

Internet in the Joint?

Published in the *Angolite*, an award winning prison news magazine from the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. November/ December 2002, vol. 27, #6

The man in 222 North has two daughters in elementary school. Every night they send him an e-mail and he writes back to them. Sometimes they ask him for help with their history homework. He checks his facts on the web and then communicates with them by instant messenger. Since his wife has to work longer now that he's doing time, the kids depend on their father more for help with school. Because of the Internet, he can help them.

In 333 South the pictures on the wall show scenes from 3000 miles away. This man's parents worry about him and he worries about them. Phone calls cost too much, so he keeps in touch with them by e-mail which is free. Being connected to his family makes a big difference in his life. His mother frequently scans in pictures of friends and of their small farm. 333 South sees a picture of their rice field ready for harvest. These scenes from home make him regret his drug-running.

After e-mailing his parents, 333 South logs on to Dave's ESL cafe and takes an English grammar test on the web. After each test question he can see the answer right away. He doesn't have to wait a week until his teacher corrects him. He's doing a lot better with English now.

But evil lurks in 444 East. This man wants some hot Internet sex. He types in an address a guy sold him for 3 smokes. A blue screen comes up: BLOCKED. He goes to a good search engine and types in SEXY SLUTS. Oh man, too good to be true, 133,000 sites. He clicks the first one: BLOCKED. And the second and so on. All BLOCKED just as they are in any secondary school.

555 West works late into the night. He's getting out in three months and he needs work. Even though the dot.com crisis has eliminated a lot of computer jobs, he knows there's room for a system administrator who knows UNIX and LINUX. He studies hard. No more prison for him.

He finishes at 1 AM. Used to be the last drink of the day at that time. He misses it, so he signs on to AA ON-LINE.

In the central guard room, On-Duty Joe sips his coffee and smiles. Three months ago he got a lay-off notice. "Electronic security has eliminated the need for...etc. etc. " But Joe is working again. He monitors all Internet action. It's a beautiful job because he knows who to watch. He sees 444 East go for the SEXY SLUTS. He chuckles because he knows what's going to happen. But when 444 East gives up on sex and sends an e-mail to someone demanding money, Joe goes into action. He types a few numbers on his computer and 444 East is off the web forever.

Up in the front office during the day, the budget director is happy. Internet access costs each guy \$30 a month. 300 guys have signed on, that's \$9,000 a month. "After expenses," he tells the warden, "we'll have a profit of at least \$5,000 a month. Imagine that -- a profit."

This budget information fits neatly into the warden's report. The local right wing politician screams about the prison predators having access to the Internet. But the warden's report details the safety measures and also notes a dramatic decrease in prison violence.

The warden includes reports from his department heads: better job preparation, more informed class room participation, closer family ties, auto cad skills and so forth. There is a problem, however -- the warden doesn't mention it in his report -- the men need more exercise now.

Out in the yard, the prison cynic flicks his smoke away. "What's the big deal? Guys want to do crime, they don't need the Internet to do it. A phone call and a coded message -- that's all it takes.

The chair of the lifers' group strikes a more positive note: "The Internet is here to stay. It makes the world smaller and all of us smarter. We need the Internet."