

Mackenzie Elrod

Journalism

Dr. Bednar

June 27, 2016

Rehabilitate Me, Please

Lisa stood terrified, her entire body quivering as she stood in line waiting her turn. She tightly gripped her new uniform hard against her chest in her sweaty shaking hands, as she slowly inched forward towards the front of the line.

The large lifeless hallway, despite its worn and dated interior, gave the illusion of safety. Everything on this side of the door was so orderly, peaceful and safe. But Lisa was not fooled; she could hear the shrieking noises and loud voices just beyond the giant steel door. She stood petrified, unsure of what to expect, completely unprepared to face what stood before her.

As Lisa made it to the front of the line, her heart began racing, her knees shaking and her head pounding, in fear of her new reality. She knew what she would soon be subjected to beyond the door that stood before her. All sense of self, any sliver of privacy, and what little remained of her dignity would be stripped away.

As the door opened a large man emerged and called her forward. She slowly walked towards what she thought with certainty her death. *I need a drink*, she thought.

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Lisa Manzer has been arrested 17 times, under 3 different aliases and in 5 different counties. Of those arrests, 14 were drinking related offenses, 2 for trespassing and 1 for assault.

However, what sent Lisa to prison was her third DWI. She was quickly convicted, and shipped off to the Federal Detention Center (FDC), the Houston facility for a two year sentenced.

The troubling aspect of this conviction is that she was not sent to a rehabilitation center, but a prison where rapists and murderers share very close quarters. Lisa's roommate in fact, was a young woman convicted of murdering her husband's assistant under the false belief that they were having an affair.

This dangerous, dark and terrifying place was Lisa's home for an anticipated two years.

Given that there are only three women prison's in the state of Texas, these prisons face a serious overcrowding problem. The FDC Houston facility currently has 856 inmates, with a constant influx of 12 new inmates every month.

Due to this prison being at maximum capacity, prison guards are worn thin, resulting in many things going unnoticed.

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The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), which oversees all 111 various prison units in Texas claims to provide “confinement, supervision, rehabilitation, and reintegration of offenders.”

Prison is supposed to be a place of “rehabilitation,” an institution which forces people to reflect on their actions and to mend their ways. However, this is clearly not the case.

Texas leads the nation with the largest state prison population. Texas also faces a chronic shortage of prison guards. As of November 2015, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) had more than 3,300 vacant guard positions.

Due to the sheer size of the prison, the extreme lack of guards and the continuous onslaught of prisoners: contraband is missed, inmates and their issues are forgotten and goes unaddressed.

Lisa is categorized as “alcohol dependent”. The most clear distinction between an alcoholic and an alcohol dependent is that if an alcoholic stopped drinking “cold turkey,” it would have no negative effects on the body. However if an alcohol dependent quits drinking “cold turkey,” she would be subject to severe withdraw seizures, sometimes resulting in death. Their system has become so intertwined with alcohol, that it literally needs it to survive. In severe cases such as this, alcohol dependents need to be slowly weaned off the substance, and intensive

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psychological help must ensue. Unfortunately Lisa did not receive this needed help to overcome her alcohol dependency.

While serving her sentence at the FDC Houston prison, Lisa was given an unknown medication every three hours to prevent seizures, and over time the medication slowly stopped coming, finally inducing sobriety. What generally would be a relief for most, was a calamity to Lisa. She quickly began searching for contraband, and found some fellow inmates that possessed what she wanted, alcohol.

However, this illegal substance did not come free. She was often forced to perform sexual acts and other favors for a mere sip.

I asked how the inmates had alcohol in prison, and she claimed some made it there and others somehow snuck it in. She did not really care how it got there or where it came from, she just needed it.

In 2007, Texas legislators decided to invest \$241 million in rehabilitation and diversion programs. As a result, recidivism rates fell from 31.9% of offenders

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released in 2004 who returned to prison within three years, to 24.3% of offenders released in 2007 after Texas lawmakers initiated the reforms.

Unfortunately, starting salaries for corrections officers in 2007 were approximately \$27,000 per year — 48th among the states. Which lead to correctional officers leaving their state employment in numbers. Texas prisons end up with an unacceptable prisoner to guard ratio, thereby jeopardizing the safety of both staff and inmates.

Therefore, rehabilitation services (the very same programs that led to a drop in recidivism), as well as educational and vocational programs were significantly cut.

Studies have shown that with the now financially cut rehabilitation programs, offenders end up back on the streets with untreated alcohol and substance abuse issues which increase recidivism rates.

Lisa was released on good behavior one year into her two-year sentence.

She was then placed on probation, but still not offered any psychological help besides her weekly meetings with her probation officer.

She was essentially free, allowed to begin a new life under the pretense that drinking was strictly prohibited. "I immediately bought a bottle of Crown," Lisa said

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giggling. It was not long after that she was found drunk on stolen liquor, and unable to escape the bathroom at HEB.

She was then quickly sent back, but to a different prison. Federal Medical Center (FMC) Carswell is supposed to be a medical prison that assists in helping women who suffer from addiction or other mental illnesses that lead them to prison. It is here Lisa served the remainder of her sentence. However Lisa assured me, "there was not rehabilitation involved there either."

"The only differences between this prison, and the first one is that we were in solitary most the day, and we watched a Christian movie every Wednesday," Lisa told me confidently. Most of the movies in fact had nothing to do with substance abuse at all, such as: Fireproof, Remember the Titans and Courageous.

Despite FMC Carswell being a certified medical institution, with the intended purpose to help criminals with mental diseases, its curriculum was less than inspiring.

On the FMC Carswell's website for example, "Adult Programs" is mentioned as the "heart of rehabilitation activity," listing as its three primary goals:

- 1) Provide effective evidence based programming to adult offenders
- 2) Create strong partnerships with local government, community based providers, and the communities to which offenders return in order to provide services that are critical to offenders' success on parole

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3) Establish and nurture collaborative partnerships linking Department facilities and communities in which they are located.

Beyond the three proposed primary goals, the website provides little additional details explaining how any of the “goals” are intended to be carried out. When the very methods for achieving rehabilitation are either limited or unavailable, it is a challenge to see how rehabilitation is supposed to find success.

Lisa was released from prison after one year at FMC Carswell, and placed back into the supervision of a probation officer. Once again she was never offered psychological help.

Lisa reentered society, continued drinking, and jumped from man to man, using men as shelter, transportation and substance providers.

She has been an alcohol dependent now for 21 years, following a mentally abusive marriage and losing her son in the divorce, Lisa fell into an inescapable pit of despair and alcoholism. She is unable to find work, and cannot rent or buy a car, apartment, house or anything of value due to her arrest record. And most females won't be her roommate due her history, which forces Lisa into a sexually promiscuous and dangerous lifestyle.

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I asked Lisa if she regretted anything, and she opened up a cloth HEB bag she had been carrying around with her all day. She pulled out pictures of Jonah, her son and my boyfriend, whom she has been estranged from for 12 years. "I regret disappointing him," she said in between deep breaths and tears in her eyes.

It was obvious that the years of alcohol abuse had left a permanent hindrance to her memory and mind. As she attempted to remember and explain the memories behind the pictures of her son she dutifully carried around with her.

However, I struggled finding sympathy for the broken woman who sat before me. For I only knew her as the woman who broke my boyfriend's nose with a Magic 8 Ball when he was 9 because he wouldn't stop begging her to quit drinking.

Due to the Texas prison system's failure to fulfill their promise of rehabilitation, they did not only fail Lisa, but also her son Jonah. Condemning her to a life of alcoholism, with no clear direction on how to defeat her disease, and sentencing her son to a life without a mother.

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Author Note

Interviewing Lisa was tough, I did not know much about her, but I was well aware of the pain both physically and emotionally she inflicted on her son, my boyfriend Jonah.

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Through this article I hope to convey the failure of the prison “rehabilitation” system. I also hope to provide insight into the negative and permanent side effects convicts endure outside of prison, which usually force them back into their former way of life.

I believe that this article best conveys my progress and developed journalism skills. During my writing process of Article #1 I learned how to intertwine a “message” throughout my narrative. I utilized this skill when telling Lisa’s story, while sharing the statistics and facts that collaborate her account and depicted the faultiness of Texas prison rehabilitation systems.

As I wrote Article #2 in my Journalism class I learned how to interview difficult/shy people. I applied this skill while interviewing Lisa, she was not shy or difficult, but her memory and mind are on a permanent delay. It took copious amounts of patience, understanding and dedication to find her story and to see the “message” that accompanied her experiences.

Overall this is my favorite article that I have completed for Dr. Bednar’s Journalism class. I feel confident that I implemented, to the best of my ability, the skills that we were taught in both our readings and during the Work Shops.