

Carving a Non-violent Path

Eugene Alexander Dey

A Crip and a Skin Head within arm's reach is a situation that would usually have us all on edge – but this was a false alarm. Rather than sizing each other up or staring each other down, they laughed and joked like old friends. Serving a range of prison terms, hardcore felons all, we endeavoured to break new ground. Choosing to work on our dispositions towards violence, we volunteered to participate in an innovative workshop.

North Bay residents Alice Waco and Ann Boone are part of a small group of dedicated activists who are determined to offer incarcerated people a new direction. Regularly making the trip to the California Correctional Center (CCC) in Susanville, located hundreds of miles away, they facilitate workshops in their Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP).

Beginning at the infamous Attica Prison in New York in 1975, AVP is now practiced in 45 states and 25 countries on six continents. Rwanda has codified the process into their post-genocide justice system and the Australian school system incorporated it into their charter. At the Delaware Correctional Center, Delaware's largest prison, a three-year cumulative study reveals AVP produced an 11.5 percent recidivism rate.

Alternatives to Violence is relatively new to this northern-California prison community, home of two huge state prisons and a small federal facility, dubbed Prison Town USA. But the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) is no stranger to the concept.

Waco, the AVP coordinator, is quick to share warm anecdotes about the workshops at San Quentin (SQ). The previous warden fully supported the process, but they were denied access during Gray Davis' tenure as governor. "Davis kicked us out the prisons", recalled Waco, shaking her head. But the Schwarzenegger administration, with a better record on corrections than his predecessor, has allowed AVP back into the crisis-laden CDCR. Lamenting the fact that SQ's new warden has not allowed the AVP group to return, Waco promotes responsible behaviour by not harbouring new hard feelings.

Now the Bay Area faction of AVP-California have their sights fixed on Prison Town USA. "We have been doing most of our work in California", said Waco, whose group facilitates AVP workshops at numerous CDCR institutions. "For the last two and a half years... we have regularly been coming to Susanville".

While most self-help groups in the CDCR are faith-based, conflict resolution takes a different approach. Unlike 12-step programs, anger management does not emphasize higher powers. The *AVP Manual*, an evolving treatise, recognizes a “spiritual power is inherent in humans”, but the process empowers “people to lead non-violent lives through affirmation, respect for all, community building, cooperation and trust”.

Having been in prison for the last decade, violence has become a permanent fixture in my life. Though I am alleged to pose a threat to society due to my lengthy rap sheet, the real threat is the corrupting influence of the nation’s violent prison system. Scores of fights, stabbings and riots dominate the mind’s eye. The only “segregated” system in the country, the agency is plagued by a myriad of systemic problems. A 70 percent recidivism rate is fuelled by issues of untreated addiction that co-exist in high number with mental ailments. These conditions are exacerbated by dozens of racial and geographical gang rivalries – generational intolerance being the norm.

Skin Heads and Crips do not enter AVP workshops inclined to be friends. With conflicts stayed due to a practice of reluctant tolerance, peace is always temporary. Away from the pressures of our peers, however, we are given a rare opportunity to relax. Often for the first time in our lives, we can interact with historical enemies in a secure part of the facility. Twenty-two hour workshops spanning three days, exhaustive exercises and role plays keep the workshops moving. Prisoners being stubborn, uncooperative and suspicion bound, the first few hours are tough. As facilitators we endeavour to break the ice. Getting to know prisoners from different ethnic groups is the necessary first step.

During a February workshop, the first at CCC’s Lassen Facility since the summer of 2007, the participants were tentative. Racial melees and numerous stabbings made our job as facilitators even harder. But difficulty is the nature of a prison workshop and we are up to the challenge.

Everyone is welcome to attend the basic course. The long range-goal is to train prisoners to become “inside” facilitators. According to the *AVP Manual*, “anyone who really wants to be a leader can learn to be one”. However, these next two levels, “advanced” and “training for facilitators”, are offered only to those who display the characteristics of a potential leader. It is a struggle. Due to numerous lockdowns throughout 2006 and 2007, a three to six month training period took me well over a year to complete. At a facility with roughly 1,000, I

am one of only six facilitators. With the next group looking forward to completing their training, the waiting list is long.

Producing prisoners less inclined to commit violent crime is a trifecta of “wins” for self, system and society. Holding enormous potential, it remains a popular program. At some point, AVP must be one of the penological pillars on top of which rehabilitative reforms are founded. Waiting patiently for that day to arrive, I just take my recovery one workshop – and riot – at a time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eugene Alexander Dey is a prisoner at California Correctional Center serving a life sentence for a non-violent drug offence. A freelance writer, successful jailhouse lawyer and dedicated activist, Dey has won three writing awards from PEN America Center. He also has numerous pieces in the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* and regularly contributes to other publications. In a college career spanning twenty years and hundreds of semester units, Dey has an application for a Bachelors degree in sociology pending at Sacramento State University. With four Associates degrees, including two from Lassen Community College and Coastline, Dey has been asked to take a lead role in writing a proposal for Feather River Community College to codify post-secondary college education across the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. To see more of his work, please go to www.myspace.com/eugenedey. You can write Eugene at the following address:

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