



The Court Report

By Richard Blassberg

By Jeffrey Deskovic

What was being wrongfully in prison at 17 years of age really like?

In my last column I spoke about my wrongful arrest and conviction. Over the next several weeks I will discuss what it was like for me in prison. It will not be a blow-by-blow account of my entire experience, as that would take a book. Rather, it will be a summary.

The Guilty Verdict

I was stunned when the jury returned the verdict of, "Guilty." The courtroom began spinning and time stood still, and I felt, that I was in Fantasyland. As my lawyer went with Assistant District Attorney George Bolen and Judge Colabella into his chambers, my family, seated directly behind me, wanted me to sit with them, doubtless to provide support, comfort, and to help me deal with the shock and disbelief that was on my face. One of the court officers asked Judge Colabella if it was all right for me to sit a mere four steps from where I was seated. Giving short shrift to the question, and looking annoyed at even having been asked, he said, "No" without even considering it and continued to his chambers.

Given that there were court officers all around who had sidearms, I don't see what there was to fear from such a request being allowed. Shortly afterward, when the Judge and the attorneys re-entered, I scarcely heard the words from Colabella, "The defendant is remanded to the County Jail for sentencing," even though I am sure he spoke in a normal tone. I was escorted into a room with a brown door with bars, not much bigger than a closet, with only a bench.

I sat in shock and disbelief. A court officer walked by and sensed that I was going through something mentally. Yet, there was nothing he could do. He paused as he walked by, unsure of what to do, or even what his superiors would allow. I asked him, "What will happen to me now?" He told me that I would be taken downstairs and searched because it was a different department. He wanted to know if there was anything that I wanted to give to my family. I quickly decided that I wanted my family to have my wallet, tie clip, and watch, as mementos to remember me by. I was silently bidding them farewell, unsure if I would ever see them again.

The County Jail

There is a vigilante-type attitude in both county jails and prisons, towards prisoners who are incarcerated for sexual offenses. This is maintained both by the prisoners and by the guards. Tactics utilized include beatings, stabbings, cuttings, name calling, and social isolation. The guards themselves typically refrained from directly participating in the violence, instead directly and indirectly putting the inmates up to it. Therefore, no matter what I might be doing at any particular moment, this risk was always on my mind.

The price of getting a visit, at either the county jail and prison, was that at the conclusion of the visit you would be strip-searched. The reason, or course, is to prevent contraband and drugs from being smuggled into the facility. This same

Doing Hard Time

Part One

objective could be accomplished by less invasive methods utilizing devices similar to those used at airports, at the same time preserving basic human dignity.

The food in general was not very good. The choice always came down to forcing yourself to eat or going hungry. There was one particular entrée that was referred to by both staff and inmates as "mystery meat." To this day I still do not know what kind of meat it was.

The Downstate Classification Center

Sitting in the bus just outside of the gate waiting to go into "Downstate", which is a reception center where all prisoners must go to be processed before being sent to various prisons, I was frightened. The prison walls loomed very large and daunting, and the barbed wire seemed especially mean-looking. Along with the other prisoners, I was marched through various lines in order to complete the many procedures, and also to be issued prison supplies. They would not tell us what place to stop at or what to do. This resulted in mistakes and verbal use being thrown at us as punishment.

The guards knew that being in a new environment for the first time made the prisoners feel fearful, shell-shocked and disoriented, and therefore easily alarmed. They purposely yelled a lot and acted menacingly, playing off of our fears, knowing what effect this would have. One guard refused to allow me to sit down in a chair while I was being interviewed by a civilian, even though I was hopping around on one foot having sprained one of my ankles. He snapped, "You are a piece of shit." I could see the look of shock on the interviewer's face, yet she did not intervene. He then whispered to me, "if you didn't have rights I would kill you." She overheard his remarks but, again, she did not intervene nor report it.

The non-intervention, not-wanting-to-get-involved, at times even indifference, of both guards and prison staff, including those whose jobs consisted of oversight regarding things that were done to prisoners by their co-workers, was something that over the years I would observe and experience over and over again.

With respect to phone calls home, I received an initial call home for five minutes. The opportunities to call home were, in general, few and far between, and lasted only for five minutes.

Every morning we were made to wake up around 6am to the sound of a bullhorn-type instrument yelling, "WAKE UP TIME." That alarm meant that we had to quickly scramble and dress and be near our cell doors,

standing silently as correction officers made their rounds to be sure nobody had escaped and that everybody was still alive. Why this couldn't be accomplished by another method still escapes me, as did the constant hanging of the threat of being 'keep-locked' held over our heads. (Note: 'keep-locked' meant that one would be kept in his cell for 23 hours a day, fed less food, not allowed showers as often, not allowed to call one's family, or go to the library, and would receive only one hour of recreation, generally in a small area, with little more than a chinning bar in it.)

Often the guards walked extremely quickly, so as to try purposely to catch



Jeffrey Deskovic

Editor's Note: In an effort to help our readers fully comprehend the terrible injustice that was worked against 16-year-old Jeffrey Deskovic of Peekskill, resulting in his imprisonment for 16 years for a rape and murder that Peekskill Police and Assistant DA George Bolen were well aware he was not guilty of, The Westchester Guardian, once again, turns over the pages of *The Court Report* to Mr. Deskovic in order that he might describe the ordeal in his own words. We will continue to present his story in upcoming issues.

- RB

Continued on page 16



Doing Hard Time, Part I, continued from page 3

someone unprepared. I am not a morning person and I was not used to getting up early. And, as a heavy sleeper, I was afraid each night that I might not hear the bullhorn in the morning, or get up on time.

Sleeping days away was a way of escaping the cell as well as a sign of depression. Yet even this unhealthy coping device was not entirely available, and was done at one's own risk since there would be three or four such body counts throughout the day. We had to wait quite a while, after arriving at Downstate prior to being able to get any books, so passing the time away by reading was not an option.

I was afraid of the other prisoners, since I knew that although there were other innocent victims of injustice there, there were a good number of guilty as well. There were men in prison for assault and murder, who were grown adults with huge muscles; and I was small and only 17 years old. It took little to imagine what the outcome of any altercation between any of them and me.

I was depressed much of the time in Downstate and was therefore put on suicide watch.

When was I taken off of suicide watch and was allowed to go to the mess hall, I discovered that prisoners were forbidden to talk in the underground tunnels on the way to meals. Even if one recognized another prisoner it was forbidden to say hello. As far as when we were in the mess hall itself, we were informed that

we could talk, but that we had a small amount of time to eat and so if we wasted it talking that was not the correction officers' concern. Once, when an inmate informed an officer that we were not getting enough time to eat, his solution was not to speak to his superior but instead to recommend that the inmate try to get to the front of the line. Since not everyone could be at the front of the line simultaneously, this was like being told "tough".

I became conditioned to eating fast. Everybody has his own limits of what they are able to force down. At the same time there was a general level of hunger. In combination these factors sometimes resulted in 'tray-watching' and the constant asking of the question, "Are you eating that?"

When it was finally time to leave Downstate and go to a permanent prison, I was taken along with the other prisoners. We were awakened quite early, 5am, and marched through a series of long lines that seemed to go on forever, and again strip-searched. We were then put into a cold bullpen for several hours. None of us had any idea how long it would be before the bus that was to transport us would arrive. None of the guards would tell us, so it was at once unpleasantly suspenseful and monotonous.

Since there were no phones around, I couldn't see how giving us this information would have run counter to Department of Corrections' legitimate in-

terests. It was a psychological tactic in line with the general practice of treating prisoners like non-human beings. I was so fearful that I might go to Attica or Clinton, two of New York's worst prisons because of the reputation of their guards being particularly abusive towards inmates.

Prison Violence

There was plenty of violence in prison. Fights were common, as were stabbings and cuttings with homemade weapons. There are also a lot of gangs in prison. A tactic commonly employed was to cut another inmate's face, thereby leaving a permanent scar. Another common tactic involved slashing from behind so as to be able to run and get away. Victims were obliged not to report incidents. If one did it was seen as a sign of weakness, thereby setting oneself up to be a victim again in the future, and also possibly to be labeled a snitch. The label of a snitch would, of course, permanently put one at risk of being assaulted at any time by anyone.

At the time of any disagreement, often the first thing to pop into many prisoners' minds were threats and violence. It was commonplace for two to four acts of violence to take place every day. As a result I had to remain alert to who was around me and what they were doing at all times. Additionally, I needed to understand the personality of other inmates, what their threat levels were, and what things to look out for.

I hated living in an environment in which violence, and the threat of it, was part of the fabric of everyday life. It often sickened me to see all of that going on around me, watching people being beaten and bleeding, etc. Yet, at the same time, I had to mind my own business and hide what I really felt, lest I, too, might become a target.

I was always aware that while my mentality was to avoid trouble so as to be in good position for when I might go to the parole board, as well as to not get another charge in addition to the rape and murder of which I was innocent but for which I was doing time, there were some prisoners who did not think that way, and didn't care. It was not simply that they had nothing to lose, although some didn't, it was that some let the frustration get the best of them.

When an inmate has to defend himself, the incident is handled much the same way as a schoolyard fight is. Both parties get into trouble for "fighting". Any such incident, in addition to receiving the penalty of being 'keep-locked', would also be a black mark on one's disciplinary record that would have to be explained to the Parole Board. Yet avoiding things for this purpose remained my mentality. This thinking was not shared by all, and that fact made it all the more difficult for me. There were several times when I had to defend myself and got into trouble for it. ■

FIRST TIME HOME BUYERS

Free list with pictures
Affordable Homes

www.FTHBwestchester.com
or
24/7 Hotline recorded message
1-800-667-0516 ID #1051

Westchester • Manhattan

Law Offices of
RICHARD A. ROBERTS, ESQ.

www.richardaroberts.com

<i>Real Estate</i>	<i>Bankruptcy</i>
<i>Business</i>	<i>Estates</i>
<i>Family</i>	<i>Criminal</i>

105 Stevens Ave., Suite 401
Mount Vernon, NY 10550

(914) 668-6622
Fax (914) 668-7763

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Who We Are

Big Brothers Big Sisters is the oldest mentoring program in the nation and the only one of its kind in Westchester. Our unique service matches adult volunteers to children of single parent families. Professional staff provide careful screening, training and supervision to ensure that volunteers and children enjoy all of the rewards of a Big Brother Big Sister relationship. Big Brothers Big Sisters, along with Thrift Lands USA, who handle the collections and fundraising process, distribute all items to needy Westchester families or sell them to benefit the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.

Use Our Convenient Drop Boxes
Call for the location nearest you.

Used Clothing Home Pick Up
Men's • Women's • Children's Clothing, Shoes (all seasons), Toys, Books, Towels, Blankets, Curtains & Sheets
Connecting CARING People to Needy Families

Tax Deductible
(914) 963-4453

Recycle Your Clothing And Help Others
We collect year round

Fast Free Pick Ups On Your Block Every Week

We Also Accept Auto Donations

Collection Office: 9 Romaine Ave., Yonkers, NY 10705 **Office Hours: Mon.-Fri. 9AM-6PM**