A day in the life...

By Dunstan Prival
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"It's hard in jail, believe me. You've got to keep your mind in the right perspective because if you don't you'll go berserk," said Bernard. 35, of Lafayette, is in a position to know. Busted for dealing drugs, he's been incarcerated inside the Lafayette Parish Correctional Center for almost four years.

In a recent interview, Bernard dispelled several myths about life in jail. First, inmates cannot call out for pizza. Second, they no longer get premium cable channels.

Finally, at the Lafayette Parish jail anyway, life in prison is a great deal more boring than it is dangerous. And it's the boredom more than anything else that gets to the inmates, said Bernard.

The inmates pass their days in a seemingly endless routine of card games, dominoes and soap operas. The routine is broken only for meals, gym and an occasional visit from a friend or family member.

Each weekday begins at 7 a.m. when inmates are awakened for breakfast. Inspection is held at 9 a.m. Lunch is served between 11 a.m. and 12 noon. At 5:30 p.m., the inmates are locked in their cells while the guards change shifts. They are in bed by midnight.

What they do in between the breaks in the monotony is entirely up to them. Weekends are similar, only there is no morning inspection.

Virtually all of the inmates' time is spent in their "pods," the triangular-shaped 30 by 70 foot day rooms where they play cards and board games or watch television.

The inmates remain in their pods even during mealtime. Guards hand the inmates trays through iron bars.

They leave the pod twice a week for a total of six hours — three two-hour periods in the outdoor gym. "It's the same routine day after day," said Bernard.

Each pod contains 11 cells. Ten inmates are assigned to each pod. Each cell is equipped with a stainless steel toilet and sink. The toilet juts out from the wall, leaving little if any space to move around.

Bernard said privacy is hard to come by and is an extremely valued commodity.

"Once inside the jail's walls, Bernard said, the inmates have just two enemies—boredom and time.

"Some guys can't do six months in here. Everybody's different, they have to find their own way," he said. "The main thing is just to occupy your time because if you don't that's when you get into mischief. It's up to you to do what you want to do."

Bernard said he's chosen to use his time wisely. He has received his General Equivalency Degree and now attends Bible classes regularly.

The Lafayette Parish jail has numerous programs, all aimed at preventing the inmates' return to prison after they are released. Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous, the public speaking group Toastmasters, a reading program for inmate parents and their children, among others, are all available to inmates who wish to take advantage of them.

"You can rehabilitate here if you really want to. It's up to you," said Bernard.

Inmates who choose to do nothing with their time except count the days until they are released run the greatest risk of winding up in more trouble, said Bernard.

"If you don't learn anything you'll just keep coming back. I've seen guys come back four or five times since I've been here. If you rehabilitate yourself you won't come back.

The majority of the inmates spend more time playing dominos than working towards a high school degree, he said.

Bernard, on the other hand, has asked for and received a great deal of help, he said.

"If you want the help, they'll help you. But if you don't want the help, there's nobody who's going to help you," he said.

"You have to prove to these people that you want to do right."