

On The Inside Looking Out

A True Story About a Camper's Family Problems, Gang-Related Murder, and Life in Prison

by Greg Cronin

" . . . Greg, at the risk of losing your respect, I must tell you I am serving twenty years for manslaughter"

That quote was in a six-page, handwritten letter, dated July 1991. The day I received the letter was like every other busy camp morning with staff questions and camper problems so the mail had to wait until the morning rush subsided. Sometime before lunch, I began sorting through the stack determining what needed my immediate attention. To my surprise, I saw a letter from a former camper who had been away from camp for two years.

As I began to read, tears came to my eyes. My hand went over my mouth, and my heart started beating faster. I immediately sat down and read, and re-read, every unbelievable word. The devastating news of his crime was almost too much to imagine. How could a former camper, counselor-in-training (CIT), and junior counselor be involved in a gang-related murder? How could things have gone so wrong so fast?

A Complex Story

The complexity of this story began nineteen years ago when a thirteen-year-old boy named John walked into camp with a Texas-sized chip on his shoulder. He was attending camp for the first time with his older brother, Steve, who was also here for the first time. The two boys couldn't have been any more different. Steve was well liked by his group and quickly formed a wonderful relationship with his counselor. John, on the other hand, adjusted pretty well but was quick to act out, blame others, and was a pro at testing limits.

We had some recurring problems over the two years John was a camper, but his heart was always in the right place. His anger was related to several things including parental divorce, living in two states with two sets of rules, feeling misunderstood, and following in his brother's footsteps. However, if his schedule was carefully planned and he was not overwhelmed, John could be quite helpful — especially when he worked with horses. Because I believed he wanted to make significant contributions to camp, I encouraged him to apply for the CIT program.

During his years as a CIT and first-year junior counselor, his behavior showed steady signs of improvement. The staff was quite proud of his progress and looked forward to his returning as a second-year junior counselor. Although he was planning to return for his second year and had completed all the pre-orientation paperwork, he made an office visit to inform me he would be unable to work. In our long discussion, I learned that because of a parental request to make more money, he was going to seek a higher paying job elsewhere. This is where I lost track of him until I got the letter.

And the letter explained what happened to his life. After returning home to Texas, he had trouble finding a job, and school became a distant memory. During the day, while his mom worked, he wandered the street.

He found staying out late at night and/or not coming home soon took the place of normal life. Eventually ill-advised friendships were made, and he became interested in joining a gang.

A Turn for the Worse

During his first day in the gang, he was getting something to eat at a Burger King when members from a rival gang grabbed his girlfriend and held a knife to her throat. The assailant then publicly groped her and made some lewd comments. They threatened to stab her if he, or his fellow gang member, tried to help her. Eventually she was freed, and they raced back to get more help from other gang members.

Three members, including John, went back to the Burger King area. One of them brought a gun and it was lying on the front seat. The other gang was spotted at the end of a long side street. They stopped the car and as they got out John grabbed the gun, turned, and fired. The shot was almost 300 feet and unfortunately killed the rival gang member. Police later said a skilled marksman would have trouble making that shot.

After reading this, I was shaken and confused. What was I supposed to do? After a few days of soul searching I decided to find out as much as I could about the situation. As I told him at the time, "Just because you are in prison and not at camp, I am still your camp director." It was up to me to provide nonfamily guidance and continuous moral support by using the knowledge I had gained by working with him at camp.

Believing in Good Despite the Bad

Over the next several years, John and I wrote several times, and we each agreed to help the situation. He was going to enroll in classes to get his GED and then take college courses in psychology. I was going to write the parole board and stay in contact with his brother Steve. The parole board would not relent because of several factors — the severity of the crime, the past history of other convicts who were released early, and local politics.

My first real sign of optimism came in 1998 during the ACA's national conference in Dallas. Six months prior to the conference, I worked with prison officials to get permission to visit him. The day before I left, I got word that my name had been cleared for an hour of supervised visitation. Steve picked me up at the hotel, and we drove down to the federal penitentiary. After being searched twice, I finally saw John. He left camp as a sixteen-year-old, and I was now meeting a twenty-six-year-old grown man whose only understanding of adult life was prison.

To my relief, John handled our visit with maturity and self-introspection. We spoke of how camp had changed, and we even shared a few funny stories. The conversation eventually shifted towards his situation, and we had a very candid discussion about his mental attitude, the true sorrow he felt for his crime, some intricacies of gang life, the feelings of his victim's family, and what about eventually being in the free world. In our discussions, I reminded him that gang-related crimes can go either way, and it very easily could have been him or his girlfriend who were killed. He agreed and confessed had he not been incarcerated, he too would likely be dead by now.

He asked me about the campers in his former group, the counselors, and of course, the horses. As we talked, I realized camp created most of his positive memories. As a free person, his social experiences ended at eighteen. John referred to me as "you people" (meaning those of us who are free) and to all other things as "on the outside." Clearly by how he spoke, camp was the single most positive influence in his life.

Inspiration for Future Camp Leaders

I came back to the hotel and cried. My heart was broken, and my mind was at a loss for ideas on how to help. Then it happened! In reflecting on my visit, I began to realize how much he was teaching me. He was providing me with all the information I needed to make a difference, and I almost missed it. My task was to translate what I experienced and put it into a forum which could benefit others. How ironic was that? He is the one doing time for a mistake, yet he is providing me with the inspiration to help future camp leaders.

John's ability to articulate his thoughts revealed the maturity of his growth. The same positive qualities I saw in him as a CIT were still there after many years in prison. Some were masked by years of emotional neglect, but I could tell his fundamental desire to be a contributing member of society was strong and intact. He took this seemingly insignificant moment in time and taught me it was okay to use his misfortune to help guide others.

When it comes to the task of teaching leadership development, John's story is a powerful reminder that everyone has the responsibility to treat each day as if we have to create a lasting memory. At a minimum, leaders should create a plan, which enforces the importance of making good choices through personal accountability. Camp is the ideal setting to implement age-appropriate activities that test social situations in a controlled environment. When carefully implemented, this form of parallel process learning will have dramatic results on each camper's ability to rationalize their positive impact on personal responsibilities.

Creating urgency in staff to cherish each moment with the campers is practically impossible. Most counselors and specialists do not have the life experience to understand the long lasting implications of their job. Had John's counselor known he was going to lose almost fifteen years of his life to a violent crime, don't you think he would have tried to make each day special? It is difficult to explain to staff exactly what validates their efforts. To be successful, you must use examples they understand. Unfortunately, tragic experiences are often very memorable for people and if some good can come from John's mistake, then the lesson will not be lost. Use his ability to separate his crime from an unrelenting desire to make positive contributions to society, and then be passionate about his example.

The key to John's message is not taking for granted the teaching opportunities camp has to offer. Through activities, camp staff instruct fundamental skills that pertain to each specialty area. These abilities are demonstrated each day through camper participation and staff guidance. Along the way, the process of building life skills is established through multi-layered learning. After spending a short time with John, it was evident he remembered the importance of the group development process, which was astonishing given his time in such an impersonal environment.

Forever a Camp Director

The story, however, is not over. After fourteen years, five hearings, five letters from his camp director, a change in the political structure of the prison review board, and proof of solid family support, John was granted parole this past March. He was given a reduced sentence because of his excellent record and willingness to cooperate with prison officials. While in prison, he completed his GED, got a B.S. in psychology, successfully completed a nine-month cooperative program on the prison's working farm and mastered many skills in the woodshop. After he was released, he hugged his mom and his brother, and then he called me. After fourteen years of prison he wanted to hear my voice to let me know he was finally free. He thanked me over and over for all that I had done. I know I didn't do anything other responsible camp directors wouldn't do when confronted with similar circumstances.

We talked about his plans and what is next. Being in the outside world is a scary place but it's especially daunting when you have missed all the technological advances over the past fourteen years. He knows how much I am indebted to him for all he has taught me. I have incorporated his story in staff and CIT training sessions with the express purpose of using his inspiration to help others. It is a lesson that has taken me nineteen years to learn, and I hope it helps you to understand the unique relationship you have with your campers. You have a gift in being able to teach the future leaders of tomorrow, use your time wisely.

In the meantime, we are working on getting John acclimated to his new surroundings, and he is applying to learn a trade. Amazingly, he retains some of his team building skills and is excited to re-establish interpersonal relationships on the outside world. I told him I expected him to do his best, and I wanted a report as soon as he is accepted into trade school. He didn't question me; he knows why I'm asking . . . I'm forever his camp director.

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