

**'THINK SMART'**

# Learning To Say 'No' Said Way To Stay Out Of Trouble

BY SUSAN USHER

John Rogoski had never been in trouble with the law until, at age 28, the world crashed in around him.

The Wilmington resident found himself headed toward prison. He had lost his apartment, his car, his job—and his girlfriend of several years.

Instead he was forced to eat, sleep, shower (infrequently) and go to the toilet in front of more than 100 other men. He had to watch whatever was on a single TV station because, if he changed channels, everyone in the prison section got punished. He was surrounded by homosexual activity—much of it forced on weaker inmates who couldn't defend themselves.

He was allowed one telephone call each 25 days, for five minutes only. Friends and family could visit two hours a week—"you can hold hands, that's all," he said. Letters and packages were subject to being opened and read.

That's what life behind bars is all about—"a vacation you don't want to take," Rogoski said. "There's no such thing as going down to McDonald's... All you are is a number."

His number? 10557.

Now Rogoski washes pots and pans and trays in a minimum security facility for \$2.80 a week, with a workday that starts at 3:30 a.m. and continues off and on until around 9 p.m.

And, starting with this group at Shallotte Middle School, Rogoski tells his story with a specific goal in mind.

"If I just help one of you it's worth it to me," he said. Rogoski gave up an opportunity for work release—working during the day in the community and returning to prison at night—to participate in a crime prevention program that tells youngsters to "Think Smart" and stay out of prison.

The testimonial program, begun in 1983, appears to make an impression on youthful audiences, as it did that day for local seventh- and eighth-graders.

"I learned to say no," a seventh-grader named Robert said. "I thought prison was like in-school suspension."

"He told me how bad it really was."

So how did it happen? How did John Rogoski go from All-American boy to criminal?

Seven months behind bars "with no peace and no privacy" has given Rogoski a new look at his previous life and a new appreciation of the "outside".

"There's only one way to make money—I'm convinced of that now," he told a classroom of Shallotte Middle School seventh graders. "That's by working. By getting a job and working."

There was a time, less than a year ago, when Rogoski had a taste—and a need—for easy money.

"You get addicted," he told the students. "I would do anything I had to do to get cocaine—including stealing from my friends and writing bad checks." And—in the end—selling dope.

**Out Of Hand**

Rogoski had lived what he considered a good life, he said, but one thing gradually led to another. The changes were so subtle his life had changed before he realized what was happening.

"It starts with being dishonest," he told the youngsters, some leaning intently forward at their desks, others clustered on the floor around him. "It starts with little things, like taking money from your mom's purse when she's not around, or swiping your dad's beer from the refrigerator."

And it also starts with peer pressure, he continued, going along with the crowd when it comes to drugs, drinking and other temptations to go wrong.

With a college background in the physical sciences, the New Jersey native moved to Wilmington to work in construction with his brother-in-law. He was making good money, enjoying life—and gradually developing



"LEARN TO SAY 'NO'," prison inmate John Rogoski of Wilmington told Shallotte Middle School seventh-graders recently in a talk about life behind bars and the lifestyle that led him there.

some bad habits.

"If you don't believe drug habits can start with marijuana, you're mistaken," he said. "Acid, heroin, LSD—I always said, 'I'll never try it.'"

"But then you want a better high."

**Habit Was Costly**

And a better high he got. Soon Rogoski was supporting an \$80,000 a year cocaine habit any way he could—that eventually included uttering and forging bad checks, breaking and entering, taking \$3,000 from the residence of an acquaintance who owed him money—only the cash he took belonged to the man's roommate.

"I took the wrong man's money," he said.

Next thing Rogoski knew, he was in court. The lucky combination of a "good lawyer and a sympathetic judge," he said, rescued him from a long active sentence.

Instead, he was sentenced to several years' active time suspended with one year's "intensified probation."

He was put under what Rogoski calls "house arrest"—an 8 p.m. curfew—combined with community service working without pay at the Wilmington YMCA and giving up some of his former associates.

"One month before my probation was to end a friend from home (New Jersey) showed up and asked me if I'd like to make some easy money," he recalled.

Soon Rogoski was up to his neck, using and dealing drugs.

"I didn't sell to little kids," he told the students. "But I learned that if you sell it, sooner or later it gets to the kids—sixth grade and under that, even."

He was arrested and charged with possession and in-

tent to sell and deliver cocaine. He faced sentences of up to 35 years in prison unless he talked about his connections. Rogoski was scared to squeal, however, because the people he had been dealing with were big time operators.

Still, he was "lucky" when he returned to court. He comes up for his first parole hearing in July and could be released, he thinks, by October 1987.

After seven months in prison, Rogoski told students he's just now becoming himself again.

"I lost a year snorting cocaine," he said. "I'm just now getting my memory back."

His face has healed. At one time the tissues in and around his nose were burned out, raw from cocaine use.

Rogoski, now 29, is one of three inmates at the minimum security camp in Wilmington selected to participate in the N.C. Department of Corrections crime prevention program called "Think Smart."

Don Gates, crime prevention officer for the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department, is encouraging individual teachers, schools and other youth programs to book the inmates for appearances. Youngsters at Shallotte Middle School and Waccamaw Elementary School have had plenty of questions for Rogoski and his counterparts. "It's worked very well," Gates said. "I hope we can get other schools interested in inviting them."

Gates said the program is intended to give young people a realistic glimpse at life behind bars and the lifestyles that can lead them there, and practical advice on how to avoid making the same mistakes.

As Rogoski advised his student audience: "Messing with drugs sooner or later will get you in trouble. It got me. You are more of a man or a lady to say, 'No, I don't need that stuff.'"

"Learn to say no."

**Updates Available**

Updates for the 1984 Community Service Directory are available from the Volunteer and Information Center (VAC) in Bolivia.

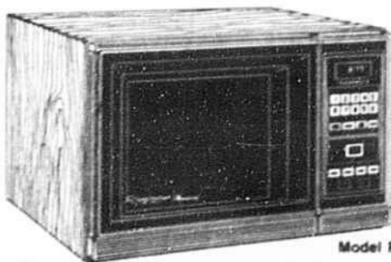
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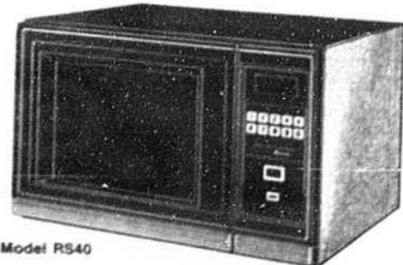
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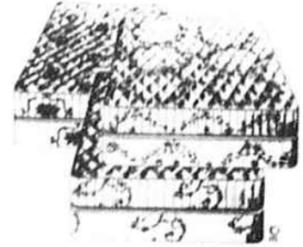
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