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Attica Lifers help educate their own

By John J. Lennon, Commentary

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Almost 43 years ago, tensions reached a tipping point in Attica; a bloody one-day battle ensued and 43 men died. Today, the opposing sides remain, prisoners on one side, administrators and correction officers on the other. And we prisoners know what to expect: no talking in the corridors; stop at the yellow lines; two standing counts, at 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. Programs, for those lucky enough to get assigned one, are mandatory.

So a few months ago when I received a call-out (an appointment slip) to report to the reception building on the following day, May 14, it was unusual. The unexpected is eerie in Attica. Word around the joint, though, was that some people from the Albany central office wanted to meet with members of the Attica Lifers Organization, of which I am a member.

The next morning, I marched through the bleak brick corridors and headed to my surprise call-out. A prisoner swinging a mop. A wet-floor sign. The scent of germicide. Clank, clank. The sounds of gates opening and closing. It's prison.

When I reached the reception building, the CO asked, "What are you here for?"

"I don't know. I'm a Lifer. I got a call-out," I said.

"Oh, he's here for the thingamajig," the CO sarcastically said to another.

"Just go," the CO said.

At the end of a narrow hallway I reached a conference room. I slid in and saw my fellow Lifers seated among several suits. The presentation had already begun. A stout 60-something man was talking.

"Can you imagine the impact it will have on the next generation if we offer college educations to prisoners' kids?" he said.

Wait; I know this guy. Percy Pitzer.

The Attica Superintendent, Dale Artus, waved me over and offered his seat and grabbed another one off the stack.

"Thank you, sir. Is this Percy Pitzer?" I asked.

"Yeah. Your letter brought him," Mr. Artus said, approvingly.

Here's the backdrop: Months before, I wrote a letter to Stan Stojkovic, a criminal justice scholar, in response to his New York Times' Op-Ed "Inmates Helping Inmates." His article explained how Percy

Pitzer, a retired federal warden, started Creative Corrections Education Foundation with his own money, and toured prisons asking prisoners to help him provide scholarships to children of those who are incarcerated, are on parole, or are under community supervision.

In my letter to Stojkovic, who sits on CCEF's board, I explained that Attica is the "big show" of prisons and suggested that Pitzer pitch his idea to the ALO. As it turned out, this is exactly what Pitzer and his colleague, Anthony Haynes, another retired federal warden, were doing right before our eyes.

You would never expect that Attica Lifers, many of whom are convicted of murder, would have been interested in being in a room full of jailers. But we were. Pitzer laid out the qualifications for scholarships and finished with his signature line, asking us for the cost of a candy bar monthly. Then he invited questions.

"What do you say to the people who ask, 'Why not give scholarships to the victims' kids or the COs' kids?' " asked Chris Hynes, a witty jailhouse lawyer who's been in prison for 27 years.

"I tell them, 'That's an amazing idea. You should do that. I'm doing this.' And, as for the COs' kids, they aren't the ones coming to prison," Pitzer said.

Haynes, an African-American, had that seen-it-all swagger and spoke the prison lingo: He'd been a warden at several federal prisons, including one in Puerto Rico. "I could be on the lake fishing right now; I've got a nice pension," he said. "But when Percy called me about this, I told him I was in, 100 percent."

ALO President David McClary, in prison for the notorious murder of New York City police officer Edward Byrne, loved the idea.

"The ALO has a fundraiser — we sell pound cakes," he said. "And we'd be open to allocating a segment of the funds every quarter for this." The ALO was fired up.

There are 1.7 million kids in America who have a parent involved in The System. "Research show that these kids are five times more likely to wind up in prison than their peers," Percy said. What's more is that half of our locked-up juveniles have a locked-up parent, according to the American Correctional Association. Most fathers — and mothers — in prison are ashamed of those statistics.

Mass incarceration has reached a tipping point. It's the one thing on which opposing sides — Republicans and Democrats, haves and have-nots, and now, Attica Lifers and jailers — see eye to eye. We in Attica will do our part; we hope the rest of the nation's prisoners will do theirs.

Our contributions may never be enough, but hopefully our willingness to help reshape our kids' futures will attract others to take a position and join us in playing a bigger game.

John J. Lennon is serving a 28-years-to-life term in Attica for a 2001 murder. For more information on CCEF, go to <http://creativecorrectionseducationfoundation.org>