

Doing time hits home

Maxine is a maori woman who has done time. She's agreed to write about her time inside and out in the hope that other maori people can understand and learn from her experience. For reasons of anonymity, Maxine's real name is not used.

Maxine worked with the writer prior to being released. She was determined that her past was to be forgotten, although freely admitting that her period of imprisonment was a deserved punishment for the crime that she had committed.

She states that sentences imposed on those charged with theft of money are incompatible with those imposed for acts of violence. Money value seems to influence the period of imprisonment served, which is a degree of gross injustice in many cases.

Maxine has almost completed her two-year term of imprisonment. She holds no bitter grudges. She has had to come to terms with the changes imposed on her life and on her home, her husband, her family and close friends, and the changed attitudes of the small-town community where she lives.

There is no need to dwell on her crime other than to say that it was a "white-collar" offence spanning five years in a position of trust and responsibility and involving a substantial amount of money. Maxine admits that if audits by her employers had been carried out correctly she would have been apprehended a long time ago. Because they were not carried out she continued and the amount grew. She does not use this oversight as an excuse.

There is no beach house, speed boat, cars or anything to show for her indulgence. In fact she cannot itemise exactly where the ill-gotten gains went to.

Maxine had never been before the court previously. She was married, with no children, living in her own home in a small farming town. She had been brought up in the town and her family was well known in that community.

She had strong family support which developed even more as time in prison passed. Without this support her confinement would have been unbearable. It was of the greatest help and comfort at the initial break away from her normal life, although the move to an institution many miles away from her home town ensured that visits by them were impossible. Throughout the time she was away family support both spiritually and financially was a major factor that helped her to remain emotionally balanced. She was not always so placid, as she recalls the first month when she was locked up at 5pm every day in her cell.

Being a person who enjoyed company of others she found solitary confinement almost soul-destroying. She knows now that this one-month rigid ritual of regular solitary confinement was specifically designed to emphasise the reality of prison. Perhaps it needed to be enforced upon a person who was there for the first time.

Dealing with those in authority led to many depressing as well as angry moments. Many requests led to blank refusals and unsympathetic responses. Inquiries as to insignificant matters were left unanswered. Officers and administrators didn't seem to care. Time turned small matters into major problems.



Some administrators were prepared to deal with requests but the majority didn't really want to know. Perhaps this was another ingredient of prison life; the personal need one takes for granted is ignored.

There was a variety of officers both male and female: some good, some bad, some indifferent. Prison officers attempt to impress upon the prisoner at all times their relative stations. If the prisoner is aware of it, it can be ignored, and in some cases used to advantage.

Through her previous employment responsibilities Maxine had had the opportunity to assess people in different situations, socially, and at work, whether as an employee, or as a superior. She was fully aware of how people in varying situations reacted to good comments, to bad remarks and to a mixture of both. The ways in which individual officers interpreted discipline was at first frustrating but through time and patience she became accustomed to this inconsistency — and you can use such inconsistencies to your advantage. Many persons less familiar with that situation would find it very distressing.

As time progressed the authorities realised that Maxine was intent on 'swimming with the current' and not against it and that she was able to announce her own intentions in keeping with the system. She decided to seek

her own job once she became eligible rather than be placed by one of the prison agencies. As a result she was able to work in an environment which made outside work both educational and satisfying. Many who did not know what steps were available to them once they became eligible could find outside employment embarrassing, demanding and of very little value.

Maxine fully realises that her biggest task will be her return to her own community life. There will be moments when she knows she may be abused and even ignored by so-called friends. Maxine is prepared for this. She is aware that this reaction is part of her punishment. She also acknowledges that some may still want their 'pound of flesh' but she is prepared for this.

Her time away is probably something everyone can do without. It does not add to one's experiences of life. It's a period where one's ability to survive, physically, morally and spiritually is tested. Maxine admits that her habits have changed. Her outlook on life has altered, and she challenges anyone who has spent a considerable time in prison not to be affected in some way by that environment. Small insignificant issues are major exercises. Many tasks which are mundane to the average person can become demanding and an important factor to her future attitude. She has learnt to be tolerant to those whom she has contact with, and she hopes people can be tolerant towards her. If a term in prison can be of any benefit to anyone (and Maxine has reservations about that) then it has aided her to exercise tolerance and perhaps charity, both for those inside and outside the prison.

Because of her support from home Maxine has not been troubled with matters that have a profound effect on other residents: financial commitments, family troubles, and marriage insecurity plague others. Maxine was able to use her spare time on other pursuits whilst her companions fretted and worried.

Maxine was able to identify subtle racial discrimination. Because of the predominance of maori residents racial matters were never openly apparent but nevertheless existed. Visits by maori groups were well received but were regarded with criticism by non-maori people because there was no other group representing other cultures. Maxine's whanau or family support was an important and valued example of her own cultural benefits.

By the time this article appears Maxine will have returned home, her sentence with remission completed. She knows that her troubles are not over. She knows that perhaps they will never be really over. She has hopes of obtaining a job in her home town. She hopes that she has paid her debt to society, and she hopes that society agrees.