GIRAFFES, SCHOOL BUSES, &
PRISON LIBRARIANSHIPS
(or, "WHY DID YOU MOVE HUNDREDS OF MILES
AWAY TO BUY A CAR, BILL?")

"It's a decent place to live, but I
wouldn't want to work here."

That's the tongue-firmly-in-cheek consen-
sus at the medium-security prison where I work,
a running joke started -- as most good jokes
on the inside are -- by the cons themselves.

And how do you answer a convicted felon
when he asks you with no small amount of in-
credulity, "Why the hell would you want to work
in a place like this?" Some cons consider you
a money-grubbing opportunist, and they know how
much you make because any con worth his commit-
tment number can find out things like that,
prison being the demented Peyton Places that
they are. Others view you as a parasite,
a non-person leeching off of the misfortune of
those whom merciless Fate has sealed behind
the miles of fence and concertina wire: almost
weekly a prisoner will announce -- with all
the self-righteousness he can muster -- "You
wouldn't even have a job if it wasn't for us!"
And there is a small but vocal corps of cons
who think you're just stupid, and delight in
telling you that. As often as possible.

Coming to a decision about working in a
prison is as uncomplicated as lighting a ciga-
rette butt with a blowtorch: even after
working for the Massachusetts Department of
Corrections for 2 1/2 years, it's difficult offer-
ing a coherent rationale to the uninitiated as
to why I do what I do. My wife, parents, and
the Department head of the Graduate School of
Library and Information Science at the Univer-
sity of Pittsburgh received the same Confucian
admonishments: "Well, why does anybody do
anything?!" After writing to a friend back
home in Pennsylvania that I'd just located
and purchased a second-hand jalopy after residing
in Mass. only a week, I received the response:
"Why did you have to move hundreds of miles
away just to buy a car?"

And when I requested an internship in
prison library management, my mentor at Pitt
displayed that certain look of befuddlement
that people do when they've just sat naked on
a plate of cold spaghetti. I got my intern-
ship, though: the State Correctional Institu-
tion (SCI) at Pittsburgh, sponsored by then
senior librarian and fellow Pitt alumnus
Stephen Mallinger.

Every misguided and ill-fated crusade
receives an historical epitaph: Custer's Last
Stand, for example. With the luxury of hind-
sight, I reverently refer to my experience at
Pittsburgh "Mallinger's Prison Library Boot
Camp for the Criminally Naive." The premise
of the 10-hour-per-week, 9-month internship
was to study the information needs of the 1,600
inmates at the penitentiary. I achieved this
by:

1) Compiling a 40-page bibliography of
all reference material in the library
(I used catalogue card software
borrowed from the local library to
generate the list on my home PC);

2) Working alongside Mallinger's inmate
clers at the circulation desk and in
the law library; and

3) Continuing my collateral reading of
as much information as I could find on
prison libraries in particular and
the behavior of criminals in general:
I then composed a 15-page paper draw-
ing from these sources and my experi-
ences behind the wall.

As if to punctuate this Herculean indoc-
tration, I also observed bibliotherapy groups
held in the library; observed in-house video
production; and coordinated and participated
in a 2-day workshop addressing the information
needs of the Hispanic inmate.

The outline of the internship was struc-
turally sound, for I was able to study and
participate in all aspects of running a prison
library, specifically a prison library operat-
ing on the therapeutic model of service as
opposed to attempting to simply replicate the
look and feel of a public library. My time
inside also gave me an understanding of and
a healthy respect for the security needs of
both the library and of the institution in
which it is housed. I would recommend this
model of internship to any prison librarian
interested in ensuring that
every Wanna-Be prison librarian enrolled in
the local library school pays his dues.

A word of warning to the Wanna-Bees:
folks will never really understand your call-
ing. To illustrate: one day at SCI-
Pittsburgh, Mallinger was complaining to one
of the inmate counselors about the nuisance
civil suits filed by prisoners against the
library, and the counselor quipped: "Well,

(CONTD)
GIRAFFES, SCHOOL BUSES... (CONTD)

you're the one who wanted to grow up to be a prison librarian." The absurdity of that non-sequitur caused me to stop and reflect on what it was exactly that I was willingly and without duress or coercion getting myself into. My guess is that very few children when quizzed about career aspirations would rank "prison librarian" up there with "fireman" or "ballerina." My six-year old responded to this question at the time by confiding that she hoped to become "either a giraffe or a school bus."

If nothing else, an internship in prison library management is a litmus test of the psyche: it will tell you if you have the 3 crucial attributes for surviving in this field of librarianship. These attributes are -- in order of importance --

1) You cherish and cultivate an innate sense of the bizarre;
2) You believe unequivocally that the sun will come out tomorrow; and
3) You enjoy working in a field of librarianship which must be experienced to be understood.

--William D. Mongelli
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(4/30/89)

TEN WAYS TO HELP YOUR CHILD
BECOME A BETTER READER

1. Help your child acquire a wide range of knowledge. Go on shopping trips, walks in the park, and visits to the zoo. This builds background knowledge needed as children learn to read textbooks.

2. Talk with your child about his or her experiences. This helps children learn new words and their meanings.

3. Encourage your child to think about events. Asking your child to describe events helps him or her learn to give good descriptions and tell complete stories.

4. Read aloud to your child. This is probably the single most important activity you can do to affect reading success. It is especially important during the preschool years. The benefits of reading aloud are greatest when children participate in the activity by identifying words and letters and by talking about the story and the meaning of words.

5. Provide your child with writing materials. Writing is an important way to learn about letters and words. Children are often eager to learn how to write; encourage them by having paper, pencils and crayons in your home.

6. Encourage your child to watch TV programs that have educational value. Ask your child questions about the shows and relate what they see to experiences in real life.

7. Monitor how much TV your child watches. Watching quality TV up to 10 hours a week can have a slightly positive effect on your child's achievement. Most children who watch 20 or more hours a week of TV don't do well in school.

8. Monitor your child's school performance. Research shows that children tend to be more successful readers when their parents have an accurate view of their schoolwork. Visit your child's teacher and classroom, find out about the reading program, and participate in home-school programs.

9. Encourage your child to read independently. The amount of reading done out of school influences the level of success in school. Help your child by having plenty of books in your home and by visiting the library regularly.

10. Continue your personal involvement in your child's growth as a reader. Set a good example by reading magazines, newspapers and books. Encourage reading as a leisure time activity for the whole family.

--Parent Cues (6/89)
Plainridge Public Library
1060 Hicksville Road
Massapequa, NY 11760