

CRP California Reentry Program



Letter from the Director

A Visit to a Norwegian Prison

Two months ago, I dropped in unannounced at a low-security prison in Bergen, Norway. Even though I wasn't able to make arrangements prior to my visit, the staff and inmate workers greeted me warmly.

Norway's incarceration rate is just 75 per 100,000 people. That's compared to 707 people for every 100,000 people here in the U.S. They also have one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world at 20 percent.

The staff was astounded at the population of San Quentin, which I had boasted has reduced dramatically in recent years. In 2000, when I began working at the prison, it was 6,300 and it's now about 4,200. That number exceeds the entire prison population in all of Norway. They were also shocked that therapeutic, reentry, vocational, and educational programming is not available to all prisoners. This left them wondering why California would tolerate a system that promotes recidivism.

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Arthur's Story

By Natalie G.

Arthur R was one of my first clients when I began volunteering with the California Reentry Program. Our first several encounters were short and he was quiet and reserved. But when he realized he could safely put his trust in our program and in me, he was quite forthcoming about his aspirations upon release and his plans for achieving those goals.

We met every week and Arthur worked thoughtfully and diligently on his re-entry plans. From crafting resumes and budget plans, to writing accountability statements and relapse prevention plans, he got himself organized to meet the parole board.

"I have been incarcerated 39 years," Arthur says. "And the volunteers that come in here to help write

"I can honestly say this was the best prepared I had ever been."

- Arthur R.

budgets, resumes, look for transitional housing, help with things like getting birth certificates ... is a huge load off

one's shoulders coming out of prison because we have the opportunity to hit the ground with a head start."

After Arthur's plans were in order, we worked on how he would present himself to the board. I asked

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Arthur's Story *continued from page 1*

him difficult questions, gave him worksheets and other writing assignments to ensure he was prepared to explain his crime to the board. Arthur welcomed my input and accepted my efforts to push him to dig deeper into his past, no matter how uncomfortable the memories were for him.

"I had been to the Board of Prison Terms 12 times and I can honestly say this was the best prepared I had ever been," Arthur says. "My case worker helped me with transitional housing, my budget, and resume. She helped me with everything I needed for the board and they were impressed with the work I had put in."

Despite serving nearly four decades behind bars Arthur remains optimistic. He participates in a number of self-help programs, cultivating skills vital to success on the outside, and learning to reconcile a violent past with a much different vision for his future. I continue to cherish my time working with Arthur, and we both eagerly anticipate the day he is set free. ♦

Volunteer Report

Xandra

I've seen firsthand what a strong impact this program has on the men at San Quentin. While our duty is to assist prisoners with information they'll need after they're released on parole, I see how our help benefits them while they're still inside, too. Many of these men are enrolled in school and hungry for knowledge.

I do my best to encourage them by expanding their understanding of what's

available, what applying to college really looks like, or what

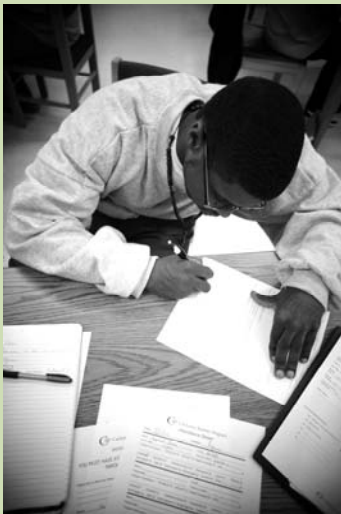
steps are involved in starting a business. Many of these men have been imprisoned for more than a decade. Some got locked up when they were 18 and have never had a real job. Many need to learn how to apply for a driver's license, food stamps, or Social Security benefits after they get out.

But, for many more of them, prison has ignited a deep-rooted passion for knowledge, likely intensified by hours of self-reflection. I inquire and encourage and I am truly inspired by the resiliency of many of these men.

I started volunteering because I'm interested in becoming a prison psychologist, and I wanted to gain experience working in this setting. But these men also have become a source of inspiration for me, and my commitment to them is stronger than ever. ♦

"...prison has ignited a deep-rooted passion for knowledge, likely intensified by hours of self-reflection."

- Xandra



This and cover photo courtesy Ryan Smith

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A major reason for Norway's success is their approach to reentry. Planning begins as soon as inmates arrive and it includes substance abuse, mental health, and medical treatment as well as job training. This is based on what one prison official called the "normality principle" in which prisoners are housed in conditions that prepare them to reenter society.

While waiting to receive same-day approval to visit - another near-impossibility here in the U.S. - I visited the gift shop where prison-made arts and crafts like picnic tables, compost bins, soaps, woolen seating pads, trivets, greeting cards, candles and rocking horses, were sold. The inmate who ran the shop, like all inmates at this facility, wore street clothing. He gave me a tour of the outdoor woodworking area and indoor craft shop.

After my tour, I met with the second-in-command (equivalent to the chief deputy warden in California prisons) who gave me a full tour of the facility, which houses 250 men and women, and an overview of the Norwegian prison system. The maximum sentence there is generally no more than 15 years, although if someone is not deemed safe for society that can be extended. Bergen prison had several industries, housing both inside and outside the wall, as well as a facility on a nearby lake island that houses both men and women. According to my guide, Norway strives to have an equal number of male and female custodial staff to further normalize the environment by providing regular interactions with both sexes during incarceration. Notably, there are no firearms carried within the facility.

Residences are home-like living spaces and they work and recreate in ways that help them adjust to living within the bounds of a society. Many prisoners start in facilities that have cells and high walls, similar to the U.S., but they step down to lower security levels as soon as possible. Most earn furlough time that eventually allows them to live in halfway houses where they begin reintegrating to their families right away.

I was able to see the family visiting area, a one-bedroom, split-level apartment with a full kitchen and patio with barbeque. I also saw a prisoner housing unit, which I cannot in good conscience call a cell because it was basically a studio apartment with kitchen and patio. I visited the sex offender unit, which had both housing and meeting rooms where they held therapeutic groups - again, with apartment-like furnishings. Most of

the residents were at work, but I did get a chance to speak to a couple of men. They reported good conditions, treatment that they found effective, and regular visits at their family homes to prepare them for successful reentry to society. ♦

For more information: <http://www.bergenfengsel.no/>

Best wishes to all for a happy and health 2017! *Alllyson West, Executive Director*



Bergen Prison

Our Parole Clothing Program

For the past eight years the California Reentry Program has offered free street clothing to all participants, saving them \$38 of their \$200 gate money. This was made possible by the generous individual donations of clothing and money for mailing. In 2011, the entire operation was taken over by Mission Ministries, a collaboration of the faith community in Marin County, and led by volunteer Mike Robinson. Through Mike's tireless efforts he is able to fill boxes with gently used pants, shirts, sweaters, jackets, underwear and socks to EVERY prisoner who requests them. If you'd like to help, please contact them Mike Robinson at skybird24@comcast.net or the Presbyterian Church of Novato at 415-897-6152. We are grateful for this tremendous support!



L to R: Mike Robison, Allyson West, Pastor Morris Curry,

Support for the California Reentry Program comes from individual donations and foundations

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