



Up in Here: Jailing Kids on Chicago's Other Side

Mark Dostert

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Raised in a comfortable Dallas suburb, Mark Dostert crossed cultural and socioeconomic boundaries as a college student by volunteering as a counselor at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, Chicago's infamous 500-cell juvenile jail, known locally as the Audy Home. Inmates there had been indicted on first-degree murder, rape, and carjacking charges, yet some enthusiastically met with him for weekly Bible-based lessons and discussions. Dostert formed friendly relationships with his students and envisioned becoming an even closer mentor to the legally troubled boys when he became an employee there after graduating from college.

The juveniles' attitudes toward Dostert change, however, once he begins working as a "Children's Attendant" at the Audy Home, clocking in for eight hours every day to enforce rules and maintain order on the cellblocks. His colorblind, altruistic volunteer world fractures into a full-time, emotionally charged reality of white and black and brown. When the boys change, he must change too. Despite wanting to help them feel human in such a dehumanizing environment, Dostert realizes he needs to make sure his kindness is not perceived as weakness. Dostert learns to march the juveniles through the facility to school, recreation activities, and chapel. He must strip-search them, interrupt their brawls, root through their cells for drugs and handcrafted weapons, and monitor group showers to thwart sexual extortion and the inscription of gang symbols in soap on walls and mirrors. Week after week and month after month, the job exposes hidden views not only of the juveniles and the "system" incarcerating them, but of Children's Attendant Dostert himself.

From one man's struggle to reconcile his humanitarian intentions with his actual job responsibilities in what, to him, is a strange new world, emerges a sincere effort to confront the realities of America's persisting racial tensions and institutionalized poverty. Dostert's story is an honest and unflinching journey from thinking he has many of the answers for how to change this world to discovering how little he really knows about the world he is trying to change.

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