

A debt paid, a chance given

There are no bars in the building, and it is not called a prison. Rather, it is called a "correctional center" and the people who live there are called residents. Yet, as one of them sardonically notes, the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center at Eagle River is a prison, and the people they call residents are in fact prisoners. They live behind locked doors and high fences topped with razor wire. They must stay there, day after day.

Yet, as prisons go, it's much better than most. Inmates have their own rooms, and keys. After they've been oriented in "Phase I" where they wear yellow jump suits and go everywhere as a group, they are given a certain amount of freedom. They wear civilian clothes, go to class on their own, have leisure time to work out in the gym or sit in the library and read a book, and have times they can use the telephone without being monitored, so long as they've got the coins to pay for it.

One reason for the seeming privileges is that the inmates housed here have been judged to have the potential to return to society as contributing citizens. All of them started out in prisons elsewhere, and were transferred here after proving themselves capable of a certain amount of good. Among them there are some amazingly positive attitudes. Michael Hootch, a talented artist, is only one of many who will tell of their efforts to improve themselves while in jail. Michael works on his art for hours each day, and has resolved not to let resentment get the best of him. He has better things to do, like preparing for what he will face when he gets outside.

Although many of the prisoners have accepted their position and seem determined to better themselves, prison is still a distasteful place to be. Some of the guards are easy to get along with; some seem bent on displaying a certain macho toughness. Some of the inmates can be hard to get along with, although superintendent Sauser points with pride to the fact there has never been a homicide in an Alaska prison nor a serious assault.

Still, it will be tough for even the best of these prisoners on the outside. Statistics show that a frightening number of them return to jail. Yet, many have demonstrated true leadership qualities on the inside, and could do well outside, if given the proper chance and if they can find the strength to stay away from alcohol.

With Alaskans drinking one-third more liquor, wine and beer than other Americans, we suspect that under the proper circumstances, many well-meaning citizens could wind up in jail, as many already have. While we do not advocate coddling criminals, we do hope that those prisoners who have paid the debt society says they owe will be given a chance on the outside.