

Sunday Review Article

Article from The Sunday Review newspaper. This article was originally published on Sunday, March 11, 2007 in Pennsylvania's The Sunday Review newspaper under the title 'Devil's Den' - Troy-area man writes second book on troubled prison system. Written by Nancy Coleman.

It was a morning in March 2004. Cracks from a gun sliced through the hills.

And with that, Bradford County sheriff's deputies Mike VanKuren and Chris Burgert were shot and killed in the line of duty.

It happened so quickly. Two husbands, two fathers... gone.

In early 2006, Dustin Briggs of Gillett was convicted in the murders and given the death penalty.

Who would have seen it coming? Who would have thought?...

John Pecchio would. He's seen it over and over.

John will tell you: Briggs had arrests going back to 1995, and in 1997 he had pulled a gun on two New York troopers. Yet he spent a great deal of his time free, on parole. In 2003, he reportedly told a woman he was going to get into a shootout with police.

Then it really happened.

The story of Briggs, VanKuren, and Burgert is just one of many in John's new book, "The Devil's Den of Prison and Justice." In it, the Troy-area resident, a former employee of a maximum-security prison, talks about the modern prison system. And what he sees wrong with it.

"People have to know what's going on here!" he states.

"People don't know what it's like in prisons!"

A distinguished-looking man with dark, intent eyes, John is passionate about the subject. For 25 years, he worked as a vocational instructor at the Elmira Correctional Facility. It was OK when he started. But then a new philosophy took over the system. And things changed.

In the years ahead, John saw politics at work and prison violence explode. He himself was beaten by a convicted murderer.

"I'm a man. I'm a father. I have children," he states. He's a caring person.

And when he saw what went on in prison... it ate at him.

He had to tell.

In 2003, he wrote his first book, "Hell Behind Prison Walls," which was a regional bestseller. And last year, "Devil's Den." Brundage Publishing in Binghamton, N.Y., has published both, and John and the company work together to sell them. For the last few years, John has toted his books to book signing after book signing.

For "Devil's Den," he designed elaborate display

boards to take along, to attract the eye, inform the mind... and startle the soul.

You have the Plexiglas knives on display (made secretly by prisoners). Weapons for stabbing, hitting, cutting, made from magazines, pens, a toothbrush, a hair brush, a razor blade, a tuna fish can lid. Photos of scars on men's scalps. Handcuffs. Book covers. Newspaper articles ("Female prison worker attacked," "Inmate gets life," ...) Short pieces John wrote (like "The Criminal Mind Never Sleeps").

What happened?

The brochure for John's new book explains:

"Society started building prisons in the 16th century with the main concept being lawful detainment. As the centuries passed, so did the purpose of advancing prison reform. By the 19th century our prisons began focusing on education, vocational, and industrial learning programs. Administrative leaders took charge, along with the prison guards that were the backbone of the prison system, enforcing strict discipline, which made prisons a lot safer to work in." Inmates came out "with a more productive outlook on life."

Zebulon Brockway first superintendent at the Elmira Reformatory, in the late 1800s, is called a "master warden" who set up a good, military-style discipline system and "introduced the first academic, vocational and industrial programs that are still being used today in many federal and state prisons."

But in 1969, things changed. "Lawmakers and politicians pressured prison leaders to take a well-run prison system and turn it into a nightmare from hell," the brochure reads. "They began experimenting for a better reform system, and started by passing more humanitarian laws." Those laws aimed to protect prisoners' rights, it says, "without knowing the impact those laws were going to have on prisons and society." The results? Those "rights" were valued above all else. Employee morale dropped. Guards, now called "correctional officers," became "glorified babysitting robots." Also, "Along with civilian staff, they lived in fear of inmates. ...Prison staffs were being reprimanded or fired by their superiors on an inmate's word." It could be for violating rights, for "using too much physical force in breaking up inmates fighting and/or when using too much physical force when protecting themselves from violent inmates..."

"Criminals serving life in prisons will develop a lack of remorse for human life, and many end up acting like prehistoric man existing all over again."

In the brochure, John also takes aim at the court system: "in Annapolis, Md., in a court of law, Judge Pamela L. North in October of 2006, was listening to a death-penalty case where an inmate serving 100 years for horrific crimes, had stabbed to death another inmate at his prison with a dangerous weapon."

("Guards can't protect you in prison," John insists.)

North reportedly said: "A prisoner who thinks he is in danger has a right to carry a weapon."

John writes that her statement showed "the lack of knowledge she has of prison life."

- "The recidivism rate" (prisoners who are released then return to jail) "from all federal and state prisons: 67 percent

repeat felons return in one to three years."

- The rate one to three years later for felons with 15 or more prior arrests, 80 percent; 90 percent for sex offenders and pedophiles in one to three years.

- "Because of repeat felons, one law-enforcement officer dies every 57 hours."

- \$35,000-\$40,000 to keep an inmate in prison one year; \$1 million to keep a person on death row for one year

- 75 percent of all inmates are school dropouts

- The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world: 6.9 million in prisons or jail, or on parole.

"We're not rehabilitating anymore, just pacifying them," John states. "They're not rehabilitated... they're not disciplined."

He was serving two life sentences for murdering his own baby, wife, and mother-in-law. Weighed almost 300 pounds.

John says the prisoner wrote a letter to the superintendent, stating "something bad was going to happen" if he wasn't taken out of John's shop. The superintendent, according to John, said he would take care of it.

He never did. He never told John about it.

John also asked officials to take the prisoner out of his shop "because he was a threat to security, and out of control."

They didn't.

On Sept. 6, 1991, John asked the man to do something in class. The prisoner swore. John turned away.

The prisoner hit him. Then he threw him against a shop machine.

Blood had started streaming down John's face, and his legs went numb. He got to a phone and called for help. They sent him to the hospital.

A few months later, John retired.

"Hell Behind Prison Walls" is more an autobiography of John's career and the bureaucracy he worked with. "How they set you up, how the prison was changing and I came right into the middle of it," John explains.

He had good reader response. And as time went by, John saw more TV news, saw what was happening out there. He thought about it...

"My God!" he realized. He hadn't really told what went on - "I didn't really write anything!" There was so much more he could say.

"And I did it!"

In "Devil's Den," he looks at the federal and state prisons and their failures, and the courts.

"I've gone way beyond. It took a lot of nerve..."

Setups, escapes, thugs, riots, twisted law, recidivism - John writes about it all, and more, in "Devil's Den." At 500 plus pages, it's a thick book, but with short, readable chapters with titles like "Avila the Killer," "Tuttle the Killer" "Larry the Killer," "The Mentally Disturbed Talking to the Animals," and "prison Nightmares from Hell."

John dives deep into the whole murky pool.

"I'm not afraid anymore!"

John writes about the Briggs case in "Devil's Den":

"Now that the two law enforcement officers have been shot and killed by Briggs, the justice system is going to make sure that this prisoner's rights will not be violated. We pay for his lawyer. He has a comfortable cell, steady flow of food, medical bills, and tender care. As he waits to enter that lethal injection chamber to be put to death for these terrible crimes he committed, his lawyer is working hard in the background to make sure he finds a loophole in the law to reduce Briggs' death sentence."

Then there was Bucky Phillips. Remember Bucky?

He was in the local news not long ago, after breaking out of Erie County Correctional Facility in Alden, N.Y. John followed that story:

"He was a loser. He was a killer." In and out of prison for 25 years.

He was due to get out again, but knew more charges were going to land him right back in. So he got an idea...

I want to be assigned to the prison kitchen! he told a guidance counselor. No, the counselor said.

So Phillips wrote a letter to the New York Central Office. "I'm being discriminated against!" He declared.

Why? During one certain meal, Phillips received three pieces of cheese, he said. He was supposed to have four!

The prison superintendent saw the letter before it was mailed. He talked to a Lieutenant on the adjustment board (where inmates are

sent when violating prison rules). Squash this thing! He ordered.

The Lieutenant talked to Phillips. I want to be assigned to the prison kitchen! The prisoner insisted again. His RIGHTS were being violated!

All right, all right, we'll assign you to the prison kitchen, the official said.

Phillips got his way. He went to work in the kitchen.

There he used a can opener to cut a hole in the kitchen ceiling and escaped.

He later was re-captured. But not before killing New York State Trooper Joseph Longobardo and injuring troopers Sean Brown and Donald Baker.

John ends the story. Even though Phillips is back in prison, "he'll be well taken care of."

What do people think of John's books?

John had a sales tent at the Bloomsburg Fair. A young man with lots of tattoos (John thinks he was a Skinhead) walked by and heard him talking with a couple. "Why do you tell them all that ----?" the young man cursed. "man... you're full of it! You're wrong!"

But then you have Joy. Joy's a teenager who visited John's table at a past Winterfest in Troy. Later she wrote to him: "Just from listening to you tell us about how prison is I don't ever want to see me or my sister in a place like that!... Kids these days think that it's cool to be all big and bad and go to jail like a criminal but if they only knew what happens maybe we could keep them from doing crime to keep them out of jail." According to John, his first book at one time outsold John Grisham in Elmira.

And just a few weeks ago, a guard at the Dallas, Pa., state prison wrote to him:

"I have just recently completed your book 'The Devil's Den of Prison and Justice.' I felt overwhelmed to write you and let you know how much I enjoyed the book. The book revolved around honest and truth and nobody ever said the truth is attractive... I am writing to encourage all citizens that seek the truth about our current prisons to read both books, as ugly as the truth and honesty may be...

"The average citizen dismisses the idea that grown men can and will act like animals on the inside. We can't imagine that there are inmates that have knowledge that they are HIV-positive and have hepatitis that literally will bite their lips causing themselves to bleed so they can spit at you hoping that some will end up in your eyes or mouth...

"Shall we discuss perhaps the inmate that use to 'cheek' his medication so that in the evening time he could put the medication in his 'cellies' coffee and rape him after the medication took effect?...

"The inmate has the opportunity for six hours of

exercise yard per day. During this time they play basketball, horseshoes, botchy-ball, softball, football, throw Frisbee, play handball, lift weights or just have casual walks... They are not required to work unless they choose to... They pay a fraction of cost for cable television in their cells."

The guard writes that inmates have picnics with family in the summer; hear bands in the gym in the winter; and can mail out 10 postage-paid letters a month (\$1.5 million per year statewide).

"John, I offer this letter to you as testimony. I encourage others to read both books. I encourage the citizens to question how tax dollars are being spent..."

It was signed: "Correctional Officer (number)."
Apparently the guard couldn't risk his supervisors learning what he'd written.

John sees a dark future. In the prison system, there's "no turning back now," he states.

The high recidivism rate shows that prisoners are not disciplined and that they cannot be rehabilitated.

Yet he writes on.

"There's something in me that's driving me," he states. "I want to help my fellow prison workers. I want to help people to understand what really goes on behind those prison walls," he explains.

"There's nobody in the prison system... can say I'm wrong, because I told it like it was!"