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Visiting a model prisoner in southeast Missouri

by Mary Ann McGivern

NCR Today

A week or so ago, I drove south to Missouri's boot heel to visit an inmate at the Southeast Correctional Center in Charleston. I've written before about Kenneth Carter, who killed a man when he was 14. He's almost 40 now and still incarcerated on a sentence of life with parole.

It was a food visit, so I brought pork chops, dressing, fried apples and a Sara Lee cheesecake. The regs require clear plastic containers, no fresh food, no frozen food and no knives -- not even plastic knives -- so our pork chops were finger food.

It was a good visit. I've known Kenneth since 2006, when he applied to a re-entry program I directed, hoping that a home plan would enhance his case for parole. He's had four hearings since then and been denied each time. The parole board doesn't give any reason for the denials or offer suggestions on behavior strategies. Kenneth has been in an honor wing for years and received a commendation in the winter for five years without a prison violation.

Southeast CC has instituted a program Kenneth graduated from a dozen years ago at another prison, Intensive Therapy Community. The deputy warden was the case officer when Kenneth was in the program. She wanted to bring it to this institution and invited Kenneth and a couple of other graduates to take facilitator and elder roles.

ITC is inmate-run with staff supervision. It is essentially an addiction recovery program. Kenneth was telling me that they use the "pull up" system; that is, any participant can say to you, "I'm pulling you up for cussing." The only correct response is, "I'll get right on that."

As Kenneth said to me, it doesn't matter whether you did it or not. The point is to learn that you can't change other people's worldview. You can only change yourself, in this case by being open to whatever

anybody else sees in you. Kenneth is on the wing hall with the pre-participants, sharing a room with a tattooed white guy (Kenneth is black) who is in the middle of a love-hate monologue with God. Kenneth shakes his head in wonder at what might be the outcome of the argument. The program uses words like "room" and "roommate" instead of "cell" and "cellie" to try to lessen prison's permeation on their lives.

Kenneth has a small business making greeting cards for other inmates. He's sent me some, and the sister I live with, who is an artist, says he's very good. He told me he's painted three wall murals in the ITC wing. He'd never worked with paint, only pencils, but the recreation department sent over a paint set with 18 brushes (less a few that had been stolen), so Kenneth had his first chance to work with paint. He says the murals look terrific. The ITC logo has an eagle with a snake in his talons. He learned to use the paints on that eagle.

He got to talking about learning to look at pictures to see how other artists had done their work. "Where are these pictures?" I asked.

"In the library, in books," he said. So I told him about using an audio guide in a museum and he said, "I never been to a museum."

Then he asked me what skills I have besides cooking, which he agreed I could do. Can I drive a nail in straight? Yes. Operate power tools? No. But I told him I can grow a meal in my garden, teach a class of little children to multiply, and I can raise money. He laughed at that.

It was a good visit. I carried the mother of another inmate so she could visit her son. It was a three-hour drive each way. She was a blues singer in her youth, then joined a church choir and wrote some songs. So she sang to me during part of the drive.

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