Doing Time: Tales from the Washtenaw County Jail

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Steve had been walking past the apartment for hours, trying to appear casual, waiting for the right moment. Then he saw the occupants - two college kids - walk laughing to their neighbors' house, beers in hand. They left the screen door open behind them. Steve crept silently toward the door, struggling to concentrate. His nose was running, his eyes were watery, and the nausea he'd felt since morning was getting worse. But if he could just pull this off, he knew that everything would be all right. He slipped silently through the door and immediately began stuffing things into his backpack – CD's, DVD's, whatever would bring a few bucks at the pawnshop. But as he struggled to unhook the Play Station from the mass of wires that anchored it, he heard voices behind him. "The kids came home and chased me down and caught me," he recalls. "The police were there immediately."

There's been a lot of talk about how crowded the county jail is, and everyone has an opinion on what to do about it. But for some reason, you don't hear much about the men and women who actually live there. How do they end up in jail, and what happens to them there? To find out, I spoke with several current and former inmates, of whom Steve* is the first. His situation is significantly different from the others – he's the only one who's out of jail at the time of our interview.

We meet at Espresso Royale on State Street, walking past panhandlers and haggard punks, some of whom Steve seems to know quite well. He got straight, he tells me, thanks to a spiritual awakening – and a state-run boot camp program that "scared the shit" out of him. But there's still enough of the convict in his appearance to draw furtive stares from the chattering students around us. His face is hard and unsmiling, his eyes small and deep set. With his shaved head and the web of tattoos on his muscular arms, I can easily imagine him in a jail cell – a fact I decide not to mention. Instead, I ask him how his troubles started.

"When I was in my early 20's, I was interested in painkillers," he explains. "I had them for dental work, and they give you a nice feeling. But I found that if I drank alcohol with them, I got an even better feeling. I was already a daily pot smoker and a heavy drinker, and after I started with the painkillers, I knew heroin wasn't very different. So I started sniffing it and soon moved on to injecting it, and it was off to the races from there."

I ask where he got the drugs. "Sometimes I'd drive down to Detroit. It helps to be a young white person from Ann Arbor, driving around the 'hood. They know why you're there, there's really only one reason you'd be there. You make eye contact with someone, and you take a risk that what they put in your hand is the real thing. Once you find one person on the street, you've got a dealer for a long time who wants your business back."

He pauses for a moment. “Of course, in the last year of my addiction, when I had access to a vehicle I would’ve sold it for drug money. So I would just bounce around Ypsilanti to different areas. It’s not hard to find drugs around here. There is kind of a tight knit community of addicts in Washtenaw County - you meet dealers through word of mouth from other junkies.”

When I ask if he worked to support his habit, he laughs humorlessly. “Man, in the worse part of my addiction, I couldn’t even spell work. Although I will say, finding money and trying to find drugs each day was a full time job, in and of itself. I think I generally spent between 20 and 100 dollars a day on drugs. With heroin, the physical withdrawal is agonizing. First thing in the morning, an addict will feel a craving for the drug. If you don’t get some more heroin by the middle of the day, you’re gonna be real sick. You’re basically willing to do anything at that point to get more.” He frowns slightly. “I don’t know exactly when I started stealing, but little by little my morals started to deteriorate, and I was willing to do things that I wouldn’t have considered doing before. Like breaking into houses, taking VCR’s, jewelry, whatever I could get my hands on.” He shakes his head. “There are things that I didn’t do, like prostitute myself, but there’s no telling what would’ve happened if I’d continued using. Because when I first started, if you would’ve told me that I’d end up stealing to buy drugs, I would’ve thought you were crazy.”

I ask if it was hard to support his habit by theft alone. He shrugs. “Not really. The students in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti leave their houses wide open – I just looked for easy access. And I’d steal from stores. Sometimes the alarm goes off if you’ve got a backpack full of CD’s, but generally it’s staffed by a couple of 19 year-old college kids that’d just as soon not chase you, so you just run.”

He didn’t always run fast enough, though. “The first time I went to Washtenaw County Jail was for stealing a car. The owners decided not to press charges, so they let me go. Then a month or two later, I got arrested for home invasion. I was in jail for 30 or 40 days before I could finally talk my dad into bailing me out. I was detoxed by then, but I wasn’t in any frame of mind that I wanted to change. I was just marking time until I could get out and start using again. The day he bailed me out, I started using drugs again, and was back in jail within a week.”

None of this made Steve unusual. “Most of the people in the county jail are there for something to do with drugs or alcohol, whether that’s stealing, dealing, drunk driving, domestic violence, whatever. Either that or they’re mentally ill. So if you hear somebody screaming, it’s hard to tell if they haven’t taken their medicines, or if they’re going through withdrawal.”

I ask him if jail is as intense as that makes it sound. “Well, it’s nothing like the movies, with people beating each other up and raping each other. It’s a lot of boring down time, associating with a lot of losers, and listening to people tell stories that are obviously not true. A lot of people are being held for selling $50 of crack, but they tell you they’re dealing in kilos of cocaine with the Colombians. So it’s a lot of bullshit.”

Still, I'm a little nervous when I arrive at the Hogback Road facility to meet a group of inmates – it's my first time in a jail. So when Commander Kirk Filsinger offers me a brief tour before the interviews begin, I gratefully accept. He leads me down the gray, stale-smelling halls, through metal detectors, through door after clanking door, and past glass-encased security cells where guards gaze dully at banks of flickering monitors. Suddenly I see a blue-jumpered inmate ambling toward us, without handcuffs or guards, fixing us with an intensely curious stare. I move a little closer to Filsinger, but the commander is unconcerned. He explains that the inmate's blue jumper marks him as a "trustee" – a minimum-security inmate who's allowed to walk unescorted around the facilities. He's coming from J Block, where low-risk male inmates are housed (there's a smaller female equivalent in another part of the jail.) Up to 60 men live there together, sleeping in bunks in a large dorm room. As we enter the block, a few dozen are sitting around cafeteria-style tables in a spacious, well-lit room - eating, talking softly, reading. Motioning to them, Filsinger says, "They're allowed to watch TV, they've got movies, there's a back room where they can play cards. As long as they follow the rules, they can decide what they want to do with their time."

So far, life in jail seems a lot more pleasant than I'd imagined. But as we approach the higher security area where the bulk of the roughly 400 inmates are housed, I'm forced to revise that opinion. We walk past 10 different cellblocks, most of which house 32 men, bunked 2 to a cell. Inmates are locked in these cells for 19 ½ hours a day. At mealtimes they're let out in small groups, eating under the watchful eyes of the guards. I can see some peering out of narrow windows in the steel doors, their eyes following us as we pass. As we enter the maximum-security block, Filsinger explains that inmates here are usually locked up alone, let out for just one hour a day. They eat in their cells, with meals passed in through a slot in the door. And according to the Commander, the need for these kinds of safety measures is growing. "As a result of overcrowding, the number of low-security inmates here has diminished dramatically – they get early release. So the jail population to a large extent is becoming more violent." But when I ask if this has led to an increase in violence inside the jail, he doesn't hesitate. "No. We have not seen an increase in violent behavior. The staff is excellent. These are stressful conditions, but they're really doing a terrific job."

Three inmates are waiting to speak to me at the Correctional Services office. As I'm walked through the consent forms, I'm starting to wonder if this was such a good idea. The tour has left me rather uneasy. I assume the jail has selected individuals who are well behaved enough to sit for an unsupervised face-to-face meeting, but I suddenly realize that those details were never really discussed. Too late now – a corrections officer leads me to an empty cubicle, I take a few deep breaths, and Brad walks in.

I can't avoid a quiet sigh of relief. Brad appears to be in his late teens, with smooth cheeks, baby blue eyes and dark blond hair, carefully moussed. Unless the Ann Arbor police have finally cracked down on campus jaywalking, I can't imagine why he'd be here. "When I was 17, I got a hold of an ATM card that had the PIN number on it," he tells me, his face reddening slightly. "And I wrote a bad check, and got caught in a stolen

car. And I was resisting arrest." Trying unsuccessfully to conceal my surprise, I ask what caused his crime spree. He shrugs and looks down. "I got kicked out of my house, and I started hanging out with the wrong group of kids. I was almost 18, so they charged me as an adult. I could've got 14 years in prison, but since it was my first offense, they gave me 90 days in boot camp, and 3 years of probation. But after about 2 years, I stopped coming. I felt like if I just forgot about it, it would go away." He looks up and smiles sheepishly. "You know, I'm engaged, I have house payments to make. But I ended up getting pulled over and sentenced to a year in jail for probation violation – I've been here for 7 months now."

"At first, they put me on the block with the worst criminals. People would try to mess with me, because I'm young, and I don't - I don't come across as being a tough guy." He leans forward, his voice lowered to a whisper. "It was mind blowing. Most of the guys down there are real criminals - drug dealers, murderers, that kind of stuff. It was hard, but [the jail] does a good job. When you go in a cell down there, they place you with someone who's your size, your build, so you're not in there with some 300 pound guy that's been to prison." He pauses for a moment. "Now I'm down on J Block, and most of the guys seem all right. They call me Ritchie Rich, but it's not as bad as people might think."

I ask him if he feels scared in here. "Not in a physical way. But I was scared that…could I really end up like this? Is this really where I'm headed? The best thing that could happen to me was to be put down here, to see where these guys are going in life, to see that it's not worth it. It's been eye opening." He pauses, becomes reflective. "See, a lot of guys here are habitual, they know how to jail. And they know everyone here, they all play card games together - it seems like they enjoy themselves." He smiles self-consciously. "I just tell them that I'm not the typical guy that comes to jail, and I won't ever be back after this. But most of the guys don't believe that. They think everyone comes back…and you know, most of them do."

At the moment, Washtenaw County doesn't keep statistics on recidivism, yet everyone I speak to echoes Brad's statement. (As Filsinger puts it, "When an inmate gets released, it's basically, 'Here's your clothes, we'll see you in a couple months.'") But with the jail plagued by chronic overcrowding, administrators are trying to stem the tide of repeat offenders. Inmates have access to over a dozen programs designed to help them change their ways. If they're eligible, they can get their GED, attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and be baptized into the Catholic faith, all without leaving the confines of the jail. Some of these programs, like those that address substance abuse, are funded by the county and often mandated by courts as part of an offender's sentence. But most are optional, organized by volunteer groups from the local community. Inmates often sign up voluntarily for all the programs they can. There are plenty of reasons for their enthusiasm. Many want an excuse to leave their cells, or to have fleeting contact with inmates of the opposite sex. Others are trying to demonstrate their desire for rehabilitation, in the hope that this will lessen their sentences. And some, of course, really want to turn their lives around.

The next prisoner, Julian arrives preceded by a small commotion--the corrections officer who brought him to the interview room is berating him for not following her instructions. He stares at her mulishly, mumbling something. I introduce myself, and he immediately presents me with a piece of notebook paper, covered with cramped handwriting. At the top of the page is written "To the Media: Things that need to be addressed," followed by a list of complaints: "leaking toilets" (#1), "food sucks" (#7), "toothpaste being sold after expiration date" (#3), and so on. Before I can ask him a question, he launches into a bewildering tirade against the jail, the police ("I'm suing the police department for harassment - Sam Bernstein"), and the county. "The way the system is set up here, this is not Washtenaw, this is Wash Away County. Once they get you in the system, they will wash you away."

When he pauses for breath, I inquire about his criminal history. "Through the years I've been in this jail more than 12 times. I'd say I've got 14 misdemeanors since '97 – trespassing, open intox, driving on a suspended license, possession, refusing to do community service, resisting an officer, little stuff like that. And I had one domestic violence." And was he at fault any of those times? "The only time was that domestic dispute, the other times was like, a misunderstanding." He looks at me, defiant yet earnest. "I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time." And with that, he launches into an exhaustive description of his latest wrongful arrest.

Eventually, I manage to ask what he'll do when he's released. His frustration is palpable. "I'll have to go through the whole process over again. Try to start my life again, try to find something to get into. But in the environment I'm living in, I don't really have any family, and I'm surrounded by a lot of people that I sold dope to, or that I started using around, you know. It's a bad thing for me, but I don't wanna just start turning away from people. Because I'm starting out with nothing, no money, no place to stay. They don't have any support group for you once they open that door, so I'm on my own with all that."

In spite of his demeanor, I find myself sympathizing with Julian's predicament. But when I ask him what kind of support might help him stay out of jail, he seems momentarily at a loss. "I don't know, like set-up programs, something to help you find housing, find a job. But what I really need is to get my GED - to get a steady job that's gonna keep me motivated, help me stay away from the things I did in the past. I'm coming up on 30 in a couple more years. I want to change my ways - I don't want to come back here. But I can't guarantee it won't happen. Most of the people they let go, if they don't have nothing to do, their only option is to commit a crime." There's a mixture of defensiveness and resignation in his voice. "If they was to let me out the door right now, I don't know what I'd do, other than go back to the homeless shelter and take it one day at a time."

His words linger in my mind as I sit down for my final interview. Richard sits across the desk from me, wearing a blue jumper that hangs loose on his thin shoulders. Though his cheeks seem a bit hollow, his face is handsome and oddly youthful, and he gazes at me with good-natured curiosity. With his dark hands folded casually on his lap, his black hair graying at the temples, he sort of looks like a minister. He certainly talks like one –

there’s a clarity and richness to his speech that clashes oddly with the street slang that punctuates it. Had I met him in any other setting, I would have found his story hard to believe. He tells me he’s been jailed here 30 times in his 41 years – and always for the same crime.

“The first time I came to jail was back in 1984,” he begins matter-of-factly. “I was in my early 20’s. I just went to the store and stole some liquor - I only steal liquor. I’ve probably stolen thousands of times.” I ask if he’s an alcoholic. “No sir. I have a drug addiction – crack cocaine. Stealing alcohol’s my way of supporting the habit - I sell it to friends or drug dealers. I just go in there minding my business, then sneak it in my jacket and leave. Or sometimes I’ll go in with another guy. I’m groomed up real well, I’m almost looking like you.” He glances at my dress clothes and laughs. “If you’re working there, I’ll stop to talk to you, hold you up so the other guy can get through with the stuff. That’s the art form of it.” He smiles and looks down. “I probably get away 20 times, and get caught once. But you know, the few times you get caught pay for all the times you think you done got away.”

I tell him about Julian’s opinion of “Wash Away County.” He nods his head knowingly. “That’s why he’ll keep coming back. I used to be there. ‘It’s their fault. It ain’t me, it’s you.’ Ain’t nobody made me do nothing I’ve done. I went out and done it myself. But if a guy really wants to clean himself up, he can do it. You can take Narcotics Anonymous and Dawn Farms substance abuse programs here in jail - I’m in both of them. I’m at that point where I should be able to do it. This is more confident than I’ve ever been.” He smiles at me calmly. “I wasn’t just caught in jail, you know - I was rescued and also I was blessed. Someone could have killed me out there, trying to get the drug that I got.”

But soon a subtle tension enters his voice, as if he were eager to convince me of something. “You know, I was brought up right. My dad is a pastor in his own church, he’s been there for forty some odd years. I don’t take any other drug, I don’t drink or anything. I ain’t into tricking you, ganking you out of your money, or nothing like that. I don’t pack guns - if you carry a gun, sooner or later you’re gonna use it.” He leans forward slightly, his tone insistent. “I know right from wrong, but when you don’t have the drug, the only thing that’s going through your head is ‘get the stuff, get the stuff.’ Consequences and all that don’t even enter my mind.”

“When crack came into my life, it just turned me into a monster. I was born and raised here, graduated from Ann Arbor Huron. When I graduated, I was boxing - I wanted to be a professional. I really had an open door until I started using.” I ask how it happened. He’s quiet for a moment, then looks down. “It’s just been a hard climb. After high school, I didn’t work the best of jobs, didn’t have much to get into. A lot of guys I knew were into drugs, so I started smoking weed. The first time I ever used crack was in Ypsi, at my best friend’s house. He was already addicted at that time, and he brought it out and we smoked it.” He hesitates, and I prompt him – what was it like? He sighs, then laughs softly and somewhat exasperatedly, as though I ought to know better than to ask. “It was the ultimate.”

After a long silence, I ask him what he did when he came down. “Well, I really didn’t come down. I kept using, kept using, kept using. You use ‘til you pass out. And after that, you’re addicted.” He smiles sadly. “You know, you can be clean while you’re here, but it’s never out of your mind. You can get it out of your system, but you know it’ll always come back.” He looks at me, frustration etched on his face. “But there comes a time when things gotta change. And I’m just ready, you know. Once upon a time, I wasn’t.”

I ask if it’s his last time in jail. “Well, I pray to God it is.” And then I ask him if he hates crack. “Well….” He laughs nervously and seems to waver, then his smile disappears. “Yes I do. I hate that it ever came into my life. I just ask the lord to bless me, to take this from me.” He looks at me, and his expression is inscrutable. “Will you beat it?” I ask him quietly. He doesn’t look away. “Yeah, I’ll beat it. I’ll beat it one day. I’ll beat it one day. I just pray to the lord that it’s now.”

*The names of inmates have been changed.