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V11N8 FEATURES

THIS ISSUE:

- HOT FOR TEACHER
- AMERICAN HISTORY X'D
- THE BEST ACADEMIC WRITING OF 2004
- TRENCHCOAT MAFIA
- TEACHERS ARE STUPID
- TEACHERS AREN'T STUPID
- HIPPY FASCISTS
- IRON BOY
- TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE HEART
- GOT A CRUSH ON YOU
- HEAR ME NOW!
- INSTITUTIONALIZED
- FREE SHYNE!

REGULARS:

- BY DESIGN
- DEAR DIARY
- DOs & DON'Ts
- FASHION
- I WANT MY DVDs
- PICTURES
- POCKETS DUMB FAT
- SKINEMA
- TIDBITS

BACK ISSUES

Get the Vice Newsletter:

email

INSTITUTIONALIZED

There's No College in Here

Due to the war on drugs, I was sentenced to a mandatory-minimum 25-year sentence in federal prison when I was 22 years old. I've been in here for nine years now, and I've spent every day trying to improve, rehabilitate, and educate myself. At first, I figured the best way to go about it would be to enroll in college courses. I wanted to work my way up to a master's degree. I sure as hell had enough time. All I needed was the effort, right? Wrong! I've had enough boulders thrown in my educational path by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) to build my own fucking private wing here.

I started my sentence in 1993 at FCI Manchester, a medium to high-security facility in the mountains of Kentucky. It was a brand new prison, just opened. My only goal was to enroll in college courses, and I was happy to learn the education department there offered classes through the University of Eastern Kentucky. I signed up for courses in the fall of 1994. The university professors came right into the prison compound. It was almost like attending a real college. Pell Grants funded my classes and I was on my way towards an associate's degree. After three semesters (holding down a 4.0 all the way), the prison administrators informed us that classes would be immediately discontinued. Apparently, some

AUDIO COMMENTARY ON THIS ARTICLE

PLAY

Vice Recommends: congressman decided prisoners shouldn't have access to Pell Grants. Overnight, I had no funding and no school.

I contacted my parents and asked if they could afford to pay for my education. They agreed, and the money part was taken care of. Then I looked into different independent-learning and distance-education programs and found a good one offered through Penn State. I applied, and when accepted I transferred my University of Eastern Kentucky credits and was accepted into a Letters, Arts, and Sciences two-year AA program. I was back in school. I worked like a dog, and with my parents' funding I earned my AA degree from Penn State in 1999 while incarcerated at FCI Beckley.

Later that year, I was transferred to FCI Fort Dix—a low-security prison in New Jersey. I decided to pursue my Bachelor's degree through the University of Iowa. They ran a program in conjunction with Penn State, so my credits transferred right in, and I was accepted into a program called Lionhawk.

That's when I found out that FCI Fort Dix doesn't allow prisoners to enroll in correspondence courses that require the use of audio or videotapes. I was outraged. I'd spent six years in higher-level security prisons and had access to video and audiotapes to complete my AA degree, but now that I'd finally made it to a lower-security prison I couldn't touch them? Another roadblock erected.

So I made the best of a bad situation. I studied the degree requirements and plotted a course of study that would enable me to get almost completely through without video or audio. There was only one problem. The degree had a foreign-language requirement. How could I learn a foreign language in prison without any audiotapes? I filed administrative remedy claims explaining my situation, but it was like shooting them into a black hole. I would not be allowed to take courses with A/V components, and that was that. It was against FCI Fort Dix policy.

So, I dove into the courses that I was allowed to take and was soon met with my next obstacle. The lady they assigned to be my liaison—the college program coordinator that every student prisoner must have—was invisible. I would look for her for weeks on end, trying to schedule an exam so she could proctor it. Often we would finally schedule the exam, and then, after I studied for it, she simply wouldn't show up on the designated day. I took my education seriously and this woman didn't give a shit.

And here we see the essential paradox of the entire BOP system. They want prisoners to adhere to their rules and regulations without question, and if you break their policy there is no excuse. You will be thrown into the hole. But the staff? They have carte blanche to do what they want, when they want. They can ignore you, disregard you, and rearrange and break policy at will with zero repercussions.

My problems with this program coordinator got to the point where she complained to her supervisor, saying she couldn't handle me. I was bounced to another coordinator, Mr. Watford. He turned out to be a good guy (after my parents got a senator on his back). They did that because I enrolled in some new courses, and when the books and materials arrived, Mr. Watford refused to give them to me, saying the books were too numerous. But these courses had been pre-approved by him. He couldn't refuse me the books at that point. I related this event to my parents, who advocated for me on the outside by contacting Sen. John Warner, who in turn contacted Mr. Watford. He was angry about my going over his head, but he also got a chance to see just how serious I am about my education. He gave me the books and was very nice to me after that.

After a couple of years, I was well on my way toward my Bachelor's with around 80 credits. I'd maintained a 3.4 GPA. One of the few requirements I still needed was the foreign language. I approached Mr. Watford about it. He had this sign on his door that said, "When policy and common sense conflict, common sense will prevail." I explained the situation to him, and he figured out a way I could take some Spanish course with audiotapes to fulfill the degree requirement. Excellent. I could see the finish line at that point.

Then the biggest roadblock came down. Right after I enrolled in the Spanish course, the warden decided that several people on the compound merited higher security due to the 9/11 tragedy. I happened to be one of them. So I was sent back to a medium to high-security level institution—FCI Fairton in New Jersey, an hour and a half south of Fort Dix. My newest round of books and materials were en route to Fort Dix when I was transferred, and Mr. Watford said he would send them on to Fairton when they arrived.

It's three months later, and I'm still waiting. Apparently, right after my transfer Mr. Watford took another job. So my books sit in Fort Dix gathering dust, while the time limit for my courses ticks down. I have been trying to get the staff here to get my books sent, but it's a no-go. The college program coordinator here has called Fort Dix twice. Both times, they said the books would be on the way. But I don't think so. Even my new case manager has called twice, but still no books. I

am trying to be patient, but this whole thing stinks of foul play.

It seems the BOP doesn't want me to gain an education. They don't want me to be rehabilitated. They want me to work in Unicor (the prison's work program) and watch Jerry Springer. They want me to be complacent. Education frees my mind, and the BOP wants me imprisoned. The higher the education, the more free I become. And the BOP doesn't want that. They want me ignorant. The worst thing to them is a prisoner who can think.

I refuse to be controlled. I will finish my Bachelor's Degree and then move on to my Master's. I don't know when I'll get my books, and maybe the \$2,000 my parents paid for the courses will be lost, but that's just another roadblock. I won't be intimidated, deterred, or placated. My education is paramount and it will become a reality, despite any obstacles the BOP puts in my path.

SETH M. FERRANTI

Since writing this, Seth has been transferred to another facility and is still awaiting his course materials.