

Thanks to Hiland Native Council

To the Editor,

I wish to extend my special gratitude to the Native Council of Hiland Mountain Correctional Center for hosting yet another educational, spiritual and entertaining Potlatch. Each time I attend I am warmed by the cooperation, effort, and sharing that forms the foundation of this celebration. Joining hands across cultures, this gathering demonstrates a spirit of brotherhood that transcends all differences.

It is refreshing to see rehabilitative/treatment centers such as Hiland Mountain and Meadow Creek, combine forces for this event to prove the benefits of treating people as human beings rather than as animals caged in an overcrowded zoo. However, I have become aware that the inmates who strive so hard to better themselves, earning their daily visits to 'outside society' and participation in work training programs, are being denied the same, blamed and punished when a few inmates run away because they don't make it on the 'outside' - or can't. I therefore must take this opportunity to strongly express a personal opinion based on some experiences.

It is a sad commentary that the public is not informed of the real problems facing inmates who are released from institutions after a lengthy absence from the rest of the world. It is a failing of the correctional system in general, to adequately prepare inmates for and supervise them within, educational and work-related programs. As Irving Goffman said, "the inherent characteristics of total institutions make impossible the achievement of rehabilitative goals."

Some fault also lies in lack of public and legislative education - those people who vote for and approve or disapprove the necessary funding and staff for such treatment centers. The chronic revolving

door syndrome would be better served by such education and funding for preventative aspects of the correctional system than by building more and more expensive prisons - a supposed 'cure-all' for all 'crime' and an extra bite out of my taxes that I would prefer to see put to better use. At this rate of prison-building, there will be more people "inside" than out!

With joint effort, information, education, and active participation, society could see a substantial decline in this phenomena. We cannot take people out of the highly structured, extremely disciplined, abnormal environment of an institution, throw them into the rapidly flowing mainstream of life, and expect them to swim against strong and unknown currents.

Society cannot possibly benefit in the long run from such unrealistic expectations. Especially when 30+ percent of the State's prison population are Natives from rural Alaska who have been caught up in an alien criminal justice system, become victims themselves of disparity in sentencing, and are still entangled in that web that has them serving extreme sentences in extreme conditions of the Federal Bureau of Prisons as well as in State.

At the UAA-sponsored Conference on Violence held in Anchorage last fall, Helen Beirne, Director of Health & Social Services commented that 85+ percent of the crimes committed by Alaska Natives are directly attributable to alcohol and that these inmates are neither hard-core, incorrigible, nor career criminals.

She further added, along with many other of the 'expert panelists,' that shipping these people off to such places as McNeil Island, Springfield, Lompoc, and Leavenworth where they would be thrown in with career criminals and sophisticated inmates, would

certainly have an adverse effect on their attitudes and be an unfavorable influence upon any treatment or rehabilitation.

Why then are they still there? Why then are we, as citizens concerned for our safety and that of our children, permitting such a vicious cycle of violence begetting violence, to continue?

As we all know, if a white, middle class American commits a crime, punishment will most likely be negligible. Treatment a certainty. Attitude and behavior modification, a good probability, resulting in lower recidivism rates if any. But if you're white, middle class American you had better think twice about the minority groups who commit the same crimes and are not given those opportunities and you should wonder if they become recidivist for lack of help and/or rehabilitation - just who their next victim could be.

As a former victim of crime, a current Justice student, and a concerned citizen, I think we need to refrain from crying "crime, violence, longer sentences, throw the key away" - particularly since if we really paid attention, we would see that historically that has never provided an answer and it doesn't provide one now. There isn't a nice, simple one but I think becoming more actively involved with the system, the treatment centers, staff and inmates is better than all talk and no action.

Again, I thank Hiland Mountain and Meadow Creek superintendents, staff, inmates, the liaisons between the centers and the community, the guest speakers and entertainers, and all the family and friends who attended - for showing just what a little brotherhood and-human-ness can really accomplish.

Thank you,
Lynda Craig