

## TWENTY-ONE

### THE MEANING FOR ME

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It was a tall, fenced-in cage—Is this the main entrance? For Visitors? [Push a button and state your business.] “Umm... volunteer for the University of Wyoming... Writing, Education, Class?” The cage rattled slightly as I heard a buzz; the gate unlocked and I stepped through. I spent weeks mulling over how to begin this piece that I knew I wanted to write as our writing class continued and I’ve decided the best way to communicate is to include notes from the (once-typed) 37 pages I compiled. Over speaking with and hearing the stories of fourteen women housed at the Wyoming Women’s Center, I came to the conclusion that too many people, myself included, do not really understand what prison is like, and we all should. Those in America that have not been convicted of a crime may feel as though the “criminals” deserve to be in prison and the prison environment is fitting for the punishment. I used to be one of those people.

I have always had a strange fascination with crime—mainly supported in my love of true crime shows on television. But, prior to being involved with this course, that’s all I could say was the source of my interest and I know that television shows are made with a certain angle. I am a dual-major business student. Upon taking Business Law my second year, I decided the next step in my education was to pursue a law degree. I became involved with this University of Wyoming class and project simply by browsing the courses offered for the summer of 2016, and this course, taught as “Women, Crime & The Law,” caught my eye, as I was in the middle of law school applications. When I couldn’t instantly register, I emailed the professor to see how to get into the class. She responded and invited me to her office to speak with her. This was unusual; never before had a professor taken such measures

before letting me into a class, which further increased my interest. It wasn't until we met that I learned that the course involved traveling to a prison and being a part of a writing course. I actually thought each of us would be writing a memoir, so I started writing one. I really wasn't sure what to expect and had no idea what the workload would be like or had any other expectations going into the class, other than (honestly) some fear of the unknown, hoping to enjoy the experience, and to learn from this unique opportunity.

Previously I thought, "the law is the law is the law." I thought punishments should be harsher pretty much all around. I thought that crime was what divided society. I thought that time in prison wasn't enough for most crimes. And I thought rehabilitation didn't work. But, I wanted to see prison life firsthand; I did my best to open my mind and set those notions aside. *Orange is the New Black* was my only idea of what prison was like, and while it may be similar to Piper Kerman's production, I can tell you, the women's prison in Wyoming is far from *Orange is the New Black*. My 60 hours in the Wyoming Women's Center led to the 37 pages of class notes I mentioned earlier. Please keep in mind that many of the points are from personal opinions or experiences that may not apply to all prisons, all inmates, all processes—these were the bits of discussion that intrigued me, surprised me, or led me to a question. I would like to share with you what I learned from the 60 hours of nonstop discussion between the inmates and the women from the university.

## LEGAL

- Some of the accused may meet his/her public defender on the way to the courtroom for his/her hearing.
- An attorney can take a case pro-bono and only speak to the client twice: once for meet and greet, and once more a year later when telling the accused that they are going to trial. Said accused could have taken a plea for approximately 15 years rather than be sentenced to life.

- An accessory to a crime can be tried, convicted, and sentenced prior to the person charged for the crime itself; both can be charged the “same”. In reality, the accessory receives life without parole and the primary perpetrator receives life with parole, released in 2008.
- For a potential commutation of a sentence, an inmate first sees a three-person parole board, waits five years and then see the seven-person parole board, and then sees the governor—if its deemed worthy.

### **SYSTEM**

- It takes over two hours for nine volunteers to be fingerprinted, while it is understandable that having a computer scan of the images is more systematic and cleaner, the old inksure seems quicker.
- Pre-sentence investigations (PSI), the background investigation prior to being sentenced, after conviction, to learn more about extenuating circumstances and/or criminal history that will increase or decrease the severity of an upcoming sentence. Only approved visitors and those on an inmate’s PSI (who are not felons) can send an inmate money, using credit cards through AccessCorrections.com.
- Caseworkers are supposed to see each inmate monthly; “I saw mine 9 months ago,” said one of the inmates in our class. Depending on which prison, there could be 1 caseworker for 260 inmates, or 5 caseworkers for 280 inmates.
- Count is performed five times per day, which is favored over former freeze-counts, standing exactly where one is (in the exact position one is in) until the officers have counted everyone.
- Lack of staffing was likely the cause of the walking path being canceled in the evenings, and the lack of staff for supervision forces the prison to lock down the entire prison when any inmates get in a fight.

- Temporary rest orders (TRO's) are holding cells which are not used for permanent housing—just for cool downs—and inmates who do not want to be in general population will try to get in trouble on purpose in order to be sent there.
- In most other states, life means 25 years to life; in Wyoming, life usually means life.

### **GENDER**

- There are more programs available to assist men in returning to society, including job training for men who have dependents.
- Over time, the men's facilities have had pool tables, leather shops, fisheries, play stations, musical instruments, among other things, far from what the women have. According to the female inmates, the men will stand united and fight for what they want, unlike the women.

### **MEDICAL**

- The medical facility cells are much more spacious than that of the individual cells, according to the officer who escorted our volunteer group to the intake area for fingerprinting.
- The water is treated; it seems to cause feet to swell and many people get kidney stones.
- If giving birth in a hospital while incarcerated, one could expect to be surrounded by mirrors, and to receive a handshake from the male officer observing followed by, "Never seen that before," or be handcuffed to the hospital bed for the entirety of labor, or be induced and before the labor fully starts, be sent back to the prison because another women's water breaks and there aren't enough doctors.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

- Mental and emotional health treatment lags behind the free world in some prison settings.
- There is absolutely no physical contact allowed at the Wyoming Women's Center—not even a hug when a loved one dies from a cellmate—rehabilitation without contact? One inmate, particularly fond of psychology, referenced the scientific experiment with the baby monkeys, Harlow's Monkeys, in which many chose cloth-covered mothers providing comfort over wire-mothers providing nourishment. If an inmate hugs another inmate they could be arrested, in prison, for a sexual and lose good-time.
- No more than one person can sign something that could be considered a call of action of sorts, otherwise the inmates can be charged with "inciting a riot."

## **SUPPORT**

- Inmates want support groups to help them cope with domestic violence, depression, anxiety, and many believe that the criminal justice system treats intimate partner violence far less seriously than other types of violence.
- It is popular opinion among the inmates in our class that inmates, or domestic assault victims, should be the ones teaching cops how to work on domestic abuse cases. It became clear that some victims feel as though police officers don't have the proper training on how to deal with domestic violence and it was stressed that no one wants to answer those calls. According to the inmates in our class, police sometimes handle these situations of abuse as though reporting the abuse would lead to both partners involved being arrested and children being placed with Family Services.

- SANE nurses, sexual assault nurse examiners, should have similar training as police officers when conducting themselves and carrying out investigations of domestic violence and sexual assaults.
- The Intensive Treatment Unit (ITU) requires “Guilt and Shame Letters,” in addition to an autobiography from each inmate, but most are concerned with getting it done rather than focusing on the writing and the intended emotional benefits.

### **EDUCATION**

- College credit can be earned in prison, like the 1-credit received for completing our class, but it is often too expensive; the inmates want prerequisite courses, online classes (in locked-down browsers), and to teach/tutor one another. The teachers in the prisons have to teach all five main subject areas: math, reading, writing, science, social studies. It can be arranged for a teacher to Skype into the prison for a class, but it is strongly held that there is a benefit to being on-site.
- The easiest way to bring college credit into a prison is to find a school looking to increase its total number of students, in exchange for credits, as long as the teacher does not have to be provided and a teacher can fit the course plan into the description of a class that already exists at that college.
- The women wish that the focus in the prison system, and the programs provided therein, would be focused on re-entry and reducing recidivism, that is, whether or not a person upon completing his/her sentence and rehabilitation, will relapse and commit more crimes.

### **WORK**

- Inmates make between \$0.35 to \$1.30 an hour in Aquaculture (the tilapia farm) and \$0.60 to a \$1.10 and in Garment, the two most well-paid jobs in the facility; one inmate told me, “It took me 10 years to get to \$1.20/hour” another inmate expressed that she, after having a hip replacement, “lost a job and top pay that took [her] nine years to get.” She desperately wants a job.
- The Garment Industry consists of making officer and inmate uniforms (not lace panties); the inmate uniforms are down to two different colors for cost efficiency, orange (inside only) and red (allowed outside). They had woodworking until an inmate cut off a finger.
- Restitution, court costs, child support, and the like are taken out of those pay checks; they are paid on the 10<sup>th</sup> of each month.

### **LIFE INSIDE**

- The Wyoming Women’s Center is publicized as one of the safest prisons in America.
- Two inmates are being housed in cells designed for a single person.
- Commissary (inmate purchases) come in individual plastic bags in giant clear bins and the women check each item off their list as received making sure everything is in their bag. If an inmate makes an order and doesn’t have the appropriate funds, that inmate will get a write-up for “insufficient funds”, like an overdraft fee.
- The day rooms hold 28 women at a time and are open from 7:30am-11pm for minimum security, and until 8:30pm for medium security housing. The day rooms hold an exercise bike, a TV, a computer, little couches, plastic lounge chairs that look like rubber but aren’t, and a microwave. There is a music kiosk, pay phones, book return, and bulletin boards in the halls. For those living in pods rather than halls, the day areas are in the middle of the housing pod, opposed to

being a room across the hall from the homes (the inmate cells).

- Breakfast is at 6:00/6:30am; dinner is at 5pm; lunch is in between; and, inmates have 20 minutes to eat. There is food available through commissary but it is mostly unhealthy and it can be quite expensive.
- Inmates are not allowed to wear their jackets inside irrespective of the temperature.

### **RELEASE**

- Min dates, jam dates, and flatline dates—the min date is the minimum amount of time an inmate must serve; the jam date is the calculated release date configured by applying an equation to the minimum or maximum sentence (usually taking time served and adding half of the remaining sentence on); the flatline date is the maximum sentence, after which the inmate must be released.
- When talking about release dates, inmates don't count what day it is currently, and inmates don't count "wake up," the day of release; the days in between equates to how many days an inmate has left.

### **LIFE OUTSIDE**

- Some advice for a released felon is to add a paragraph(s) to their resume detailing the crime(s), how restitution was paid, and what has been done since to rehabilitate oneself and contribute to society. Inmates say, "There's a sellable angle about your rehabilitation: the classes I took, the nature of my crime, and what I've done since."
- The "Ban the Box" movement is working towards removing the "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" question and "Check yes or no," boxes on job applications because of discrimination against felons. There is a temporary-work agency that focuses on placing felons; the



primary woman running the program is called “The Felon Fairy.”

- How hard it is for felons to find housing: for example, for drug-convicted felons because of the assumption for relapse and the liability of possessing drugs that may destroy the property, and felons convicted of violent crimes for connotations associated with fear (both can be reasonable and understandable, but shouldn't cover all like a blanket).
- While one may think that there is nothing more humbling than asking for food stamps, in reality what is the most humbling is being denied food stamps. And, as unemployment increases, felon placement decreases.
- A felon from America cannot travel to many countries, in addition to various other restrictions based on one's criminal background. Also, anyone that owes more than \$5000 in child support cannot get a passport.

### **PERSONAL**

- I felt like I was on alert all the time, almost like a paranoia that began the second I walked in the door not because I felt threatened but just because of the tone of the environment.
- Having to carefully watch what I say and how I say it is more draining than anything else; because of the hierarchy I feel like I need to be very mindful before I say what I want to.
- Unless you're passing a window or looking at a clock, it's pretty much impossible to know what time it is. The lighting is all the same—really bright—all the time.
- There's more than I expected available through commissary like MP3 players, current music, televisions, keyboards, tweezers, Dove and Avon Products, a selection of makeup, and the level of security.

- The library is way, way, way smaller than I expected and visitors can't bring books to inmates—I thought they could, like Elle Woods did in bringing a basket of beauty products to her client in *Legally Blonde*.
- While I thought the women would be untrusting, quiet, and uninterested, my experience was exactly the opposite. The ladies I've worked with are very open-minded, open to sharing, outspoken, and interested in why I decided to come which really established friendships from the first conversation.
- The women in the kitchen make pretty great food with the limited resources they have—it's better than I expected, even though everything tastes sweeter. Loved the chicken and rice!
- Many women come to prison with high expectations of, and a strong desire for, help and those expectations don't usually align with what they get as a result even though that's what authorities claim to be the purpose to coming to prison.
- Lastly, I learned that there is more to giving a sentence than current and past situations, the future needs to be taken into consideration and some may say that those who commit crimes should be locked away in an orange jumpsuit just "in case" of repeat criminal behavior. But, if Americans can justify prison sentences as helping the community and rehabilitating the criminals, we need to give the former criminals the opportunity to prove that they can contribute to society. The United States incarcerates at a rate that is the highest in the world; according to the U.S. Department of Justice, 1 in 31 Americans are under some form of control by the criminal justice system.

The morning after our first day at the Wyoming Women's Center, I stepped in the shower and quickly became overwhelmed by emotions from all the choices I could make: what time I went to sleep, what time I woke up, what I wanted to watch on television,

what I wanted to eat for dinner, what I wanted to eat for breakfast (quite the selection at the hotel we stayed at—cereal, waffles, bagels, yogurt, omelets, scrambled eggs, burritos, biscuits and gravy, fresh fruit, oatmeal, sausage/bacon), when I showered and for how long, what to wear that day, and as we all exited the prison the day before, we got our phones from the lockers to catch up on emails, text messages, phone calls, snap chats and the like. Seven hours, of something similar to isolation compared to being outside and able to make all those choices. In that shower I just didn't want to make a decision of which shampoo to use because the day before I wasn't making choices, I was being told and just going along with the flow. I'm not a person that easily "goes with the flow." My mind just wouldn't shut off that morning in the shower.

I had gone into this project thinking, "you do wrong and break the law, you get locked up—end of discussion." Yet the more I listened to the women's stories about their lives, the more I realized that no two cases are the same. While it can be comforting to look at life in a clear-cut manner, the reality is that life is complicated. The number of life sentences I heard about was fairly shocking, especially when one person was convicted at age nineteen. And while it's great to have that one-on-one connection with a person, and listen empathetically, it's also understandable that the law cannot be implemented fairly in that way when the law is categorized as it is. And Wyoming is different. "Wyoming's imprisonment rate grew faster than all but four other states between 2009 and 2014, according to a study released by the Pew Charitable Trusts in September. During those five years, Wyoming's crime rate dropped 24 percent, while the state's incarceration rate grew by 7 percent. This means fewer crimes are being reported, but more people are being locked up" (Schrock, 2016).

An article published in the Latest News on WyoFile.com on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015 was entitled, "Convict who has served 32 years says he's a Million Dollar Man." According to the said convict and author, Mark Farnham, the State of Wyoming has spent, "adjusting for inflation, \$1,779,375 to house me. For the

amount of money the state has spent to keep me incarcerated, Wyoming could have paid the tuition for 383 Wyoming citizens to attend the University of Wyoming” (Farnham, 2015). This article describes in great and yet concise detail his crime, his sentence expectations, and how he has spent his much-longer-than-expected-sentence. Farnham expected to serve around a decade and the only thing that can reduce his sentence is a commutation from the governor. Farnham states, “Since 1985, Wyoming governors have routinely reduced life sentences through commutations, until Gov. Jim Geringer. Since Geringer’s term, the commutations have become almost nonexistent” (Farnham, 2015). The current governor Matt Mead, in office since 2011, granted his first commutation on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 to a man who was convicted for felony burglary in 1980 and was on the lam for 31 years before being arrested in Alaska, in June, and transported back to Wyoming (Cassidy, 2013). Mead had denied the 17 commutation requests prior. Mead, a former prosecutor for the federal government, “said he expected his commutations would be rare and he favored restoration of rights as a first step rather than granting a pardon outright” (Barron, 2011). I cannot speak to the interactions of Governor Mead and others involved within the criminal justice and legal fields but I can say how much of an impact working with the inmates on a writing piece of their choice as a peer coach had on me. It’s one thing to interact with an inmate when you’re on one side and he/she is on the other; but, it’s another thing to interact with an inmate as equals, not for any particular reason or with any particular goal, but just because you can. Now, I move for those directly involved within criminal justice and further, the legal fields, to spend some time understanding exactly what they are sentencing people to.

Jenny Lawson, in “Furiously Happy,” one of the class readings, wrote: “In the dark you find yourself, all bones and exhaustion and helplessness. In the dark you find your basest self. In the dark you find the bottom of watery trenches the rest of the world only sees the surface of.” One inmate suggested replacing the word dark for prison, reading: “In the prison you find yourself,

all bones and exhaustion and helplessness. In the prison you find your basest self. In the prison you find the bottom of watery trenches the rest of the world only sees the surface of.” Those in the class agreed that it’s haunting how well that fits.

An inmate who I worked with closely throughout the course said, “The orange suit says a lot. You’re young and in college, that says a lot. But opposite”. I know that people have mixed feelings regarding punitive justice. I know that there are two sides to every story. I know that no system is perfect. I know that there will always be room for improvements and changes. I was told, “I hope you actually defend; that you don’t get jaded; I hope you don’t get too attached because you are compassionate, or make the wrong decisions, or do too much for the wrong cases. Hold other attorneys accountable. Not all crimes are as black and white as they appear on paper.”

I’m not saying that prison does not work. I’m not saying that all sentences should be short, or commuted. What I am saying is that there is work that needs to be done! To be a better society, we need to help one another—criminals, or not. We should hope that we can help each other from a young age, hopefully preventing criminal thinking and criminal behavior, rather than punishing those afterwards. The last thing I heard from an inmate, on my way out of the door of the classroom was, “I hope I never see you again—but if I do, I hope you’re defending me!” I thought I knew that I wanted to be a lawyer before going into the prison, and that it would just be an interesting three weeks, but now, I know that I must be a lawyer and do everything I can to improve the criminal justice system and do my part as a member of this society for my fellow man, and woman. Each point that I have mentioned has an important application and should be addressed to change current conditions.

As I was driving back home for my final time from Lusk, the sunset burnt a vibrant orange and yellow, so bright I was frightened to think that I may be actually driving into a summer wildfire. I pulled over to take some photographs, which resulted in my sitting on the hood of my car for a while to reflect on the

experience. In that moment, I realized just how fitting the sunset was and I felt the fire inside of me.

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