

Imprisonment?

By Nancy C. Lewine, PhD
© 2007 All Rights Reserved

Introduction - How I ended up in prison!

I certainly have made my share of mistakes. I have made a litany of apologies and amends to other people. I have paid my dues, made restitution, suffered the consequences of my actions, and learned a multitude of life lessons; but in all my 50+ years, I never thought I would end up in prison! How could this have happened?

A few years ago, it was time to conclude a phase in my life (= my marriage). Considering all of the circumstances and people affected, my primary goal was an amicable divorce. So, either I was crazy, rebellious, or a trend-setter by our current history of divorce in our country. My philosophy was to enlarge the family, not reduce it, while restructuring one of the primary relationships from marital to friendship. We experienced a few bumps along the way, but generally all was going well. . .and then WHAM! The next thing I know is that my ex (Rich) is dragging me off to prison! Now I am in State Correctional Institution (SCI)-Graterford, and it is all his fault!

Pause. Smiley face. Tongue-in-cheek. Yes, I am dramatizing the situation. No, I'm not fabricating a story. He DID invite me to volunteer at the prison (also known affectionately as "dragging me off. . .:)! I am in the prison for 2 hours once a week working with inmates.

Rich had been volunteering for over one year at the prison. His childhood friend came to know one the the inmates during a time he was out of prison. When he returned, for reasons I won't get into here, the two of them remained in contact. Over time that inmate found out about

our consulting company and contacted Rich about donating our facilitation services to a Lifer's organization. After Rich worked with the group for months, they identified the need for my expertise in facilitating personal growth and enhancing train-the-trainer skills for this group of men. It was an intriguing challenge which I accepted. It's been three months now, and I've never looked back.

Imprisonment - Careful! You might actually relate. . .

Have you ever felt unduly constrained or controlled by a situation or circumstance in your life? You may have felt stuck, restrained, or trapped. I know I have had the displeasure of going through that type of experience. You cannot see a way out, there's no one to turn to for help, and your soul is defeated, your mind and body are impotent. Your sense is that you are trapped and being held against your will. If you can relate, then you have been imprisoned.

Obviously, I worked my way out of my perceived imprisonment. I have learned that lesson. Today, while those perceptions may re-surface during times of exceptional stress, I have quite a different way to interpret it. Why? Because for the past two months, I actually have been in a prison! Yes, in State Correctional Institute(SCI)-Graterford. I have had the honor, and I do mean *honor*, of working with a group of 10 men facilitating my all-time favorite development program, Effective Personal Leadership. A program I have facilitated for countless organizations, from Presidents of companies to public school teachers! I was invited to run the same program for a select group of inmates! They are developing their own personal leadership.

During the past several weeks, these participants have been working their tails off learning how to visualize and crystallize their dreams! They are learning to write positive goals and action plans. Each one has been digging deep inside himself asking questions and seeking

answers of how to become a better person. Yep, *better people!* People who are literally living behind bars.

It's important that you know most of them are "Lifers." They are just what it sounds like, prisoners who were awarded life sentences for crimes they committed decades ago. Several men are in their sixties. They've been in jail almost as long as I have been alive! Oo vey, that is difficult to comprehend. Out of the 3,000 plus inmate population (coincidentally, that was the size of my son's high school student population last year!), these individuals have worked hard and earned their way "up" to the level of respect within the prison population to become facilitators. They are leaders and trainers of a series of internal prisoner release programs designed to help other inmates who receive parole or fulfill their sentences. There are several programs delivered, but the one I am connected to is PAR (pargraterford.org), People Against Recidivism. What the heck is that?

Recidivism is "going back" or "returning" to a previous state or condition. It can mean reverting back to a bad habit one is trying to break. Our society defines it most commonly as what percentage of the inmates released end up back in jail for an additional crime committed. That number is an appalling 70%. What we know is that "doing your time" doesn't produce productive citizens. Whatever caused the crime in the first place doesn't get fixed just because we put someone in jail. We need to focus on the 30% who DO get out and stay out successfully. That is the challenge. It's a social concern we should be aware of because it affects us all.

These inmates are physically confined. You and I know what it's like to be figuratively imprisoned. I acknowledge it is not exactly the same thing, but it is a starting place for us to relate to them. They are human beings. We are human beings. We are all connected. On that,

we can build a foundation for all of us to learn and grow with each other.

My job is to maintain my focus and do what I do best, help others develop their own personal leadership. As a result, they become better goal setters and achievers. Even within the confines and constraints of a state correctional institution they become better *people*.

I am there to share my expertise with a group of individuals who will transfer their growth and improvement directly to their participants - the very guys who ARE getting back out on the street. I'm not working with the entire prison population. You may wonder if working with such a small group makes a difference. Here's how I view my contribution: if I help these 10 gentlemen and they in turn each help 10 other inmates, that's 100 people who potentially benefit! If one more parolee stays out and becomes a productive member of society as a result of six hours of training per month, **I consider that a success!**

Tune in periodically as I chronicle my experiences with these 10 remarkable men. I invite you to sign up for my e-mail alerts to keep you up-to-date on how my volunteer work challenges and inspires me. *Ankora Imparo*, I'm still learning (Michaelangelo)!