

on the MOVE

A fresh perspective on freedom

Chris DeTorio isn't nervous or fearful about his prison ministry. In fact, he looks quite forward to interacting with inmates at Wayne County Jail.

What does scare Chris is imagining himself in their shoes.

Though Chris doesn't actually visit the inmates in their cells, he senses the confinement of their daily lives. The room where he performs his ministry has no door handles, so even he cannot leave the room — or the prison — without the aid of guards.

"It feels horrible. You have no control; it seems unnatural," he remarked.

That feeling has given Chris a new appreciation for his freedom: "You know you can go home at the end of the day."

Chris, 17, began prison ministry earlier this fall and has visited Wayne County Jail three times. The facility is situated two miles east of the village of Lyons, where Chris resides.

Actually, the concept of crime and punishment isn't all that foreign to Chris. Last year, he acknowledged, he and some friends were arrested for vandalism in another town — damaging property by throwing eggs. According to Chris, they have paid for the damages and their charges will be dropped, assuming they commit no similar offense.

Looking back, Chris views that experience as a warning: Greater trouble lay ahead unless he changed his life.

"We were really scared. By God's grace, I got arrested. It kicked me in the butt," he stated.

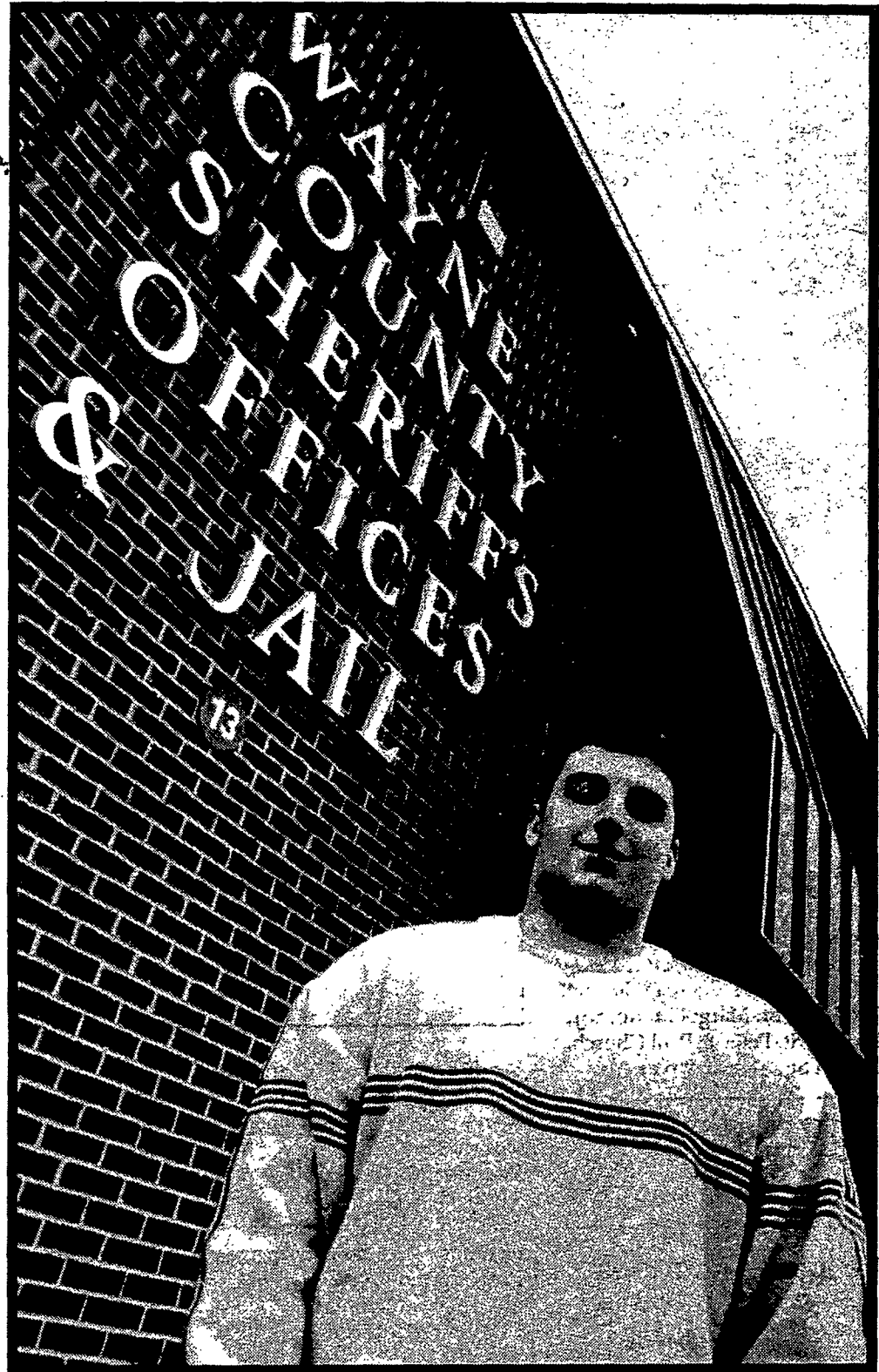
These days, Chris said, he'd rather go bowling or catch a movie to fill in his social time.

"I have no desire to get in trouble. I want to stay as far away as I can," he remarked.

That means staying off the streets, which he said is a very real temptation in Lyons: "It's a small town and there isn't much to do. The tendency to get in trouble would be higher if I was just standing on the (street) corner," he said.

One constructive activity is prison ministry. Chris said he got the idea from Father William Barrett, pastor of St. Michael's Church in Lyons, who preached one Sunday about the need for volunteers at the jail.

Chris ministers in tandem with his uncle, Lawrence DeTorio. Of all the Catholic prison-ministry volunteers in Wayne County, Chris is the only one not



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

yet an adult.

Each session lasts about 90 minutes and is attended by an average of 20 inmates, Chris said. He and his uncle guide the men through Scripture readings, music and spiritual discussion. For the most part, Chris observed, the prisoners take these meetings quite seriously.

"These people, you could tell, they really needed somebody to talk to. This is like, a release, so they can get out a lot of things," he explained.

Inmates range in age from early 20s to late 40s, he said. They are serving sentences for such crimes as drug possession; driving while intoxicated; domestic violence; breaking and entering; and stealing.

Chris noted that many of the inmates lack education and come from troubled upbringings. He strives to treat these people no differently than anyone else.

"They're normal; they make mistakes. We try not to separate ourselves, saying 'I'm better than you,'" Chris commented. "They say they realize what they've done. A lot of them have come to realize, 'I'm going to fix up my life.'"

Chris hopes that his ministry will help inmates grown in their faith, both now and after they're released. "Maybe if you show them a way to get this guidance from the

Bible, they'll do it on their own," he remarked.

Prison ministry is one of several volunteer duties for Chris. He is also an altar server, eucharistic minister and occasional usher at St. Michael's Church. His efforts were acknowledged by the Diocese of Rochester in October, when he received the diocesan Hands of Christ award from Bishop Matthew H. Clark. The honor is given to high-school seniors for their accomplishments in their church, school and community.

Standing 5-foot-10 and 205 pounds, Chris was co-captain of the Lyons High School football team this year. Because he is a leader among his peers, Chris said, he can serve as a good role-model by performing prison ministry.

"People might look up to me. Maybe that's another reason to do this," he remarked.

He also hopes to convey that prisoners, despite their crimes, are still worthy of our care and compassion and should not be forgotten by society.

"You may prefer to shun them just because they've done something wrong. I don't believe in that," he said.

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