

## Why We Wouldn't Make It in The Movies

by [Richard McCarthy](#)

A while back, a friend of mine approached me. His son, he said, was going before the judge soon on a drug charge, and was looking at doing some time. My friend was seeking information about what his son could expect. He was concerned about his kid, as parents are. I told him some things that I thought would be beneficial for him to know, and that were appropriate for me to pass along to a "civilian" - personal property policy; physical conditions of confinement; etc.

Shortly afterward, my friend contacted me for a second time. Again he was seeking information, but it seemed as if whatever I told him wasn't answering his concerns. I wondered why I couldn't seem to hit the spot.

Finally, it hit me! What he was probably really worried about was rape and assaults by other inmates, and assaults by staff. When I asked him if that was really what was on his mind, what he was really probing about, he confirmed that it was.

It occurred to me that I so took for granted that we did not run an institution that fostered or tolerated rapes and assaults, that I thought that it went without saying.

I reassured him and told him that I'd never work at an institution that allowed, directly or tacitly, rape or assault; that his son might get himself in a fight or two, but our correctional officers would quickly intercede in a professional manner, trained through policy and procedure to use no undue force. I also told him that those who sought to prey on other inmates were prosecuted through our Criminal Investigation Unit to the full extent of the law.

Then someone sent me a book to read. It was Tom Wolfe's novel, "A Man In Full," and a good deal of it involved Wolfe's description of a really (or surreally) bestial prison, where rape and assault were the norm. It hit me again that I wouldn't work at such a place for a moment; that I wouldn't be an apologist for such evil. I sent the person who sent me the book a forty-two page report from Mass. Inc., a prestigious Eastern Massachusetts think tank, in which the author kept pointing to the Hampden County Correctional Center as a leader in sensible, progressive, effective corrections.

I might also have written that we received four "A-pluses" for four different levels of security in our American Correctional Association audit, the first county correctional institution ever to be so honored; or that the American Correctional Association evaluator said he would run out of superlatives when describing our institution, because of our decorum, respect by and to staff, cleanliness, and positive, productive climate; or that the leader of a delegation from the Center for Crime, Communities and Culture of the prestigious Soros Foundation, the nation's second leading philanthropy, said of our institution: "I never expected to find a jail like this in America." I referred in the letter to the Hampden County Correctional Center as the "Harvard of slammers, as it were."

All of this brought home to me anew how I work at a special place, if only in its dissimilarity to the stereotypical, "Grade B" movie sadistic, brutish, corrupt image that people have of a jail. There will always be those who, left to their own devices, will prey on those that they perceive to be weaker than themselves. But at Hampden County we have a ruling ethos of "strength reinforced with decency; firmness dignified with fairness." We also take it upon ourselves to provide the tools and directions to those who seek to build a law-abiding life. This combination of unwavering and ethical professionalism in our security role and an extensive and intensive pro-active "corrective" effort is our genius and our accomplishment. It is why we are, perhaps not even arguably, the best correctional institution in the land. It is why we are a A-plus reality, not a "Grade B" movie.

Corrections is an "uncool," "unpraised" endeavor. It is not, and may never be, impressive to say that you work "at the jail." Part of this has to do with the stereotypical way that jails and prisons are portrayed in entertainment and media, and part of this has to do with the way some jails and prisons have more to do with man's inhumanity to man than with criminal justice professionalism.

Those of us who work at the Hampden County Correctional Center are practitioners of the adage "anything worth doing is worth doing well."

Although, come to think of it, in this case the adage might more properly read: "anything worth doing is worth doing in a manner so that those who are seeking to build the optimal institutions in our society are pointing to us to emulate."

Or, to put it simply, in the difficult and "unglorious" business of corrections, we are the best.

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