

Retreat offers 'resurrection' to inmates

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ATTICA — Solomon Davis knows what it's like on both sides of the bars at Attica State Correctional Facility.

Davis looked out from behind those bars while serving a sentence in the 1970s.

And from August 7-9 of this year, he looked back in from the other side as a member of a team from the Diocese of Rochester that conducted the first Residents Encounter Christ retreat to take place within the prison walls.

"You have to start inside," said Davis, who previously attended RECs at Orleans Correctional Facility. "That's the message I want to bring the guys. You can't change the things you did in the past, but you can change your present and you can change your future."

"Change" — or perhaps more accurately, resurrection — is the key to the REC retreats, which are offered in prisons throughout New York state. The

three-day retreats focus on such themes as death, penance and baptism to help inmates "commit to a life of following Christ," noted Deacon Stan Zawacki, a member of the team that went into Attica.

Zawacki, Davis and 20 other men and women — including three men who had served time in prison — traveled from Rochester to staff the REC retreat at Attica, which is located in the Diocese of Buffalo.

That the retreat took place at all is a tribute to the perseverance of team members and of Attica's Catholic chaplain, Father Joe Pencaul.

Efforts to bring REC to Attica began about eight years ago. But a variety of circumstances combined to lock the retreat out.

Attica was the site of bloody riots back in 1971. Those riots are still on the minds of both prisoners and correctional officers at the prison, Davis noted. "They still have the riots attitude," he observed. "It's a fear on both sides, and it won't go away."

During the second-night "hootenanny," in fact, one resident commented on the climate of fear in the prison, bluntly observing that "Attica is like no place on earth. It's like a living nightmare day after day."

Thus, the REC team faced a number of restrictions, including the amount of time they could spend with prisoners — forcing them to eliminate parts of the retreat that they normally include at other correctional facilities. In addition, the number of residents who could participate at Attica was strictly limited by prison authorities.

After gaining entry into the facility, the REC team was confronted by several practical problems in presenting the first retreat of any kind to take place at Attica in 25 years.

One of the biggest obstacles was a lack of space in the prison on weekends — when RECs normally take place — due to the influx of people coming to visit the inmates. That problem was solved when the team agreed to conduct the retreat in the middle of the week. Many team members used their vacation time for the retreat, and Dave and Joyce Lortscher even chose to spend their 26th wedding anniversary in Attica.

Even after the REC began, team members were nearly prevented from entering the prison one morning because of a prison drill. And on the second day of the retreat, the team and other volunteers who came to the prison for the hootenanny were confined to the visitors' center because of disturbances in the prison: two knifings, an attempted suicide and an

assault on a correctional officer.

Nevertheless, REC team members reported that the retreat produced positive changes in the 34 inmates who participated.

Many of the participants appeared deeply touched by the three-day experience, crying and offering testimony about how it affected them.

"Here in jail, nobody wants to hear nothing," reflected Roosevelt Ramirez. "Nobody cares what problems you have. Here (at the REC), you can say the hundreds, the millions of things you have on your mind."

"Sometimes, I got crazy dreams," Ramirez added. "Last night, I sleep lovely. The first thing when I woke up, I pray to God and give thanks for what he do for me."

"The feelings are just overwhelming — the love, the caring, the sharing," noted one resident who asked to be identified only as "Scott P." "You get a feeling here you can't get inside when you're sitting in your cell."

Jesus Dearman said the retreat was helping him to discover ways to deal with the pressure toward violence that is inherent in prison life. Dearman said he was especially impressed by the fact that so many people came to the prison for the REC. "For me, seeing how many people came in from far away, I can see that we are not alone," he said.

An inmate who asked to be identified as "Jack" said he was not very religious, rarely attended church services and had participated in the REC out of respect for his family's religious beliefs. Yet he said he had also come to the retreat because he was searching for something beyond the dehumanizing atmosphere of prison. "I kind of miss being like a human being instead of living like one of these animals," he said.

In prison, Jack said, peer pressure keeps residents from signing up for religious activities. "A lot of guys don't come because people say religion is a sign of weakness," he remarked. "Everybody wants to look strong."

"I think if more guys came, it would make a difference," Jack observed. "It gives them a reminder of what it's really like out there."

As for himself, Jack said, "there should be an increase in my appearances on Sunday."

Peter VanBortel, one of the team members who had spent time in prison, was not surprised that the retreat touched the lives of the inmates. And like Davis, he offered testimony about how REC had helped him change the direction of his life.

"It was something I needed in my life to help turn me around from the way I was," noted VanBortel, who was an inmate at Orleans Correctional Facility when he made his first REC retreat. "I didn't think it was going to be as joyful and spirit-filled as it was."

He said the experience gave him the tools he needed to look at his own life and to begin changing those aspects that needed changing. "I had to go to prison to find God. That's what it took," VanBortel said.

One of the things VanBortel said he learned was to develop a more positive view of the world. "I don't look at the dark side anymore," he said. "I don't look for the bad things."

Davis likewise observed that one of the keys to survival both inside prison and out is developing a positive attitude. To explain his point, he cited a black cat that was walking across one of the prison yards.

"When I see that black cat," Davis said, "I can see a nice finely tuned animal, or I can see what some people call a curse. When I see that cat, I see a beautiful animal that God created."

Now a counselor working with youths in the Rochester City School District, Davis said the REC he attended at Orleans Correctional facility "made me feel human again. I wasn't a number anymore. I wasn't an inmate. I was just another human being."

The presence of such former inmates as Davis and himself help to make the RECs more effective, VanBortel said.

"I can offer them just the love that others offered me," he remarked, "and just the fact that while I was in here I made the system work for me, I just didn't sit on my pity pot."

"If I can do it, they can do it, too," VanBortel concluded, "if they just give 110 percent."



Zawacki holds up a cross made at the gallows at San Quentin



Michael Kelly (from left) Fernando Polanco and Rigoberto Carty reflect during a service.



Michael Kelly (left) slated to lead the next Attica retreat, sings with inmate Michael Duchesne during the hootenanny, a celebration of the retreat and volunteers.