



## Fourth Report from Bridewell

By Frank Cordaro

October 25, 2007

### Doing Time at Bridewell

In a confined space shared by 64 others and where one's basic needs are met, the most challenging concerns can be the social ones. The inmate population here is not much different from the inmate populations in other county jails. The most common characteristic shared by the inmates is poverty. The difference between locked up or out on the streets is money.

The old say, "You get all the justice you can afford."

That truth holds here, and these men can't afford much. Most of the inmates have yet to be sentenced. They are somehow caught in legal limbo, waiting for their case to be settled, waiting for a parole or probation violation to get sorted out, or waiting for a determination of their incarceration status. Most are non-violent offenders, charged with crimes that are drug or alcohol related. The more serious or violent offenders are kept back in the Polk County Jail. The racial composition here is at least 20% African American, a few Latinos, and the rest are white.

Dealing with foul and hateful language is difficult. Its use is common and filled with misogyny and homophobia. The hate speech is so frequent and common that many don't seem to notice it. While it's spoken primarily by younger inmates, there are a lot of them (the median age is 25); and this contributes to its frequent use. Though some older inmates, too, can be just as foul and hateful in their speech.

This speech added to the lack of privacy, the blare of the t.v. from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and the constant human chatter creates a din that is nerve rattling. Time for prayer or reflection is tough to manage.

*On October 5, 2007, peace-maker Frank Cordaro was sentenced to 30 days in jail for the criminal trespass charge that came from his participation in an occupation of Senator Charles Grassley's office on September 21. He joined an effort led by Iowa high school students who are members of the group, Students beyond War.*

*After being taken into custody, Cordaro was transferred to the Bridewell Detention Center in Bethany, Missouri, where he is serving his sentence. This is his fourth and last report from there. He is scheduled to be released on November 3rd.*

Of course, there are times when the guys are disrespectful such as making noise during sleep hours, and fights do break out once in awhile. What is truly amazing, given the situation, is that most actually get along.

Thirty days is not enough time to carve out a regimen or the discipline for prayer, reading, writing, or exercise. The setting simply limits the possibilities. The first two weeks my primary reading material was the

King James Bible, not my favorite translation. I try to frame my experience as an opportunity to learn to be present in the "now," the immediate moment.

In jail, it is easy to get lost in your own emotional issues and not be in the "now." Though in reality, I'm here in a

small space with 64 others, I'm tempted to hide and spend most of my time inside my own mind thinking about things over which I have no control, worrying about what is happening on the outside, thinking about all the work I left behind, and all the work I have to do when I get out. The self-absorption can become all-consuming.

To offset this, I try to make myself available to those with whom I'm sharing this time and space. It did not take long for the guys to learn who I am and why I'm here, especially since a few have been guests of the Catholic Worker house (plus a few *Des Moines Register* newspapers with stories about me were passed around). Soon, I was spending a lot of time talking one-on-one with guys, hearing their stories, and actively listening.

It comes as no surprise that most come from difficult and broken lives. A lot of their troubles they bring on themselves, and a lot are brought on by factors beyond their control. Each story is far more complicated than it would seem on its surface, and none lend themselves to easy, pat answers. Sometimes just listening and caring seems to fill a real need.

I'm certainly not the only guy in our Pod offering a caring ear. One man stands out for me here as someone who went beyond listening and caring to serve as the Pod minister. Jerry Carr is 57, African American, and from Des Moines. Coincidentally, Jerry is one of those who has been a guest at the Catholic Worker house. Jerry has spent a lifetime on and off drugs and in and out of jails and prisons. He tells me he didn't have a "real" job until he was in his 50s. His physical bearing alone tells you his life has been hard and rough. He's lost half of his teeth, and this causes a slur when he talks.

I first noticed Jerry as the guy doing a daily Bible study in the Pod. Sometimes as many as 12 men attended his study group, most of them younger African American men, but not all. He also had a steady stream of men visiting him on his bottom bunk. So, Jerry was the man I approached about getting a Bible. That's when he invited me to join his group, and I gratefully accepted.

Jerry finally sobered-up a few years ago. He secured a minimum wage job and lives with his mother, who's been praying for him for years. He now attends church regularly and reads his Bible daily. He has two grown daughters and several grand kids and describes himself as "one of the richest men" he knows because he's survived and now has the love of God in his life. His greatest joys are being with his family, especially those grand kids. And, while he acknowledges he can't do anything about the chunk of life he's wasted; he's determined to make the best of the remaining years he says God has given him.

Jerry found himself back in jail after the driver of a car in which he was a passenger was pulled over for a minor traffic violation. The officer ran Jerry's name through their system and discovered a warrant for an unpaid fine in Las Vegas from several years ago that he'd forgotten. Jerry embraced this return to jail as an opportunity to study his Bible and to reach out to others about the life lessons he had learned and what his newly-found faith had taught him.

Jerry is not an academically learned man. I can barely understand him when he talks. Yet, he speaks from his heart and has a way of speaking directly and effectively to the young men who attended his Bible service.

Jerry left a few days ago. The day before he left, he shared with me his hope of starting a faith-based recovery meeting in Des Moines. He says his time in jail and his experiences with leading the Bible study group have boosted his confidence and his call to do so. He's promised to visit us at the Catholic Worker. I hope he does. I also hope he starts his faith-based recovery group. He has much to teach and share.

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*You can donate to a fund for fees for those arrested through the Iowa Peace Network at the link below:*

[www.iowapeacenetwork.org](http://www.iowapeacenetwork.org)

*Or you can make donations to the Des Moines Catholic Worker at:*

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org)

*Updates on the Iowa Occupation Project can be found on the web page:*

[www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html](http://www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html)

*Information about SODaPOP:*

[www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html](http://www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html)