

Gay
Voices
From
Prison

"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." -- Dostoevski

By STUART WELLS
LAMBDA Editor

What's it like to be a gay prisoner -- caught in a one-sex society that mirrors the free world's distaste for gay life-styles?

Jenny and Georgia say life is difficult as openly gay youthful offenders at Hamlett Youth Center in Lillington, N.C., 42 miles southeast of Chapel Hill.

"The gays here are very scared and let their bodies be used as instruments," the two male inmates told JOIN HANDS, a San Francisco-based gay prisoners' newspaper and support group.

"There are head queens here, street prostitutes, and female impersonators. Out of a population of 700 inmates there are about 75 gay men. Half of those hide it and stay undercover. There are only a few of us which are completely open with our gayness."

Jenny and Georgia, who say they carry themselves as women, were chastised one Sunday by the prison chaplain who told them in front of their fellows that they were "headed for hell and were possessed with Satan's treachery and evil." They said they were also criticized by staff and inmates, but see some progress in the opening of a camp for homosexuals. "We are soon to be leaving for it," they said in early 1978.

Tony W., 37, a one-time resident of Carrboro, N.C., and an ex-boxer, has been in and out of prisons in Florida, South Carolina and Georgia since 1958 (for burglaries). Writing from the Palm Beach County Jail last month, Tony said that he has not loved anyone since 1962, when his 21-year-old lover was killed by three other prisoners.

THE EMPTY CLOSET of Rochester, N.Y., reports that between May 1976 and April 1977 the only two murders at the U.S. Penitentiary at McNeil Island, Washington, were of two gay men. The periodical, which alleges that prison officials knew in advance of threats on the men's lives, says the official response was merely to get them to sign a "release of responsibility" form, which released the institution from being held accountable for their deaths.

"Federal prison officials use gay inmates as a means of control -- to pacify the most aggressive and dangerous inmates," THE EMPTY CLOSET said. "But, when they are no longer useful or when they resist this type of treatment, they often end up dead from official 'negligence.'"

The most aggressive inmates find sexual release in raping other inmates. As the (Raleigh) News and Observer reported Dec. 17, "Some inmates plainly live in fear -- of other inmates."

North Carolina prison officials, while discounting the likelihood of widespread forcible rape, concede it is perhaps the least reported of all inmate crimes.

Tony W. said blacks are responsible for most prison rapes. "The ones they get are young, sweet-looking, the ones that will not fight back and the ones that do not have a friend,"

Seymour Kleinberg, writing in this month's CHRISTOPHER STREET, says rape victims, like their attackers, are predominately straight. "Black men in prison are using the most humiliating of weapons," he writes, "They are turning white men into women. White women. By fucking them. It is the nightmare of lynch-law America come true."

Racial tensions are surely flamed by the inequitable treatment blacks receive in the U.S., white-dominated criminal justice system. But racial hatred may not be enough to explain the black-on-white rape phenomenon. Dan Leonard of Carrboro, recalling a prison outreach he conducted, said it should be remembered that blacks are over-represented in the prison population and that black male inmates may be rationalizing that sex with white men is different, that it is not homosexual. He also said that some men find that having sex with someone of another race is more erotic and that this may be a factor in the rape statistics.

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