

Jon

Today I have finished my research project with the St Giles Trust at HMP Oakwood working with Prisoners. It has been an incredibly eye-opening experience. I went into this project with an archaic opinion of what prison life would be like. I was expecting it to be more like the TV show *Porridge* or the film *The Shawshank Redemption*.

The reality is vastly different. Yes, we were working with the highly trusted prisoners, men who'd used their time in prison to great effect. They'd taken rehabilitation courses, they'd educated themselves, but more than that, they were educating and mentoring other prisoners.

My first moments inside the prison I was quite apprehensive, we were taken on to a prison block where the prisoners were wandering around, quite freely and I hadn't noticed any guards. But it didn't take long for me to realise that I was perfectly safe and when interacting with the prisoners whom we were there to assist, I often didn't realise they were prisoners but thought they were St Giles staff members.

We chatted with these men, they told us their issues and we went away and we researched these issues. The whole time I was doing this, I very selfishly was thinking how good this would look on my CV. By the last meeting with the prisoners I'd come to realise how awful that was of me. When we finished our work, we left the prison to carry on with our lives, our degrees, our futures. For some of the people we were helping the future is so uncertain. They will remain in prison, some on indeterminate sentences and as much as I wanted to give them good news, unfortunately the outlook is quite bleak.

I have taken so many positives out of this experience. On a purely selfish note, I have enhanced my CV and gained valuable experience in understanding how life in a prison works. But, I also feel like I have contributed to helping these men by taking the time to research issues of huge importance to them. But they have changed me, my views on prisoners and prison life are now much higher. I no longer think that we should be locking people up and throwing away the key but that prison should be a fully integrated rehabilitation programme working towards re-integrating these people back into society.

I want to thank the Open University for selecting me for this project, for the St Giles Trust for running this pilot scheme and for working so closely with us, but mostly I want to thank the prisoners I was helping. They have made me sit up and think about the world and reconsider my own future in law. But also to reconsider my future as a person as my outlook on certain things has now changed forever.

This was such an enriching experience and one that could not possibly be achieved through writing an essay.