



Second Report from Bridewell

By Frank Cordaro

October 17, 2007

The Fish Bowl

Traditionally-called a holding tank, at Polk County Jail it is called "the Fish Bowl." These cells hold inmates during the booking process. Ostensibly inmates are to be held in these cells for a short time—no more than a few hours—while they are booked and then sent to a longer-term cell block or bonded out. This is not the case at the Polk County Jail.

Because of overcrowding and inmates being perpetual transferred between facilities, the Fish Bowl serves as a staging pen of comings and goings. The shortage of bunk space exacerbates the problem and forces jailers to also use the space as overnight backup until bunks open up. So, instead of a few hours, inmates routinely spend whole days and nights in these hard places.

The name, "Fish Bowl" is inspired by the large windows across the entire side of the cell that faces the booking area. These windows allow officers a full of view of the holding area. There is not much more than humanity in the

12- by 20-foot space. Along two sides are cement shelves molded onto the cement walls for seating, a stainless steel sink and toilet in one corner shrouded by a waist-high concrete "privacy" wall, and two wall phones in another corner. The space is a reasonable place to spend a few hours. It is fair to call prolonged stays of 24 to 48 hours physical abuse.

It is most difficult in the Fish Bowl at night. The lights are kept bright at all times, and the temperature at night is set very low. For warmth inmates are issued only one thin blanket and only between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. As the night slowly passes, more and more inmates are added to the space. It is not uncommon for the number to reach twenty or more. Frequently there is not enough room for all the inmates to lie down. And, one unruly drunk can set the entire cell into chaos.

Sleeping is the biggest challenge. One must lie on one of the cement benches or on the concrete floor. The blanket can serve as a pillow until it becomes too cold then it must become one's cover. I tried using the plastic sandals I was issued as a pillow. Rolling from side to side helps some to keep the cold concrete from becoming literally bone-chilling. However, I will admit that by morning the old bones and flesh throughout my body were impressively sore.

Our entertainment in the Fish Bowl was Johnny Smith. Coincidentally, Johnny is a regular guest at the Des Moines

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 second report from there.

Catholic Worker hospitality house. Johnny picked me out of the crowd immediately and befriended me. I knew he was a talker, but I had no idea how much of a talker he could be. Except when he slept, he never stopped talking. My night with Johnny allowed us some quality time. I learned more of his story than I had all these years that he's been one of our guests at the hospitality house. Johnny's habitual crime is public intoxication. He is well-known by all the jailers and the only guy I know who owes Polk County more in fines and court costs than I.

After 22 hours, a short time by most accounts, I was moved to the Fifth Floor West Cell Block to share a cell with a young Mexican man waiting to be deported. He was picked up for a traffic violation and is leaving behind his wife and two young children.

Anyone considering risking arrest during the SODaPOP effort should be prepared to spend at least one overnight in the Fish Bowl. And, if you are lucky enough to be granted the experience, expect to find it enriching and well worth the time.

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

www.iowapeacenet.org

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

www.desmoinescatholicworker.org

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

www.schoolformoralcourage.com/iowaoccupationproject.html

Information about SODaPOP:

www.desmoinescatholicworker.org/sodapop.html