

My Five Days in “Pod A” at the Juneau County Jail

Guest Post by Bonnie Block

On April 1, 2015 a six person jury found me guilty of trespassing at the Volk Field Open House because I handed out leaflets with four questions about drone warfare in the parking lot of the Wisconsin National Guard Museum. National Guard personnel deemed that “propaganda” sight unseen. The result was my arrest, being charged with trespass, pretrial motions to greatly limit the evidence I could present to the jury and ultimately the trial. The fine was \$232 but I felt I couldn't in good conscience pay it.

So Judge Paul Curran sentenced me to serve five days in the county jail. After I was “booked in” and issued my orange jump suit and orange plastic clogs, I was escorted to Pod A where I became the 7th woman living in a two-story cinderblock room about 35 by 15 feet. The front half was common space with metal tables with stools or benches attached, a TV high the wall, a cabinet with the various request forms and some books & games or puzzles and two phones. The front wall was one-way glass so guards in the “bubble” could see in but we couldn't see out.

The back half of the room was divided into two levels each of which had five bunk- beds and a bathroom with shower. There were seven narrow windows on each level but they were opaque so no one could see out. The TV was on from 8 am till 11 pm (or 12:30 am on weekends) as were bright florescent lights which were dimmed after “lockdown” but never turned off.

[NOTE: The Juneau County Jail was built in 2002 and its website describes the jail like this: “This modern Pod design allows Jail Deputies to restrict and control the movement of

prisoners throughout the facility, while minimizing the staff needed to monitor and control the population. This layout places Pod's or housing units around a centralized control center from which a single deputy can monitor all of the cells and each pod. The Control Deputy can control cell doors, lights, water, inmate's communications and inmate movement. CCTV monitoring is conducted from the central control station as well."]

I set my small storage box and bedding on Cot #2 as directed and the guard left slamming the metal door shut. I introduced myself to four of the women (the other two were napping) and told them why I was there. We talked a while and then I went to make my bed. One of the women came to help because the sheets were only about 2/3 the length of the blue plastic mat that served as a mattress, but if you knotted them together just right you could cover the whole pad.

A few hours later as I was working on a puzzle, I realized I was chilly because I only had a short sleeved shirt and no socks (my socks, bra, and turtleneck were the wrong color so they stayed in storage in the booking area). I went to put my towel around my neck like a shawl. Immediately there was a voice over the intercom: "Ladies, please inform the new person what the rules are." The rules are that you cannot cover your neck or face. I put the towel back and rubbed my arms. Without a word one of the women went to her box and brought me a thermal long-sleeved shirt and another brought me a warm pair of socks – both regulation white. Thanks to their generosity I was comfortable for the rest of my stay.

As I listened to these women for the next few days I heard stories of being victimized or suffering abuse, of addiction to drugs, of homelessness, of illness, of needing dental care or surgery, of poverty and unemployment, and of more than a dozen children in foster care or cared for by relatives while their mothers were locked up. Five of the six women were there because they couldn't make bail or were on a probation hold.

Only one had already been tried and sentenced to one year in jail.

I entered the Jail voluntarily to make a public witness with support from family and friends and knowing I would get out in five days. They entered abruptly and now sit waiting weeks or months for a court date, or a visitor (allowed once a week) or till they could make a phone call (\$1.50 a minute to a corporation called Securus which someone outside has to pay in advance and then accept the collect calls.) They waited for mail or finding a book that looked interesting, or for the Friday commissary pick-up (assuming someone had put money in their account.) And they walked—54 times around the common area was a mile and you counted it off with a deck of cards.

I've seen clients in various Wisconsin jails and prisons and I've visited fellow resisters in jail — but it's very different to have metal doors clang shut and know that you've lost your freedom. I expected there to be regimentation and rules — but I had no idea of how frustrating and aggravating the guard's collective punishment mindset would be. I knew I'd be locked up in a confined space — but didn't understand what happens when you don't know if it's day or night and feel cut off from the natural world. I knew there would be little privacy and a lot of surveillance—but I didn't know how dehumanizing that would feel.

In short, I have been one of the absurdly privileged people who has not had to face the punitive U.S. criminal justice system—just as I have not lived in countries beneath the Hellfire Missiles carried by U.S. drones that I'm working hard to stop. As I was writing this reflection a few days after I got out of jail, the daily e-mail from Campaign Nonviolence arrived and put both of these things into context.

“No one today can afford to be innocent, or to indulge themselves in ignorance of the nature of contemporary governments, politics and social orders. The national polities of the modern world are “states” which maintain their

existence by deliberately fostered craving and fear: monstrous protection rackets.” [Gary Snyder, *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, p. 83]

It is precisely our “craving and fear” which makes us wrongly believe we are protected from the “terrorists” by our government’s program of targeted assassination via drones. And it is precisely “a protection racket” which makes us think spending billions on jails and prisons is being “tough on crime” and that we’re safer if we lock people up in cells or Pods without adequate services or diversion programs and often before they’ve even been convicted of a crime.

Just as we can’t kill our way to peace and security, we can’t imprison our way to public safety and justice. Militarism and drone warfare are not the answer. Nor are jails the answer. Those who have created the current systems are not going to be the ones who fix it. That’s up to us as nonviolent, determined, and relentlessly persistent activists.

Bonnie’s description of her experiences will resonate with many of us who have spent a few days in the county lockup. Five days in jail for distributing flyers opposing drone warfare. Such is life in the land of the free. The questions on Bonnie’s Leaflet should be shared widely: [Four Questions that Will help you Understand What Military Drones Do](#)

Here is Bonnie’s note regarding publishing her description: *I read the postings and rarely reply but this time I’m attaching my reflections about the five days I spent in the Juneau County Jail for refusing to pay the fine when I was found guilty of trespassing at Volk Field’s open house last May. Fr. Jim Murphy and I were arrested for leafletting with four questions about drones. The questions are also attached in a quarter page handout which the National Guard personnel declared was “propaganda” without even reading it.*

