aunt Teresa had a baby, respond with a line or two about how you remember she was such a terrible driver. Whoever wrote you will in turn respond that Aunt Teresa recently had two fender-bender accidents, automatically continuing your long-

distance communications. Your letters will be longer and far more interesting. You want those writing you to enjoy the experience as much as you do receiving their letters. Be positive.