



INSIDE Journal®

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Confessions of a Regular Joe

by Ruth Chodniewicz

Joe Bruton knows how to welcome prisoners back into society. He has walked that road himself – twice. But his two experiences could not have looked more different. The first led to total failure, and the second to a whole new life.

Joe grew up in Houston, Texas. He did well in high school, but there was always alcohol around his home, and he accepted it as normal. He began drinking early and added drugs to the routine while still a teenager.

That pattern continued when Joe enrolled in college. By his sophomore year he was a heavy drinker, cocaine user, and heroin addict. To support his habit, he grew and sold marijuana.

He tried to escape the Houston drug scene by transferring to the University of Arkansas. In 1987, Joe received his bachelor's degree and was accepted into graduate school. He met and married his wife a year later. But during his second year of study, the FBI caught up with Joe

for drug trafficking. He would spend the next 33 months in a federal prison while his wife struggled with the family finances – and with the birth of their first son.

Fleeting Success

After prison, Joe paroled to a halfway house in Tulsa, Okla. He transferred his graduate school credits to Oklahoma State University and earned a master's degree in environmental engineering. After landing a good-paying job, he was able to move his wife and son to Oklahoma.

After several years of success – and two more children – Joe started an environmental consulting firm. Everything went well until an insurance company refused to pay for a major project. Trying to keep his thinly financed company afloat, Joe returned to drug trafficking to pay the bills. Next he went back to using drugs and alcohol to deal with his stress. He lost his home and business and was stuck with huge debt. The family car

Continued on page 2



Joe Bruton thought he had lost everything when he went through terrible withdrawal in the county jail – but an unexpected future was waiting for him.

Photo by Michael Drager

Until Prison Do Us Part? Maintaining a Marriage While Incarcerated

by John Byrne

Nothing is harder on a marriage than incarceration. Under the weight of distance, shame, financial hardship, and mutual misunderstanding, even unions that seemed strong can fall apart. Quoting California prison chaplain Ron Grant, a 2005 *New York Times* article estimates that “between a married man’s arrest and the end of his first year in prison, 80 percent of marriages break up ... For female inmates, the divorce rate is closer to 100 percent.”

Even if your marriage survives while you are in prison, you’re not out of the woods after your release date. Your



When you do time, your loved ones do, too. The right perspective can help you hold a marriage together through the tough times.

spouse might have hung in there with you through your

arrest, trial, and prison time, and you might intend to keep the

relationship together when you get out. But even those relationships often fail eventually.

The reasons for the failures are complex.

Here is one scenario: A wife goes to prison. The husband stays on the outside, taking care of the home and family. The husband stays with his incarcerated wife because he feels it’s the right thing to do. He gets a lot of pressure from family members not to make his wife feel abandoned or hurt. The husband genuinely cares about his incarcerated wife. He feels sorry for what she is going through. He can’t imagine asking for a divorce while she’s behind bars because he knows it would devastate her emotionally. After the wife comes home, though, the sympathy dries up. The real

problems in the marriage erupt again, causing separation or divorce.

Let’s imagine another situation: A husband goes to prison, leaving his wife and a couple of kids. The wife struggles for a while, but eventually she creates a whole new life for herself. She works. She takes care of the family. The children are growing up, and she is the only authority in their lives. She calls and visits her incarcerated husband as often as she can afford it, but essentially she has learned to function without him. When the husband gets out of prison, he tries his best to be a good dad and disciplinarian, but it’s like he’s moved back into a house of strangers. His kids look at him as if to say, Where did you

Continued on page 2

Don't Sit on Your Gifts

Guest Column: Garland Hunt

Recently I visited California State Prison at Solano for a yard event organized by Prison Fellowship. As I mingled with the inmates on the yard, one young man told me that he had been playing the drums for most of his life. He pointed out another inmate who was a great singer. It struck me – so many inmates have such special gifts from God, but no way to use them to advance His kingdom. They are just sitting on their gifts!

It was arranged that the drummer and the singer – who could also play the keyboard – would come onstage and perform before I spoke. They were so excited! Performing in front of their peers was a huge thing for them. The young singer sang a song he had written while in prison. It was beautiful and inspiring.

In 2 Timothy 1:6, Paul urges a young pastor named Timothy to “stir up the gift of God which is in you.” God has given great gifts to inmates. Some are entrepreneurs, writers, artists (see page 4!), singers, or preachers. As president of

Prison Fellowship, it's part of my calling and commitment to help you use your gifts even while you are still incarcerated, so whether you're going home in six months or you're facing a long sentence, your time is productive, your God-given abilities aren't gathering dust, and you're better prepared for the future. My prayer is that you will take full advantage of everything that's available to you to “stir up the gift of God,” whether your facility has lots of programs and volunteers, or all you've got is the copy of *Inside Journal* in your hands. No matter what your unique situation is, God has given you gifts that you can use right now to benefit other people and give Him glory.

Have you received gifts from God that until now you have kept on the sidelines? Ask

God how He wants to use the talents you have received from Him. God gave you gifts for a purpose; don't sit on them any longer. ■

Garland Hunt
President, Prison Fellowship



Prison Fellowship Ministries

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Until Prison Do Us Part?

Continued from page 1

come from? His wife is happy he's home, but she also has years of resentment built up from holding the house together all by herself. Conflicts build up that threaten to destroy the reunited family.

If you're in prison and still married, you've got an uphill battle to fight, but you and your family can succeed with a lot of faith, love, and hard work. Here are some tips to help you maintain your marriage while you serve your sentence – and lay a firm foundation for the future:

1. Use your prison time to grow from the inside out. If you are already trying to follow Christ, keep going! Study the Bible and learn what it says about His purpose for your life. You can be the greatest asset to your spouse and your family if you are in the processing of becoming a new man or a new woman. If you're not sure where you stand with God, it's never too late to start a relationship with Him (check out the article on page 3), and you can look inside yourself to ask some hard questions: How has your lifestyle and your incarceration hurt your spouse? Have you told them you are sorry? Are

you ready to change?

2. Let your spouse (and children) know they are your top priority. If you have a job, send money home to them for school clothes, food, or special presents. It doesn't matter whether it's a lot or a little. The important thing is that you are making a sacrifice for them. Don't ask them to make your life more comfortable. Write and call. Listen to your spouse and really hear what he or she is saying. Pray for your spouse and family every day.

3. If your spouse has an ongoing problem with drugs or alcohol, do NOT go directly home to live with that spouse if and when you are released. I know this is difficult advice to read, but the very best thing you can do for your spouse and your family is to stay clean, keep away from overwhelming temptation, and let him or her see you living a new life. If you've struggled with addiction in the past, your recovery has to come first. It will be hard, but if you are Christian, you can know that in Christ all things are possible. Let things come together in God's time. ■

John Byrne is the director of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative in Lino Lakes, Minn.

Confessions of a Regular Joe

Continued from page 1

was repossessed. An eviction notice was hung on the door.

Drunk and needing a drug fix, Joe robbed a bank by bluffing that he had a gun. His take was just \$2,000. On his way out the door, he glanced directly into a security camera, and his fate was sealed.

“I was going through gut-wrenching withdrawal and facing 30 years in prison.”

Finding Jesus in the Rubber Room

Joe was quickly arrested and placed in a rubber room detox center at the county jail. “I was going through gut-wrenching withdrawal and facing 30 years in prison. I asked Jesus not into my life, but to take it – to kill me. I was pathetic. ... Little did I know that Jesus Christ had a different plan for me.”

“Jesus touched my life on the floor of that detox tank, and I was born again,” Joe recalls. “I knew that God was real.”

Joe started listening to the prison ministers, and he began to read the Bible. He also started to pray for a way to grow in Christ while in prison. God answered with an intensive Prison Fellowship reentry program.

“[The program] gave me a place to grow in my knowledge of the Lord,” Joe recalls. “The whole environment was geared towards spiritual growth and character development. I found out who I was – a man of God. I was forgiven. I learned how to take the steps to restore my life and my relationships.”

Moving into Ministry

Released from prison in October 2008, Joe began the reentry process. Through the church family he met while in the reentry program, Joe found employment at a chicken processing plant. He served at church by leading Bible studies and became an active volunteer for the reentry program and a local jail ministry.

Two years after his release, he was hired full-time by Goodwill Industries of Arkansas. At Goodwill, Joe now is building a reentry program for ex-prisoners modeled after his own experiences in the Prison Fellowship program. There, he has helped to double the capacity of Goodwill's reentry program. According to Joe, the nearly 60 men and women who have graduated from the program have enjoyed a 93-percent success



Photo by Michael Drager

Through his work at Goodwill Industries, Joe is helping other ex-prisoners get a second chance at life on the outside.

rate over the last two years.

Joe is still a jail minister, and he is involved in numerous programs that assist prisoners and their families. For example, he leads Prison Fellowship's Angel

Tree program at his church.

But he doesn't do any of it on his own strength. He spends hours every week in prayer, and he's on his tenth time reading through the Bible. “You get to

know someone by spending time with them,” says Joe. “I continue to seek my Lord on a daily basis. I roll out of bed, hit my knees, and pray and start giving thanks.” ■

Life without Pain Is Agony

by Steve Rempe

A recently published news article tells the story of Steven Pete. Steven and his brother were both born with a rare genetic disorder called congenital analgesia. While Steven has a sense of touch, he is unable to feel pain.

Right now you might be feeling envious of Steven. Who wouldn't want to enjoy a life free from hurt? Without pain, you wouldn't have to fear the consequences of your actions, and there'd be nothing to hold you back from achieving what you want in life ... right?

As Steven states in the article, a pain-free life is hardly ideal. Instead, Steven spends his days in fear that he might do serious harm to himself without noticing it. He tells the story of time he broke his leg at a roller-skating party, and didn't realize it until he saw people pointing at him and his blood-soaked pants where the broken bone had actually come out of the skin. Much of his childhood was spent at home or in hospitals recovering from injuries that he never felt.

Now, as an adult, Steven has to be very careful in choosing physical activities, and he lives in constant fear of internal injuries, like an appendicitis, which might not be diagnosed until it is too late. (His brother, sadly, took his own life, rather than have to deal with the growing list of complications resulting from his condition.)

The Purpose of Pain

As much as we dislike physical pain, the truth is that it serves a very important function. Pain tells us that something is wrong – it tells us that what we're doing is dangerous, and that if we continue to do it, we'll cause ourselves even more hurt and grief. Pain is the body's built-in



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warning system, and we ignore it at our peril.

Let's say you kick a stone wall. The laws of physics are pretty clear about what happens next. The wall is stronger than your foot, and you can expect to feel a lot of pain. The same thing happens when you break God's law (the term for breaking God's law is "sin.") When you break God's law, the consequences are equally predictable – you can expect a lot of pain in your life. The pain caused by our sin is God's way of giving us a warning, like a red flag that says, "Watch out! You are in danger!" God can even use our pain to direct us closer to Himself. When we feel discouraged or alone, our pain can encourage us to seek out God, who the Bible tells us is a "friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Prov. 18:24).

Does this mean that God intended there to be pain in this world? The answer is "no." But God allows us to feel the painful consequences of our own sin so that we will know when we are wandering away from Him and to remind us that this broken world is not our permanent home.

Even when we suffer for someone else's mistake, God can still use that pain in our lives to help us stay close to Him and get our strength from Him. And just as a good doctor can diagnose and fix something that is causing us physical pain, so God can reach down and heal us, preparing us to be used by Him.

It is important to remember that God did not protect His Son from pain. Jesus wept when His friend Lazarus died. He felt great sorrow for the people living in Jerusalem,

saying that he wanted to "gather [God's] children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings," and lamenting that they had instead chosen to reject the message God had given them. And while the physical suffering Jesus experienced on the cross far exceeds any pain most of us will ever experience, it was the separation from His Father that occurred when taking on our sins that caused Jesus the most agony. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He cried.

A Pain-Free Future

The good news is that pain doesn't have to have the final word. When we feel disgraced, frustrated, alone, or hurt, we can always turn to God, who offers us a peace that money can't buy, a peace that's bigger than our circumstances. And while we will never be able to escape pain

entirely in this world, we can rest easy, knowing that God is using our troubles to mold us into the men and women He wants us to be, and that He promises us a coming life where such pain is a distant memory.

"I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them,"" says Revelation 21:3-4. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."

Do you need God's help to deal with the pain you are facing? Do you want to accept His invitation to a future where – thanks to the death of His Son Jesus Christ to pay for your sins – "He will wipe every tear" from your eyes? Read "No Pain, No Gain." ■

No Pain, No Gain

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains," says Christian writer C. S. Lewis. "It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Some pain we bring upon ourselves with our own actions, and some pain is caused by events outside our control. But all pain is a result of our separation from God. The good news: God offers us forgiveness and healing for all of it. Because of the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, we have the chance to be restored, adopted children of God.

If you desire God's free gift of salvation, you might pray something like this:

God, I don't want to be separated from You anymore. Thank You for Jesus, and His paying the price for my sins on the cross. I give You control of my life. Please help me to live a life that brings You joy, and one that shows Your love to everyone around me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If you have prayed a prayer like this, or if you want to know more about Jesus and what He did on your behalf, *Inside Journal* will help you enroll in a free correspondence Bible study – and get a Bible, if you don't have access to one through your chaplain or chapel program – when you write to **"No Pain, No Gain," c/o Inside Journal, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.**

California Votes to Reform “Three Strikes”

by A.R. Quinn

On November 6, 2012, citizens of California overwhelmingly voted to approve Proposition 36, a ballot measure reforming the state's Three Strikes law. Sixty-nine percent of the voting public were in favor of the proposition, while only 31 percent opposed it.

Under the old version of California's Three Strikes law, a life sentence could be handed down after an offender was convicted of his or her third felony – even if the third offense was something as minor as shoplifting. Under the revised law, an offender who has two or more serious or violent felony convictions, and whose third conviction is for a less serious,

nonviolent crime, would receive twice the normal recommended sentence, instead of 25-years-to-life, as was required under the old law. There are some exceptions; if the third striker's new or previous convictions involve certain drug-, sex-, or gun-related crimes, a 25-years-to-life sentence may still apply.

The new law also gives nearly 3,000 inmates now serving life terms under the Three Strikes law a means to ask for a reduced sentence.

California's Three Strikes law was originally passed in 1994, after a young woman was killed in a 1992 purse snatching by two repeat offenders. It was intended to keep the most dangerous criminals behind bars and improve public safety, but many consid-

ered it to be one of the harshest sentencing laws in the country, and it was partially to blame for the rapid growth of California's prison population in the years that followed.

Advocates for Prop 36 say that the sentencing changes will save the state between \$70 to \$90 million a year, money that can be used to fund schools and decrease the burden on taxpayers.

Mike Reynolds, who wrote the original Three Strikes law after his daughter, Kimber, died in the purse snatching, warned that the changes will put the safety of communities at risk. "It's a big day for criminals and their attorneys," he said to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

But criminal justice reform advocates had a more positive take.

"[The] vote on Proposition 36 sends a powerful message to policymakers in California and across the country that taxpayers are ready for a new direction in criminal justice," Adam Gelb, director of the Pew Center on the States' Public Safety Performance Project, told the *San Jose Mercury News*. "States that have already made some changes to their sentencing laws may be inspired to take a second look, and states that haven't made significant changes yet may start."

This is the second time that California voters have revised their state's Three Strikes law. In 2000, they passed a measure that sent some nonviolent drug offenders to drug treatment instead of prison.

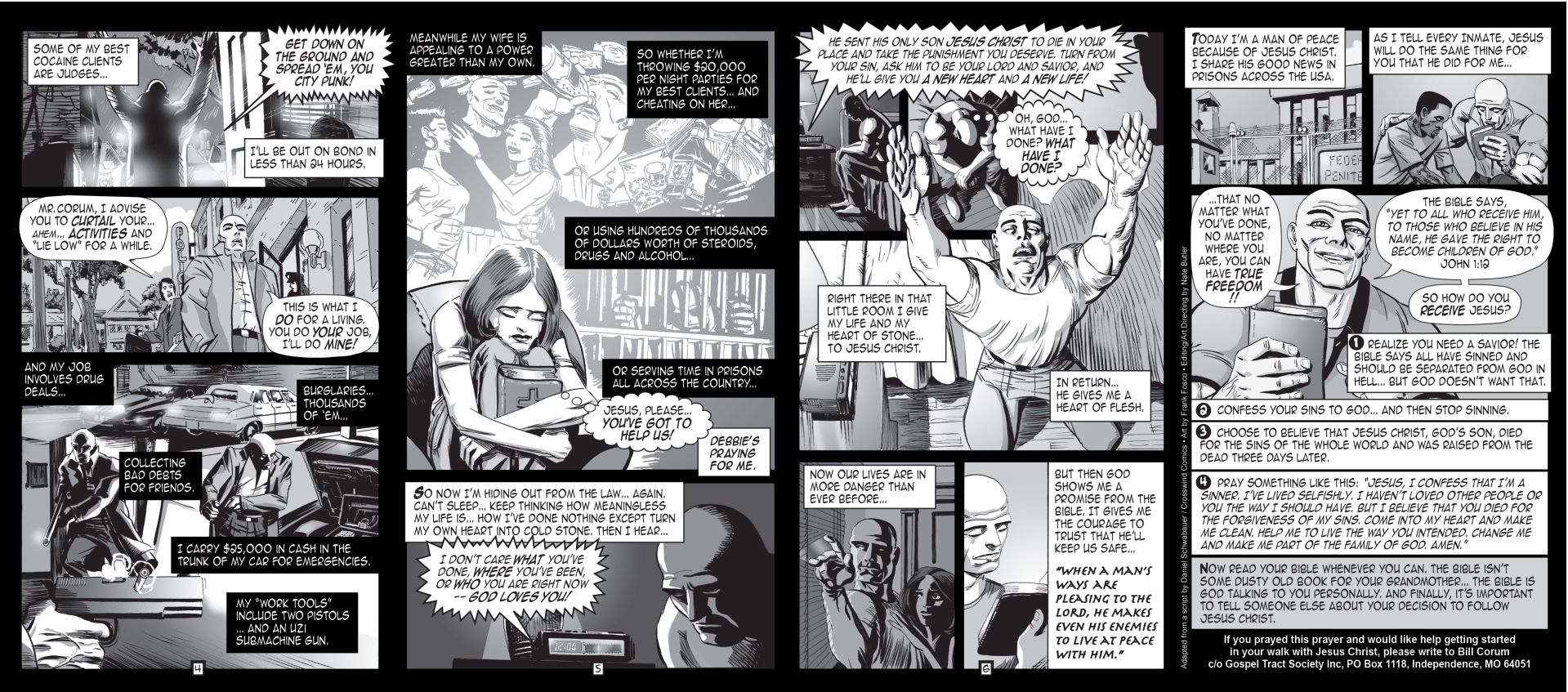
Also on November 6, a majority

of Golden State voters said "no" to Proposition 34. If Prop 34 had passed, it would have outlawed the death penalty in California. ■



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Comics Tell Inmate Stories



A Q&A with Nate Butler

For this edition of *Inside Journal*, Managing Editor A.R. Quinn sat down to talk with Nate Butler, president, CEO, and co-founder of COMIX35, a unique Christian comics ministry. Before founding COMIX35, Nate spent two decades as a cartoonist, commercial artist, and writer/illustrator. He worked for clients such as Jim Henson Productions, Weekly Reader, Children's Television Network, DC Comics, and Kings Features Syndicate, and he has done comic scriptwriting for Modern Publishing, Archie Comics, and Marvel Comics. Through the years, he has worked on many internationally known characters such as *Archie & Jughead*, *The Muppets*, *Popeye*, *Barbie*, *Heathcliff*, *Bugs Bunny*, *Tiny Toons*, *Mighty Mouse*, *Rocky & Bullwinkle*, *Snuffy Smith*, *Animated Batman*, *The Jetsons*, *Berenstain Bears*, *Tom & Jerry*, and more.

IJ: What's behind the name of your organization, COMIX35?

Nate: COMIX35 comes from Exodus 35:30-35, where God gifts certain artisans who are creating the works of art for the tabernacle. He doesn't just give them the calling, but He also inspires them to teach these artistic abilities to others.

IJ: Why have a Christian comics ministry?

Nate: Comics are really accessible to people all over the world. Our whole thing is about helping people within their unique cultures produce their own comics for people in their

own contexts and languages, so they can understand the Gospel.

IJ: How did you get started in comics and cartooning?

Nate: When I was four years old I saw Dick Tracy in the paper ... I told my mother, "That's what I'm gonna be - the guy who draws Dick Tracy." I started drawing, and I never made any other plans for my life. My mother was an amateur artist and supportive. My dad was a little skeptical. He wanted me to have security, but God opened all the doors. I worked for a while in the newspaper business and then went into freelancing commercial art ... I looked back at some point and realized God had put me through this life-long training program to know everything about producing and printing comics. My vision was small - to produce Christian comics.

IJ: Eventually you started hosting seminars so people from all over the world could learn how to produce Christian comics to explain the Gospel to people in their home cultures. How did you start to apply your ministry to prison inmates?

Nate: I was married for 30 years to my first wife, Susan. Before she died from ovarian cancer, she and I went up to Colorado for vacation. We stayed at this charming bed and breakfast. We had to drive down the mountain into the town to get groceries or go to a restaurant ... We were driving down the hill and I looked to my right, and there was a prison. I felt like the Lord was saying, "Look at that." We went down the hill and came back

up. I looked to my left, and there was the prison. Every time I went down the hill I felt the prompting to look at that prison. I asked God, "Why are you telling me this?" I didn't hear anything.

But eventually I realized that prison is a culture - it has a language all its own. Maybe I am supposed to help do that in prisons. Eventually we had one of our cartooning seminars at the Radgowski Correctional Institution. I learned in the process that there's lots of institutional concerns. Inmates in prison have very limited supplies. There are problems with printing in colored ink ... And of course no staples. We came up with these black-and-white folding tracts on enameled paper. When we first started, my idea was inmates doing their own stories. The first tract we did we did professionally just as an example to show them. The person that ended up doing [ex-prisoner and worship leader] Bobby McGee's tract does not want to do his own story, but he is an excellent artist and storyteller. He is working on another one now for [ex-prisoner and prison minister] Manny Mill.

IJ: Do you think these comics telling the real-life stories of inmates and former inmates will be well-received?

Nate: A while ago I went down to [the Louisiana State Penitentiary at] Angola. I wasn't sure what I could bring in, so I didn't bring any of our comics. We were walking around visiting cells, and I offered a New Testament to this one young guy. He pushed it right back. He said, "Do you know how many of those have been offered to me?" But we kept talking, and I soon as I told him I worked

ATTENTION INMATES & CHAPLAINS!

CHRISTIAN COMICS TRACTS for PRISON INMATES

This mini-comic was written and designed by a prison inmate! Would YOU like to create a similar 7-page comic about a prison ministry worker - or about your own personal testimony? If you are a talented Christian inmate, here is an opportunity for you to create a mini-comic to reach your fellow inmates and at-risk youth!

Ask your chaplain to recommend you and submit examples of your drawing and storytelling abilities. (Other prison ministry workers or family members may also help identify Christian inmates who are good artists and storytellers, but inmate submissions accompanied by a recommendation letter from a chaplain will receive first consideration.)

Christian comics professionals will review your submitted samples and your recommendation. If your work is chosen, volunteer consultants may assist you in producing or refining your own 7-page mini-comic in a format like this one, either in person or via correspondence.

You will draw your finished comic pages in pencil, and Christian comics professionals will do the finished inking and lettering to prepare the comic for reproduction.

You will receive at least 1 copy of the printed comic and also a Christian Comics Collection containing 1 copy each of 12 different Christian comic books and graphic novels (if your prison rules permit it). Upon request, your chaplain may receive up to 2000 copies of your printed mini-comic for distribution within your prison or the local community.

E-mail prison_contact@comix35.org for more details or see this web page: www.comix35.org/prison.html

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