



Inmates at Essex County jail play basketball with a makeshift hoop in a cell block of the prison.

DOING TIME

# The final days

*Counseling, then freedom*

Last of a five-part series

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**S**ALEM — The large room where the alcohol counseling session was held served a multitude of activities. Most of them took place at the same time.

Lawyers met there to discuss cases with inmates. Social workers talked with new arrivals and counseled inmates with problems. Inmates came and went with books because the room also serves as the library.

Guards occasionally walked in and shouted the names of prisoners who were wanted elsewhere.

In the midst of this frenzy, 13 men sat on benches and chairs against a far wall and discussed their personal bouts with alcohol and drugs while they smoked cigarettes and drank coffee from Styrofoam cups.

Paul Diefenbach, 49, of Peabody, a drunk for 25 years before he quit drinking nine years ago to become a certified counselor, draws the men out one by one, trying to get them to talk about themselves. Slowly, agonizingly, a few men in the group begin to reach deeper into themselves and their chaotic lives.

(When it was finally revealed that I was a Globe reporter, I returned to the group to assure them that I would not report on the sessions because of their confidential nature. They volunteered that I could use the material if I did not identify them by name.)

A bearded man, who appeared to be in his 60s but was actually 41, sat quietly apart from the group listening to the others. He finally broke in.

"I've ruined three wives — turned them all into drunks," he said. "I used them. Drunks use people."

He told of an occasion when, in a drunken rage, he decided to kill two people. "I went to the place they lived and they weren't home. I stood in front of the house yelling, 'You inconsiderate bastards.'"

He visited me in my cell in the evening, and we talked.

"How long are you in for?" I asked.

"Forever," he said. "I can't ever want to leave here. I've destroyed too many people out there. I can't do it in here. Besides, how do you think I feel? My own son is in here with me."

As the counseling session continued,



Diefenbach drew them out about their families and the love they had known in their lives. "When's the last time you told somebody you loved them?" he asked.

"It struck a nerve in a young man of 18, doing time on drug charges. He began talking about his father, who had died of cancer."

"He was at home, and he knew he was dying," the youth said. "The day he died, I went to his room and I told him I didn't want to go to my Little League game. He knew I was pretty good. I've got trophies at home. He told me to go to the game, so I did."

"They took him to the hospital before I came home. My mother said before he left he got up from the bed and went to the window and asked for me. He died that night. My father loved me."

He bent forward and pressed his face closer to his lap to hide his tears.

"Go ahead and cry," said Diefenbach. "Men can cry."

He was seated beside me, a boy the age of my own son. I reached over and rubbed my hand across his back. It was a minimal act of caring, I really wanted to hug him.

Lunch that same day consisted of three meatballs in a roll, a bag of chips and a fruit drink. Then the cell doors closed again.

"Leader, you've got a visitor." I had heard my phony name so often I was now reacting to it as if it were real.

I knew the visitor would be my wife. She identified herself as my sister because of my new name. (To be admitted, she had to show her driver's license with her picture.) My cell door opened, and I went to the visitors section in the front corridor outside the cell blocks.

A wall of wood, glass and wire mesh separated the visitors from the inmates. Everybody was seated side by side in a row of wooden benches, talking through a strip of wire mesh 6 inches wide. There was no privacy.

"You bring my pillow?" I asked.

"Oh, God." She had forgotten.

Anger welled up inside me. I had depended on her. "Do you realize I'm a prisoner here?" I said, a cutting edge in my voice. "I'm at everybody's mercy. I can't do a damn thing for myself."

Her eyes darted around the place. She was so fixated with the surroundings

# The final days in jail

## ■ JAIL

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that she was ignoring me. "Gee, it's awfully noisy in here," she said. "This is an awful place."

I was angry at her and embarrassed for her at the same time. The inmate next to me was talking to a young woman. Every sentence contained a mixture of vulgarities.

I told my wife to leave just as a guard announced that visiting hours were over. It couldn't have been more than 15 minutes.

I sent out word through my minister, who visited later and brought my pillow, that I did not want her to return. Her presence made me too nervous, too embarrassed.

That night, a group of inmates played basketball in the corridor in front of my cell. The net was a yellow plastic washbasin with the bottom cut out. It was tied to the bottom of the second tier. For a basketball, they stuffed cloth into a sock.

There is no recreation for the inmates when the weather turns cold. Use of the activity yard ends in the winter because the jail doesn't have any warm clothes for the inmates.

The corridor on the first level was the only place for any group physical activity.

"Time out!" one of the players yelled.

"Time out? Time out on a ----- sock?" another youth chided. "OK, time out on the ----- sock."

As they ran back and forth on the granite floor, they would hold the stuffed sock in their hands and move it quickly up and down as if they were bouncing it on the floor. To simulate the sound of dribbling, they would make a noise, "phhht, phhht, phhht," with each motion of their hand.

A guard, another inmate and I took turns refereeing. There were the usual arguments about fouls and rules.

Young men, full of the exuberance of youth, were finding their only outlet for that youthful energy on an imaginary basketball court in the corridor of a prison instead of in a gymnasium or a field.

In those moments they looked like every kid who ever played a game. There was nothing bad about them.

□

Three days later, I was ready to

leave the cell block for the last time. "Leader, pack up" came the order shouted by a guard.

With all my belongings piled into the same torn grocery bag I had entered with five days earlier, I was let out of the block through the barred door.

My stomach churned with the anxiety of the expectation that in another moment I would be free. There was one more gate to pass through. There was no guard at the gate. Freedom was on the other side of that gate, and there was nobody to open it.

My heart raced. I began to feel anger. Why wasn't somebody there? I glanced in all directions. A guard finally arrived and let me through.

But freedom was delayed. A guard ordered me up the stairs to an attic room to change into my street clothes. He stood there watching me sternly as though I were coming in, not going out.

Dressed in my civilian clothes, I returned with Essex County Sheriff Charles Reardon to the cell block to identify myself to the inmates.

Many of them shook my hand. Several seemed to get a kick out of my subterfuge.

"Hey, man, right on."

"Great, man. That's great."

There was no resentment, although one inmate scolded me on the grounds that I did not bring to the jail "the same baggage the rest of us bring in here. So how can you write about it?"

"You came in here with a carton of cigarettes," he continued, "and you could buy a television set. Most of us come in here without a dime. You could leave any time you wanted to. There are guys who'll be here for years. You didn't do hard time."

That night, in my own bed with my own pillow, sipping a cup of tea while watching a color television set that I could hear and see, I considered his words again.

He was right.

I returned home knowing that my friends and neighbors would not turn away from me. I would not be an embarrassment to my wife and children.

I would not have to live the rest of my life with the burden of trying to conceal the fact that I was a criminal, a man with a prison record.