

GIRAFFES, SCHOOL BUSES, &
PRISON LIBRARIANSHIPS

(or,
"WHY DID YOU MOVE HUNDREDS OF MILES
AWAY TO BUY A CAR, BILL?")

"It's a decent place to live, but I wouldn't want to work here."

That's the tongue-firmly-in-cheek consensus at the medium-security prison where I work, a running joke started -- as most good jokes on the inside are -- by the cons themselves.

And how do you answer a convicted felon when he asks you with no small amount of incredulity, "Why the hell would you want to work in a place like this?" Some cons consider you a money-grubbing opportunist, and they know how much you make because any con worth his commitment number can find out things like that, prison being the demented Peyton Places that they are. Others view you as a parasite, a non-person leeching off of the misfortune of those whom merciless Fate has sealed behind the miles of fence and concertina wire: almost weekly a prisoner will announce -- with all the self-righteousness he can muster -- "You wouldn't even have a job if it wasn't for us!" And there is a small but vocal corps of cons who think you're just stupid, and delight in telling you that. As often as possible.

Coming to a decision about working in a prison is as uncomplicated as lighting a cigarette butt with a blow torch: even after working for the Massachusetts Department of Corrections for 2½ years, it's difficult offering a coherent rationale to the uninitiated as to why I do what I do. My wife, parents, and the Department head of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Pittsburgh received the same Confucian admonishments: "Well, why does anybody do anything?!" After writing to a friend back home in Pennsylvania that I'd just located and purchased a second-hand jalopy after residing in Mass. only a week, I received the response: "Why did you have to move hundreds of miles away just to buy a car?"

And when I requested an internship in prison library management, my mentor at Pitt displayed that certain look of befuddlement that people do when they've just sat naked on a plate of cold spaghetti. I got my internship, though: the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Pittsburgh, sponsored by then senior librarian and fellow Pitt alumnus Stephen Mallinger.

Every misguided and ill-fated crusade receives an historical epitaph: Custer's Last Stand, for example. With the luxury of hindsight, I reverently refer to my experience at Pittsburgh "Mallinger's Prison Library Boot Camp for the Criminally Naive." The premise of the 10-hour-per-week, 9-month internship was to study the information needs of the 1,600 inmates at the penitentiary. I achieved this by:

- 1) Compiling a 40-page bibliography of all reference material in the library (I used catalogue card software borrowed from the local library to generate the list on my home PC);
- 2) Working alongside Mallinger's inmate clerks at the circulation desk and in the law library; and
- 3) Continuing my collateral reading of as much information as I could find on prison libraries in particular and the behavior of criminals in general: I then composed a 15-page paper drawing from these sources and my experiences behind the wall.

As if to punctuate this Herculean indoctrination, I also observed bibliotherapy groups held in the library; observed in-house video production; and coordinated and participated in a 2-day workshop addressing the information needs of the Hispanic inmate.

The outline of the internship was structurally sound, for I was able to study and participate in all aspects of running a prison library, specifically a prison library operating on the therapeutic model of service as opposed to attempting to simply replicate the look and feel of a public library. My time inside also gave me an understanding of and a healthy respect for the security needs of both the library and of the institution in which it is housed. I would recommend this model of internship to any prison librarian interested in ensuring that every Wanna-Be prison librarian enrolled in the local library school pays his dues.

A word of warning to the Wanna-Bees: folks will never really understand your calling. To illustrate: one day at SCI-Pittsburgh, Mallinger was complaining to one of the inmate counselors about the nuisance civil suits filed by prisoners against the library, and the counselor quipped: "Well,

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you're the one who wanted to grow up to be a prison librarian." The absurdity of that non-sequitur caused me to stop and reflect on what it was exactly that I was willingly and without duress or coercion getting myself into. My guess is that very few children when quizzed about career aspirations would rank "prison librarian" up there with "fireman" or "ballerina." My six-year old responded to this question at the time by confiding that she hoped to become "either a giraffe or a school bus."

If nothing else, an internship in prison library management is a litmus test of the psyche: it will tell you if you have the 3 crucial attributes for surviving in this field of librarianship. These attributes are -- in order of importance --

- 1) You cherish and cultivate an innate sense of the bizarre;
- 2) You believe unequivocally that the sun will come out tomorrow; and
- 3) You enjoy working in a field of librarianship which must be experienced to be understood.

--William D. Mongelli
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(4/30/89)

TEN WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD BECOME A BETTER READER

1. Help your child acquire a wide range of knowledge. Go on shopping trips, walks in the park, and visits to the zoo. This builds background knowledge needed as children learn to read textbooks.
2. Talk with your child about his or her experiences. This helps children learn new words and their meanings.
3. Encourage your child to think about events. Asking your child to describe events helps him or her learn to give good descriptions and tell complete stories.
4. Read aloud to your child. This is probably the single most important activity you can do to affect reading success. It is especially important during the preschool years. The benefits of reading aloud are greatest when children participate in the activity by identifying words and letters and by talking about the story and the meaning of words.
5. Provide your child with writing materials. Writing is an important way to learn about letters and words. Children are often eager to learn how to write; encourage them by having paper, pencils and crayons in your home.
6. Encourage your child to watch TV programs that have educational value. Ask your child questions about the shows and relate what they see to experiences in real life.
7. Monitor how much TV your child watches. Watching quality TV up to 10 hours a week can have a slightly positive effect on your child's achievement. Most children who watch 20 or more hours a week of TV don't do well in school.
8. Monitor your child's school performance. Research shows that children tend to be more successful readers when their parents have an accurate view of their schoolwork. Visit your child's teacher and classroom, find out about the reading program, and participate in home-school programs.
9. Encourage your child to read independently. The amount of reading done out of school influences the level of success in school. Help your child by having plenty of books in your home and by visiting the library regularly.
10. Continue your personal involvement in your child's growth as a reader. Set a good example by reading magazines, newspapers and books. Encourage reading as a leisure time activity for the whole family.

--Parent Cues (6/89)
Plainedge Public Library
1060 Hicksville Road
Massapequa, NY 11758