

An Hour in Jail

By Vinnie Hansen

“Santa Cruz PD, one male,” the officer announces into the intercom at the county jail. Doors painted with the insignia of the county law enforcement fold open, accordion style, and the police car rolls into a large garage. The inmate is escorted to a white plastic chair, while the officer works at a table full of forms.

This is where I left my reader when I wrote about my police ride-along (See “A Night with a Cop” under the research link on our Guppies website.) But from the garage what happens to the “one male”? Recently our County Sheriff’s Office advertised public tours of the Main Jail. I seized the opportunity to take the one-hour tour on a Sunday afternoon and to learn what became of the detainee.

From the garage, he enters a small intake room that stinks of nervous sweat and vomit. He faces a padded wall as the intake officer empties his pockets, pats him down, and asks for his belt and shoes to reduce the risk of a jail hanging. The intake officer also fills out an extensive form: name, address, age, health questions (TB is a major concern in the jail), substance abuse, mental health

If the detainee is under the influence, and many of them are, his first stop will be a drunk tank, now more politely called a “sobering cell,” a larger one for men, a smaller one for women. However, sometimes on Thursdays, Ladies Night at the local bars, they switch the bigger cell to women. The sobering cell is about as empty as a room can be. A small toilet and sink hide in the corner and a drain marks the center of the floor. Periodically an officer will check the prisoners through the reinforced three-ply laminate window.

A special room awaits any unruly inmate. It’s small, seven by twelve, with nothing in it but an ominous black molded chair equipped with shoulder, arm and leg restraints. The average stay in the room is two hours. “But I’ve seen guys fight the chair for up to six hours,” Sergeant Kemper, our guide, informs us.

A couple of holding cells serve routine prisoners. These are larger rooms complete with tables and chairs and a phone. Forget the myth of one phone call. Detainees can make unlimited local calls.

From the holding cell, the arrested person passes through a metal detector. The correctional officers, too, are unarmed with anything more than pepper spray or Taser. The arrestee is fingerprinted with a computer. Despite the honed efficiency of the jail, it is overcrowded. Built to house 311 inmates, on the day of my visit, the jail held approximately 340. “It’s been over 400,” Kemper mentions.

I am shocked that a relatively peaceful community like Santa Cruz has so many people in jail, especially since the jail is only one of four facilities in the county. On any given day, a minimum-security facility called The Farm houses an additional, average 171 non-violent offenders. Furthermore, not all arrestees are jailed. For those who make bail, the next step is to pass through a central office and back into the community.

Clearly, many do not make bail. They are escorted to a prison shower, where they can wash before donning their jumpsuits, orange for men, red for women. From the jumpsuit closet, a working inmate, in a special blue uniform, flips us a peace sign, but we have been firmly instructed not to interact with the inmates. The rules for visiting the jail are as strict as those for visiting San Quentin—no cell phones, no cameras or recorders of any type, not even pencil and paper. Visitors must dress conservatively, nothing tight or revealing, and offensive or gang-related tattoos must be covered. Two members of our ten-person tour are five minutes late; they are left behind.

“There’s only one place in the United States where you are constitutionally guaranteed medical care,” Kemper explains. That is during incarceration. The jail has a nurse on duty at all times and a doctor pays regular visits.

The jail radiates into four wings, East, West, North and South, which divide the inmates according to the level of their criminal behavior. Are they first-timers or hardened, repeat offenders? Within the wings, prisoners are further segregated according to gender, gang affiliations, and mental health. Sexual predators occupy a separate pod. In most cases, double-decks of cells cluster around a day area where inmates can drink coffee, watch television, and hang out. Since haggling over what to watch created frequent tension, the jail now selects all programming. The pods also have an exercise area “open” to the

air at the top if one discounts the double layers of chain link fence and razor wire. When the jail was first built, the razor wire didn't exist, but some enterprising prisoners managed to climb up, cut through the chain link, and leap to a very short-lived freedom. The prisoners do not have any weights in the exercise area, but we watch a group who has created circuit training, using stacks of plastic chairs. The group of six young men parade in a circle, curling and bench pressing chairs and doing pull-ups on an improvised bar. Supposedly they can not see us in the dim control center of the pods, but occasionally a young man approaches the window and peers out, as though he senses our shadowy forms. Perhaps he just knows that tours are offered at one o'clock on Sunday.

The jail is able to feed the inmates at the low cost of two dollars per meal. "They complain about the food," Kemper states, yet he adds, as though it proves the food can't be that bad, "they almost all gain weight."

In the center of the jail, various rooms serve the whole population. The small, mandated law library is deserted. It used to be popular, Kemper explains, but not for the study of law. Prisoners visited the library to inspect one another and to pass notes in the law books. Other small generic rooms are used for twelve-step meetings, educational programs, and church services.

Television accurately depicts the visitors' room: transparent laminate dividing two banks of corrals with telephones. Each row is entered via a separate door, but they are identical, prompting us to ask which side is for the inmates, which side for the visitors. In another dingy room attorneys can meet with clients.

Contrary to local myth, no tunnel connects the jail to the courthouse. Whenever a prisoner needs to appear in court, he or she is hauled across the street in a van. Most detainees are awaiting sentencing, but some are serving time. The average stay in the county jail is fourteen days, but some of the inmates are involved in long, complicated trials and have been here for years. Others have been in and out of the jail so much, Officer Kemper remarks, "It's like home to them."

Happily it is nothing like home to me!

Long-time English teacher Vinnie Hansen, author of the Carol Sabala mystery series: *Murder, Honey*; *One Tough Cookie*; *Rotten Dates* and *Tang Is Not Juice*, takes us on her tour of the Santa Cruz, California, County Jail. Check out Vinnie Hansen's work at www.vinniehansen.com. Watch for her upcoming Carol Sabala mystery, *Flimflam Flan*.

