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Home town
Psych

From Death Row to Inmate Privileges

Internship at Prison Challenges IWU Psychology Major

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--His first day on the job, he saw a prison guard mopping his bloodied face with a towel. A few minutes later, a handcuffed inmate, dripping with MACE, came into view. The prisoner had slugged the guard in a scuffle over a missed shower time.

"It definitely was an eye-opening experience," said Kirk Liesemer, an Illinois Wesleyan University senior, majoring in psychology. "It really struck me. The guard, who was wearing a uniform and had the aura of authority around him, was beaten up on a whim.

"I thought, 'What have I gotten into?'"

Liesemer was recalling one of his first memories of the Pontiac Correctional Center, where he interned as a volunteer inmate counselor from May to August last year.

Liesemer, who is fascinated by the criminal side of psychology, made a two-and-one-half hour round-trip commute every work day from his Naperville, Ill., home to Illinois' oldest prison last summer--a lockup with 2,500 prisoners, including some living on Death Row.

Death Row Conversation

When an assistant warden who Liesemer worked with closely was assigned responsibility for the condemned unit, the IWU psychology major got a chance to see Death Row firsthand--an experience that resulted in paper he wrote for academic credit.

Liesemer had a wide-ranging conversation with Henry Brisbon, the Interstate 57 killer, who was accused of murdering three individuals in 1973.

"He is widely acknowledged as the worst inmate in the history of the state," Liesemer said, referring to Brisbon. "He murdered an inmate and got the death sentence for that. He has received hundreds of disciplinary tickets.

"We talked for about two-and-one-half hours," Liesemer recalled. "I think he liked my 'outside' perspective since he had been in jail for 20 years."

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The conversation took place with Liesemer sitting outside of Brisbon's cell.

"I wanted to learn about him," Liesemer said of Brisbon. "I had this vision of an angry guy sitting in his cell or pacing--a guy who wouldn't want to talk. I read his file ahead of time to help strike up a conversation."

Liesemer began the chat by praising a grievance Brisbon had written for its logic and vocabulary. The condemned man, at first defensive about Liesemer reading his file, started to talk.

He observed, according to Liesemer, that young guys now brought into the condemned unit think they can solve problems with their fists. Brisbon said he coped with his problems by using his pen and intellect.

When Liesemer challenged Brisbon, noting that he had had his share of confrontations, the inmate stopped talking, stared at Liesemer, and finally agreed with him.

"That was at the beginning of our conversation," Liesemer said. "He saw that I wouldn't back down to him--and fortunately it worked."

The conversation ranged from First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton to queries about Liesemer not having a girlfriend.

Liesemer said Brisbon is among the top five convicts facing execution on Death Row. "But it's strange," he added, "you don't get the feeling they're waiting to be executed. They seem as alive as they can be--they're all working with lawyers on appeals and they use the law library and the exercise yard. They're locked up but they aren't just waiting to die."

Death Row is different from the rest of the prison, according to Liesemer. There are four additional checkpoints and visitors are frisked. It is spotlessly clean, prisoners are fed in cells, and when they take showers inmates are shackled.

Eligibility for Privileges

On a typical day, Liesemer would talk to prisoners--one-on-one or in small groups--in the cell houses about the status of their privileges.

"I'd look at their files to see if they were eligible," Liesemer explained, "and if they were I'd do the paperwork for them to get the privilege."

"I'd usually write them a note if they weren't eligible," he added,

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quipping, "there was high potential for disagreement."

The type of privileges at stake typically involved shopping, recreation, or athletics.

Prisoners often came to the cramped room staffed by counselors to campaign for privilege upgrades.

"I had my share of verbal confrontations," Liesemer said, "but nothing physical. I consider myself very fortunate."

Well-Rounded Internship Experience; Parents' Reaction

His internship experience also included visits to other prisons in Joliet, Dixon, and Rockford. He sat in on various classes offered as part of the education program available at Pontiac, attended sessions with drug counseling groups, and observed disciplinary committees at work.

"It was a well-rounded experience," Liesemer said. "I got to see the total institution."

Consequently, he observed firsthand a built-in prison conflict: guards and others wanting to keep everything tightly controlled, and educators and counselors trying to offer various opportunities to inmates as part of a rehabilitation process.

Liesemer's parents reacted differently to his internship at Pontiac.

"My mother wasn't too thrilled about it," Liesemer said. "My dad was apprehensive at first, but after two or three weeks of hearing about what I was doing he came down and toured the prison. He was fascinated by it."

Glimpse Inside Prison

Prison security is ever-present, according to Liesemer. Entering the prison, five checkpoints are negotiated. Barred, locked, and slamming doors are everywhere. Doors are opened by guards with keys or electronically. Prison buildings--cell houses, chapel, education building, a Clinical Services Building, and others--dot the prison landscape, as well as guard towers.

"You have the feeling your every move is watched," Liesemer said, "that other forces control you. If you try to do something out of the ordinary, you will be stopped. Everything is made of concrete and steel, there's razor wire and lights--you have the total feeling that there is no way out."

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However, prisoners are not locked up in cells all day, a situation that immediately caught Liesemer's attention.

"In the morning," he explained, "a wheel at the end of a cell house gallery is pulled--this is called 'rolling the brakes'--and the cell doors open. From that point on, prisoners mill around their cell houses and at times go to the yard and their job sites. Prisoners are not overly confined and that was shocking. Most people think prisoners just sit in their cells."

Gangs

Another surprise for Liesemer were the large number of gangs inside the prison's walls.

"Gangs are common," he explained. "But prisoners are very good at masking whether they are gang members. For example, there might be 30 guys in a circle in the recreation yard and two guys in the middle talking. They'll tell prison officials that they're picking teams--but really they're having a gang meeting."

There is some jockeying for cell assignments because of threatened beatings to inmates over gang loyalties.

Tested from the Beginning

Liesemer's grit was tested from the moment he arrived at Pontiac for a job interview. Without talking to a soul, he navigated the various security checkpoints, walking by inmates in the yard, on his way to the Clinical Services Building.

"With no knowledge or experience," he recalled, "I was thrown into the middle of it. From what I gathered, the head of clinical services likes to see how you act when you come for an interview. If you're flustered, shaken, or nervous--this isn't the place for you to work."

Views on Crime

Liesemer's interest in crime, in part, stems from its prominent role in society.

His Pontiac internship spurred spirited family chats about crime and criminals, especially around the Sunday brunch table.

"I agree," Liesemer said, "that criminals should be segregated from society and punished. But are steel bars the answer? We're running out of

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room in prisons and they are very costly--and the problem isn't getting any better. Many prisoners are repeat offenders. It seems that what society is doing isn't the answer."

Changed by Pontiac

The experience of working at Pontiac has changed Liesemer. "I'm not as shocked or surprised by things as I used to be," he explained. "After walking in the yard with people yelling, and others in your face when you said they weren't eligible for privileges, playing football last fall was easy. Concentrating on a football in the air in front of a crowd was nothing after a conversation with an inmate with 10 other inmates screaming at you."

Liesemer, a wide receiver who made 18 catches for 215 yards and four touchdowns, was named to the all-College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) football team following the 1994 season.

Liesemer's Future Plans, Background

Liesemer is contemplating his options as graduation nears in May. He is eyeing graduate school and a master's degree, as well as going to law school. His top choice at the moment is Arizona State University, where he can earn a masters degree in criminology and a law degree. He also is investigating the University of California-Irvine and its doctoral program in criminology.

Liesemer is a graduate of Naperville Central High School. He is the son of Richard Liesemer, a retired high school math and computer teacher, and Esther Liesemer, a third grade school teacher. The Liesemers reside at 335 Highland Ave. in Naperville.

IWU Profiled

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,800 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. In recent years, the university's endowment has grown to more than \$92 million; a \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$24 million science building will open in 1995. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 164 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *U.S. News* ranks IWU the second most

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efficient national liberal arts college--a key gauge of the campus' quality academic program and relatively reasonable cost. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition. IWU's 1994 freshman class scored an average 27.9 on the ACT exam, compared to the national average of 20.7.