

Shoe-eating and Other Oddities

By J.A. Brown

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"He ate his shoes," was what my husband mumbled over and over one evening during his first couple of months on the job in the prison system. What sort of job had he found himself in and what sort of people would eat their shoes? Thus began his life as a corrections officer, dealing with not only shoe-eaters, but inmates that would do just about anything. Corrections is a field that is unrecognized, underappreciated and rarely thought about, other than those working in it or who have family that spend their days working in this environment. But without the folks working behind the walls, the rest of us would be in a world of hurt. And with the ever increasing inmate population at all levels, the challenges and risks of this job increase right along with it.

As the wife of a corrections officer, I know I don't hear even half of what goes on during his workday. But I have sure picked up a whole new lingo, which is required if you want to keep up with a day in the life. Bang-in, hack, shank, SHU, Boss, shake-down, hooch, tat, kite, bubble, sally-port, grill, lockdown, cop-out, chit, body alarm.... is there such a thing as a prison lingo translator? Wonder how much it would pay?

Then you have the fact that the corrections employees don't know their fellow workers first names! Going to a work sponsored event or bumping into coworkers out in the world is always interesting when getting introduced. Everyone is either just their last name.... Thomas, Rodriguez, Hughes, Miller; - or they are their title... Warden, Captain, LT; - or someone says "I'm sorry, I don't know your first name". First names are rarely used on the job, and thus they remain a mystery to most.

Dental coverage should be handled in the same way as a uniform allowance for those in the corrections field. With the stresses of the job, grinding of one's teeth while sleeping can sometimes be heard throughout the house, keeping all awake, other than the officer, who has finally managed to shut their mind off long enough to fall asleep. And all that grinding takes a toll on the teeth, thus the need for good dental insurance.

Restaurants need to spend a little more time thinking about how to decorate their walls since many an officer tends to sit with their back to the wall, leaving the others at the table facing the wall. Without some lively decorations, the view can get old real fast, even as the officer keeps their eyes on the move, watching for shady characters, weapons, and anything else out of the ordinary that might be cause for alarm.

Remember the saying that hair makes a man? One of the reasons I fell for my man was his hair. In the world of Corrections, hair can kill a man. Having hair on your head in any length over an inch gives the inmate something to grab hold of. Regular haircuts at home become part of the routine. The good news is that this also becomes a way to help the environment, by leaving the pile of hair outside for the birds to use in their nests.

Spending your day inside the walls can be a dark place and you never know what the day will bring. But where else can a person get the idea for a limerick such as this:

*There once was an inmate who knew,
He'd get protein by eating his shoe,
Canvas, laces and soles,
He didn't need any bowls,
Though he bit off more than he could chew.*

Thank you to all those working in the Corrections field. You are a special group of people and your willingness to spend your day in this environment, risking your lives, is much appreciated!