

Dr. Prison teaches future inmates to toe the line

by Elizabeth Fitzsimons

The client wore a \$95 navy Burberry shirt tucked into jeans held up by a grosgrain ribbon belt, and blue socks with black penny loafers. He was freshly shaven, and his short, brown hair was shiny and stiff from the gel that held it in place.

In five days, he was going to prison.

He offered the men across the table a cup of coffee. Then he carried his oversized wallet to Starbucks and returned with a large cup and a muffin, which sat uneaten until an uncomfortable silence during their visit grew intolerable and peeling away its wrapper provided him with a diversion.

"How many fights you been in?" asked the man in the Chargers beanie, leaning forward. He wore sunglasses, though he was indoors and it was a rainy day.

"I'm not a fighter," the client said. "I have a big mouth, but I'm not a fighter. I'm afraid to fight."

PRISON DOCTOR - Steve Scholl started Dr. Prison about two years ago to coach men and women who are about to serve sentences in jail or prison on how to make allies and avoid making enemies. CNS Photo by Nelvin Cepeda. The two men sat with that for a moment. But then they asked again. And they pressed their client, driving him into a corner until he admitted a misdemeanor conviction for spitting in a cop's face and an arrest for "going after" a co-worker.

And there was a lesson learned: In prison, the men said, always answer a question truthfully the first time. The client nodded his understanding.

Convicted of wire fraud and tax evasion, the client had been sentenced to 10 months in federal prison. He had only ever spent a few hours in jail.

That was why he had paid hundreds of dollars and come here, to a noisy food court in an San Diego County shopping center, for advice from Dr. Prison.

Dr. Prison is a consulting business, based in La Mesa, Calif., and run by a San Diego man, that coaches men

and women who are about to serve sentences in jail or prison. Dr. Prison teaches them how to talk, how to carry themselves, how to make allies and how to avoid making enemies. Really, how to survive.

"Dr. Prison's mission is to help you avoid being physically hurt, extorted, or possibly killed in prison," the business says on its Web site, www.drprison.com.

"Just because you didn't know you shouldn't walk into another person's open cell because you didn't ask permission doesn't mean you should get the crap beaten out of you," said Steve Scholl, who started Dr. Prison about two years ago.

Scholl has never been to prison, but he works with 10 on-call ex-convicts. He carefully selects the right ones to match the client's background and crime. Each client - he sees about two a month - is charged a fee based on the amount of time and attention they need.

"They will always have directly across the table from them someone who has served time," Scholl said.

ADVICE FOR FAMILIES

Rates start with the phone/e-mail package, at \$275 for jail preparation and \$375 for prison. The personal visit package runs \$375 for jail, \$575 for prison, with the client paying for travel expenses; and the video teleconference deal costs \$900 for jail and \$1,200 for prison.

Dr. Prison also works with families of convicts, advising them how to best support their loved ones as they deal with the sentence from their side of the bars. In February, Scholl and his consultants started hosting a national, online radio talk show Saturday nights on www.wsRadio.com. Listeners can call in for advice.

Scholl and his consultants usually meet their clients in a public place, the noisier and busier, the better. They want the client to be distracted, agitated. They want to mimic the stressful environment in prison, to tease out any weaknesses that might attract unwanted attention.

Clients contact Dr. Prison on the advice of their lawyers or bail bondsmen.

"They're generally middle-class people, people like you and me, people with \$400 in their pocket," Scholl

said.

They aren't gang members, and certainly aren't people who have been in prison before.

"We are trying to help the person who probably is most vulnerable," Scholl said.

A few years ago, Scholl was talking with a friend who had been released from prison.

"He was telling me stories about how things work in there, what you should and shouldn't do. I thought: this is valuable information," Scholl said.

"It's a pretty fearful thing to think, 'My gosh, I'm going to go to prison.' Most of the stories you hear, they're true. And I thought, I'd pay someone to clue me in."

AURA OF SCIENCE

Based on interviews he conducted with released convicts, Scholl says a person who doesn't know how to act in prison has a 25 percent to 30 percent chance of getting killed; a 10 percent to 15 percent chance of being raped; a 30 percent to 40 percent chance of getting stabbed; and an 80 percent to 90 percent chance of getting beaten.

The numbers are hardly scientific.

"He plants the fear in people, if they didn't already have it, that something terrible is going to happen to them in prison," said Paul Sutton, a professor of criminal justice at San Diego State University.

The percentages give the aura of science, Sutton said. But they're nonsense.

"The advice isn't necessarily nonsense," Sutton said.

Although Dr. Prison may be preying on people's fears, and implying that the politics of maximum-security prisons apply to all levels of facilities, Sutton said the business does provide sound advice.

"This kind of information, or at least useful survival information, needs to get to people somehow, and the prisons don't provide it," Sutton said.

Upon entering prison, inmates are given a handbook that lays out the rules and punishments for infractions.

"It's important stuff, but it doesn't tell you how to survive or tell you how to get along," Sutton said.

He recalled a visit with his students to a state prison, where the guards stopped in the yard and told the group how each public phone belonged to a certain race, and using the wrong phone would result in a beating from other inmates.

Sutton asked the guard whether they shared that tip with new inmates. The guard said no. It was up to the inmates to learn for themselves.

Scholl's goal is to give his clients a head start.

Recently, when he met with the client going to federal prison, he called in his consultant Tom, who served nearly two years for drug convictions.

Tom, in his beanie and sunglasses and gray Vandyke beard, frowned and stared at the client. Tom, an addiction counselor, asked that his last name not be used. The client's name was not given because he feared for his safety in prison. Scholl, in a Hawaiian shirt, read from an assessment questionnaire.

"I hate the cliché, but it's a good cop, bad cop thing," Scholl said before the meeting.

BE STRAIGHTFORWARD

In this meeting, the client kept fudging the truth. When Tom asked how long he had been sober, the client said 15 years, then backtracked. Well, it actually was five years, then five and another five, because he had a few lapses.

The men stared at their client. Wouldn't let the matter drop.

"Any inconsistencies, any hesitating, means something to a greater degree," Scholl told him later.

Rather than blurting out something that isn't true, take a moment and think. Then answer truthfully, Scholl said. But don't give too much detail.

"Specific things are better than nothing because nothing means you're hiding things," Scholl said. "Be more straightforward. Answer in straightforward generalities."

Later, they were reassuring. Tom encouraged the client to stick with his drug addiction recovery, and to make plans for his release.

"I think you will do well and one of the reasons is because you're a smart guy," Scholl told him.

"I thought you guys hated me," the client said. No, the men said. They were just trying to help him.

After the client shook their hands, thanked them and walked off, Tom pulled off his beanie and removed his sunglasses.

He had gray, receding hair and a kind, gently lined face. Going to prison could be a positive experience, he said. Like it was for him.

"It changed my life."

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