

Hope and Hardship at the **Dismas House**

Feature Writing II
(Evelyn Herwitz)

by Randi Beth Beckman

Everyone helps make dinner and set the table. Shepards pie, a jello mold, and peas are casually placed next to the warped soda bottle holding wild flowers. Twelve plastic plates from different sets complement the varying mugs, glasses and cups holding apple juice and orange soda. Hand in hand, with eyes closed, we sit around a wooden table in preparation for a prayer. Andre, 23, opens a book entitled *Twenty-four Hours a Day, Seven Days a Week* and reads, "I pray that I may never become discouraged in helping others. I pray that I may always rely on the power of God to help me."

With squeezes of hands and scrunches of eyes, Rich, Andre, Shirley and everyone else sitting at the dining room table chant "Amen" and then reach for a helping of food or drink. Shirley smiles until her gums show. "I'm grateful to be here, and to be free," says Shirley. Then everyone chimes in about what he or she is grateful for. "I'm grateful for the day I had today," said Rich. "I'm grateful to be alive," said Andre.

A dinner at the Dismas House doesn't feel like a dinner with "ex-prisoners." Instead, it feels like dinner at Shirley, Andre and Rich's house. Those who reside at the Dismas House (a halfway house between prison and main stream located on 30 Richards Street) are not two-dimensional psycho-killers. They are people who are desperately trying to get their lives together after spending years in prison.

Shirley, who is thankful for her freedom, was released two weeks ago after a 21 month sentence for armed robbery. Andre, with whom I held hands and prayed, has been out for about six months after several charges of assault and battery. Home life led them to drugs, and drugs led them to jail. And jail is where many of these citizens have spent a majority of their years.

Shirley, for example, has spent 16 years in and out of jails. "I don't know anything but jail," says Shirley. "You can basically say I

spent half my life in prison." Shirley has been a drug addict since she was 13. She was born into a dysfunctional home but she lived in numerous foster homes growing up. In order to get high, Shirley would lie, steal, and manipulate. She was first arrested at the age of 21 for disorderly conduct. Since 1980, Shirley has been arrested for armed robbery, possession of drugs, and more accounts of disorderly conduct.

"I am an addict," says Shirley. "So I had to do what I had to do, and it put me behind bars." Now though, Shirley says she is ready to face the real world. She doesn't know exactly why or how she plans on embracing each day, but, after 16 years of jail, Shirley claims that she is ready to be free. "Now, I can go into a store and purchase what I need," says Shirley. "I don't need to hide it in my girdle. It's a big step. I feel really trusted." Shirley hopes that she can trust herself enough to not relapse into her old patterns. "It's a big step to leave jail and get into the world again." Shirley says. "It's like a baby: I have to learn how to walk again."

Andre talks about his experiences in prison as a character-building experience but also as a dehumanizing and demoralizing experience. "I did my first stretch in '94... 18 months. In a way, it made me feel good, stronger," claims Andre. He feels strong because he has been through so much. In jail, Andre spent 30 days in "the hole" for getting into a fight at the chow hall. "You're just locked in by yourself," says Andre. "Nothing you can do. No cigarettes to smoke. Nothing," says Andre. "Sometimes they don't give you the full lunch and sometimes," Andre says, "they spit in the

food."

Andre and Shirley both referred to Worcester House of Correction as a day camp. Shirley listened to her Walkman, received packages, and watched day time television all day. Andre was best friends with his cell mate and together they worked out a system for getting drugs and getting high during free time. Andre also worked out, went bowling and wrote poetry to fill his time. Besides being trapped for months and years, the days in jail weren't all that bad.

Life in prison and life in mainstream society are worlds apart. Prisoners can't serve themselves seconds when they are hungry; they can't keep the lights on after lights out and they can't take a walk without permission. In retrospect, other than having no freedom, Shirley doesn't think jail was all that bad. On the one hand, "back in the day, prison was fun. We could go bowling and all my friends were there," said Shirley. On the other hand, "the only way you could walk around in Framingham," Shirley says, "was walking through the circle in the prison's yard."

But, after 18 months straight locked behind bars and eating the bare minimum, Andre's time in jail was up. Although Andre said that jail "isn't that difficult once you're there," his never-ending jail experiences drove him to change. "You know most of the people there," said Andre. "You see the same peo-

SCENES FROM ACADEMIC SPREE DAY...



Part of the highly-technological set-up used for monitoring and analysis. Note the brick.

The First Annual WheatBread Academic Spree Day

ple who have gone and come back and gone and come back. I don't want that," Andre said. "It made me change." Being away from his kids, his ex-girlfriend and his family drove him crazy.

Because Andre never got mail or visitors, jail taught Andre how to be completely self sufficient. "When you go to jail," Andre says. "It's basically 'keep to yourself.'" But now, after being drug free and out of prison for nearly a year, Andre believes that he is trying to embrace the sober world whole heartedly. "It's awesome," said Andre. "I get up. I go to work and when I look in the mirror, I can see the change."

But this adjustment into mainstream society, coupled with trying to overcome a severe drug addiction, is profoundly difficult. The same issues which drove Andre and Shirley to drugs in the first place continue to exist. But now, these issues need to be dealt with instead of buried by an addiction. Although Shirley and Andre have both relapsed since their release from prison, both have an extraordinarily positive attitude about their respective lives and futures. Andre knows that the road ahead, will be overwhelmingly challenging, but he believes that being sober is worth his efforts. "Sometimes it seems like an endless struggle. I feel like I'm not going anywhere. But," Andre says, "I don't want to lose everything that I have gained so far."

But for Shirley and Andre, every day brings new temptations. I've only known Shirley for a week and she already considers me a close friend. At least, that is what she

said when she called me and asked me for money. First, Shirley said that she needed the money for tampons. So, I bought her some tampons. Then, she said she needed the money from transportation to and from work.

When I told her that I would take her wherever she had to go, she still wanted money.

Her next excuse was cigarettes. "The director of the Dismas House advised me not to lend any money," I said. She seemed okay with my response and we talked about her life for another half hour, until she said "I want to ask you something when we're done." "Ask me now," I said, "anything at all." "How come you won't give me money?" Shirley asked. "I thought we was good friends." After explaining my position, Shirley had difficulty focusing on our interview and asked me to leave. She said she wasn't mad and she gave me a hug, but she just couldn't understand that I didn't want to contribute to her supposed nicotine addiction.

Shirley tested positive for cocaine the other day. She apologized to everyone at the Dismas House and then she headed for the PIP Shelter (Public Inebriate Program), a shelter where one can go and stay overnight even when drunk. Two days later, Andre witnessed Shirley

SCENES FROM ACADEMIC SPREE DAY...



A disapproving Seymour Wapner, founder of Academic Spree Day, examines the bold presentation. Dr. Steve explains that his faculty sponsor is Professor Spigot of Neuroscience.

also informed him that he was mandated only to remain at the Dismas House for two more weeks.

"Andre saw two truths in one day," said Dick Lathrop, director of Dismas. According to Lathrop, Andre witnessed Shirley's loss of self, of money, of home and of life to an attractive yet repulsive addiction to cocaine. At the same time, Andre's eyes were opened to the truth of possibilities and opportunities for himself and his future. On Saturday, April 12, Andre recalled feeling numb for three years of his life. He doesn't remember beating his girlfriend and he doesn't remember selling drugs to children. For Andre, those numb years seem more real than his future possibilities. "The reason why I don't do drugs is because I'm weak and I know once won't be enough."

Andre also wants to stay clean for his children. He has two little boys, Joshy and Giovanni, who live with his ex-girlfriend, Michelle. When he isn't with them, he desperately misses their hugs, tickles, kisses, spins, tag games, and even the whining. "My boys keep me clean," said Andre. "They know where I've been. They know what I've done to their mother and they know that I am trying to get better. Their mom used to tell them I was dead," said Andre. "But, now that I've been doing so well, she tells them the good stuff." •

[Author's Note: The Dismas House began through the efforts of college students. If you are interested in being a positive role model for Dismas House residents, please contact Dick Lathrop at 799-9389.]

SCENES FROM ACADEMIC SPREE DAY...



A pretentious Dr. Steve adjusts the voltage ratio on the oscilloscope. An anxious audience looks on in wonder.

in "her same clothes, drunk and totally gone." Just minutes after witnessin Shirley as destitute, abandoned and alone with just her bottle, Andre was told that all of his cases of assault and battery had been Dismased. His parole officer