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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Crime Is A Community Problem

by Emmett Solomon, Restorative Justice Ministry

During my 20 years of prison chaplaincy, I knew there were many things wrong with the prison system. I began when bullwhips were still being used on inmates in the fields surrounding the Eastham Unit of the Texas Department of Corrections. And, I found great disfavor with the warden when I protested. The name of the agency had been recently changed, but the methodology had not; it was still in actuality the Texas Prison System.

If I was going to bring any redemption to that institution, I knew I must cordon off some area in which to function. I was the chaplain, so I set about making the *Chapel of Peace* at the Eastham Unit a therapeutic community. It took several years to truly become just that and, I am proud to say, remains so today.

Each prisoner who became a member of the core group, *Chapel Fellowship*, had to be in one of the seven counseling groups which I

conducted each week. During twenty years, I sat for fifty hours with 2000 men, giving them a chance to share their innermost feelings. In some cases, it had to be coaxed out of them. Gradually, they learned to cognitively recognize the personal baggage they were carrying within themselves.

In the midst of one of the worst prisons in Texas, the chapel was an oasis where prisoners functioned in a church-like atmosphere. Men were finding personal healing. After twenty years, I was promoted to the Director of Chaplain's Office. There, I attempted to guide every chaplain to do quality interactive ministry.

Criminal Justice Ministry and Restorative Justice

Upon taking early retirement, I became a consultant for the Baptist General Convention of Texas to develop *Criminal Justice Ministry*. When we began to seriously minister to Crime

Victims, it became clear that we should embrace *Restorative Justice*. It best serves crime victims because it keeps them in the process. In restorative justice the

state does not take the case away from the victims as happens in traditional justice. Restorative Justice sees crime as creating broken relationships which cry out for healing. The traditional system engenders almost no

(continued on page 2)

Prison does not teach what upper and middle class people assume that it teaches. They think it teaches right and wrong. It does not.

Budget Woes Impact Inmates in Texas

(see page 3 for details)

healing. It simply renews the suffering daily.

In the early days in the chapel, I began to notice that these well meaning prisoners never prayed for their victims. At that time, I did not understand why. However, after some teaching, they began to include their victims in their prayers.

Now I understand why that happened. Prison does not teach what upper and middle class people assume that it teaches. They think it teaches *right* and *wrong*. It does not. When I taught the prisoners about *truth*, I was careful to use many adjectives to describe what I meant. It had been so long since they had been around truth, it was unfamiliar to them.

As soon as they were locked away in county jail they began a bargaining process which had little to do with the truth. The D.A. was determined to work out a plea bargain with the prisoner. After months, an arrangement was in place for the prisoner to plead guilty to some agreed upon charge. If the prisoner was seasoned, he was a tough bargainer whose efforts were to minimize his sentence. During that bargaining between the D.A. and his big staff of attorneys and the prisoner and his

little attorney, the prisoner felt hammered. By the time he reached prison, he felt like he had been victimized. Hence he never again thought of those people he had injured and frustrated. The great lesson he had learned was, "If you have a good attorney you receive a small punishment, if you have a weak attorney you receive big punishment."

As soon as they were locked away in county jail they began a bargaining process that had little to do with truth.

We changed the name of our enterprise to *Restorative Justice Ministry* and began to develop a network. That RJM Network was helped along by publishing a quarterly newspaper, *Restorative Justice News* and the numbers of people doing hands-on ministry continued to grow. Currently the network has more than

50,000 such people on its mailing list.

The newspaper is filled with stories of exemplary ministry activities and gives lists of active ministries for the purposes of networking. Also contained in its pages are articles about Restorative Justice concepts. We believe the network has had some influence on the 45,000 volunteers who have signed up since 1995 to become regular religious volunteers in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Their numbers are still growing with new applications received at the rate of 5,000 each year.

Within the last two years the emphasis has turned toward after-care programming in the community. Ministry directed at that pivotal transition will continue to bless the lives of many who will be leaving our gigantic prison systems in the next few years.

The criminal justice system is a suffering system. As in the past, the Church has always reached out to the suffering and does so once again.

Coming Soon From OPEN, INC.

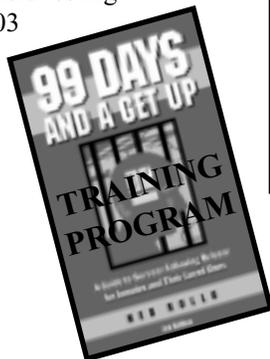
The 99 Days and a Get Up Training Program

This training program is based upon OPEN INC's self help guide, *99 Days and a Get Up*.

The *99 Days and a Get Up* Training Program is designed to teach the client how to make the necessary changes to first survive and finally integrate into the community.

The Training Program is currently in field testing and should be available September 2003

For additional information about the *99 Days and a Get Up* Training Program, please contact us at **1-800-966-1966** or at info@openinc.org.

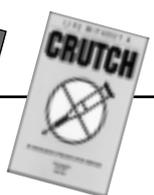
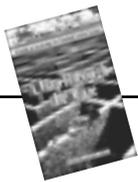


Emmett Soloman, Executive Director, Restorative Justice Ministry Network, retired in 1993 as Director of Chaplaincy for the State of Texas. He established the RJMN to encourage, educate, and stir up the hearts of the people he could reach personally and through the RJMN newsletter. He can be reached at 936-291-2156

In an effort to help erase a \$9.9 billion budget deficit, the Texas State Legislature recently passed its FY 2004 Budget that includes the following cuts in the Texas Prison System:

- Reductions in the availability of community college courses to inmates. Under the new budget, only inmates close to being released will be eligible to participate. Inmates over 25 who have more than 5 years remaining on their sentences will be excluded.
- Up to 1,500 of the prisons' 41,000 employees may be laid off.
- Overnight nurse staffing will be cut at some units.
- Daily diet reduced by 200 calories; there will be more use of powdered milk and meat extenders made of soy.
- Alcohol and Drug abuse self-help programs total reliance on volunteer counselors.
- A reduction to six months, from nine months, in intensive substance abuse therapy for probationers.

Source: The Dallas Morning News (06/01/03)



Information Series

Life Without a Crutch (Overcoming Dependency)

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New edition of the most widely used reentry handbook in America. A powerful guide to successful social and emotional transition from prison into the community. This candid but compassionate handbook leads offenders and their loved ones through the turbulent period before and after release, helping establish a sense of perspective and control, thus reducing stress, fear, and "short pains." Revised and expanded to cover the last six months pre-release and the first six months post-release, **99 Days** gives honest, direct advice for dealing with the major barriers ex-offenders must overcome to achieve long-term success. (3rd edition, 88 pages)

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A Map Through the Maze (Orientation)

Nothing empowers like the big picture! This psycho-social map of the correctional experience documents predictable social and emotional stages for positive use of incarceration, overcoming alienation and rage, and encouraging personal growth. Includes compassionate advice for families and loved ones. Ideal for inmate orientation as well as a wide range of life skills and social development programming. (119 pages)

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Preparing for Success

Ideal attention-getter for pre-release programming and a prelude to the book *99 Days and A Get Up*. Looks at real people discussing real feelings.

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- A. *Trainer's Manual* (for group leader) including participant worksheets
- B. 15 copies of *Life Without a Crutch (text)* - for re-orders, see next column
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