

Rocket Courier Article

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Area Author Mourns Lost Promise of American Prisons

Latest Book by John J. Pecchio includes Bradford County Murder Case

John Pecchio is a man on a mission, brimming with passion in his effort to get the word out on what American prisons have become - breeding grounds for violent human species that may be beyond rehabilitation. The local author will tell you that 80 percent of the inmates in federal and state prisons cannot be rehabilitated. The 20 percent who can are frightened and intimidated by the real rulers of our prisons, the hardcore criminals who fail at anything legal they try on the outside but thrive in the garden on iniquity that grows behind prison walls. It is a scenario the local author has labeled the "Devil's Den" and incorporated into his most recent book title.

He ought to know. He was part of a prison system that relied on discipline and providing vocational training that would allow inmates to adapt to the outside world. He was also there to see the system changed dramatically starting in the late 1960's.

This trim, courteous man speaks in rapid-fire sentences, as if he can't get the words out fast enough. His appearance belies his 69 years, and it is even harder to believe that he was almost beaten to death nearly 16 years ago by a convicted killer in a vocational shop at the Elmira State Correctional Facility where he had been an instructor for the previous 25 years. Other inmates watched the attack on Sept. 6, 1991, but none offered much more than, "Leave him alone, he was good to you," as the inmate, Lester Taylor, pummeled Pecchio.

In a semi-conscious state, his mind slipping away as he contemplated his own death, he was able to knock a phone in the shop off the hook during the struggle. Fortunately there was a seven-second delay when a prison phone is activated and corrections officers responded. After they subdued Taylor, they found the shank, a homemade weapon, that would have certainly been used on Pecchio had help not arrived when it did.

"He would have sliced me up with that," he says on this day in the home he shares with his wife, Pamela, outside of Columbia Cross Roads.

The story of Pecchio and his years on the inside of the maximum-security prison was recounted several years ago in the Rocket-Courier. The occasion was a book he had recently published entitled "Hell Behind Prison Walls," which went on to become a regional bestseller.

First Book Therapeutic

It took me 11 years to write that book. I was learning how to write, to put my feelings on paper," he says of his initial foray as a writer. "The rewarding part was, at first, it was good therapy for all the

stress that comes from working in a prison. Then, after you see all those thousands of prison workers I have met over the years at my book signing tours and at presentations on prisons, giving me compliments for doing what they were afraid to do, writing about prisons."

The fact is that prison employees are discouraged from talking to the public and news media about what they do when they are inside, and years ago, according to Pecchio, it became an administrative practice to have prison workers sign confidential documents. The penalty of blabbing was losing one's job, at least a suspension, and perhaps even putting your pension on the line after you retired or leave the job.

Pecchio harbored many of those fears while writing "Hell Behind Prison Walls," but things are different now. Years after his beating, which was the last day he worked inside a prison, he finally received some civil remedy with a sizeable monetary settlement. Pamela is a retired respiratory therapist, and together they live comfortably. Pecchio, thanks to the response of his book, feels unfettered psychologically and the result is his recently published second book, "The Devil's Den of Prison and Justice." In fact, he is signing copies of the book this week at the Troy Fair.

He enjoys the compliments that have come his way, but he is most moved when he receives a letter from someone who works inside a state or federal prison lauding him as one of the few purveyors of truth about what goes on behind prison walls.

"John, you have captured the ugliness of our prison system," wrote one corrections officer at the Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) near Dallas, PA — a man who described his reaction to his latest book as "overwhelmed." "We don't hold the inmates accountable for the time they are there or the reason they are there; Keep them happy and, hopefully, they'll behave."

Then there was a psychiatric nurse in a federal prison who described his book as "enlightening" and confirmation that she is not alone in her perceptions about our prisons: "DOCs (Departments of Corrections) will quickly tell people about all the programs they offer to inmates. What they do not tell the public is that the inmates do not have to participate in any of them if they don't want to."

No More Reformatories

Indeed, much of Pecchio's message is what has gone wrong in our prisons, along with an abiding hopefulness that someday they will return to respecting the military-style discipline that was instituted by Zebulon Brockway, the first warden at Elmira, then known as the Elmira Reformatory, in the late 1800's. Brockway was an innovator who changed the reigning philosophy of the role of prisons. His way became THE way, and it was the way for decades. The facility was as much a trades school as a prison, and inmates earned time for good behavior, had privileges denied or time added when they misbehaved, and when they got out they had learned a trade that allowed them to more easily adapt to society. The recidivism rate, or those returning after incarceration, was barely 16 percent. Now, says Pecchio, 67 percent of these prisoners are back behind bars within three years. That rate is as high as 80 percent for those with prior arrests in the double-figures. Those were different times, that is for certain, but somewhere along the line they gave up on the idea of reform — like a parent who abandons

disciplining a child, choosing instead to pamper him, with no consequences for his actions, until he is out on his own.

He calls the hardest core inmates "thugs"; essentially cold-blooded killers, and the next step down "gangsters." Gangsters are less violent but career criminals nonetheless.

"Years ago, when prisons were under control, prisoners had to attend prison schools and had to work in vocational and industrial programs," says the man who ran a shoemaking shop inside a maximum-security prison for a quarter of a century. "That's not so today. When any prisoners choose not to reform themselves, and do not want to attend or work in any prison program, no one with prison authority, or any lawmakers, can make them do it."

The mentality of these prisoners is underlined in one of the fan letters to Pecchio from a prison guard: "(The public) can't imagine that there are inmates who know they are HIV-positive and have Hepatitis that literally bite their lips, causing themselves to bleed so they can spit at you, hoping some will end up in your eyes or mouth... One inmate described it as the gift that keeps on giving."

"The Devil's Den" continues to do what "Hell Behind Prison Walls" did as far as letting the public know the failings of our corrections systems. It also tells stories of killers, miscarriages of justice inside and outside of prisons, escapes, prison riots, and security breakdowns. It stands up for prison workers and calls administrators to task who have become sheep and snitches, not leaders, more concerned about the rights of the criminals than their caretakers.

Dustin Briggs Freed to Prey

The book also analyzes a justice system that has become so distorted that cold-blooded killers are walking the streets, time bombs waiting to kill, rape, and maim. One of the stories he tells is in a chapter called "The Justice System and the Killer" and is all too familiar to residents in this region. Dustin Briggs, a man who should have been in jail for his previous acts, ambushed two Bradford County Sheriff's Deputies, Michael VanKuren and Chris Burgert, in March of 2004.

Pecchio tells of how Briggs became a convicted felon when he was only 18 and spent the next decade committing crimes, violating probation when they did let him out, and exhibiting violent behavior that should have put someone on notice that it was only a matter of time until he killed someone. He may be on death row now, thanks to a Bradford County jury, but Pecchio argues in his book that had the justice system done its job, Burgert and VanKuren would have been alive today. In fact, the deputies, on the day they died, were attempting to serve warrants on Briggs and his girlfriend, April Harris.

The key incident, as retold in Pecchio's book, took place in December of 1997 — after Briggs had already committed numerous crimes, including leading Towanda police on a high-speed chase two years earlier — in a traffic stop by New York State Police. They found in the vehicle a sawed-off shotgun under the seat, and when they ordered him to put his hands on his pickup truck, he pulled out a fully

loaded .32 caliber semiautomatic pistol instead. Two officers were able to subdue and disarm him in a struggle before he was able to use it. It was an opportunity VanKuren and Burgert didn't have when Briggs turned a loaded gun on them. The New York State Police Officers, in fact, received commendations for bravery and a special award given annually through the state police superintendent for courage in the line of duty. Their peers and superiors knew they had faced a cold-blooded killer — something the courts apparently ignored.

Still, in the summer of 2000, Briggs, who had shown that he was willing to kill a cop and whose own parole officer had opposed his release, was out on parole. Just a few months before he killed the deputies in his father's junkyard, Pecchio reports in his book, Briggs had bragged he was going to get in a shootout with police.

“Briggs was a career criminal and had no intentions of reforming,” Pecchio writes, noting that what he really needed was “strict, uncompromising discipline of a physical and mental nature. He needed to know that society took his criminal acts seriously and that his crime has serious and absolute consequences.”

That is something we need from both our justice system and the prisons where we send those convicted of crimes, argues Pecchio. “The Devil's Den” is revealing and informative, but it is not reassuring because, as the book cover promises, it tells “why prisons are failing and courts have become a playground for criminals.”