

## **My Journey by Rev. Deacon Rick Todd**

Greetings, fellow deacons and to all who are reading my story. My name is Rick Todd and I have been a deacon for approximately 18 or so years. I am currently one of the deacons at The Episcopal Church of St. John in the Wilderness in White Bear Lake and I have been there for about 16-17 years. I am also on the Commission for the Diaconate and I was asked to write a summary of my work and vocational careers because I have worked with people who are severely mentally ill in unique environments in that 95% of my work time has been in locked programs. I am also a Licensed Psychologist with a Master's degree from the University of Minnesota.

My work in locked setting began when I was in college in 1979 when I started working at Park Point Manner which is a large nursing home in Duluth on Park Point. At the time I was a pre-physical therapy major at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and I needed health care experience to qualify for the program at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis. Being a young healthy male I was usually placed in the upper floors of nursing homes because often that is where there were the most challenging clients who were either quite senile and needed intense care as these patients suffered from physical and mental issues that were serious. The depression, anxiety, along with other mental illnesses were often present and I began to develop my psychology skills there. I found that I liked the locked settings and the challenges that I faced. After about a year or so I moved from University of Minnesota-Duluth to the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis campus and I changed my major to Psychology because I was unable to get admitted to the physical therapy program at the U of M, as you will hopefully understand as you read this was that God did not plan for me to be a physical therapist. I kept working in nursing homes as a nursing assistant through a nursing service and my best friend's older sister was a scheduler for the company I worked for and she was the person who got me the hours I needed in various nursing homes in the twin cities. As you might expect, I was always placed in the units that had seriously needy patients and it was tough work as I was usually at nursing homes with staffing shortages. My friend's sister was able to get me into the then Golden Valley Health Center that at the time was a large hospital that had a number of inpatient mental health and chemical dependency programs.

I really enjoyed this work and eventually applied there for a part-time job on a locked adolescent mental health program while I was still in college. There I experience very difficult work as these kids were very needy. I did well there and eventually picked up additional on-call work at two other hospitals (Mercy Hospital in Coon Rapids and Abbott Northwestern in Mpls.) primarily on the locked mental health programs with seriously mentally ill persons. Over time I have worked with nearly every form of serious mental health problem imaginable.

While I was at Abbott a co-worker of mine told me about the Department of Corrections mental health unit at the Oak Park Heights prison which was a level 5 security (most secure) facility that at the time was only about ten years old. I interviewed well, I thought, as I had about ten years of inpatient mental health experience with very tough patients and I had done well. I even developed and implemented a treatment program for really tough adolescents at The Golden Valley Health Center that worked well and helped seriously disturbed adolescents from around the country. It took nearly nine months to get hired but finally I was offered the job and started working at the Oak Park Heights prison and I loved it

and I started to realize that God had a plan for me to work with these tough persons and that my previous work in the nursing homes and inpatient hospital programs was part of His plan for my life to prepare me for what was to come.

During my time at the Oak Park Heights prison I began studying for the Psychologist licensing exam (this is a very tough test) and passed on my second attempt, which is not unusual. Once licensed, I was able to move from my Counselor position to the Psychologist II position in the Department of Corrections which was my career goal. My journey into the Counselor job took longer than I expected and I wondered what the issue was because I felt that my education and work experience were good. A few years later I was in my supervisor's office chatting and I asked him why it took so long from my interview to the job offer and he explained to me about some gender balancing issues he was expected to deal with; it was a unique situation in a unique environment but it was a real part of my life that helped me grow as a person.

It is important for me to tell you that all the people I have worked with, men and women, have all been very tough and skilled people because you have to be to handle the stress in the prison setting. Over the years I developed a tremendous respect for the women I worked with at every level in the prison system because many of the inmates are very sexist and have very poor boundaries and social skills and they will ask the women about things and say things to them that are extremely inappropriate. Needless to say, it's a different world in prison that is much different from the world we live in outside of Corrections. Eventually, a Psychologist position opened at the Moose Lake prison which is a medium security facility and I interviewed and was hired. Medium security was much different than the high security prisons I had been at for the past seven or so years as there were dorm rooms and not just single or double cells along with a more relaxed environment.

One thing that I always did at the facilities I worked at was to get to know the Chaplain and form a working relationship with him/her as I used spirituality in my work at times (spirituality is part of our psyche) with the inmates when appropriate. Because I was clergy I was always able to connect with the Chaplains and work with them to help the inmates.

When I moved from the Oak Park Heights prison to the Moose Lake facility the prison at Rush City was under construction and when it opened in October of 1999 both my supervisor and I moved to the Rush City prison. This was the most remarkable time in my career as opening a prison does not happen very often and it was very interesting. For the first six months or so there were no inmates and all the doors were open and everything was freshly painted and brand new; it is not that way now and I will leave it at that. The first inmates that arrived were illegal aliens waiting to be deported that were actually federal inmates and working with them was difficult as they spoke limited English and did not understand why they were talking to a psychologist. This is where I needed to develop a way to deal with them as their problems were really not mental illness but very serious life problems and the hopelessness was off the scales. I realized that this hopelessness and depression were not a state of being but part of their personalities, it was their life. What I had to learn to do that was very difficult was to work with persons with serious personality disorders. In my work prior to prison as a psychologist I dealt with things like depression and anxiety mostly but in the prison system I dealt with personality disorders a lot

(antisocial, borderline, narcissistic mostly) and this was difficult because there is really no medication for these conditions as the problem with them were their narcissistic and antisocial personalities.

Rush City was a very violent place and the inmates over time in the Department of Corrections called Rush City “gladiator school” as there were usually assaults every day often times more than one. Rush City was a place with difficult inmates in that many were release violators coming back to prison to finish their time and “treatment failures” who were wash outs from various treatment programs in the corrections system. My supervisor and I were the only mental health staff for couple of years or so I did much of the actual work as my supervisor was busy setting up the psychology program and hiring folks and I was simply going from emergency to emergency. One of the things I did when I was at Rush City was I brought Bishop Prior, Fr. Randy Johnson, and Fr. Mark Kelm into the prison for tours and I showed them everything from the Industry program to Segregation to the living units. I really liked doing that as I was able to show someone what my work life was like.

How I used God in all of this was to always remember that prison was a place that has been created out of humanities lack of understanding of how to truly care for each other and our culture having too many people not being able to meet their basic needs and the subsequent crime and alcohol/drug use that often grows out of that. I need to say that when Minnesota closed the state hospitals and turned them into medium security prisons (Moose Lake/Faribault) needy people ended up on the streets and many came to prison. I am editorializing a little here but I realize that Minnesota went in the wrong direction with this issue.

What I tried to do with the inmates was to be present and listen and build on *any* positive things they did or said. Many of them had done things that were very bad and had lost their families, homes, jobs/careers, friends, etc. and were truly alone. I knew that they had earned their sentence time but the other suffering that I saw (assaults, extortion, etc.) no one deserves, I don't care what their crime was. When an inmate that is not in a gang (usually a sex offender) does not pay the extortion to the gangs they are often assaulted and frequently end up in the hospital.

Basically, I did three things in prison. First, was dealing with the chronic mental health issues such a Major Depression, Generalized Anxiety, Schizophrenia, and other serious issues like these. The second thing was dealing with the situational issues that came up such as divorces, family members dying, the stressors of the extortion and assaults, and other serious issues that came up. The third thing was very difficult and time consuming for myself and my colleagues and was the inmates' quest for psychotropic medication which required them to go through the Psychologist to get to Psychiatry. Often offenders would not be truthful because they were trying to get the mood altering medications to use inappropriately. Mental health staff had to spend much time trying to determine their actual needs.

I know that I have shared mostly negative things and it is important for people to realize that there is a lot being done to help inmates who want help such as treatment for chemical dependency and sex offending, job training, GED's, basic college courses, medical and mental health care, and more. I spent 25 years in corrections working with the most difficult inmates. On January 17, 2017 when I retired and turned in my keys and I.D. and the heavy steel sliding door slammed behind me and I stepped out of

prison for the last time I thanked God for giving me the privilege of working with his most needy people that that I knew He loved and over those years I experienced how God's love is immense and is ever-present. I saw myself and many others do our best to show inmates a different way and to share with them alternatives that they could bring out of prison with them...mostly patience, self-control, cognitive skills, and others things like that that they never learned or were exposed to as children, particularly if they grew up on the streets. As a deacon, I will often comment on the prison issues in my preaching and my discussions with others to bring this problem into the church for prayer and so the people know that when they pray for prisoners in the Prayers for the People and at other times that they are doing something unbelievably important. When we do this we are really working on changing ourselves because that is what God can help us do regarding this issue. I will close by simply saying that I realize that inmates have done harmful things to others but that once they do their time let us prayerfully realize that inmates are people who are much like the rest of us and have experienced things in their lives that are really bad and they need support and love and hope and a chance to start over. Amen.