

## Final Paper

When I first heard about the possibility of actually going into a prison and interacting with the inmates for a class, I thought to myself this is a good idea, but I don't know if it is for me. After a couple of weeks passed Dr. Monroe announced it to our juvenile justice class again and I thought maybe I should apply. After being accepted in the class I grew more and more excited as second semester quickly approached. From the first week of the last to the last week of the class you can tell how different we all felt about the class.

Week one we were all extremely nervous about what to expect and how the inside students would react to us and most of all how we would react to them. By the last week of the class we had spent a significant amount of time discussing what we thought was wrong with the criminal justice system, what prisons are for, among other topics. We had the opportunity to agree and disagree about different subjects and I believe that is what this course is all about.

### **Section One: Process**

I was extremely nervous upon entering into the visiting room the first day the entire class met together. I was nervous because I knew that I was in a prison and sometimes when people are in prison they feel like they are already locked up therefore I have nothing to lose. I knew that it would not have been this bad in this minimum security setting. Although, I was still kind of worried about what would happen if something one of the outside students or event the inside students said something that someone did not like and things turned violent. On the first day of class we were all

sweating under our armpits and wondering whether or not this was a good idea after all. I feel like our inside-out class got off to a bit of a slow start because the weather was working against us. After the two week delay due to the snow storms we got back together and I felt that we were back at square one because we hadn't been there to get comfortable in that setting. I believe that the class discussions had a lot less talking and debating in them because of the very fact that we were not comfortable with our surroundings quite yet. The group especially the outside students were not very talkative.

For me, the group dynamics took a turn for the better when we spent almost a whole day together while on the tour of the main compound. I believe that the outside students as a whole were glad to have the inside students with them during the tour because it brought a sense of comfort although, they gave us a better sense of what prison life is actually like because the tour was too directed. From that day on I do feel that everyone was a lot more comfortable with the class and the people in it. At week one you could cut the tension in the room with a knife, but after the tour things took a turn for the better.

Not long after the tour we had our discussion on rehabilitation versus punishment and I feel like it was the best class that we had all semester. No one was afraid to say what they felt and I personally did not care whether or not someone's feelings were hurt because that was not the intention. This is how you could tell the group dynamics had changed a lot because of the fact that we got into arguments and disagreed about the opinions of those in our class. I was actually excited that the dynamics of the group change because the class was much better for everyone.

Although the dynamics of the group changed thorough out the class my individual opinion did not change about anything. I was open to hear the different arguments that other members of the class proposed and take that into consideration, but I really did not change my views on anything. I think that I tried to participate in the class to the best of my ability. I at least gave a comment about how I felt about the particular topic that we were discussing during each class. I felt like the same people gave input all the time and this is why it took so long for class to get rolling like we were expecting in the beginning of the semester. The best class of the semester that I feel we had was the one on punishment and rehabilitation because I felt like it was me against the rest of class. If other people did share my opinion they did not speak up and say anything. I like to have differences during class because this is what I was expecting this class to be all about.

As a whole this experience was a great time although there were both ups and downs throughout the semester. I do feel that for the next class that those inside students who will be getting out before or during the span of the class should not be able to participate because it changes what the class is actually supposed to be about we are supposed to be together as a group for about fifteen weeks and that was not the case during this class because of the release dates of some of our inside students.

I try to be a pretty open minded individual; I listen and hear the opinions of others and how others think about certain situations. The one class in particular that left me upset was the class about punishment versus rehabilitation. I felt that I was extremely open to what others had to say and their thoughts about rehabilitation being that I am a person who is a fan of punishment rather than rehabilitation. When given the scenarios that we discussed in small groups, the most controversial group was the one that I was in.

We had a scenario about an abused woman who stabbed and “accidentally” killed her lover. As a group we decided to give the woman a sentence of eight years in prison along with indefinite treatment for the abuse that she endured throughout the years. The entire class was in an uproar about the decision that we had come to and I was upset because before we could get out the entire decision people were yelling and screaming about. After the yelling subsided everyone says what about treatment? The treatment was stated, but no one could hear it. This was the day that my perception of others changed because someone said in the closing of that day's class as their phrase that they were disappointed in women. That really made me upset because yes, the woman in the scenario was abused but that did not justify the fact that she took the life of the man who abused her.

Being in class we did have the opportunity to see and hear how prison life actually is through our own eyes and from stories that the inside students told us about. The first thing I noticed every time we entered into the honor camp for class was the horrible stench that we smelled. It reminded me of dirty gym socks and Frito corn chips. During the tour of the main compound we had the opportunity to go into a cell and I thought that it was extremely small, even for prison. There was a toilet in the room along with some kind of table like structure and bunk beds. This cell was occupied by two full grown men and it was not even the size of my bathroom. I think that if I had to live there I would lose my mind because of the fact that the room is so small and you have to share it with another person.

We also learned that anything that you wanted to have while you are in prison that you could probably get even if it's on the outside. They also make a food concoction called a break. The inside students described this to us as a treat from the everyday food

that they must eat in the chow hall. During the tour when we went through the honor camp these men, in my opinion, had even worse living conditions than those who lived on the main compound. They all lived in cubicles, some with another man, that were nowhere near the size of the cells in the main compound of the prison. To me, these men lived everyday on top of each other all of the time. I think this is punishment enough in and of itself, being a college student I know what it is like to have someone in your personal space all of the time and when you try to get away from them you really can't because of the fact that they live there too. My views of prison life have never changed I always thought that being in jail or prison would be a horrible experience and from what I have witness I still believe that it is a horrible way of life, but like the old saying goes if you do the crime you must do the time.

### **Section Two A: Content**

During the discussion about what are prisons for the inside students said many asinine things in my opinion, such as “prisons are only set up for people to get locked up and they are only for the government to make money.”

When we went up on the hill we were able to get a bit of real prison life and to me it was more fun than actual being locked away and punished for something that they did, in my opinion, although the inmates are required to work I do not feel that they are suffering at all for what they have done. Prior to the tour we had to read the book entitled *Life in Prison* by Stanley “Tookie” Williams. Although, this book was written for children he did describe prison as a place that no one would even want their pet to stay in. Williams said in his book that **“Day to day life in prison provides few opportunities to do anything of value or to experience peace or joy (Williams 25).”** The men who were

in prison seemed to be experiencing a lot of peace and joy to me but I am an outsider looking in. I learned that prisons are basically to house people to live life as they would on the outside for doing something wrong on the outside.

With that my other favorite topic was the myths and realities of prison class because this is where we talked a lot about the fighting, sexual activity, and other things that go on in prison or that we think go on in prisons from television and other forms of media. The inside students shed a lot of light on some things that I thought were very interesting. Some of things they said went in tune to what “Tookie” said in his book. He says **“Since I’ve been in prison I haven’t had one meal that I care to remember. In fact, I try to forget them all (Williams 59).”** The inside students definitely relate to this because they were so happy for us to bring food from home for the closing of our class as a group even though the food was just things that we are used to eating regularly, but some of them haven’t eaten those things in years.

My favorite topic and what seemed to be the most controversial topic of our entire class was punishment versus rehabilitation. This was one of about three classes that I left extremely frustrated with the way people thought about things. However, I did realize that if there are no rehabilitation programs whatsoever available to inmates in state prisons then how will they be helped. I also came to a conclusion that I believe that both punishment and rehabilitation can work together. Even though I think that prisons are more of a playground for offenders the only place in a prison that I feel is geared toward punishment is the hole. “Tookie” spent about seven years in the hole and he said **“in the hole you are more isolated than ever and more locked down than before and you have far less of everything (Williams 51).”**

The final topic of great interest to me was why people commit crime. I went into this class saying that some people who commit crime do not always do it just because they want to because there are some situations that people really have no other means. I walked away from this class with the idea that any crime that someone commits that they indeed had a choice in doing so.

### **Section Two B: Content**

Although, I am a punishment person and I think that I will always be geared more towards punishment for those who commit crimes. However, I do believe that those who are incarcerated should have some type of rehabilitation programs especially those who will be released sometime in the near future. I do not think that there should be as much free time in prisons though. If there is to be programs that rehabilitate in preparation to reintegrate into society that this should take up much of the time that the inmates have to “play” outside in the yard.

This is a major issue to me because many of the inside students have complained about not having any programs worth even talking about at the camp and I am quite sure that this goes on throughout the country in many different institutions. It can be solved by making sure that there are sufficient amounts of rehabilitation programming that are preparing the inmates for reintegration back into the communities.

The second issue that I have found from being in this class is the amount of recidivism that is in the United States. I think the solution to this issue is that we must impose harsher sentences and begin to make examples out of offenders. If we give someone a punishment that others would not want to have themselves then possibly, people would be deterred from committing crime. If it is not possible to deter people

from re-offending then I think that as a country we are doing something wrong raising our children.

Being a part of this class has been a great experience even more so than I can explain on paper. It was great to be one of the ground breakers for the state of Ohio. Although, there were good times and bad we had a great experience we found out things that need to be done differently for this course. With each semester that this course continues it will get better and each group of people will bring something different to the course and I feel that it will continue to get better over time. Even being able to have this course at Xavier is a step forward and again I am grateful to have been apart of it.