

I, Statistics
by Duncan Martinez

The idea of getting to take actual college classes in prison is amazing, but, let's face it, no matter how you slice it, statistics sucks. For my entire life, I have had friends in school, and they have—to a person—hated statistics. And here we were, a bunch of older guys, in prison... great. It's deeper than the simple disdain for statistics that many people have: our math backgrounds are scattered and some of the guys have not taken a math class for twenty years. Or more. My dad is one of the smartest people I know, certainly one of the best educated, and when he heard we had to take statistics, he groaned. Now, I'm proud of our class and what it says about our yard: this place is about growth and inspires a unity that is impressive—we really do work well together to try and better ourselves. The effect is cyclical, where men helping men to grow becomes a new cadre of men helping—you learn so that you can help the next: I learned how to help others, how to make a difference in the lives of those about me.

When I first got here, it wasn't like that, not immediately. I wasn't like that, either. Prison is only a team sport when survival comes into play. The ideal or ideas of teamwork and unity are not generally very *prison*," not in the sense that I'm writing about here.

What's impressive is how often men are willing to go out of their way to help other men; how, despite being *criminals* they are actually good community people. The *me* thinking of when I got here has been replaced (for the most part) with *we* thinking. Ours is a community, and a community that wants the whole to get better. To be better.

So, back to math. I know, you thought we were gonna get away from that... no luck. Our class was made up, for the first time, with members of two cohorts. The first cohort, that I am a part of, began a couple of years ago. We started the program and have worked through most of the red tape to get it running. The second cohort just started, so going in there were a ton of uncertainty about how they would act—what would they think of all of this? Would they see all of the work that went into it happening? Or, would they just take it for granted?

Our cohort has formed into study groups and the like to try and help everyone along the way (let's face it, we all need help). The new group fell right into that with us. There were no cohort lines, none of that. Men that were good at math took charge and everyone worked their butts off.

I am proud of the entire class, I am, but this is about something deeper: I was fortunate to get to help the guys in my group. Looking back to how I would have seen that when I first got here, I might have asked, "Fortunate to get to help?! You mean, they were fortunate to get help, right?"

No, I don't.

And that, right there, is what makes this place so special. Everyone was a dumb kid once, there's nothing odd about that. But, in prison, that tends to be the default setting. To mature is generally seen as bad, especially if you do it in any kind of a diverse group. On some yards, that can get you stabbed.

Think about that.

When I came here in 2001, I was a good kid (for the most part) trying to be a better person. Mostly, that meant *I* wanted to get better—I wanted to learn more, be more. Other people needed to work for themselves, right? I mean, I couldn't just force them to be better, could I?

I shouldn't have to. Their problems, in short, were theirs.

It's like that Christmas where you realize that giving presents is better than receiving them; helping your fellow man just because you can; being, simply, an adult. These things don't just happen, but unfold slowly. You understand giving one step at a time. Not to say that even a kid cannot give, of course they can, but to point out that giving for the sake of it is harder. I did not know how to do that when I was younger. I wanted to know what I would get out of everything or why I was to be bothered. I wanted for me, not just for the other guy. It's a difficult thing, but a much better world to live in when you figure it out. This entire thing, of course, is what society is built on. Working together for the common good, understanding that a happy neighbor makes for a better one. Feeling, inside, the joy of seeing someone else succeed. Being, like I said, an adult. So much of prison does not allow this, but this yard... it is really special.

The thing that many people miss about this place is the amazing men that helped to make it happen. It wasn't following the rules or the way the yard was set up that made this work: it was the men of the yard. I thought I was a leader back then, and to some I certainly was, but I had so much to learn myself. I was blessed to have men that not only could teach me, but men that would. Excitedly, too. I didn't see that for what it was, maybe I couldn't. I don't know if I thought I deserved it somehow or that I somehow rated extra attention—but, I took full advantage. I grew, in an environment that doesn't grow; I grew.

When people ask me what the most important thing about this yard was, what allowed it to really come together, my answer is “softball.” Seriously, so much changed through that sport and how the league came together. And, it all started with one team: the Zillas.

I was, again, fortunate to be a part of a team that broke all sorts of boundaries. The racial line fell to us, and that caused a huge stink. But, more importantly, we were built on hard work and doing it right. Simple ideals, but very societal ones—certainly not prison-thinking.

We won a lot, too, which inspired a bunch of other teams to follow the formula. Hard work won the day, playing together, being positive—wanting to do it right. Our league is still really good, and I am proud of that, too. More than fifteen years after we first put our team together, you still see hard work at the core of most teams—certainly the successful ones.

So, the math class. I had more math than some of the guys, so I was one of the ones that took charge. We had a few groups in my building alone, and I got to work with everyone in there (I was lucky to work with most everyone in the class). That opportunity gave me a different kind of purpose: I wasn't just doing the homework for myself, I was doing it so that I could explain it to the other guys. I wasn't just studying for me, then, but for the whole. I was working for our cohorts, because that's who I am, and there's a certain magic to that.

Our professor, Tran, was great, and the class really worked hard. As men in prison, we are really good at taking advantage of opportunities, as we get so few: we do the readings before class, we study, we get upset if we get an answer wrong. Almost the entire class got an A. In a class that everyone hated, we succeeded. All of this was possible because of ideals and ethics instilled in this yard (in these classes) by the men who came before us.

It is rare to get to say that you are proud of something in prison, rare unless you're going the wrong way (Did you see how well I stabbed that guy!?) I'm proud to be a member of this yard and this legacy; proud that I was able to learn valuable lessons from men who took the time to care about anyone else. I'm proud of the growth we have fostered, the men we were lucky to help improve.

Several guys thanked me for helping them get an A, and it felt great. But, many of the men responsible for my being able to help are gone. They don't get to see the amazing things they left behind.

So, thank you statistics for helping me to remember the remarkable people that helped me get to this point; the men who gave their time so that I didn't have to be a dumb kid anymore; the men who made this a community to be proud of.