

KATE ALLMAN spends a night in Yasmar Youth Detention Centre and gains a glimpse of life on the inside.

# My night in prison



LSJ journalist Kate, second from right, lines up for the Whitelion Bail Out.

“OI, BLONDIE!”

The greeting booms into my ears from a stern female guard who is so close to the side of my head I can smell stale coffee and chewing gum on her breath.

“Do you have a hair tie? Why the f\*ck would you come to prison without a hair tie?”

I’m facing a brick wall with my nose almost touching the mortar, trying not to move. Other jumpsuit-clad “prisoners” stand motionless in a row next to me, facing the wall. “No hair tie means push-ups,” snarls the officer.

“Get down on the ground, prisoner. Lie flat. Put your face on the dirt.” I obey. The concrete is cold on my knee caps and hands.

“Now give me 10 push-ups.”

**T**his is the beginning of my first night in Yasmar Youth Detention training facility in the inner-west of Sydney. I’ve agreed to spend a night in this former juvenile detention centre for what is known as the “Whitelion Bail Out” – a charity event held each year in capital cities around Australia to raise money for the organisation Whitelion. The idea is that people spend a night in a real prison to get an insight into what prisoners go through.

Whitelion offers services to young people at risk of being trapped in what can be a revolving-door cycle of imprisonment, release and reoffending (often coupled with addiction) for juvenile offenders. The organisation tries to break the cycle by finding stable housing, providing mentoring programs and diverting young people to education and employment rather than prison.

Yasmar Youth Detention Centre sits under the flight path to Sydney airport. This means planes roar overhead repeatedly during my Bail Out

experience. They are an ironic symbol of freedom because there’ll be no escape for the 100 “prisoners” incarcerated for the fundraiser.

“Next!” A short male guard with slicked-back hair calls me into a small office to take my mug shot.

“Where are you from, precious?” he asks softly, fixing me with creepy, wide eyes. “Bowral, sir,” I stammer. His big eyes glint excitedly. “Ooh, Bowral, I’ve been there,” he continues. “I used to teach at a lovely ladies college in Bowral. Frensham School. Oh, I did like the young girls at Frensham School.”

It’s an off experience. I know this slime ball is an actor being paid to play a guard for the event, but our exchange still irks me. I can’t help thinking about all the young girls who have been through the juvenile justice system and suffered abuse. Cases of institutional harassment and abuse in Northern Territory detention centres, exposed earlier this year at the youth justice royal commission, spring to mind. I also recall reading staggering figures from a 2009

report by Justice Health and Juvenile Justice on sexual abuse in detention centres. That report found that nearly 40 per cent of girls were sexually abused in NSW juvenile detention facilities.

The cells at Yasmar are larger than I expected – probably the size of the four by five metre “dog box” room I squeezed into when I was at college at university. Each cell has a thin mattress on a single bed, a desk and a small ensuite featuring a toilet and no door.

The lodgings are starkly different to the tiny, cramped double-bunk cells I saw a few years ago when I visited Long Bay adult prison as part of my university studies. At Long Bay, silver toilet bowls without lids stand centimetres from the bedheads of each narrow steel bunk.

Although during the Bail Out we get a staged glimpse into day-to-day life of juvenile prisoners, I can’t help recalling that this is all an act and I’ll be back home in my safe and warm (if over-priced) rental apartment in Sydney tomorrow. Two former juvenile prisoners who now work for Whitelion have attend the Bail Out to offer us more authentic insights.

“It was my 12th birthday and my dad marched me down to Turana Youth Detention Centre in Victoria,” says Stephen Cain, a former inmate who spent 16 years in jail before he turned 35. “He decided he didn’t want me any more, so I was made a ward of the state. That began my 25-year addiction to heroin, speed and cocaine. I became institutionalised. Over 20 years, I spent only four years on the outside.”

Another former prisoner, an Indigenous woman, recounts the sexual abuse and homelessness she endured as a child, which made prison a safer place for her to live than her own community.

“When I was three, a dark shadow

in the night crept into my bedroom, and stole my innocence,” she says.

The woman, now an ambassador for Whitelion, bravely tells how she became homeless by age 12 and a prostitute by 18. There is barely a dry eye in the room when she’s finished telling her story.

The recurring theme is not that these former offenders were delinquent kids who made bad choices, but that there was hardly an opportunity for them to make the right choices. They were born into families with immense social disadvantage, rife with abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction.

According to a 2015 Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) report, once caught up in the prison system, almost 60 per cent of offenders in NSW (juvenile and adult) are convicted of another offence within 10 years. BOCSAR says juveniles have a higher recidivism rate than adults – at 79 per cent compared with 56 per cent. The stories we hear during the Bail Out, of children moving in and out of prison, sadly confirm these statistics.

In 2014-2015, the average cost per day, per young person in juvenile detention was \$1,207, according to the Australian Government Productivity Commission. In comparison, Whitelion’s Leaving Care Mentoring Program costs just under \$12 per young person per day. About 456 young people are enrolled in Whitelion programs across NSW.

As the Federal Government grapples with a budget deficit in the billions, it’s interesting to consider the high costs of prisons, unemployment, crime, health, court processes and child protection. So many of these costs could be reduced by offering juvenile offenders a “white lion” that might divert them from a life of crime. **LSJ**

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