

The Impact of "Entertainment" in Prison

by Jack Murphy

1965, Riker's Island prison. 5,600 inmates from the Boroughs of New York City; Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island. Over 90% of the inmates were heroin addicts. 3 years was the maximum sentence being served. Most inmates were recidivists.

I lived on a wing with 400 inmates; 20 Spanish, 14 White, the rest African-American. On the kitchen crew of 160, I was the only White inmate. The drug culture represented here produced every anti-social, criminal, and unacceptable attitude and behavior imaginable. Every conversation was saturated with drugs, sex, prostitution, pimps, robberies, thieves, addictions, perverted life styles, seldom was there a normal conversation. It was a society of dysfunction, failure, and total hopelessness.

Knowing that I would be released in 2 years, I found it interesting surviving in this sub-culture world. It was like an anthropologist visiting Papua New Guinea for the first time, absolutely fascinating.

During the day, since there were few inmate jobs and very little yard or recreation activity, the inmates languished in their cells or the cell blocks playing cards or just hanging out.

Anna M. Kross was the highly respected Commissioner of New York prisons. She was an outspoken leader in her work with juveniles and modernizing the New York correctional facilities.

It was after lunch on a Tuesday, I remember it as though it was yesterday. 600 inmates were marched to the large prison auditorium, something totally unheard of. As the inmates settled in, the place went into a roar as Commissioner Kross came out on the stage. She introduced a Mr. Destifano, a new employee with an impressive music background. Mr. Destifano had traveled with the Woody Herman band, Gene Krupa, Lionel Hampton, Les Brown, and other well know groups.

Mr. Destifano asked the audience if they liked music? The crowd applauded and cheered, "Then hold on to your seats because here is the King of Soul, the James Brown Review." The curtain opened and the inmates went crazy! 10 acts, singers, dancers, the same show that was playing at the famous New York Apollo Theater in Harlem.

The entertainment changed the entire atmosphere of the prison. For the following week there was little else the inmates talked about. Conversations, attitudes, and behavior all moved to higher ground.

Then, it happened again. Mr. Destifano called friends and every 2 weeks another famous entertainer would come to Riker's Island. Dizzy Gillespie, Buddy Rich, Lionel Hampton, Carmen McCray, Nina Simone, Maynard Ferguson, it was unreal how these shows impacted and transformed the prison.

Just the fact that someone cared brought hope and lifted spirits. The performers would share personal stories and encourage the inmates to never give up. There was a significant spirit of friendship amongst the prisoners, and a noticeable attitude of respect and gratitude from the inmates for the staff and officers for allowing the programs. The violence and arguments were greatly reduced. It was not the same depressing and dangerous atmosphere that it was before the music programs began.

I have personally experienced this positive transformation of darkness to light over and over in many of the 1,500 prisons across America and in many foreign countries where I have directed positive and entertaining programs. In the challenge of Changing Lives for a Safer Florida, it might behoove the Corrections leaders to investigate the cost effectiveness and impact of programs that entertain as well as inspire and educate the inmates of the Florida DOC.

Jack Murphy, Executive Director, *Inmate Encounter*