

20 Ways toward Understanding the Prison Experience Through the Eyes of Long-time AVP/NY Prison Volunteers

Before a community volunteer first goes into a prison to facilitate, a number of considerations need to be explored. For experienced facilitators, the following list is not new (much was rewritten from the “Quaker women” piece many are still using), but might be a good reminder or a way to explain the experience to newcomers. Excerpted from the AVP/NY Volunteer Handbook, you will find wisdom and practicality from our original AVP organization.

1. Prison is, to outsiders, a foreign country. As in any foreign country, it is wise to be quiet, observe, listen, learn the language and identify the values of the prison culture before advancing too many strong opinions or taking any drastic action.

2. Don't be afraid to define yourself clearly. You are not required to be all things to all people at all times or to live up (or down) to any stereotype prisoners may have about you as an outsider. You are entitled, moreover, to define for yourself and for others what you choose to be or not be, do or not do. This will take some time, but you should be aware of the need to do it from the beginning of your prison volunteering. Even after you have clearly defined yourself, expect to be tested—again and again. Eventually, however, if you are firm in sticking to your definition of yourself, others will adjust to it.

3. Expect to meet many tremendous and valuable people in prison. Expect also to meet some champion manipulators. Do not be surprised if these sometimes turn out to be one and the same person. Manipulation is a form of survival for the powerless.

4. Especially at first, people may find it helpful, as soon as possible after volunteering in a prison, to share with a trusted friend the feelings generated by the prison experience. It is a rare person who does not experience anger, fear, pain, outrage, wonder and other strong emotions upon contact with the prison environment. These feelings, shared, can lead to much that is constructive and

rewarding. Unshared, they can lead to emotional burnout and ill-considered actions.

5. People can expect to feel an unfamiliar, very heady and very addictive “super star” feeling, especially at first in a prison. It may arise from sexuality in a deprived environment or from the unfamiliar power that comes from knowledge of another world. Remember that as an AVP facilitator, you may have been part of a team that brought a means through which someone may have discovered a new and wonderful sense of community. In any case, do not let it go to your head.

6. It is possible that you will feel alienated after volunteering in prison from other people who have not shared and do not understand this experience and from the society that produced and maintains the prisons. Share the humanness of the people you have met in prison without expecting that others will understand what you do.

7. Expect to find in prisons all the corruption and evils of society as well as all the goodness of human nature—both magnified larger than life. Therefore, resist the temptation to:

a) Romanticize the prisoner. If his or her being incarcerated does not necessarily make him or her a monster, neither does it necessarily make him or her a saint. To assume otherwise is always inaccurate, usually patronizing and sometimes dangerous.

b) See COs and other prison staff as obstacles to our program. Some may be supportive of AVP; others may not. All are responsible for security and have specific procedures they are required to follow. Many are good people trying to do a hard and thankless job well.

8. Go cautiously at first; awareness comes with experience. The initial prison experience might be frightening in and of itself. If you have stuck with it long enough for this to wear off and you find yourself afraid of a given person, chances are that he or she may be dangerous to you. If you feel

resentful at demands being made on you, you may well be being hustled. Trust these feelings and seek support from experienced volunteers in dealing with the situation. Learn to “trust your intuition” and heed it. If after an initial exposure you find yourself fearful of the prison environment, you should not continue to go into prisons. This work is not for everyone.

9. Do not ask about what crime a person has been convicted of. AVP is about reaching for the good in each person.

10. Do not under ANY circumstances bring ANY contraband into the prison, no matter how innocent the “contraband” may seem and even if you don't agree with the rule. The introduction of ANY prohibited article by a volunteer is a misdemeanor at least and may subject that volunteer both to criminal prosecution, if caught, and to the closing down of the AVP program in that prison.

11. As for rules in general, expect to find some that seem unnecessarily silly, unjust or oppressive but never try to disobey them or discuss them with prisoners. Remember that the rules are subject to change at any moment. Questioning of rules should be done through the AVP outside coordinator and the regional AVP/NY Area Council. The AVP/NY organization can express objection to them with the NYS Department of Correctional Services.

12. Prisons are destructive environments. Essential, therefore, for you is to find a community that will offer you a safe place to vent your feelings and discuss your problems, without fear of judgment or condemnation. At the same time, that community must love you enough to reach out to bring you back when you stray onto dangerous or unproductive by-paths. AVP and Friends (Quaker) Meetings can be such communities. There are people in both who understand from experience what



Continued on page 10



Continued from page 9

20 Ways toward Understanding the Prison Experience Through the Eyes of Long-time AVP/NY Prison Volunteers

it is to be human, the very definition of which means that one is imperfect and vulnerable in one's feelings.

13. Remember, also, that many people have to spend long years in this deprived environment and that it is important for them to adjust to the realities of doing time.

14. Do not be surprised, if you become overly preoccupied with an individual prisoner. Romantic attraction is only one of the roots of such preoccupation. Others are compassion, admiration for a strong personality or valuable talent or a sense of perceived injustice. Try to keep a balance and not invest all of your valuable energy in one person where there is so much need in others also.

15. Under no circumstances should you give out your telephone number or personal information that might identify where you live.

16. Prisons have proven that people learn little from punishment but more from example. What you do in prison, therefore, is more important than what you say there. A broken promise to an incarcerated person is even more painful than in normal life, and it is an act of cruelty. Even worse, it can further inhibit one's ability to trust; and since trust is essential for integration into a community, a broken promise may alienate the person further. Therefore, do not make unrealistic promises about giving your weekends for workshops or support programs.

17. AVP is not about "saving" others. It is about creating opportunities to practice nonviolence ourselves and share the gift of Transforming Power that was shared with us.

18. Always remember that we stand for AVP values and processes based on consensus, nonviolence, truth and the availability of transforming power to every person. These values are not likely to be found in prison guidelines for volunteers. Nevertheless, they are the

most valuable thing we have to offer to the prison and the world, and we should never allow them to be compromised, no matter how strong the pressure is to do so.

19. Remember that as an AVP volunteer, you are a member of an organization that has programs in prisons all over the state, the country and the world. How AVP volunteers conduct themselves in one prison is communicated by prisoners and administrators to other prisons. The reputation you establish in the prison in which you volunteer affects the reputation of AVP as a whole and the willingness of prison administrators to support AVP programs in the prisons for which they are responsible.

20. If we are to live nonviolently to the fullest extent we are able, we must practice nonviolent behavior consistently. We encourage and support others in living nonviolently as we get better at actually being nonviolent ourselves. AVP encourages all facilitators to take part in regular support groups and all-facilitator gatherings or workshops so that we may take on the role of participant and practice with our peers.

Special thanks to AVP/NY for creating this thoughtful introduction to volunteering in a prison, so others might use it. Feel free to circulate it widely. (The section on physical attraction and power did not fit in this issue, but you will see it in the next issue as well as the revised edition of the AVP/USA Organizing Kit available at the national conference in May.)

Not all is perfect in AVP...

So tell us about a time when things went wrong and how you made them right, for the Summer *Transformer* before April 15 deadline: (Prisoners can mail to The Transformer. P.O. Box 3294, Santa Barbara, CA 93130.) All others electronic preferred: avppat@earthlink.net



Continued from page 6

A peek at AVP/USA Conference:

What is AVP and what does it achieve? This step will help others understand us better. When this happens, I believe we will be welcomed into more prisons, schools and community groups. This will extend our influence and allow us to reach even more people.

The Second Horseman helps us understand the people in our workshops and their specific needs. With this knowledge, we can become more effective because we can tailor our program to the specific needs of each group.

The Third and Fourth Horsemen will show us how to test whether AVP is, in fact, causing the positive changes we claim. I won't try to do justice to these steps in this short essay, but I will present a riveting explanation at the National Conference in Minnesota in May.

I hope you will make a mental note to check the Program Itinerary for Laura Roberts' presentation of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." You are all invited to join me on this wild ride! Lighthearted Laura Roberts is a Quaker, trained in AVP and research methods. Her one-woman crusade to change the language of research to make it more welcoming and compelling is a lonely challenge.