Students take tour of Miami-Dade County Jail

BY JAMIE OSTROFF
CONTRIBUTING NEWS WRITER

Eight students dragged themselves out of bed on an early Saturday morning to wait at Stanford Circle at 9 a.m. sharp.

No, they weren’t going to Crandon Park to do beach cleanup, and they weren’t trying to catch an early shuttle to Publix. They were going to jail.

The University of Miami police department gave students the opportunity to tour the Miami-Dade County jail Jan. 26 to give insight on the consequences for even small, non-violent crimes, said Crime Prevention Coordinator John Pepper, who organized the trip.

“Getting caught with a fake ID, which is a felony, for instance, could get you strip-searched and behind bars,” Pepper said.

The students wanted to visit the jail simply out of curiosity.

Sophomore Alexandra Pruett said that visiting a jailhouse was something she wanted to do for a while.

“I used to want to go into forensic science, so I’m really interested in how science applies to the law,” Pruett said.

UM police officer Manuel Medina accompanied the tour group and debriefed them.

“Everyone says jail is bad, but after today you’ll really know what jail is bad...you don’t know until you’ve seen it,” Medina explained.

The group was entertained in the booking station of the jail, where inmates first enter the prison system to be fingerprinted, photographed and medically examined. But things took a frightening turn after this phase of the tour.

Officer D. Munoz led the group into an area of holding cells, where inmates wait for up to eight hours while their background information is processed, before they are released or taken into custody. The room was littered with the stench of body odor and human excrement, and paint was peeling from the walls.

One inmate accused Munoz of stealing his mink coat. Another began flailing, twitching and screaming as though he was having a seizure.

“Oh, he’s a usual here,” said Munoz of the disturbed inmate.

At the group toured the prison floor by floor, the inmates stood at attention and watched. Other inmates clutched rusty bars or pounded on glass and shouted at the passers-by.

At a zoo, people look at animals in cages. In this zoo, the animals looked back.

Most inmates in the Miami prison are awaiting criminal trial; however, some have been waiting for years and do not know when their wait will end.

“I’ve been in this cell for two years, charged with attempted murder,” an anonymous inmate said. “Once you’re behind bars, you forget about you.”

The inmates are served three meals a day: breakfast at 5 a.m., lunch at 11 a.m. and dinner at 4 p.m. Lunch is always a plastic-wrapped bologna and cheese sandwich, and if an inmate is asleep or too small to defend his own food, he simply doesn’t get to eat.

Officers showed the tour group a room full of prison-made confiscated weapons.

The inmates sharpen the ends of toothbrushes, combs or pencils, pick up loose screws and nails, rip the handles off of toilets and tear air vents from the ceilings in order to fashion a pointy object, or “shank,” to inflict harm.

The group left the prison three hours after entering, and it seemed three hours too long.

Pruett’s original expression had escaped her face and she stuttered, speechless in a failed attempt to describe what she had just experienced.

“If I was living in there I would die,” said Carl Grant, a senior.

Although many of the inmates shouted inappropriate catcalls at the women on the tour, there was another very common theme among the prisoners’ shouts: remorse.

Murders, stalkers and traffic violations alike shouted the same chorus of “Stay in school, listen to your parents. You don’t want to end up here.”

Jamie Ostroff may be contacted at jostroff@umiami.edu.