

Rehabilitation versus Slave Labor

Prison is not meant to be an institution of punishment. The sole punishment an inmate is meant to endure for a crime he or she is convicted of is the complete and total loss of freedom from society and nothing more. Prison is, in fact, meant to be an institution of rehabilitation. Therefore, upon being processed into the Department of Corrections, it is the responsibility of both the institution and the inmate to take the proper steps toward rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, Arkansas' penal system's primary focus is not rehabilitation but, rather, free slave labor, and this begins the moment an inmate passes through those steel doors.

I remember quite well passing through those steel doors for the first time. I immediately went from spending 512 lazy days in county jail with absolutely no work detail or access to direct sun light to being thrust into triple digit Arkansas summer heat. Hoe squad. Named for the primary garden tool, the hoe, used to work the fields, ditches, and surrounding areas of the prison farmland. We were instructed by the hoe squad riders sitting high on their horses to get into a tight line, one man behind the other, and with a steady high rise and swift drop of our hoes we chopped the grass before us. Sometimes we're told to make two, three, four beats to the ground before taking a step backward, chopping clear to the dirt, with everyone moving as one unit. Sometimes we're told to make ten to twenty beats per step. And sometimes, if the hoe squad rider is feeling especially cantankerous, he'd order us to make fifty beats per step. We dare not stop no matter how burning tired our arms and shoulders became either or else suffer being written a disciplinary for disobeying a direct order which will suspend phone, visitation, and commissary privileges, plus time in the hole, plus set a potential parole date back several months. The hoe squad rider is the only one who decides if you are too tired to go on. Same goes for those who pass out from the heat and/or exhaustion. You weren't given permission to pass out, therefore you disobeyed a direct order.

We worked several different areas around the prison. We cleared grass and weeds beneath fence lines that run as far as the eye can see thick with colonies of sugar ants and fire ants. Get those on you and you are coming up out of your pants quick, fast and in a hurry while slapping hands at your dancing legs. We worked a nearby swamp, cleaning out grass and brush infested with cottonmouths slithering by our feet and creepy looking spiders and insects crawling all over us. It didn't take long before we were all covered in mud and stagnant swamp water. We worked fields that seemed to never end, coughing, and choking on the dust floating around us in a thick cloud that we kicked up from chopping grass and weeds a yard high. Dirt clung to our sweaty skin to the point that by the end of the day we were all so completely caked by it that no one could tell one man's racial identity from the next.

Once you've done enough time on hoe squad you've then earned the privilege of another less physically arduous work assignment. Depending on your custody level you'll be assigned to an outdoors work detail such as tractor squad, horse barn, beef herd, or outside maintenance, or an inside work detail such as kitchen, porter work, garment factory (the sweat shop), or inside maintenance. You should hope that your supervisor is easy to work for too. If you have a very stern or outright mean supervisor then you are susceptible to being written a disciplinary at any given time for any reason they want. You suddenly become ill and aren't able to work? Disciplinary action. Get accidentally injured while on the job? Disciplinary action. You're found in a different area from your workstation, even if it is only a couple of yards away? Disciplinary action. And many officers are quick to lie in order to have you busted as well. And once you are busted, guess what happens next. Back to hoe squad you go.

If incarceration is the courts mandate, then rehabilitation, and not slave labor, should be a mandatory process provided by the Department of Corrections by virtue of commitment order in which an inmate is potentially able to address and change the behavior that got them where they are and help them transition into a better way of living.

vocational training, life skills, and faith-based programs are all helpful options and ideal for rehabilitation but not all institutions provide them. In those that do, not all inmates qualify to take them. A person's time mandated by the court and the crime they have been convicted of both determine whether they are able to participate in these programs. If an inmate is serving a life sentence, he or she does not qualify for most of these rehabilitative programs because realistically there is very little possibility that they will ever be released back into free society. **NO ONE SHOULD BE DECLARED BEYOND REHABILITATION WITHOUT FIRST ATTEMPTING TO DO SO.** But our corrections system not only provides its barest minimum resources toward rehabilitating its inmates but seems to take measured steps to ensure regression which effectually assures recidivism if an inmate is granted freedom.

Ask yourself this, would you rather a man or a woman go to a prison where there is no mandatory process of rehabilitation but there is assured daily punishment by way of slave labor which is proven to be counterproductive, worsening that individuals state of mind, and then release him or her back into free society? Or would you rather a man or a woman be released from a prison that has taken the proper steps toward rehabilitating them so that they may become a positive minded productive member of society?

I was 20 years old when I was locked up. I am now 44 years old. I've come a long way from where I was mentally, emotionally, and physically as a 20-year-old kid. Early on I took the initiative to identify my problems, pinned them down, and solved them through self-rehabilitation. I refused to allow the negative nature of this prison to mold and shape my identity like it does so many others. I've taken and completed every self-help class available to me. I have a perfect work attendance record with every job detail I've been assigned to. And I am a published fiction author many times over with two books having been nominated for awards by an author's guild in 2021.

But for all that, I would still like to further my education by enrolling into the Vo-Tech and/or taking the college courses ADC offers.

But guess what?

I do not qualify for either of those due to my sentence length.

But do you know what I most certainly do qualify for in here?

Hoe squad, making fifty beats per step.

Bio

Jeremy Keith Phillips writes fiction under the name Jeremy Mac, with five books and one short story collection to his list of credits. He is currently warehoused in the Arkansas Department of Corrections, Cummins unit, serving a life sentence for first degree murder.