

A mission to reform lives behind bars

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(Photo: Washington Post)

About a mile from where the Cleveland Indians test their fans' patience, there is a facility that expresses Ohio's attempt to temper justice with patience. The facility resembles a school, except for the razor wire.

This prison contains 619 women, one of whom, Jessica Torok, mother of three sons — in the third year of her four-year sentence for manufacturing methamphetamines — says: "I've changed things I didn't even know needed changed," so "now I can go home and be the mother I should have been." Until she goes home she will "live the Army values." Here, she says proudly, "we live military style."

Women who volunteer for the military unit live in a dorm whose halls are decorated with the U.S. armed services' emblems. They practice precision marching and make their beds and organize their clothes drawers with military precision (extra blanket folded 12 inches wide, everything in drawers rolled 6 inches vertically, etc.). They also loudly recite a long oath that is the verbal equivalent of drums and bugles, culminating in a vow to "engage and destroy" enemies of the nation that has put them behind razor wire. Having long since taken responsibility for their lives, they express not a scintilla of today's culture of grievance and victimhood.

This military unit is one approach to bringing order to what were disorderly lives. Few people are in prison because their parents did not hire good SAT prep tutors. Most come from fractured families that, when concentrated in neighborhoods, produce turbulent social cauldrons rich with possibilities for dangerous choices.

The vast majority of today's 2.2 million prisoners will return to the places where they made the choices that got them incarcerated. This is a recipe for recidivism — unless their passage through what is too cheerfully called the "correctional system" gives them new inner resources for living safely.

Here, in one of Ohio's 11 prisons devoted to preparing prisoners for "reintegration," Gary Mohr is particularly proud of the separate faith-based unit. Before being offered the job of director of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, Mohr, now 62, was invited to a 15-minute meeting with Gov. John Kasich. The meeting lasted, as 15-minute Kasich meetings sometimes do, three hours. The two men were well-met because Mohr embodies Kasich's style. Call it evangelical governance.

The faith-based unit might more accurately be called faith-drenched, and not just because Christians so inclined can experience full-immersion baptism. Keyonna Smith, 32, has been incarcerated since some of her bad decisions, aggravated robbery and kidnapping at age 19, earned her a 16-year sentence. She participates in the "silent choir" because, she says, "There are some things people can say to God with their hands that they can't say with their mouths." As a recording of a hymn plays, a dozen or so women translate the lyrics into sign language: "I won't go back, can't go back to the way it used to be before [God's] presence came and changed me." Participation in the faith-based unit is voluntary. And Ohio is disinterested regarding the validity of particular faiths but intensely interested in the utility of faith in reforming the faithful.

Amanda Freed robbed a pharmacy, and she will not be free until 2021, when she can take to the job market the fluency she now brings to a PowerPoint lecture on the facility's many facets. Malika Poole, a poised and impeccably dressed ex-inmate — she got out in May after 14 years inside — has a job using computer skills she taught herself here. Seated next to her, Jenny O'Grady, who found a job two weeks after ending her six years in prison, says: "My past doesn't define who I am today." When asked what got them sent to prison, both women look the questioner in the eye when answering about their drug crimes. Mohr and others in the room are pleased by this sign of "taking ownership," meaning responsibility.

When Mohr began his career 41 years ago, Ohio had 8,300 inmates. Today it has nearly 51,000. About 20,000 Ohioans are sent to prison each year; 41 percent spend less than a year incarcerated. Mohr, who considers prisons "the most unreformed part of government," says his mission is "life reformation," which requires a lot of money as well as patience.

One test of a society is how well it treats those it does not need to treat well. Here and in similar prisons, Ohio is passing the test.

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