



Straight-A Guide Newsletter #7: Sylmar Juvenile Hall

April 19, 2012

Earlier this week, I exchanged some email correspondence with my friend Michael Santos. He recently completed his 9,000th day in federal prison, and on August 11th of 2012, he begins serving his 26th year. In our correspondence, I explained to Michael that Jimmy Wu and I are teaching weekly classes to a group of really bright young men at Barry J. Nidorf Sylmar Juvenile Hall. The young men who participate in our program made decisions that exposed them to some pretty harsh penalties in the criminal justice system. Jimmy and I are using some of the books that Michael wrote to help them understand strategies to overcome imprisonment. As Michael did, we are trying to impress upon the students the importance of reading books with a specific purpose in mind. Following the strategy, Michael explained to me, made a huge difference in opening opportunities for him while he grew through his lengthy sentence.

In describing for Michael the experiences of my latest class, I expressed some frustration at my not knowing how to properly answer a young man who was facing a life sentence. He was only 16 and didn't understand how participating in a class would help him because he expected that a judge could sentence him to life in prison. At the conclusion of our class, Jimmy spent some time alone with the young prisoner, offering some helpful words. I, on the other hand, remained at a loss for words. It bothered me. I couldn't sleep. The next morning I wrote to Michael asking for help. Michael responded suggesting that, like Jimmy, I make a special effort to reach the young man. His notes, and my summary follows.

Michael totally identified with the feelings of hopelessness that accompanied a long sentence, but he also knew from personal experience that if an individual reached deep inside of himself, he could find the strength to carry on. Reading with a purpose and participating in the Straight-A Guide program, he said, could open opportunities for any young man who struggled with the torment of decades in prison. Those opportunities would not be apparent in the beginning, but in time, the opportunities would open in abundance.

Michael told me to tell the young man that by reading and educating himself, he was like a farmer who planted seeds. The gardener might plant thousands of seeds, expecting each of those seeds would bring forth trees at some future point. Yet from the seed alone, the farmer would not be able to tell which seed would bring forth the tree that produces the most fruit.

That's what learning and reading with a purpose was all about. By reading books, the young man would be planting seeds that would help him later in life. If he chose the books wisely, they would teach him lessons. Those lessons might include learning how to express his thoughts in sentences and paragraphs. They might help him become more skillful at making persuasive arguments. By learning more, he opened the possibility to persuade a judge or other powerful forces in society to grant him his liberty. Yet while studying, he would never know which lesson

would be the one that offered the most fruit, possibly even freeing him from the difficulties of his life.

Although the young man faces the wrath of the criminal justice system, by working to educate himself he could create his own hope. It was true that a judge might soon slam the young man with an incomprehensibly long sentence, just as happened to Michael. But if the young man worked to educate himself, then used his education to make positive contributions to society, those contributions would lead to his building a strong support network. That support network could bring meaning to the young man's life. Those in his support group would develop a vested interest in helping the young man reach his highest potential. In time, influential members of society might come together on the young man's behalf to lobby for his release. If he worked toward earning his freedom, that young man would always have a beacon to strive toward. He would build the strength necessary to triumph over the indignity of a lengthy sentence.

Any individual who faced a struggle might begin by thinking in terms of incremental steps, always with his eye toward what he wanted to become. If he made a 100 percent commitment toward becoming something more than he was today, and he could see with clarity who he wanted to become, then he empowered himself to set the course that would lead to his aspiration. Michael wrote that in his case, he could build more strength by focusing on what he could do within the confines of prison rather than dwelling on all the limitations and obstacles associated with imprisonment. He never counted on any directions or guides from the institutions that held him. In fact, Michael said that prisoners should expect cynicism and interference rather than help. But by tuning out the noise of confinement and taunting from others within the system, and by following *The Straight-A Guide*, a man created his own direction. Discipline carried him through in ways that could result in his emergence from prison as a totally different man from who he was today, even if the length of sentence imposed blocked him from seeing even the possibility for release.

I was grateful to discuss the frustrations I was having with Michael. Michael used the strategy of reading with a purpose to lift him through 25 years in prison. By reading books about others who had overcome enormous challenges, like Nelson Mandela, Michael found hope that he too could conquer decades in prison. When Nelson Mandela faced sentencing, the wretched judicial system in place under Apartheid resulted in Mr. Mandela receiving a life sentence, despite his not having committed a crime. And yet Nelson Mandela never gave up. He always worked hard to improve the life of his fellow prisoners and to improve his own mind. That incredible strength led Mr. Mandela to make enormous contributions to mankind, to change a country, and to eventually seize his liberty and to walk in freedom again.

The powerful message that Mr. Mandela represents is that regardless of what severities we may face in a given moment, we can never tell what good will come later. I will use that message to inspire others who participate in our *Straight-A Guide* program.

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