Murray Singer, Cleveland, Ohio
The Chance To Enjoy Life
By TERRY ELLIS, Contributing Editor

Murray Singer has found a mission somewhere most people avoid — behind prison walls. Not that he wanted this or any mission. He wasn't looking for one; in fact, the concept of mission made him angry. All he wanted was to be happy. Then a fellow SGI leader in Cleveland, who'd always been a good friend, asked him to substitute on a visit to Grafton Correctional Institution.

"I owed him big-time, so how could I refuse?" says Mr. Singer. "I really did not want to go. I grew up in a tough neighborhood in the Bronx. I struggled to get away from the streets. I didn't want to associate with criminals. Entering prison for the first time was a real jolt to my senses.... The tension was almost overwhelming."

He was scared and nervous, but by the time he left he felt revitalized. He determined to go back again. "I had found my mission. Or my mission had found me," he says.

As he speaks, Murray Singer's voice is confident without being inflexible. And there's an undertone of humor. (Being able to laugh is something he attributes to his Buddhist practice.) It's a voice of strength that comes from living life in all its different shades.

Mr. Singer may never have wanted a mission but was always a driven man: He knew what he wanted to accomplish before he died, and he expected to be dead by the time he was 47. Both his parents had died in their 40s. When he reached that point, Mr. Singer appeared to have accumulated all the trappings of happiness — home, family and job. But he lived in an internal prison plagued by recurring depression.

"I had accomplished all of my goals — except to be happy. I never dreamed of that," says Mr. Singer.

Then, 10 years ago, he discovered this Buddhism. Now 57, he has recovered a joy in living that affects everyone around him, including people sentenced to prison terms in Ohio.

An engineer by training, he works for an executive recruiting firm in Cleveland. "This practice has been a learning experience for me. I used to see everything in a negative light, and I was always angry," he says. "I've learned to take everything in a positive way. Everything that happens has a purpose."

This understanding of unshakable happiness within serves Mr. Singer well as he works with prisoners, who often feel overwhelmed and victimized by their environment. His message is a firm, compassionate reminder of the Buddhist principle that individuals and their environment are interrelated. In this Buddhist perspective, an individual's own heart and actions are most important.

Of course, acting on this principle of personal responsibility in any environment is difficult. In prison, the conditions are difficult enough to make it seem impossible. The system is, by definition, a place that epitomizes failure of both individuals and society. This last resort also has an expensive price tag: some $78 billion a year and countless heartaches. Crime and the stories behind it have become the fabric of our TV culture, while in the political arena the talk is to get tough.

Between 1985 and 1996, the state and federal prison population more than doubled. Much of the dramatic rise resulted from drug-related convictions and sentences. Some 1.2 million people are now in state prisons. Another 3 million are on parole, and their chances of ending back in prison are high. Almost 40 percent of all paroles are revoked at some point. And the highest recidivism is among those under 18: a whopping 46.5 percent return to prison. As the system struggles with overcrowding, the fact that more than half of those

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incarcerated are defined as racial and ethnic minorities further builds up an environment of conflict.

Handed all these challenges, prison officials are taking a new look at religion in rehabilitation. They're experimenting with new approaches, and they're seeking a broader mix of religious leaders who minister to those in prison.

Murray Singer's introduction to the world of religion behind prison walls came in a state with one of the more progressive models, says the Rev. Marloe Karlen, who's in charge of religious services for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections. The Rev. Karlen has been with the department for 21 years.

"It's not all rosy," he says, "but I wouldn't be a reverend if I didn't believe in it."

For almost 30 years, Ohio has always had two "generic chaplains" to staff its institution [confused about what institution we're talking about here]. The job requires an open-minded person who is ecumenical, rather than sectarian, in approach.

States such as Texas, which until two years ago hired a limited number of chaplains to serve specific denominations, run the risk of legal problems. When Texas prisoners from various religious backgrounds sued, saying their right to worship was denied, the courts agreed. In other states, such as Georgia and Colorado, governments avoid this problem by hiring no chaplains, instead relying on volunteers.

"This makes it difficult to conduct a dynamic religious values and ethics program or to run developmental programs for the entire prison community, which require staff," says the Rev. Karlen.

Mr. Karlen has been a force behind creating a broad-based religious culture in Ohio's 30 prisons. While chaplains [only two chaplains? Confused.] take care of the overall religious program, volunteers and contract chaplains conduct religious services and study groups for specific denominations. Proselytizing is against the rules. Today, thousands of volunteers are involved, the Rev. Karlen says. Murray Singer fits the profile of a successful volunteer.

"He's compassionate, and he can be very firm," says Mr. Karlen. "It's the right kind of mix to work in this environment. He also focuses on the essence of the religion rather than the formalities."

Since in-house rules often make it difficult for prisoners to conduct their religious services the way they would in the outside world, this is a plus. For example, even prayer beads could be viewed as weapons.

Chaplain Jerry Au has worked with Mr. Singer for four years at Grafton. He appreciates that Mr. Singer asks questions and seeks to understand the rules and regulations of the system before jumping into action. Although he had met Buddhists before in the prisons, Chaplain Au says Mr. Singer "was the one who has really sat down and talked, shared on a personal level."

That personal interaction convinced him that the two were working toward the same goal: rehabilitation. And for him, this means "an actual change in the individual, inside the individual, rather than the system making a change. They realize there is a higher power, and they can't do it on their own. The ultimate test is whether they can carry it [this change] out with them into society."

"A lot of times from the prison statistics, it seems like there's no hope," says Chaplain Au. "But I've seen guys change. It's intangible, not something you can measure. You can't measure spirituality."

Staff and volunteers working together means a chance for a significant number of prisoners to turn their lives around, says the Rev. Karlen. Many, when reached early enough in life — particularly those who have committed non-violent crimes such as drug-related or white collar crimes — are changed by the valuable message offered by religion.

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Although research in this area is slim, one study published in 1990 by Baltimore clinical psychologist John Gardner showed a significant drop in parole violations among prisoners who received religious training in prison. The Rev. Karlen is working on a mentoring program that would release prisoners on parole into their religious communities to help break the cycle of parole violations.

From that first meeting at Grafton, Murray Singer's role in this process has expanded. The SGI-USA Community Center in Cleveland has become the official source of information on Buddhism for chaplains throughout the state. And next fall, Mr. Singer will conduct a full day of instruction on Buddhism during the statewide chaplains seminar.

He's now working with Buddhist groups at four institutions in Ohio. At the North Central Correctional Institution in Marion, he officially represents not only SGI members who transferred from Grafton but six Zen and Pure Land sect practitioners. And he's networking with SGI members helping prisoners in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Georgia.

His personal sense of reward also continues to expand: "They think I help them a lot. In reality, they help me. Every time I go, they encourage me. When I first went to Grafton, there was a tremendous sense of racial barriers. Now, they've become the tightest bunch of people who watch out for each other, protect each other. It's amazing, fantastic."

Ian Singer, the elder of Murray Singer's two sons, isn't surprised by all this. He says community service is something that his parents always valued highly. But he sees a dramatic change in his father's attitude toward life. "The change now is that he loves life," says Ian. "I wish he had picked the practice up years ago. Buddhism is sustaining his life."

Ian, who continues to practice Judaism in the spirit with which he was raised, appreciates the sense of "fair play and the high moral code" his father instilled in him. After studying history and philosophy in college, Ian went on to law school and now works with a legal and financial research firm in New York. "He taught me to work hard and not to expect anybody to give me something," Ian says of his father. At the time, the strictness and anger were hard to swallow, but looking back now he can appreciate his father's evolution as a human being and the hardships of life he weathered.

"I love my father," he says.

This feeling of affection is something that sticks with young prisoners, too. One young man even thanked Mr. Singer, saying that if he'd had a father like him, he wouldn't have ended up in prison.

"I tell them to take responsibility for being here, and let's move forward," says Mr. Singer. "I put the responsibility on them by being strict with them about this. I'm constantly stressing that at meetings. You and your environment are one. If you allow your environment to depress you, get you down, force you to get combative, then you've lost."

"You can change your environment," he continues. "Buddhism gives tremendous confidence in this principle. That's what life is all about.... That's the intent of what we're trying to do. We don't chant to a magic scroll and ask for things. Rather, we recognize that the wisdom, courage, compassion and conviction are inside us. We can take the proper action instead of waiting for the lottery to drop on us. It's all about having the chance to enjoy life."

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