Joe Harper Returns: Lorton Reformatory Inmate Tells His Story

A Different View of Lorton Prison

By Irma Clifton

Joe Harper lived in the Lorton Reformatory for ten years – hard time spent from 1954-1964 learning a trade, earning the respect of fellow inmates and guards and ultimately jumpstarting his life.

A Different World

Harper grew up in the streets of D.C. with seven brothers and sisters. He ran away from home at an early age to avoid his abusive stepfather and stole cars with buddies to make ends meet. Then, in 1954 he was caught, sentenced to four years and learned to live life on “The Hill”. Soon, the young man who had always shown an interest in electronics requested an assignment to the electrical shop.

“I got a lot of respect because I never got in trouble and I wasn’t a rat,” Harper said, adding that he finally had an opportunity to learn a trade.

Harper, who never drank or used drugs in prison, found the daily regimen of institutional life not difficult to follow. His hours were filled with work and teaching himself to play the trumpet. His experience as an electrician also prompted him to build sound equipment for the prison jazz band.


First Release and Going Back

In 1958, Harper, who never had a visitor in jail, was released. But within six months, and without a support network or job, he was arrested again for car theft and sentenced to six years. Back he went to Lorton.

Back at the Reformatory, Harper’s supervisors were disappointed with him, and reassigned him to the electrical shop where he became the after-duty-hours and weekend electrician. That meant often working alone or with little, if any, supervision. It was during this stretch that he earned his GED and again filled his hours with productive activities.

Harper became the prison DJ and had a budget to purchase records which were played over the prisons radio system. He was also befriended by the prison chaplain, a jazz enthusiast, who
organized the jazz festivals that brought the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Nancy Wilson and Frank Sinatra to perform for the prisoners.

It was through this friendship with the prison priest that he decided to convert to Catholicism and was confirmed in the Catholic faith. During this sentence he later found out that his mother had died, and no one had gotten word to him.

Music became a big part of Harper’s life and he spent hours practicing with the prison band. At times the band was scheduled to play for employee dances and often entertained at parties held by staff. Harper also developed an interest in photography and snapped photos of celebrities who appeared at the many jazz festivals held at the prison.

A Second Chance

One of Harpers supervisors asked what he intended to do when he was released and if he had a job lined up. Unbeknownst to Harper, he had been recommended for meritorious good time which reduced his sentence by several months. The supervisor knew someone who was looking for an electrician and would be glad to recommend Harper.

“I didn’t even know the day that I was going home,” he said.

Harper was hired by one of only two African American electrical contractors operating in Washington, DC. He stayed with that company for two years, and then worked for drugstore chain Drug Fair for eight years until they went out of business. He then took a job with the DC Government at DC General Hospital and worked there until his retirement in 1995.

At DC General, “When I interviewed with them, I said, ‘I need six weeks’ vacation a year. I need to get out,’” Harper said.

Harper and his family took his trailer on extended jaunts across the country and into Mexico and Canada. He has visited every state except four, South and North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana.

Today, Joe Harper lives a quiet life near Fredericksburg, Virginia. He credits his time behind bars for making him a better, more responsible person. Truly the Lorton prison that Joe Harper knew is not the facility the community is now only too happy to forget. But to give credit where it is due, surely there must be others like Joe Harper out there who look back acknowledge that if not for Lorton, they would have perished.