

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

February 10, 2015

How Much Will \$7.00 Buy?

Sometimes prison officials run what they call "fundraisers" where they offer us something we can't normally get at an inflated price. The extra money is always used to benefit some organization outside of the prison.. This requirement is the only reason fundraisers are allowed. With the shortage of money (and the lack of opportunities to earn money) you would think that it would make more sense to hold fundraisers to purchase items which would benefit prisoners. In this era of "get tough on crime" and punishment rather than rehabilitation, any prison administrator who suggested that prisoners be allowed to benefit from a fundraiser would soon be demoted or fired.

In February, Stanley prison is holding a Subway fundraiser. We are each allowed to purchase two 12" subs for \$7.00 each (tax included). I have no idea what subs normally cost but I assume that it is less than \$7.00; the extra amount we are charged will go toward the local special olympics.

For most of us, the question is not whether we want to buy a sub - just about everybody in her wants something to eat other than prison food - but rather what are we willing to give up in order to buy a sub (some guys have piles of money and can easily buy their two-sub limit without giving it a second thought).

What will \$7.00 buy?

- 11 stamped envelopes at 60¢ each
- 1 - 8 oz. bag of Folger's Instant coffee at \$6.71
- 1 bottle of megamax vitamins at \$7.18
- 3 boxes of granola bars at \$6.27
- Deodorant, shampoo & conditioner at \$6.95
- 1 typewriter cartridge at \$6.56 (plus 5.5% tax)
- 1 t-shirt at \$4-7 each
- 1 - 6 pack of tube socks at \$5.78 (plus 5.5% tax)
- 1 prisoner's co-pay for seeking medical attention \$7.50

For people in the real world, \$7.00 is less than an hour's wages at minimum wage. A pack of cigarettes or a trip to Starbucks for coffee and a muffin costs more than \$7.00 (at least I think they do - after 30 years in prison I can only speculate). Anyway, the point is that it's chump change for most people.

But in prison it is a major expenditure, worthy of much thought. Do I really want to forego all those other options for the chance to eat a sub? Perhaps I do - if I determine that I can afford to spend \$7.00 without running short on hygiene supplies or vitamins. On the other hand, think of how many blogs I could type if I bought another typewriter cartridge . . . .

The problem, as I see it, is not the \$7.00 cost of the sub, but the prison system which is designed to ensure that prisoners are incapable of supporting themselves no matter how willing or capable of doing so. It reminds me of communist Russia - USSR - where the communist leaders lived in opulence while the proletariat was forced to endure a lifetime of hardship. The system was set up to make it impossible for the average citizen to earn enough money to buy what he or she needed, forcing them to suffer and make needless sacrifices. Once glasnost opened up the Soviet economy, there was plenty for everyone.

In the same manner, if the DOC would abolish its policies which prevent us from earning money, the hardship in Wisconsin prisons would end.