

Sexual assaults in prison

Introduction to Risdon Prison

In 1999/2000 a member of God's Squad Launceston chapter was approached by the then Attorney General Peter Patmore to assist with young men incarcerated in Risdon Prison, the 18 – 25 year age group. This was because there had been 5 young men who had suicided in a relatively short space of time. Chris Douglas died on the 4th August 1999 at Risdon Prison...he was just 18. On the 17th September at Risdon Prison Thomas Holmes was found hanged - his death was followed on by Laurence Santos 19th October, Jack Newman and Fabian Long 10th January 2000.

I started working at the prison in the November of 2000 with the other member. We were met initially with a hostile reception as there had been little to no dialogue between the A – G office and the prison, as I understand it the director was told to let us in and pay for the service out of his budget and we were accountable to the A – G's office, not the prison director. My associate pulled out of the program after approximately six months so I was the sole worker for 18 months until some part time help was secured. In the July of 2004 we were just as abruptly told our services were no longer needed. In this approximately four year period the prison population rose from roughly 280 inmates to about 580 inmates. My relationship with the general custodial officers and staff was by this time very good.

Interaction with Young inmates

The method of interaction at the Maximum security unit was to go through the list of inmates and find those in the age group and have them called up to talk with them. It was a fascinating time as we met with such a diverse range of young people, who all had their own story to tell, and they wanted to tell it. I think the main reason that the trust of the inmates was given to us was because of our image as bikers, I had street know how and some of the experiences I was told about could easily have been me. This I believe gave the confidence to trust us. The code of silence in the jail was such that if I saw a young man today who was jovial happy etc, the next time I saw him there would be a serious change in his normal behaviour, he could be quiet, withdrawn, surly, aggressive his general appearance would be unkempt, clothes looked as if they had been slept in, be unshaven, hair not combed and so on. What would normally be an easy conversation would suddenly be like pulling teeth, nigh on impossible to have a conversation and all the time looking at the floor with no eye contact. When challenged about their situation and had they been sexually assaulted I would rarely get a response, only silence or a mumbled reply which was inconclusive. When I felt that there had been an assault or some one confided that they believed that they were a target I would then speak to the "Chief" and he would react straight away to my requests. I can only say that when I brought an issue of this nature to their attention the response was immediate. It always bothered me that these vulnerable boys were put into protection with paedophiles; this is tantamount to putting a cat in a bird cage. As time went by my reputation within the prison system grew with the

older inmates and the custodial staff so when I walked through the gates it was not uncommon to have Custodial staff and inmates waiting to tell me that I needed to talk to so and so or so and so. In the four years that I was there the only death in custody was that of a male who was in his late 30's. I had been having a lot interaction with this bloke, but at the time was on holidays and there wasn't any one he could talk to. It was interesting to Eric Abetz saying at a graduation of young people at Mission Australia's U-turn program, how our justice system has improved over the last 200 years. A visit to Port Arthur will inform you that young boys and young men were kept in an entirely separate area and they had work to do and education facilities. So much for progress the only improvement over Port Arthur at Risdon Prison is that it has the power on!

Deaths Post Release

The fact that there were no deaths in the time that I was working at Risdon was encouraging but there was a greater problem with deaths post release, in my opinion. I did at one stage have a list of those who died post release, but due to a computer crash and that we have moved house and that it is about 18 months since I worked at the prison I no longer have it but the list was of about 20 names. Some of these inmates made an impression on me and now they are dead, young blokes who could have had everything going for them are dead. Some have died from "car accidents" or "overdosed" on drugs some have hung themselves. One young man who had a history of jail finally left, never to return because he is dead, believing he was bi-sexual. I would like to challenge the government or the media to do an investigation or research on the number of deaths post release and look at the cause. I can imagine that a lot of parents would like some answers as to why there son or daughter has taken there life.

Lack of Post Release Support

The one thing that concerned me was once inmates were released there was no support for them. As part of my commitment to them I would in my own time visit those who lived in the Launceston area and then in the Hobart area once we moved to Hobart. The number who couldn't bring themselves to go to the corner shop for a packet of smokes was common. The academics here would have this named as a trauma, but in Tasmania there is no recognition of this. In conversation with a person in upper management at Risdon Prison I was told that they didn't care/concern themselves about what happened to them once they left and it would also appear neither does the Tasmanian Government. This means Labour and Liberal as there has to my knowledge never been a post release service government funded in this state unlike the rest of the states in this country. It is fact that a person who is released from prison who is now homeless, he isn't classed as homeless whilst in jail and cannot get category one status with the housing dept until he/she is released meaning that they will have up to 12 months waiting for a house. The amount of recidivism in this state was amongst the highest in the country, when I was working at the prison, I am not sure what the figure is now. It is not uncommon for some to deliberately offend so as to remand and sentenced so that they have a bed and three meals today, I use the word meals guardedly. It is also well known that if a person has accommodation and a job they less likely to re-offend this would also mean less people in jail which would mean less sexually assaults, which would also mean less legal action against the

prison. Due to the experiences they had whilst in jail it can make them emotionally and mentally scared, screwed up in the head. So instead of prison being an opportunity to address their issues all it does is create more angry frustrated anti socially human beings