

'YOU DON'T HAVE A HINT' - Survival is the goal in lawyer's class for inexperienced inmates-to-be

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RIVERSIDE, Texas - When approached by pimps and gangbangers, David is told to say: "I came in alone and I'm leaving alone."

He repeats the line and then writes it down in a spiral notebook being filled with instructions, such as sleeping with his head toward the toilet, not the bars. That way, someone reaching in can't do real damage.

David, not his real name, is upper-middle class and college- educated. He is also a criminal. He is being taught how to survive prison.

He is sitting on bar stools with his father, a retired professional, and his mother, an advocate for the homeless, at the kitchen counter of his lawyer's home. His parents are wearing stylish slacks and sweaters, and looks of pain and fear.

"Folks like you don't understand anything that is about to happen to you," counselor Ray Hill tells the three. "You're being sucked into this world, and this has been a scary trip for you. And the truth is, you don't have a hint."

Mr. Hill works with defense lawyer William T. Habern, who began this instruction several years ago for a few clients without histories of arrest or violence. Now, other lawyers refer their clients.

Although state officials say they do an adequate job of introducing new inmates to the Texas prison system, Mr. Habern's program has no shortage of students.

The idea of the short course is to prepare soon-to-be inmates and their families on what to do, what to say and how to act in prison. It's not unlike State Department instruction to Americans going abroad, or to "a frontier culture where survival is not a given," as Mr. Hill says.

It is taught by those who have been there.

Mr. Hill, a self-described provocateur for gay rights and prison reform from Houston, served four years in the 1970s for commercial burglary. "I stole antiques, art, jewels," he says.

He wears a navy blue turtleneck and tweed jacket. His closely manicured beard is white and his voice has the smooth tenor of warm gravy, betraying him as a radio talk show host. He is the producer and host of The Prison Show, weekly on KPFT-FM, a nonprofit listener- supported station in Houston.

Chuck Hurt, a legal aide to Mr. Habern, served from 1992 to 1996 on an indecency charge and is now a certified alcohol and drug counselor. He is as thin and scrappy as his 8-inch beard. Unapologetically, he lights a constant string of cigarettes.

Despite contraband laws prohibiting tobacco in prisons, the two- pack-a-day man said such rules never slowed him down: "I smoked just as much then. You just have to know where."

Other instructors include a former corrections officer and former attorney for inmates.

The price

This is not a cheap course. Usually, it lasts two days and costs \$2,500. Mr. Habern waived the fee this time in exchange for David and his family allowing a reporter and a film documentary producer to attend. The documentary will be about prison rape.

Mr. Habern said he hopes the publicity will prompt churches and nonprofit groups to see the need for these seminars locally and allow him to devote more time to his law practice.

As for David, he is an engineer who used the Internet to lure an underage girl into having sex with him. Tomorrow he'll lose the wallet, cell phone, Nikes, black jeans and white polo shirt when he stands before a judge and accepts a 7-year plea bargain for indecency with a child.

His instructors give him his first order upon leaving the courtroom - "don't tell a soul."

As much as child molesters are hated in the free world, within the walls they're "considered scum of the earth," Mr. Hurt says.

Other inmates will target and assault molesters. "Inmates are very judgmental," Mr. Hill says without irony.

Inmates talk constantly about how they landed in prison, and David will have a hard time avoiding details. He's told only to answer: "my lifestyle got out of control" or "my lawyer doesn't want me talking about it."

Mr. Hurt tells him not to make up another crime. He's an amateur, and the cons would find his lie in a heartbeat.

The next obstacle will come quickly. Within the first days of his arriving at prison, inmates will approach him menacingly and tell him he needs to join a gang or buy protection. They'll ask, "Who you gonna ride with?"

If he looks frightened or hesitant, he will become human prey.

He must say firmly, "I came in alone and I'm leaving alone," his instructors tell him. They say because he's older than most inmates, he's less likely to be a target.

But Mr. Hill tells David to be prepared to fight to protect himself, but not to win. If he does, a bigger inmate will challenge him next time, and again.

"Once you get into the fight game, the sex game, the extortion game, you never get out," he says.

David is told he'll be given an eight-hour job, probably hoeing cotton.

"Really?" he says.

"It's a plantation," Mr. Hill replies.

Advancing

After he proves himself, prison officials will probably move him to a better job that takes advantage of his education, the instructors say.

He'll be valuable as a bookkeeper or clerk. About 80 percent of Texas inmates have an eighth-grade education level, and many can't read or write.

The instructors tell David there's no air conditioning, no phones, no privacy.

His mother looks up, concerned.

Most cellblocks have three floors, Mr. Hurt continues. "You'll want a bunk lowest to the ground, shady side," he tells him.

"The heat and sweat rises. During the summer, it's 110-degrees on the top," Mr. Hill concurs.

"Who do I ask for a low bunk?" David asks.

All the assignment clerks are inmates and you barter for it, Mr. Hill says.

"Offer to help someone with their homework," Mr. Hurt explains.

Don't ever show you have money, he adds.

David's parents will deposit money into his inmate account to buy toothpaste, soap, candy and a small radio. Inmates are allowed to buy \$75 worth of supplies from the commissary every two weeks, but never spend that much, he's told.

"Keep it to a minimum," Mr. Hurt says. "Most of the others live with nothing, from nothing."

About 85 percent of inmates get less than \$5 a month from their families. Don't make yourself a target of jealousy or extortion, David is told.

Mr. Hurt tells him to serve his own time and remember the three monkeys: See, hear and speak no evil. That means don't look into another's cell, don't snitch and don't get involved with someone else's problems.

"It's a double-edged sword," Mr. Hurt says. "You don't see anything, you don't hear anything, but at the same time, you stay aware of everything."

Mr. Hill tells David he might meet someone he could think of as a friend. That's fine, just wait until they're both out.

"Close relationships are too much of an encumbrance on you in this institution," he says.

Finding sanity

They tell David several other things: He will find "an island of sanity" in his religious beliefs. He needs to get into one of the sex offender treatment programs as soon as possible - not just to confront his perversion, but because it's safer there.

"Everyone on the unit is a sex offender, so there's no threat," Mr. Hurt tells him.

There are 26,000 sex offenders in Texas prisons.

And they tell him that less than 1 percent of them are granted parole. Prepare to serve all seven years.

This is obviously the hardest news David hears.

"Really?" he says. He thought maybe, after he became eligible in 31/2 years, well, he'd be considered a good risk.

Mr. Hill speaks directly to David. "There are some things in life you can change and some things you can avoid, but you cannot undo some things."

"You don't have a story yet," Mr. Hurt says to drive the point home.

A "story" is the experience that shows to others that you won't re-offend.

"Understanding who David is and why David did what he did is the beginning of the story," Mr. Hurt says. "Maximize the benefits of being incarcerated."

David shakes his head in his hands. He is struck by the phrase, which he finds absurd.

"Your story will develop over the years," Mr. Hurt says.

David's mother has asked the most questions during the session, and now she looks pale and drained. "This is so hard," she says, and wipes away a tear.

Official view

Larry Todd, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Corrections, says he does not know of Mr. Habern's course, but he says Texas runs a humane prison system that is not literally hard to survive.

Last year, eight of 155,000 inmates were killed - a murder rate comparable to many cities that size, he says. And in 1999 there were 1,704 reported inmate-on-inmate assaults, which range from spitting to full-fledged fights.

He said inmates spend about 30 days in a diagnostic unit before being shipped to their housing unit. It gives many a chance to adjust to their new lives, he says.

"Prison is not a nice place to be, but Texas has a good system," Mr. Todd says.

Derrick Attard, one of 10 youths convicted in the beating death of Paul Broussard, a gay Houston banker, is about to be released on parole. He went through the course with his mother almost three years ago.

"They were comforting, but they were still graphic in explaining things. You have to know what's going on," says Wanda Domingez, Mr. Attard's mother.

"When they spoke to my son, they told him, 'You have to prepare yourself mentally.'" she recalls. "Prison is a totally different society."

She says it was a large help to both her and her son. "It was worth the money," she says.

David's family also says they found the instruction vital.

"Very informative," says his father, who has barely spoken a word for six hours.

"I feel 100 percent better," David says.

"Nothing is like their firsthand knowledge and consideration," his mother says.

"It'll be OK," Mr. Hill says. "Spend time with yourself," he tells David, adding, "I'm not as worried about you as I am your folks."

Mr. Hurt repeats points from the lesson, concluding with: "Do your own time. It will keep you out of all sorts of trouble."

They exchange hugs and handshakes. Although David has been instructed to say he's leaving prison alone, after his instruction he believes he's not going in that way.