

FROM HELL TO ACOOP

A journey of a lifetime in only 18 months

October 2007

I have just been sentenced and come from Court. It is my first night in Prison. The metal door has closed behind me and I have no idea of what is going to happen next. Cold stone floors, stone walls, toilet in the corner, metal bed and only two thin blankets. There is no glass in the window and it is blowing a gale outside. Only the squealing of seagulls for company. What have I done?

Some joker has scrawled ' Hades ' on the wall. I know what he means but this one is freezing cold.

I want to tell my wife and family how sorry I am and pray that they will be there for me when I get out. (That is too far off I must not think about it). I am feeling depressed already. I think I will be even more depressed when I fully realise the extent of the damage that I have caused to everyone that loves me.

Somebody told me that when you hit rock bottom there is only one way to go and that is up. I have got to the point that I will say a prayer tonight to keep those I have left behind safe and well. I hope I can speak to my wife tomorrow or else I will go mad.

November 2007

It cannot have been only 7 days that have passed. It seems like a lifetime already, but some good news has come to me. I am being transferred to a different prison tomorrow with less stringent regimes I am told.

I must admit that I have more freedom and better conditions but nobody can replace this loneliness and helplessness.

Apparently my first two weeks are an ' Induction Course ' when I must ' get to know my prison ' and be taught the ways of the world.

I have to learn the difference between a green bucket , a blue bucket and a red bucket all in the name of Industrial Cleaning (And I thought it was just the colour !!) And who would have imagined that at the age of 66 I would get a day long sex education lesson (Very interesting but totally useless to me stuck in here for another 18 months) I have the beginnings of dementia and will have forgotten all about it when I get out anyway.

At the end of all this I have to go to the Employment Office only to be told that at my age I don't have to work and that I can spend my days sitting with a load of old codgers and play games and read newspapers all day.. I will most probably get involved having to change incontinence pads as well!!

I explain that I cannot sit around and vegetate so I am told that if I can find anyone who wants me to work for them then good luck but it is not their responsibility to find it for me. My luck must be changing and I realise what they mean when they say about being in the right place at the right time. I walk in to the Chapel just as two of the Orderlies are about to be released I get the job. I now have something to occupy my day and keep ' the little grey cells ' occupied.

December 2007

I have not mentioned that in my past life I have been a bit of a workaholic and totally immersed in the business and financial world for 45 years. Sometimes I worked 7 days a week dealing with other peoples problems and a lot of the time at the expense of a family life. Leaving my wife to bring up the children on her own. What have I missed?

Because I now work for the Chaplain I get to meet people everyday with horrendous personal problems that require his help and guidance. People who have lost close relatives through bereavement and not allowed home to the funeral or be able to say goodbye to their loved one. People about to be released and have no home to go to. People who have just receive the ' Dear John ' letter.. People frightened to death because they do not know the reaction of the people that they have wronged when they meet again.

How can I feel so sorry for myself.? Compared to them I am very lucky. This is when my life is going to change. I am not going to say that ' I have seen the light ' but sitting alone in your cell every night you begin to think seriously about the true values of life and who you should concentrate your time and efforts on.

April 2008

Meetings of all descriptions are held within the Chapel Complex and this month Liz Davis (ACOOP) and Dick Stokes (Help the Aged) are coming along to encourage the inmates over the age of 50 to set up a Forum to deal with and understand the special problems of people of that age group that are in Prison. Similar Forums are in existence for the general public but this would be the first one for a Prison community. I will go along and listen as I am in the building anyway but not get involved as I have been on Committees in my working and personal life and especially as the meeting is so well attended and great interest aroused. To cut a long story short over the next few weeks further meetings are held to bring this idea to fruition but as time went on it became apparent that whilst interest did not wane those who wanted to become physically involved in the operating of the Forum became fewer. So eventually I was elected Chairman.

Whilst I accepted this position I did not appreciate at the time just how many and varied problems of this age group there were within a prison community. It was then that I began to appreciate the reasons and efforts being made by people like Liz and Dick on their behalf.. From that day forward I also started to gain more interest in this situation

During the course of my period as Chairman of this Forum I was fortunate enough to be allowed to represent it at a South West Conference and AGM of all 50+ Forums in the area. Being the only one coming from a Prison I was obviously wary and apprehensive to the reception and reaction that I would meet from others present. This was overcome within minutes of being there as the reception and interest from other groups was overwhelming and totally supportive.

December 2008

I have received news that I am going to be released this month on special licence and therefore have to resign as Chairman of the Forum. During the last six months I have been amazed at just how many problems have been brought to the attention of the Forum and how instrumental such a vehicle can be in dealing with them. Problems

about conditions and circumstances within the Prison as well as personal and financial problems of those looking forward to release. Obviously I am overjoyed and looking forward immensely to being reunited with my family but I would very much like to stay involved and hope that I can be of some help to those organisations and people who really do make a difference to peoples lives.

March 2009

I have now been home for 3 months and trying to get back into a normal way of life but it is amazing even for the short time that I was in Prison just how institutionalised you can become. I have also come up against problems that I was warned about. The reaction of so called 'friends ' and Insurance Companies objections when trying to renew policies. It only convinced me even more just how necessary the work of organisations like ACOOP and Help the Aged are and I hope that I can play a part in that process.