

After 25 years in prison, lifer Seymour Levin is working hard for his second chance. He is resident librarian and associate member of the New Breeds Jaycees.



Rockview — steel and concrete city *where hundreds of men are angry at one another and the system*

By Stephen Gerhart
photos by Randy J. Woodbury

"Welcome to the Country Club," the guard said to me when I arrived at the State Correctional Institution at Rockview. "If you have to be in prison, this is not a bad place to be."

Life at Rockview appears to be carefree, at least on the surface. If an inmate has no outside problems, he can lead an almost happy life—with no worries except his release date.

However, happiness is superficial at the Rock. Whenever five or six hundred troubled, angry men are forced to live together, tempers are difficult to control; laughter will turn sour; a wrong word or even a look will provoke an argument or fight.

The inmate who loses his temper and gets "busted" for fighting usually contemplates in a solitary cell until his temper cools off.

When a man arrives at Rockview, he might as well forget his name. He becomes an inmate, and within five minutes he is given a number. From then until his last minute at Rockview he will be referred to as C-8297 or M-0075.

The inmate should play it cool during his first days at the institution. He will get nothing but a scornful sneer if he tries to introduce himself to his neighbors. Instead, sooner or later, an inmate will come to him, not to introduce himself but to ask, "Hey man, got a cigarette?" This is not an invitation for friendship; it is exactly what the statement says—the other guy wants a free cigarette. If the inmate refuses, even though he does not smoke, he might make an enemy.

Some guys become popular in prison society for different reasons—some for being the top bully, always picking on someone to the delight of his group, others for being the most outspoken

against the system.

Another will become popular because he distributes sexual favors. Even these popular guys are known only as "Slim," "Red" or "that blond faggot in B Block."

The novice usually sticks out like a sore thumb because he talks about his arrest and even the details of his crime. He brags about the crimes for which he was not caught.

After a while, the inmate will learn about his fellow inmates through the grapevine. He may be shocked to learn that the nice-looking young fellow in the next cell is serving a life sentence for a crime that brought about someone's death. Then, as the neighbor shows a few signs of humanity, the inmate wonders, "What went wrong with him?" After thinking about his own wrong, the inmate stops wondering.

Mealtimes are nice, quiet periods in people's lives — everywhere but at Rockview.

Quiet tension builds as the men line up for chow in their respective blocks. They do so in two lines: the blacks in one, the whites in another. Knowing this is a voluntary arrangement does not diminish the tension.

As they march to the centrally located dining room, they must listen to some old Sousa marches or the marine hymn. Men in both lines curse the music.

Sometimes there is a long wait in line, with nothing to do but shuffle one's feet and eye the people in the other line. In the dining hall, blacks go to one end, whites to the other. Once seated at a table pointed out by a guard, the inmate cannot relax. The guards are watching and some inmates are behaving like five-year-olds. The men are relieved when given permission to leave.

About the author

Hungarian-born Stephen Gerhart, 42, is a full-time student at the University, majoring in Spanish and journalism. He has acquired 84 credits with a cumulative average of 3.9.

Gerhart is attending the University through the New-View Program of the State Correctional Institution at Rockview. He has spent three years of a seven to sixteen-year sentence at Rockview for burglary. Before entering the New-View program, he also obtained his general education high school diploma at Rockview.



Stephen Gerhart

On photographing Rockview

Route 26, from Pleasant Gap to State College begins as a typical, residential road. But the houses suddenly stop and the pavement cuts down and to the right, creating a corridor through a grove of tall pines. Then you see it. (You can't miss it.) The enormous, almost grotesque, concrete edifice of the State Correctional Institute at Rockview.

"You must be the photographer," said the guard at the front door. "Mr. Ault will be down in a minute." Russell Ault, assistant to the superintendent, gave me the Rockview tour.

In the office of Superintendent Mazurkiewicz, I learned Rockview's

official euphemism for inmates: "residents."

I photographed Rockview as an outsider. By no means, did I learn anything of the real life inside.

I did talk with some residents. Most were quite friendly with friendly comments:

"My old lady goes to Penn State. I used to before I got busted."

I was inside Rockview for only three hours. Stephen Gerhart, the author of the following text, was a Rockview resident for three years.

Randy Woodbury