

I
Oh, The People You Will Meet
by Dan Grote #22670-429

As a GED instructor in a maximum security prison, I'm responsible for two classes a day consisting of anywhere from six to twenty convicted felons. Some actually want to be there, some who're just going through the motions to keep from receiving a write-up that could turn into a ticket to the "Special Housing Unit" (SHU) or "Hole" as most people call it. To my credit, I've got the better part of a decade in front of the classroom under my belt. I started out on a volunteer basis in Chicago, taught for 3 1/2 years in eastern Kentucky and now find myself in my third year of employ at a facility in northeast Pennsylvania. As far as available jobs go, it's not a bad gig. My normal class-load consists of about six hours a day and, every quarter or so, I can pick up an Adult Continuing Education (A.C.E.) class for a few extra hours a week. At approximately twenty-six cents an hour it doesn't add up all that quick, but I can usually set-up a few 2-3 hour a week one on one tutoring sessions, and my going rate for those is usually a book of stamps, although that's a sliding scale, and I'd never withhold my tutelage for lack of funds. All in all, I get by. And, if you've not already guessed it, I not only work at a penitentiary, I live in one.

Eighty-four months for an unarmed bank robbery. Not my first. That one was a 48 month stretch that landed me at a Pen in eastern Kentucky. To say I've made some poor choices is to underestimate terribly, my innate ability to fuck up and sabotage anything and everything good in my life. All told though, I did better than many. Good job, home, wife, kids. Had it all and managed to hold on to it until I was almost thirty, no juvenile record, nothing more serious than a speeding ticket... Then one day, -poof-, and it's all gone. Traded for addiction and a life of crime. Well, not quite a life of crime, but two pathetically drawn out suicide attempts disguised as bank robberies. One in 2008 and one in 2013. You see, in my fucked up mind, it all made perfect sense, knock off a bank and, with the money, go hole up and drink myself to death. I came close both times, but in the end, it was off to prison. For what it's worth, I was unarmed both times and in several police reports and court transcripts have been referred to as, quite possibly, the most polite of bank robbers ever seen in the Chicago metropolitan area.

So how does an overly empathetic bank robber become a first-class convict educator? Pretty easily, as it turns out. Believe it or not,

at the penitentiary or maximum security level, there's not a whole lot of competition for a slot in the education department. Here on "The Inside", behind "The Walls", it's all about "The Hustle." When you are working for pennies, you're always on the lookout for something to borrow, steal, scam or skim. What can I get my hands on at work and sell to my fellow inmates? That being said, working in food service is top notch as far as providing a "Hustle" goes, with Commissary being next on the totem pole. You can always sell food. Knowledge, however, not so much. Pens, paper, maybe sometimes a calculator, maybe some photocopying of forms or gambling tickets? Once in awhile I can manage to hit a nice tick and make a few bucks, but, for the most part, there is no "Hustle" in "The Knowledge." Other than the few who value my eye as an instructor, nobody seems to give two shits, and that's okay with me. As long as there's at least one person I can help, it's worth it.

What are the requirements or qualifications needed to be a GED tutor in prison? Few and flexible.

"You got a GED or High School Diploma?"

"Yes."

"You're hired."

Pretty straight forward. With zero prior experience, a fierce hatred of all things mathematic, and a hearty disdain for most people in general, I wasn't at all sure how I'd pull it off, but it turns out, I'm pretty damn good at it and most days, I actually end up enjoying myself. For every dozen assholes who try to disrupt and derail a class, I end up finding one or two who make it all worthwhile. The actual classroom environment is probably akin to a small urban high-school class. As this is a maximum security facility, you have to make your peace with the fact that all of your students are strapped up with some manner of homemade shank, but I've been assured that, were the shit to ever hit the fan, the general rule is that nobody stabs the tutor. Luckily, that maxim's never been tested, though a fist fight did once break out after a particularly heated discussion about the relative merits and usefulness of the quadratic formula. I'm not making that up. The penal environment seems to breed extremely violent conclusions to some horribly lame debates. I've seen a man get knocked out for arguing that J.R.R. Tolkien was responsible for the creation of elves, numerous fistfuffs over who is better, LeBron or Jordan, a three on three dustup over turning the TV Channel when "Jerry Springer"

was on and I once saw a man get stabbed in the head after a particularly heated verbal sparring match revolving around the merits of declaring oneself a "sovereign citizen", whatever the fuck that is.

So, here I sit, having been twice crowned "Tutor of the Year" at this facility and currently about a thousand hours shy of completing a 4,000 hr. Dept. of Labor certified teacher's aide apprenticeship contemplating what a long, strange trip it's been staring at a picture of a swayback old horse. It was a gift from one of the first students I helped when I arrived here. It's not entirely uncommon for a grateful graduate to give a token of appreciation to their tutor. I've received books of stamps, bags of coffee & pair of new boots and, on one occasion, drugs for my troubles. While I appreciate the gesture when it comes along I do try and make sure my students know that they did all the work, not me. All I did was show them that they could do it. A little patience, instruction and positive reinforcement is something totally new to alot of these guys. Beyond material gifts, it's the reward of seeing someone regain hopes, watching someone who society gave up on slowly start to believe in themselves, that's what makes it worthwhile. My eyes have misted a time or two whenever a life's put their all into getting a piece of paper that won't really benefit them other than in the pride dept. Old Willie, two life sentences, in GED classes or out off for 12 years. Nobody ever took much interest in his learning, so why would he? Came to my class, had his GED a year later, said he couldn't wait to tell his grandkids that if his "old ass" could do it, they "better not have no excuses." Laughed as he said it, damn near cried at graduation. Makes two of us. Guys like that, they're the real gift. And then there's the horse...

The Federal Republic of Somalia occupies the eastern horn of Africa, is home to just shy of eleven million people and boasts 1700 miles of coastline and a fairly serious pirate problem. Perhaps you remember the incident of Somalian piracy made famous by Tom Hanks? Captain Phillips? Long story short, just to refresh everyone's memory, pirates hijack ship, U.S. Navy Seals get involved, story ends badly for our pirates. Well, as it turns out, several of the pirates survived the ordeal and were brought to the United States to face federal charges. Though the Federal penal system's population numbers well over 200,000 people, it's kind of a small world, especially at the maximum

security level. You end up meeting some fairly interesting people. I've met mobsters, cartel members and even an alleged terrorist or two. I also met Shabin. He was a student in one of the first GED classes I ever taught at this facility. Nice guy, older gentleman, couple gold teeth, starting to go gray and spoke too proficient with the English language. He did have a good attitude though, and, slow going as it was at first, the man learned his shit! His English even started to get better. He liked talking and it was through one of our conversations that I found out exactly who I was tutoring. Yes, he was one of "The Captain Phillips Guys".

I don't know that you tutor a Somali pirate any different than your run of the mill American convict, so he got the same special and attention I give everyone, and in return, I got vivid descriptions of life in a country I was previously only acquainted to through the book and film "Black Hawk Down". I never knew the standard Somali military unit, nor was I aware that one of the country's chief crops was sesame seeds. He taught me just as much as I taught him.

"You know, Magoo (everyone calls me that in here. Long story for another essay!) in my country, the horse is very important. A status symbol. It is an honor to gift a man a horse."

"Whadya mean, Shabin?"

"If you want to repay someone a great debt, you honor them with a horse."

Interesting, I thought, though the ever present addict in me would be more interested in a gift of Khat, the local stimulant of choice. He laughed at that.

The day finally came for him to take his test, and he aced it. I couldn't have been prouder. Later that very night, he presented me with a manila envelope.

"Magoo. Thank you. You are an honorable man"

Been called many things the last decade, honorable's not one of them. Either way, it was nice to get some kinda thank you. I set the envelope aside and forgot about it until we got locked in our cells for the night. Upon opening the envelope, I couldn't help but smile. Inside was a picture of possibly the most ragged horse I've ever seen, but the message behind it made it the most magnificent specimen in the world and it hangs in my cell to this day. There was also

another, smaller picture. Of a cat. Khat, cat? Jokes on me, I guess and smart-assery is bound by no language.