

Sentenced to life in society

By Eric Steele
Guest contributor

The morning sun warmed the wooded hills, flowed over the fields of green, across the parking lot and finally met the wall of frozen concrete called Attica prison.

Seeming more durable than the half-day sun, the wall's face defiantly absorbed the heat. Beyond stood red bricks and bars, equally confident.

Down a green, windowless corridor, a group of people was gathering in Room Number Four. Harold Steele sat in a chair beside the door, greeting people as they entered. Soon he closed the door and scanned the circle of green-clad figures, smiled, and began checking off names on a list. Two volunteers sat in the circle. Their clothes were different, but in Room Number Four, they didn't seem out of place.

"Before things get rollin', I'd like to say that I made parole," a thin man said, leaning forward in his chair.

"That's good," Harold remarked, continuing to check his list.

"I got a release date."

"That's good."

"You got somethin' you want to ask Harold, Al?" someone asked the parolee-to-be.

"I guess so," Al said as he slowly rubbed his pant legs. "Harold, I'd like to know if Cephass has a place for me?"

"You want the 90 days?" Harold asked, putting his list away and looking at Al.

"Yes."

"You can handle that kind of commitment?"

"Yes."

"Should we take you based on your performance in these groups or are you going to show us something different? What are you going to turn into when they break down your cell?"

"I'm not going to turn into anything."

"Oh, you'll turn into something all right,"

Harold said. "You'll either start standing up or slither. I want to know what it's going to be."

Al sat back and crossed his arms.

"What's up?" asked a man from across the room.

"Nothin," Al answered.

"Nothing! How can you sit there all crossed and tell us, 'Nothing.' You're closing down."

"I'm not closing down. Man, you don't know nothing. Don't start painting stuff on me."

Harold leaned toward him. "Al, you are shutting down. What this man has to say to you is important, and you need to hear him. Get out here and move with your life. You are a lousy communicator and there is too much at stake for you to write him off. You like calling this place home?"

Regarding Insight and Cephass Attica

Al's story is true; however, his dialogue with counselors and fellow inmates and parolees has been reconstructed based on author Eric Steele's experience as a volunteer with Cephass Attica for nearly 18 years.

Steele, 23, is the son of Harold and Dorothy Steele, who, along with Ken Siegal, founded Cephass Attica in 1972, shortly after the uprising at Attica state prison.

The program today provides counseling to 200 inmates in six area correctional facilities, and each year provides housing, counseling and job training for an average of 35 parolees — 76 percent of whom have completed the program.

Harold Steele died in November, 1989. His wife, Dorothy, continues to serve as an associate director at Cephass. Eric Steele is completing his thesis for a master's degree in English, and plans to teach.

Photographer Bruce Strong documented Al's journey through the Cephass program for a photojournalism class at Rochester Institute of Technology.

"No."

"Well, let's get going."

"Man, you got to get better than that, because the people out there in Cephass are going to be asking you more than two questions," the other man said.

"You can't keep backing off. They're gonna want to know how you're doin', how the day went, how you're feeling, where your mind is at. In here it's easy to put people off and not lose, but out there they aren't gonna take you acting like that. Don't get me wrong, things won't get physical, people will just stop coming to check you out. Who wants to talk to someone that's just gonna lock down and mouth off?"

"Yeah, all of us haven't managed our lives too well on our own man; that's why we're wearing green," another man said. "If you can't let people get close to you, you might as well just stay here and save yourself the trouble of catching another bid."

"I'm not going to come back here."

"How are you feeling right now?" the other man asked.

"I feel all right."

"Al, you know an 'all right' is another bid. You can't put any more words on it than that?" the other man challenged. "This thing not goin' the way you thought it would go?"

"No! Not a damn thing."

"Did you picture Cephass greeting you with open arms or something?"

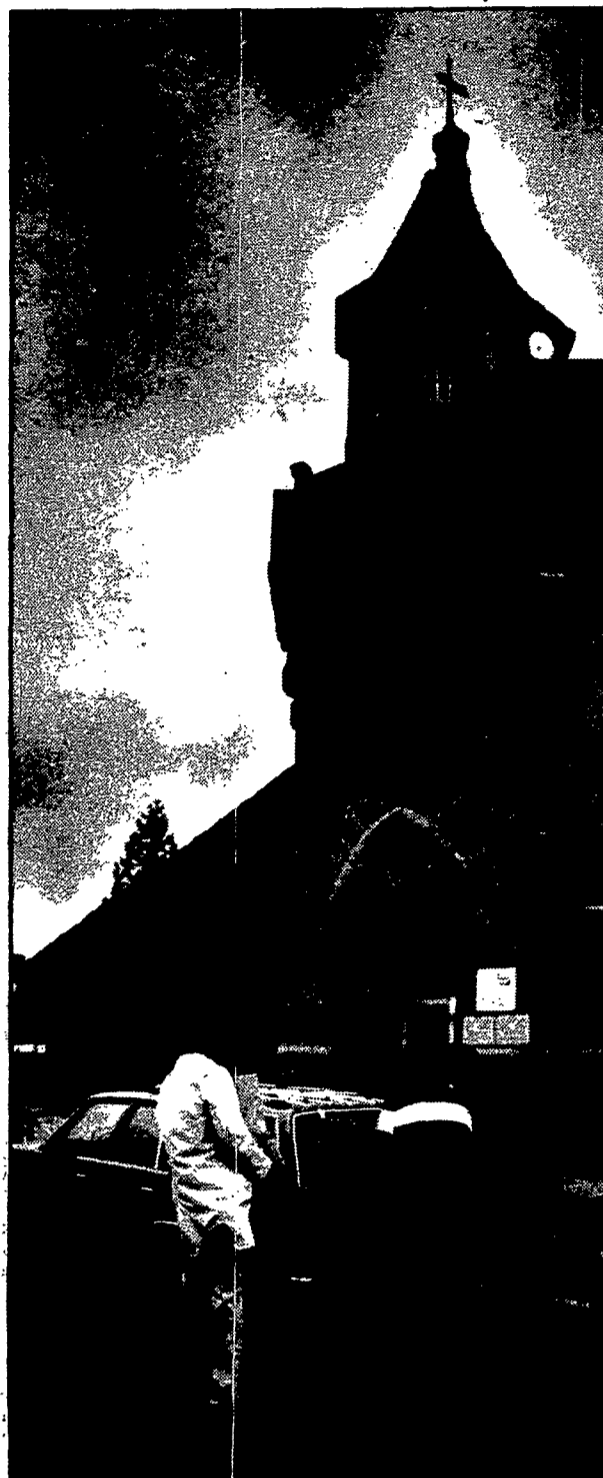
"I don't know. Something like that," Al said.

"You should know better than that. We need more than what you're giving us. Put some of your life out here," the man asked him. "Right now we're fighting harder for your life than you are. There is too much on the line. I go to the parole board in 2001, and I want Cephass to be there when I get my chance. If you go out there with one foot headed for the streets, man, you could get stupid and bring Cephass down. The way you are now, you're not worth it man."

Al clenched his jaw as the room went quiet.

"Al," Harold said. "You got a choice now. You can leave the anger alone and get to work. You got things in there and we need to see them. The conversation doesn't have to stay here, it can walk up out of this, but you got to make the steps. What do you need?"

"I don't know, Harold," Al began. "A year ago I would have said I didn't need anything. I thought I had it all together, but now I see it different. Every



Outside the walls of Attica state prison at last, Al, left, carries all his belongings in a single paper bag.



Al attends his last Cephass Attica meeting as an inmate. Counselors from Cephass conduct group meetings for 200 inmates in six Rochester-area correctional facilities.



Al punctuates his first full day of a residential program houses up to construction crew.

chance I got out there I made the wrong still the same person and if I go out there peat the same stuff. I don't want that. I change, but ..."

"But what?"

"But I don't know how to change. I began to be able to see parts of myself. want to see. They scare me. The fact th there just waiting to make me fall again. The communication in Cephass is the on can keep me out. I know that. But ... I goin' out there. I mean, it's something new. I've never lived in a family setting used to poor areas where it's easy to m. The only time I'm ever around more th of people is when I'm in the institution. isn't like that and I know it. I've never anyone. I don't know how."

"Well now, that's sounds better. Th something to work on. Would you take your house?" Harold asked the other n

"I can see he's sincere in what he sai replied.

"Yes, but he's young inside and a sh emotions."

"That's true, but I'd give him a shot

"OK. I'll check with the people back let you know next week, Al," Harold s come back ready to work, so we don't much running around to get something "I will, Harold."

Al was accepted into the Cephass resi day program, and was released from A January 27, 1988.

Day 1

"Al, you know Ken Siegal don't you

"Uh, yeah."

"It's good to see you out here, Al."

"I'll show you your room and the rest building. The bakery and offices are d live in this room and you'll be down th from Fred's room."

"OK."

"Let me fill you in on what happens day. Today's Tuesday and after I finish you around it will be close to dinner tin. Everybody starts returning from their and we gather for supper. Willie Mae the week. I'm sure you've heard of he gather as a household often, but dinner portant because it gives everyone a ch interact and talk about the day — mayl problem someone had. But anyway, d missing any dinners.

"Tonight is the Tuesday night meet continued. "We have it right here in t and everyone who is a member of the munity shows up. So there is a strange ple, but you'll find it resembles the gr. People just working out their problem "I see."

Day 21

"Morning, compatriots!" Al said. my buddy Fred? What say you take m hair curled today?"

"Didn't Ken ask you to wait awhile besides that, don't you have work?" I

"Yeah. But I really want to get it d where there is a good place. I called a time slot for me today. It's a good day

"We'll wait until it's checked out w