

NO ARMS  
Saturday  
January 24, 2015

I've been incarcerated longer than I'd like to admit, much longer, and just when I think I've seen it all, the prison system proves me wrong, but this last time really takes stupidity to a whole new plateau.

There's a guy on the yard known simply as "Hooks." The reason for his nickname becomes clear from the moment you first lay eyes upon him. From birth, he's has no hand, arm or shoulder whatsoever on the right-hand side of his body, and as far as the left hand side's concerned, it's really not much better. All he has is a tiny stump, maybe a few inches long, with 2 partial fingers. The entire appendage measures a little more than a regular sized hotdog, and it's barely enough for him to operate his prosthetic arms, a strangely shaped contraption consisting of 2 hooks connected by a fiberglass set of shoulder pads, all linked to a small series of levers allowing him to partially manipulate his hooks.

I've seen people in the outside world using far less to justify their disabilities as justification for failing, for not even making the attempt, or for giving up on life in general. I've also seen guys in here with no disability whatsoever using every excuse they can think of to justify the same things. However, while there are allot of things that Hookss finds it physically impossible to do, he refuses to allow his disability to completely stop him. Even without arms, and in an environment such as this, he somehow seems to find ways to survive, against all odds.

For instance, without any arms, it's impossible to write a letter, but I've seen Hooks painstakingly hunt and peck away on his typewriter with that tiny little stump he calls an arm. It might take him 10 times as long to something half as long, but at least he makes the attempt. Without any arms, it's impossible to brush his hair, which reaches down past his shoulders, but rather than allowing that to stop him, he had a hairbrush taped to the wall of his cell, where he runs his head up and down against it, much like a cat seeking to pet himself on the leg of a chair. Without any arms, brushing his teeth is an impossibility, or so you'd think, but somehow, Hooks was able to convince the prison authorities to allow him to have an electric toothbrush, which he's taped to his desk. When he needs to brush his teeth, he simply uses his tiny stump to put a glob of toothpaste on it, turns it on, and than puts his mouth on it, almost as if he was performing oral sex on it.

I've now known Hooks for more than 8-years, during which time I've watched him fight hard to overcome the physical limitations that life without arms can bring about, particularly, as I mentioned earlier, in an environment such as this, an environment in which there's no such thing as pity, where people are forbidden by official rules and regulations from doing certain things to help out. His most recent struggles include what I can only describe as complete and utter stupidity on the part of people who are completely without morals or compassion. Their most recent inflictions of sheer stupidity include telling him that he can no longer possess an electric toothbrush, that instead, if he wants to brush his teeth, he must use a regular toothbrush, just like the rest of the inmate population. I don't know about you, but I have hands and arms, and yet I still find myself missing areas in my mouth from time to time, so how in the hell is he supposed to provide adequate care for his teeth, without the arms, hands and fingers that so many of us take for granted?

Another fight he's engaged in involves the medical personnel here at the California Men's Colony (CMC) East Facility. He went to see them some time ago, and the doctor wanted to perform a physical examination on him. When Hooks asked for help removing his shirt, the doctor took offense and wrote him up, claiming that Hooks was attempting to "manipulate" staff, in this case, trying to convince staff to do something Hooks was perfectly capable of.

Before I go any further, perhaps I should explain something about the shirts, his shirt in particular. At one point-in-time, we used to have shirts that buttoned up, but about 10 years ago, maybe a bit longer, the prison decided to make the switch to shirts that you put on by pulling them over your head. For Hooks, he wasn't impacted though. He'd already received authorization from the prison to have his shirts customized, putting a zipper down the front. While he still can't put it on or take it off, it's certainly alot easier for someone else to provide him with assistance, creating a win/win for everyone. That being said, how's a man without any arms or hands supposed to unzip his shirt, take it off, put it back on and zip it back up? The poor guy can't even scratch his chest, and you expect him to zip and unzip himself?

Rather than simply providing him with the assistance he'd requested, they chose to issue him a write-up, which could potentially hurt his chances for an early release. How stupid is that? What kind of ignorance are we dealing with here? When Hooks filed an inmate appeal on this in an attempt to have the write-up removed from his file, they took it a step further, claiming that Hooks was lying about being unable to put on or remove his shirt without any assistance, that they'd seen him do so.

What the...? Seriously? You've seen him put his shirt on and take it off, without any assistance? And just how in the hell did he manage that? Remember, there's a zipper running down the entire front of his shirt, a zipper which is physically impossible for him to even reach because of the short length of his stump, let alone zip and unzip the full length of his shirt.

Their stupidity reminds me of an incident I see with him one day. We were in the pill line, waiting to be issued our medication. He was called up to the window, and, as usual, his identification card was clipped to the collar of his shirt. When asked for his ID, he reached down with his mouth, snagged it between his teeth, and held it up to the window so the nurse could see it, where she promptly got an attitude, saying "what's the matter, you ain't got any arms?"

Let's just say that Hooks was allot nicer than I would have been in that situation. Rather than getting upset and responding back in kind, he simply shrugged his shoulder and said "no maam, actually I don't." Talk about opening up your mouth and inserting your foot, the look on her face was priceless.

These incidents represent a fraction of a percent of what Hooks has had to deal with during his incarceration, and sadly, this is the **rule**, not the exception. This sort of thing happens all of the time, not just with Hooks, but with everyone who comes through these walls. Stupidity is the name of the game. While it's true that there are plenty of decent people who work in the system trying to make a positive difference, there are far more people working in the system undoing all of the positive ever attempted, which should be of concern to everyone. After all, approximately 95% of us are going to be released from prison, sooner or later. While it's true that we're all adults, capable of making our own decisions and responsible for our own actions, it's just as true that our experiences in here are going to impact our rehabilitation and the way we conduct ourselves outside of prison. That being said, don't treat me like an animal for decades and then wonder why I'm trying to eat my food off the floor.

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