

H A R L A N   R I C H A R D S

January 23, 2012

Stanley Correctional Institution  
A Little Taste of Prison Life

I would bet that Wisconsin has the safest prison system in the country - something to be proud of. But I would also bet that this prison in Wisconsin - Stanley - has some of the most ridiculous rules imaginable. Let me tell you about 4 incidents I have experienced since the start of the new year.

1. How Many Shoes Are Too Many?

The rule on shoes for prisoners is that we can have two personal pair and one state pair (we are required to wear state shoes on visits and trips outside of the prison). I have a crippled leg from a motorcycle accident which occurred when I was a teen and must wear special shoes with a lift. My ankle is badly damaged with little movement. The lift must be exactly right or I experience debilitating pain. The state must provide me with special shoes and after 2 years my shoes are in need of replacing. I requested new shoes and after some delay I was taken to an orthotics place to get shoes. I got the shoes and came back to prison where I was told I had to turn in my old shoes to get the new shoes. Fine, except at the fitting I was unable to do more than try the shoes on and don't know if the lift is correct. I need to have the new and old shoes for a few weeks so I can break them in and determine whether the lift is correct. I can't give up the old shoes until the new shoes are broken in and have the correct lift. I explained the problem and was told I could not have the new ones until I turned in the old ones. No exceptions.

I pointed out that I still had a pair of shoes given to me 3 years earlier that I had never been able to wear and that I would trade them in for the new ones. Nope, not good enough. I had tried to turn those shoes in twice before and was told I had to keep them. This time, I was told I had to turn them in immediately but could not have the new shoes unless I turned in the only pair of shoes I know I can wear without pain.

The officer became very angry at my refusal to give up my only wearable pair of shoes. He waited until a certain officer came on duty in my housing unit and had me called to the property department while that officer "searched" my cell. To me, it looked like a retaliatory search - something not authorized by any policy known to me.

I should mention that although prisoners are allowed to have two pair of personal shoes, I have none. The catalogs which I must order from do not sell shoes I can wear, and even if they did, I cannot afford to buy shoes or pay to have a lift installed. This brings us to the second rule.

2. A Belt, A Belt, My Kingdom For A Belt.

I have a leather belt that I made back in the 1990s while at Fox Lake when leather hobby was still allowed. This belt has accompanied me to numerous prisons over the last 15 or so years and I was allowed to have it when I arrived at Stanley. But during the search noted above, the officer took my belt and declared it contraband. I was told to file a grievance to get it back. I filed the grievance citing the well-established policy DAI 309.20.03, sub. II, i, which states that any personal property item possessed prior to September 2006 is grandfathered, i.e., even if it is banned under a new rule I can still keep it. My grievance was sent back to me and I was told I had to write to the property sergeant to ask for my belt back before I could file a grievance. So I did, was told "no" and refiled my grievance. Which brings me to the third rule.

3. Paper Clips, Rubber Bands, & Clear Plastic Bags, Oh My!

The officer who searched my cell gave me a serious talking-to and informed me that paper clips, rubber bands and clear plastic bags are not allowed. Say what? I have been in prison since 1984. In all of the prisons on which I have been housed in the last 27 years - including maximum security - I have never had anyone tell me with a straight face that I could not have these items - all of which are pervasive throughout every prison. I was so incredulous that I wrote to the security director to ask him for a copy of the rule prohibiting paper clips. Thus far, I have not gotten a response from him.

I thought I had enough excitement for the new year and that things were going to settle down to the same only dull routine. But it was not to be. Which brings us to the final policy.

4. A Clipboard By Any Other Name . . .

I bought a clipboard while I was in maximum security - Waupun - back in the 1980s. I've carted that clipboard around with me for almost 25 years and most assuredly it comes under

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the grandfather clause - or so I would think. But a different officer, walking past my cell during count, saw me holding the clipboard and notified me that clipboards were not allowed and confiscated it. She told me to - wait for it - file a grievance if I didn't agree with her decision. So I did and guess what? It was returned to me and I was told to write to the property sergeant to ask for it back before my grievance would be accepted. The funny thing about this is that hundreds of prisoners at Stanley have clipboards or drawing boards and they can still be ordered through the hobby department. In fact, my cell mate has a clipboard which the officer did not see.

All 4 incidents are still developing so it's hard to say what the final outcome will be. Will I get the new shoes? Will my belt and clipboard be returned? How about those paperclips?

Wisconsin is spending a billion dollars a year on corrections. How much do you think they are spending on staff wages to address these 4 incidents: the searches, the processing and returning of grievances, answering my letters to the property sergeant and reprocessing my grievances when I refile them?

These 4 incidents are petty and inconsequential. It doesn't really matter whether I'm allowed to keep my belt or clipboard and who cares if one crippled old guy has to limp around in broken down old shoes? The real question is, what is wrong with a prison system that has so many resources and so much staff time that it can afford to squander them on such meaningless harassment?

I am incredulous, more than anything. To think that in a time of scarcity, budget shortfalls, massive cuts to education and many of our citizens going hungry and without medical care, that a state agency can operate in such a wasteful, Byzantine manner is appalling.

Medium security prisons were not like this when I last served time in them 10 years ago, and the work release centers do not operate like this. I really can't say whether Stanley is an anomaly or representative of the current state of Wisconsin prisons. I can tell you one thing, I never would have believed it had I not experienced it.