NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

An experience visiting prisoners in Missouri

Mary Ann McGivern | Aug. 24, 2012 NCR Today

Last Wednesday, I drove several hours across Missouri to give a graduation talk to a little class at one of the maximum security prisons. Being in a prison is always demanding: juxtaposing expectations and experience; hope and fear; curiosity and good manners.

Most of Missouri's prisons have been built in the last 20 years or so, and they look a little like pre-fab housing, as if the walls could be tipped over with a determined three-man push. Of course, not so. Inside the wire fence, there's an administration building and maybe a dozen housing units that open onto a yard, basketball and handball courts, and walkways.

This yard has a dog run. A few years back, the Department of Corrections director initiated training opportunities for dogs in the local pounds. The institutional activities coordinator who managed my visit also manages the dog-training program. Great photos of dogs straight from the pound (before), ready for adoption (after) and playing with children in their new homes (now) line the office walls.

The class I was to speak to is unusual, and not just by prison standards, where Anger Management and Restorative Justice are offered every few months. It was a class in fundraising.

The instructor, Jon, himself an inmate, has a master's degree. In conjunction with an outside agency that offers college credit, Jon has developed a good course in nonprofit structure, 501(c)3 certification, and how to write grant proposals.

What really impressed me was Jon's fulsome praise of the graduates. Two of them had sent a request for $400 to pay for the 501(c)3 application for a Missouri prison re-entry program. Jon brought the two to the front of the class, one in a wheelchair, and read the agency thank-you to them for making that request.

Jon gave out gold seals on the graduation certificates to those who scored 100 percent on quizzes. He praised high-quality grant proposals, the best of which will be sent to the agencies for them to use. Jon announced that one of the men had received his GED two days before he earned two college credits.

The men applauded generously at every certificate, every gold seal, every announcement of accomplishment. I know there's enmity in a group like this. But in the satisfaction of work well done, grudges were laid aside. We were in a little bubble inside the prison walls.

I spoke about making an ask, reminding the men that people give to people. I had them ask one another in pairs for gifts to a cause, and the second time, I instructed the potential donor to say no.

"How did it feel to be asked for money?" I asked. "How did it feel to be told no?"

The graduates said they liked being asked, and we agreed most people feel honored when we are asked to help. We also agreed that nobody ever died from being told no. I said there is a 3 percent chance of getting a yes from

a letter, 25 percent from a phone call and 50 percent from a face-to-face ask.

I told them how to write an ask letter, and I suggested they write a letter asking for support for the animal shelter that sends them their dogs for rehab. We talked about including stories about both the success of the dogs and the growth of the inmates. Then I suggested sending the letter to the roster of the St. Louis Cardinals. That was a hit with the group.

Afterward, many thanked me for coming and told me to drive home safely. Others talked about their own hopes. One of the men comes up for parole in a couple of weeks. He seemed so confident he would gain release, I fear for him.

There were 55 black men in the room and eight whites. They are all far from home, deep in rural Missouri. They all have long sentences; some have life without parole. It's too much punishment, no matter what crime they committed. Most of them will be released eventually. They need more hope and purpose in their lives now in order to become productive citizens.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 07:02*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/experience-visiting-prisoners-missouri