

Following a law student through a practical pro bono module (Part 2): What happens when students and prisoners help one another?

When I left off last time, I was about to submit my final assignment before undertaking the practical pro bono projects. I am happy to report that I met the deadline and received some fantastic feedback that has assisted me in undertaking the projects. Having decided to separate the remaining portions of the blog; one for each project I have taken part in and a conclusion this blog will focus on my time in prison (and not for a crime).

I took part in a Prison Project at HMP Altcourse in Liverpool, which is a comfortable 2-hour drive from where I live in North Wales. Prior to our first of three sessions at the prison, we had a number of online meetings and set up a WhatsApp group to stay in touch. I think we all shared a similar level of nerves on that first arrival at the visitor's centre of the prison. We were told to keep an open mind and be prepared to have our expectations shattered. But to imagine what it might be like was impossible.

Having been told not to forget our ID multiple times, we all checked in at the front desk and were given red ID badges to wear. We took note of the prominent signs that displayed all the items which were prohibited. Our phones were then switched off and stored in a locker on the outside. As we made our way to the university block, we passed through countless large metal doors that required locking on both sides. Our guide reassuringly told us that incidents don't happen too frequently. I remember thinking 'is it too late to change my mind and go back'?

I entered the prison tentatively with the preconceived idea that it would be like the movies, with orange jumpsuits and all. **I was very wrong.** It was only after entering the prison for the first time that I actually took the time to research and understand the purpose of a custodial sentence with rehabilitation at the forefront, which I have come to conclude is a wonderful thing.

We were given a full tour of the prison during the first session and my jaw hit the floor. The prison offered multiple classes and jobs for the prisoners. Teaching them a variety of skills from reading and writing, to art and practical skills. In one of the skills departments, the prison had little 'bedrooms' where they were taught to paint and decorate, giving the inmates invaluable practical skills for life after prison. I was amazed when walking through the university block, where the prisoner's art work was on display. The talent that some of these young men have is breath-taking. It was lovely to see that they were able to pursue these passions, perhaps ones that they might not have discovered on the outside.

We stopped and had a chat with a prison mentor in the IT department. He told us how he went from knowing almost nothing about computers, but with his mentor's support he learned so much. He then went on to become a mentor himself. It really was inspiring to see these men helping one another succeed.

Having left after that first session, I think we all had our eyes opened and our preconceptions shattered. Our purpose of entering the prison was to collect legal questions from the prisoners and present our answers on their radio station. I did not attend the second session at the prison due to prior commitments. However, the team tell me that they entered the vulnerable prisoner's unit and collected a list of questions to go away and answer ready for the final session, our radio show. We split the questions up and began researching the answers. A fair few of the questions were related to subjects that we did not cover in the course of our LLB's. However, the legal research skills we gained made finding authoritative sources of information easier. This was actually one of the questions we were asked on the day (whether finding the answers was easy).

The radio show was a success and we all presented our answers to the questions appropriately. Myself and my two colleagues answered a couple of questions on [Imprisonment for public protection \(IPP\) sentences](#). This seemed to be a rather important question to the prisoners, and we did our very best to answer it for them. We also covered Home Detention Curfews, the rules surrounding spent convictions, the rules and requirements of the Sex Offenders Register, the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, and the guidelines and rules surrounding sentencing. In addition to our legal questions, we all had to pick a song to be played, and it was a very eclectic mix of music. Including; Queen, Red Hot Chilli Peppers, and Toploader. I could not believe that the radio station was fully run by prisoners, with a friendly guard overseeing and assigning roles. It was wonderful to see the guard so visibly proud of the prisoner's accomplishments, and rightly so as they were phenomenal. They were welcoming, kind, supportive, professional, and immensely talented at what they did.

I entered that prison thinking that I would be the one helping them, rather than them helping me. Again, I was wrong. I gained so much from the experience and I am so truly grateful to have met these fine young men. I fully support this type of prison program and I certainly encourage anyone with the opportunity to engage with prisoners to jump in. Programmes like this are helping to break down social barriers and create positive social change. They help change people's attitudes towards different people, help to shatter incorrect preconceived ideas about prisons, and benefit both students and prisoners alike.

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