

It's the Subtle Things...

by Dee Farmer

As the saying goes, it's the little things that hurt the most sometimes. The big things: no access to medications and treatments, inadequate medical care, etc. All of these seemingly insurmountable atrocities have caused pain in the

lives of quite a few, if not all, prisoners living with HIV/AIDS, their families and friends. Indeed, these mammoth inequities have proven murderous for prisoners with HIV/AIDS. But there are some subtle things that will send a prisoner living with AIDS to his/her grave just as fast!

Recently, I had the blest privilege of meeting Angel Colon, a prisoner transferred from the federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois to the Federal Prison Medical Center. For those of you who are not familiar with "maxi-maxi," Marion, a little history is in order.

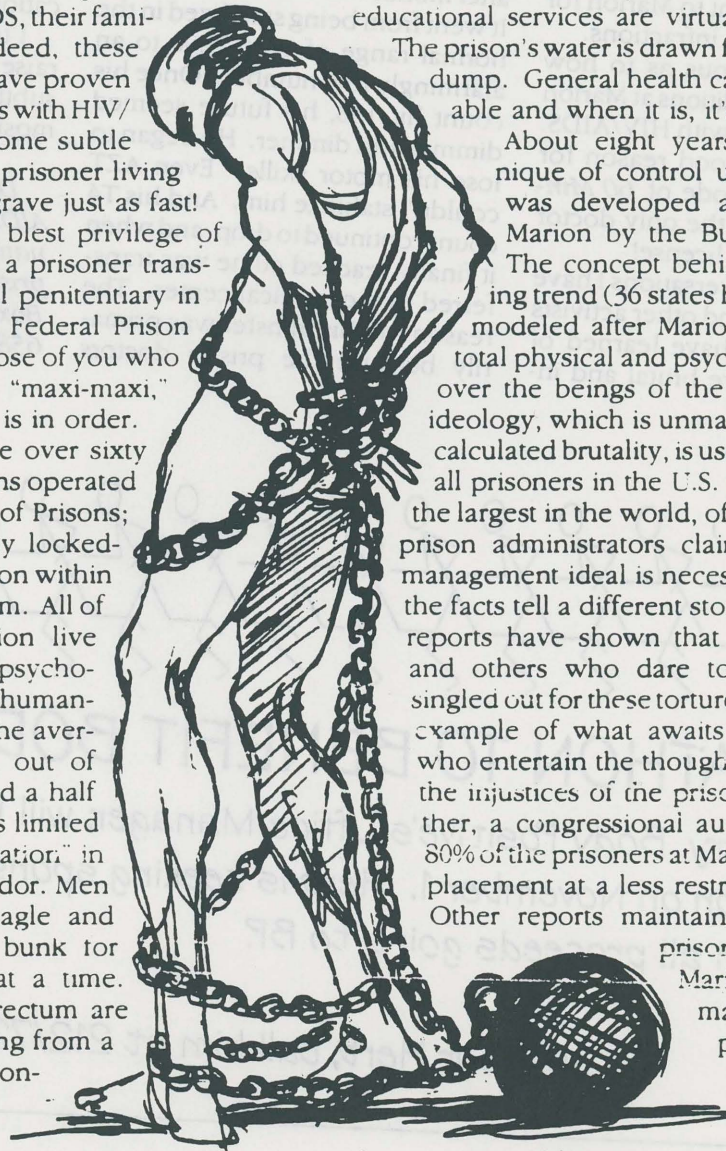
Marion is one of the over sixty federal penal institutions operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons; however, it is the only locked-down, control unit prison within the federal prison system. All of the prisoners at Marion live under physically and psychologically brutal and dehumanizing conditions. On the average, prisoners are let out of their cells only one and a half hours a day, and that is limited to a shower and "recreation" in the immediate cell corridor. Men are chained spread eagle and naked to a concrete bunk for hours or even days at a time. Finger probes of the rectum are standard when returning from a hospital or court. No contact visits are allowed — no prisoner can

touch or be touched by a loved one. Work and educational services are virtually non-existent.

The prison's water is drawn from a toxic waste dump. General health care is rarely available and when it is, it's inadequate.

About eight years ago, the technique of control unit management was developed and instituted at Marion by the Bureau of Prisons. The concept behind this burgeoning trend (36 states have built prisons modeled after Marion) is to exercise total physical and psychological control over the beings of the prisoners. This ideology, which is unmatched in terms of calculated brutality, is used as an attack on all prisoners in the U.S. prison system — the largest in the world, of course. Though prison administrators claim this atrocious management ideal is necessary for security, the facts tell a different story. For example, reports have shown that political leaders and others who dare to speak out are singled out for these torture chambers, as an example of what awaits those prisoners who entertain the thoughts of challenging the injustices of the prison systems. Further, a congressional audit revealed that 80% of the prisoners at Marion qualified for placement at a less restrictive institution.

Other reports maintain that numerous prisoners are sent to Marion for writing too many lawsuits, for protesting the brutality of the prison system, or angering



Phil Graziano

prison officials in some other way.

The inhumane conditions at Marion were further evidenced when Amnesty International condemned it for violating virtually every one of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. And, in their 1991 Report on Prison Conditions In the United States, Human Rights Watch cited conditions at Marion and its' progenies as "the most troubling aspect of the human rights situation in the U.S. prisons..."

Angel [REDACTED], the prisoner I met from Marion, is living with AIDS. He tested HIV antibody positive three or four years ago, while in another federal prison. Subsequently, he was sent to Marion for non-violent prison infractions.

I was very curious as to how treatment and conditions at Marion affected prisoners with HIV/AIDS. Indeed, there is good reason for concern! An episode of *60 Minutes* revealed that the only doctor at Marion had no license!

During the conversations I have had with Angel, and other activists and prisoners, I have learned of conditions that are brutal and in-

humane beyond imagination. I cannot fathom any individual, much less one living with HIV/AIDS, surviving these horrid conditions. The entire institution is in a state of psychological and physical warfare — guards against inmates, inmates against guards, inmates against each other. Every day is equal to living in a war zone. Guard wield night sticks, shields and other combat gear. Prisoners are handcuffed and shackled for every move within the prison. Stabbing, fights, attacks and other forms of assault is the norm. Some prisoners even shower in their tennis shoes, prepared to flee or ward off an attacker.

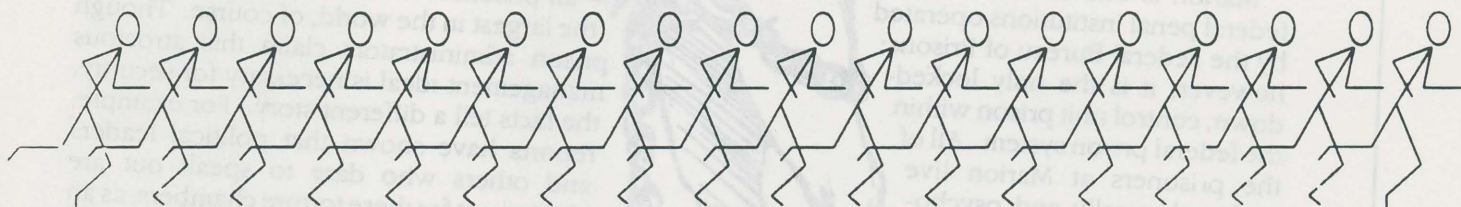
Angel's T4 count dropped month after month while he was at Marion. It went from being stabilized in the normal range of 1000-1200 to an alarmingly low number. Once his count hit 168, his future seemed dimmer and dimmer. He began to lose his motor skills. Even AZT couldn't stabilize him. And his T4 count continued to drop, and when it finally reached 40 he was transferred to the medical center. The reason for this transfer was primarily because the prison doctors

were baffled by the nose dive course with T4 count took.

Some may argue, as the prison administrators do, that being infected with HIV inevitably leads to deterioration in health, and ultimately to death. But, I tell you the medical center has been having an influx of prisoners from Marion. It's difficult to say how many were HIV infected. But it certainly doesn't take an AIDS expert to know that any person living with HIV/AIDS and being subject to depressive, horrid, abusive, antagonistic conditions will inevitably, as a direct result of those conditions, suffer progression in HIV infection, and increased susceptibility to opportunistic infection and other HIV-related complications.

I tell you, those big things sure raise a lot of fuss, but it's the most subtle things that can hurt you the most!

Dee Farmer writes regularly on AIDS and prison issues. To join the national protest against control unit prisons, write Ms. Farmer at P.O. Box 4000, Springfield, Missouri 65808.



MARATHON TO BENEFIT BODY POSITIVE

Herb Perry, Body Positive's Office Manager, will be running the NYC Marathon on November 1. Herb is seeking sponsors to support his run, with all proceeds going to BP.

To sponsor Herb, call him at 212/[REDACTED]