

Testimony Of My Experience At The Richmond County Jail

I would like to thank my longtime friend Carl Mazzola, for inviting me a few years ago to the Friday Accountability Group. I had been searching and asking for God to provide a group of mature Christian men to serve as accountability partners. Little did I know that this group was part of something much bigger.

I am a retired surgeon by profession and became interested in medicine thru my Mom, who was a nurse, and later from biographies of missionary physicians. I grew up in a Christian home and thru my youth and early adult life I became a Billy Graham crusade counselor at the young age of 15 and later became involved with Campus Crusade for Christ in College. As a young surgeon in training I moon-lighted in an infamous set of Jails on Riker's Island made famous by numerous police shows about NYC. The prisoners and corrections officers at the Richmond County Jail get a big kick when I mention the Jails at Riker's Island.

Shortly after I began attending the Friday AM group I was told about the Richmond County Jail as well as the Jails and Prisons that are visited by this group called Serving Time in the CSRA, and was excited to be involved though I believed my job as a surgeon would prove a hindrance in terms of available time. I must say I was also a bit apprehensive. I first attended the Richmond County Jail on Thursday nights. Bill Colbert, Carl and Jeff gave me some tips and I was able to sit in with Bill for a couple of nights.

What impressed me was the seriousness of my fellow volunteers and surprised by the mindfulness of the prisoners who were present. They showed respect and avid attention. Finally I went on my own to one of the blocks. I was apprehensive but prayed for God's comfort, boldness and courage. I was and still am quite astounded in what God accomplishes in the room each time I serve. When I enter invariably there are men watching TV, on the phone, playing chess or checkers, finishing meals, off to showers—in short, a lot of noise and chaos. Having worked in a jail in NYC I know better than to act with any sort of pre-ordained authority, as if I were a "cop on a beat"> telling people to turn off TVs or the like—and yet in short order everything is quiet. In almost every case someone brings me the large trash can to serve as my "pulpit" and we begin. ON a couple of occasions one of the prisoners has shouted to a couple of men to either be quiet, join the group or go to their rooms. Most of the time the men rebuked, join me quietly. Wow!

I have been giving a talk or teaching on what I entitle, a "special person—Jesus, and a plan—specifically, God's special Plan designed for each one of us which includes his son Jesus, his work, his death and resurrection. I speak of the certainty of death and judgement but also about the flip side, God's grace provided thru his son, offering everlasting life by simply trusting in Him as Savior and LORD. I tell them what a life with Christ has meant to me. How God has transformed me over the last few decades and continues to do so. One thing comes thru quickly, the men realize that they are in the "pit of despair." There is no lower point they can descend to except for death. They have lost their freedom to move about and make decisions about their daily life. But that said, I tell them they still have freedom to make choices today that will change their tomorrow. The most significant of those choices is to trust in Jesus Christ. The past is past, and shameful as it may be none of us can change it but today in our present we can make decisions that will frame our future. This is the hope that only a life with Christ can offer.

It is no wonder that as Richard Hillman said this past Sunday (and I paraphrase), "you come in walking and leave floating." Or as I told a great friend of mine in California, "I never used illegal

drugs of any type but treated or had friends who did. To me, Jail ministry is the closest I will ever get to being high, but it's being high on Christ and what He accomplishes every day thru human beings such as us." Many believers struggle to witness to one person a week and we have the opportunity at times to witness to almost 20+ at one time. What a blessing and opportunity God has so wonderfully provided us.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share with all of you.

David E. Rivera