

HOW I WENT TO PRISON

By

Nancy Nau Sullivan

My first classroom—before I went to prison—was in an old convent. I couldn't figure out which room it had been. It was non-descript with windows on one side that faced the parking lot. During breaks from teaching English, I often sat on the porch with Andi, the art teacher. I was immensely happy to visit with her randomly to gossip about surviving the teaching life at St. Malachy's Catholic School. Sometimes I felt we were holding on to the same life line while we drowned in the rules and rituals: wearing pantyhose (no open-toes), even when it was 95; monitoring the jigglers at morning mass; decorating the classroom for parent-teacher meetings (way too many). Sister said, "You better call up everyone of them to make sure they will be here." The parents were delighted to hear from me—all 112 of them.

One morning, I flopped into a wicker chair on the porch. Andi said, "Good lord, why don't you just quit? I really don't mean that. What would I do without you?"

“I can’t take it any more. It’s only November and my teaching career is nearly kaput.”

“Oh, well. Give it some time. Just think. There’ll be a whole new crop next year.”

“I may have to strangle some of them, and maybe Sister, and end up in prison.”

“Speaking of prison. The sheriff is opening a school for bad boys. I was thinking art for the artful little dodgers, but they do need English teachers.”

“I could see myself in prison. Seriously.”

“Don’t do it,” said Andi. “Your record is pretty clean. So far.”

Harry drove me out to have a look. He was the administrator of the prison’s new three-tiered school system: Academy, Boot Camp, and Omega. He wanted to recruit me for Omega, the best of the worst, the boys 13-21 who had committed a crime with a weapon. One had set fire to his uncle.

Harry wore an amethyst necklace and a white guayabera. He was a beefy fellow, voluble, friendly. I liked him instantly. He tried to sell me, and I let him. But the thought of driving 17 miles into the boonies to teach young felons seemed like a stretch. Being in a classroom with bad boys did not faze me. My brothers and sons had taught me that young men were pretty much alike. They wanted security, mothers (or grandmothers) and love (recognition). Some other things, too. But I was under no illusions. Besides, there would be deputies in the classrooms.

I took the job.

The first day, Harry led me into my classroom—through six doors with a lot of buzzing and clanking, all operated from central control that reminded me of the *Starship Enterprise*. I surveyed my English students, most of whom had shot and knifed their way into Omega. Spencer’s gaze burned at me. Hate? Already? And I hadn’t even gotten to diagramming sentences. What was I in for? What was he in for? It turned out Spencer was an African American poet extraordinaire, all six feet two inches of him. He wasn’t a bad essayist, either. I mistook his glare for a bad bout he’d had with the deputies because he’d taken an extra donut off the breakfast cart. Prison gossip, I learned, travels far and fast.

The classroom was spare, and bright. Narrow windows along the concrete block wall let in sunshine and a view of sable palms. I had a lot of wall to cover. We would not do glittery posters, nor colored-paper cutouts. What I had in mind was something else. Books. What they needed, what everyone and every school needed, was books. Lots of them.

I convinced the public library to send the bookmobile out to the prison. It took some doing: visits with staff; promises that the books would be secure and returned on time—and that young minds would withdraw the purest material. Assurances that the reading would hasten rehabilitation. I had no idea what I was talking about in that regard. But it didn’t take a special degree to see that books might be a way out, a way up, a salvation.

“Knowledge is power,” I told the “youth.” (I was forbidden to call them “students.”) The deputy in the classroom twitched at the notion of power: Beat ‘em down. That was

more the martial philosophy, with some exceptions. It was an attitude I had to fight, gently. I would win only if the boys decided that they could read themselves out of the holes they'd dug, educate themselves over the fence, learn to live and earn in a civilized society. It had to come from them, and books were what I would feed them. To make them strong.

That was the plan.

So thirsty were they for books, I had to bring more. I cajoled staff into getting us bookcases. And I filled them. I went to garage sales, my bookshelves, friends, Goodwill. At 25 cents to a dollar, it started to add up. But who was counting? I loved it, they loved it. I thought they'd prefer fiction, an escape to other lands and moons. I was wrong. They begged for biographies...Ben Carson, Jackie Robinson, the presidents, inventors.

I believe books lifted them. Barrington left prison and went to work in his uncle's air-conditioning plant—his essay skills put to use in writing up those estimates. Pedro with a zeal for science got out and gave the Heimlich to an old woman in a Chile's near Homosassa. Robert, a fiction buff, was a fan of James Lee Burke and Mary Higgins Clark. I don't know what happened to him, but I hope he's fine. Wherever he is.

I have stacks of letters from my students—the youth—thanking me. And they were happy for me when I was named Florida Teacher of the Year at the Correctional Education Association conference in 2004, mostly because of all those books I piled up—and because their reading scores on standardized tests went up.

I taught at the prison for five years, then later—K-12 in Argentina, engineering students in Mexico, college English in Chicago. The young were the same wherever I went, not only in grammar problems but also in that need for recognition and accomplishment. It

didn't make any difference whether I was in Florida, Argentina or Chicago. They had a lot in common.

But there were differences.

Many students at St. Malachy's complained. They resisted.

Robert didn't want to be at Omega. In fact, he cried because he was there.

But what Robert did with being there was different. I wouldn't say that he embraced it, but maybe he did. Maybe I helped him embrace—and own—what he had going for himself. Through writing, and reading. Dozens of books. Robert came in at the second grade reading level; he left Omega three years later with a GED, ready for college. Ready for life. I hope.

(The names have been changed, but the account is true.)

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