

Lots of innovation goes into housing inmates

by Neil Steinberg

August 4, 2010

Need a straitjacket? Humane Restraint of Waunakee, Wis., sells a handsome model in heavy-duty canvas with leather straps. List price \$163.50. But don't call it a "straitjacket." "It's the 'humane jacket,' " corrected company rep Stacy Schultz.

We were at Navy Pier, at the 140th annual Congress of Correction, the American Correctional Association's convention.

Yes, 140th -- the group began in 1870 as the National Prison Association, the trade organization for the ever-burgeoning American incarceration industry.

As I wandered the booths promoting one-piece steel toilets, digital imaging, heavy-duty locks and concertina wire, I had to adjust my vocabulary to meet industry trends. What I considered an electric fence, for instance, is now a "non-lethal electrified system."

We don't think about jails much, and some products defy imagination, though once you see them, they make perfect sense.

For instance, the Swintec Clear Cabinet Typewriter, which is just as it sounds: an electric typewriter made of clear plastic -- even the ribbon cartridge is transparent -- so prisoners can prepare their legal briefs without having a place to stash their shivs and drugs. Prisons are a \$40 billion industry in the U.S. because we are addicted to punishment -- about one out of 100 adults in this country is currently in jail.

"No other rich country is nearly as punitive as the Land of the Free," the Economist noted in a scolding cover story last week. "The rate of incarceration is a fifth of America's level in Britain, a ninth in Germany and a twelfth in Japan."

None of this is ACA's fault -- their job isn't to decide how many prisoners should use Humane Restraint's No-Shank Toothbrush -- think of a plastic thimble with bristles. They just have to figure out how to safely and economically warehouse the millions upon millions of people we insist on sending them.

'NAIL HIM TO THE ROCK'

The corrections conference offered five days of workshops, most on practical topics like "Upgrading Suicide Risk Assessment Practice" and "The North Dakota Department of Corrections' Better Results for Therapy of Hepatitis C."

But one session Tuesday afternoon seemed out of place: "Prometheus Bound -- A Reading of the Greek Tragedy and Its Relation to Corrections."

The workshop is the creation of Bryan Doerries, a New York writer and translator who founded Theater of War, a group that puts on readings of ancient Greek plays for soldiers, to get them talking about the war.

He realized that prison guards are another group under constant pressure with little opportunity to discuss it, and that "Prometheus," the tale of a god chained to a rock, punished for stealing fire and giving it to humans, might provide such an opportunity. He brought the idea to George Lombardi, director of the state of Missouri's Department of Corrections, where last year "Prometheus" was performed four times for staff.

"They got it," Lombardi said. "We do lots of stuff for offenders, all kinds of programs, but we don't have a whole lot for staff. "Prometheus has great relevance for those of us working in correctional institutions, particularly with very recalcitrant offenders."

A quartet of Chicago actors from the Steppenwolf Theater read four scenes, with James Meredith particularly fine as Prometheus. A discussion followed, and participants -- most weren't turnkeys fresh from the cell block, but longtime administrators -- immediately offered ways the play relates to them.

"He was resolute," said S. Elwood York Jr., director of pretrial services for Key West, Florida's 16th District, who heard in "Prometheus" the echo of boastful gang members. "His attitude was, 'I'm taking my lumps. I'm tough. I'm proud of what I did.' " Beforehand, I had thought Prometheus' pride would make the play less relevant -- he did something noble, in bringing fire to man. But the corrections workers said many criminals feel exactly the same way.

"Sometimes we forget that the person who committed the offense is committed to the cause," said York, mentioning gang loyalty. "It's a different set of priorities." John Gannon, a forensic psychologist, called it "a kind of heroic disorder" -- a pride in their ability to absorb punishment, a failure to see the goal of correction.

Bringing prisoners around to a different view is more important than ever.

"With overcrowding, you get double bunks, triple bunks, 3,200 people in a space for 1,600," said Adrienne Poteat, a federal corrections official from Washington, D.C. "That's a lot of people, and what do you do with them?"

What indeed? Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, who oversees nearly 10,000 prisoners at any given time at the County Jail, is concerned with this issue, and I asked him about it. "Other than a very small segment of the jail population, they're all getting out," he said. "The question is: How would you want them to be when they get out? Better or worse than when they went in?"

He said that except for a minority who are "damn close to evil," this "other, much, much, much larger group should be handled with far more flexibility" than we currently muster, focusing more on treating their problems with programs far less costly than prison. "You don't even have to get into the debate whether you're liberal, conservative, tough-on-crime -- let's talk about being fiscally smart, for once," Dart said. "We cannot continue to do it this way. Our grandchildren -- heck, our children -- will have nothing left.