

THE HYPOCRISY OF BULLYING

Sunday

November 10, 2013

A&E has a TV show called "Beyond Scared Straight." For those who have never seen it before, they take these youngsters, some as young as 11, and put them into adult prisons in an attempt to "scare them straight." Everyone, from the inmates serving life sentences to the officers hired to retain order, gets involved, all getting into the faces of these kids and doing their best to traumatize these youngsters into changing their ways. What bothers me about these programs isn't that someone's trying to get these kids on the right path, it's the way they're going about doing it and the message that way sends.

Take the episode I'm watching right now. These two young girls, ages 13 and 15, are brought into a women's prison. Immediately upon walking in, the females of the facility start yelling about which one they want in their cell, the implication being that they want to have sex with them. When order is restored, the officer makes an announcement, stating that the 15-year old stole her mother's car to go pick up her boyfriend, leaving her younger siblings behind, after which she informs everyone that she's no longer a virgin, having already given up her "goodies." The officer then informs everyone that the 13-year old posted naked pictures of herself on Facebook, and at the conclusion of the introductions and "criminal" history, the female inmates are "set free" to begin the task of "scaring them straight." The next thing you know, these poor girls are surrounded by inmates demanding to see their "goodies," informing them that they're going to be their "bitch" before the end of the night, etc.

In another episode, the officers were cheek to cheek with some of the kids, yelling and screaming at 11 and 12-year old children about how miserable and worthless they and their actions were. Several of the officers even smacked their food off of the table, immediately demanding the children to clean the mess up. While each person's actions, inmate and officer, might have been slightly different, without exception, their methods were all the same. Intimidation was the name of the game, and they'd use any method, short of actually putting their hands on the kids, to accomplish it, in the hopes that the kids were so traumatized that they left, permanently changed through trauma, hence the term "scared straight."

In theory, it's an excellent concept. You take young, impressionable children and expose them to the harsh realities of life behind bars. The hope is that these youngsters will see the consequences of a life of crime, and adjust accordingly. However, the reality of the situation is that programs like these, especially when done in such a public manner, send the wrong message, that it's okay to be a bully, so long as the ends justify the means.

I've been on all side of the equation here, so I've got a pretty good idea of what I'm talking about. As a child, I went through a rebellious period, where I was running away, trading my prescription Ritalin for toys, running away and even trying to commit suicide. Despite being innocent of many of the crimes I was accused of, I nevertheless recognize that it's my actions, and my actions alone, that put me behind bars, finishing a lengthy prison term. Finally, although I've never been provided with an opportunity to meet my own child, I have been involved in a number of relationships with women who had children of their own. During this time, I was often called upon to parent youngsters who were in the process of rebelling. So again, I've seen things from all sides of the equation here.

With that said, I think that working with inmates is an excellent idea for children to learn the true consequences of their actions, but without the intimidation aspect. Therefore, if my child ever needed an intervention, or a "reality check," I'd make sure to find a convict who could work with me without the need to use intimidation tactics. Someone who'd learned from their mistakes, albeit a bit too late to avoid incarceration. Someone who was educated and compassionate, who wanted to teach a child from their mistakes, and to make indirect amends at the same time.

So what do you think? Do you think the use of intimidation in these scared straight programs is acceptable, despite the mixed messages it sends about bullying? Or do you think that there's a better way of going about this? Perhaps you've thought of something I haven't. Either way, I'm curious to hear your point-of-view, even if it doesn't coincide with mine.

As always, I can be reached by leaving a post here on the blog, at my e-mail shawnlperrot@hotmail.com or snail mail at the address below:

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