

## **A Tribute to Ken Kerle**

In March 2009, Ken Kerle, the founding editor of *American Jails* magazine retired. Many professionals in criminal justice will miss him. Ken has visited more jails than any other known person. He worked hard not only to improve our jails but also to advance the cause of the many professionals employed in our correctional system. I am honored to know him, to have been provided with the opportunity to contribute to his magazine, *American Jails*, and to consider myself as one of his many friends.

--Cliff Roberson, Editor-in-Chief, *PICJ*

## **How Ken Kerle Changed the Corrections World (and My Life)<sup>1</sup>**

**Mary K. Stohr**

As I have said many times, Ken Kerle is the modern day John Howard, and John Howard, like Ken Kerle, changed the corrections world. As you know, John Howard was an English ex-sheriff of the 1700s. He spent his life traveling and speaking out in favor of the reformation and standardization of the treatment of those held in English and European gaols (or jails). Howard was a major influence in the movement to improve general conditions for jail inmates, in their separation or classification, and in the cessation of the fee system, whereby an inmate was required to pay a fee for even such basics as food and clothing. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, Howard literally gave his life for jail reform, as he died of gaol fever, or typhus.

Like Howard, Ken Kerle has been a major force for reform virtually his whole life. He worked in jail management. He has traveled widely, both in the United States and internationally, exhorting jail managers to increase the quality of their facilities and to meet jail standards. In his capacity as Managing Editor of *American Jails* magazine, he encouraged, some might say harangued, those of us doing research on jails to write for the magazine so those in the practitioner world might benefit from this knowledge. Conversely,

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he always promoted the need for academicians to see the workings of the jail from the staff perspective. In many ways he cross-fertilized usually distinct worlds by pushing the attendance and presentation of research by academicians at the American Jail Association conferences and the attendance and presentation of perspectives (and often research) by practitioners at the Academy of Criminal Justice Science (ACJS) conferences. His most obvious effort in this area was the “Jails and Academe” feature that he started running years ago in the magazine and which many of us wrote for.

Every major issue on jails and their history has been covered at least once, if not many times, in *American Jails* magazine. From dealing with the elderly inmate, to New Generation jails and their relative advantages or disadvantages, to stress experienced by staff, Ken made sure that if the topic was salient and the research was there, it got published in the magazine.

In fact, as you all know, Ken's promotion of increased quality in jail supervision and management as well as construction (and many other areas) did not stop with the magazine. Far, far from it. He saw a need for more textbooks devoted exclusively to jails and so he wrote one. He attended ACJS, but he also was a semi-regular attendee at ASC and many regional meetings. Ken's “agenda” was not just to change jails in this country and worldwide but to change academe so it would change minds. Because he wanted educated people to work in jails, he would use these academic meetings to convince professors to teach separate jail classes or at least devote a significant section of their corrections classes to jails and increase classroom visits to jails.

It was at one of these meetings, an ACJS meeting in 1987 (my first), that Ken began his insidious influence on my life. Along with Linda Zupan and Ben Menke, I was presenting research they had conducted on jails, which they had allowed me to use for my master's degree thesis. After I had mumbled a few nervous words and all the presentations were complete, this well-dressed man in the audience (complete suit and tie always) immediately raised his hand and stood up. It was my first glimpse of Ken! He started by telling people about himself, about AJA, about the magazine, and about how our research should appear in the magazine (or be reprinted there after we published it in a journal), and how we would truly achieve progress vis-à-vis jails only if we—scholars and practitioners—all pulled together, rather than working at cross purposes. Still on leave from the prison I was working at, I personified the combination of academe (fledgling though I was) and the practitioner world, so Ken's logic made infinite sense to me. After I had attended a few more jails panels at that conference, where Ken was also present giving the same spiel (and I admit it crossed my mind that he was following me), I began to suspect that he was a nut case! And, of course, in the tradition of all single-minded,

passionate reformers (e.g., John Howard) who actually change the world for the better, Ken was and is verging on the nutty!

In the many years since, and at Ken's urging, I have published or reprinted 10 articles in *American Jails* magazine, including a one-time "Jails and Academe" column. I have exclusively focused on jails, or made sure I included jails, in a number of research projects over the years. I have increased the discussion of jails in books I've written and classes I've taught. It is unlikely that jails would have played such a big part in my own research and teaching agenda without the influence and encouragement of Ken. Over the years he has attended a number of the presentations on jails that I've given, he has called me with questions, I've consulted with him numerous times, I've referred countless numbers of academicians, practitioners, and news media to him, and we have visited at conferences and over the phone. He even came to our house for dinner once when he was in Boise for our regional conference. There is nobody on this earth, in my opinion, who knows more about jails, how they operate and how they should operate, than Ken Kerle. It has been my great good fortune to know him and to have the benefit of his wisdom these many years.

Of course, as the email traffic regarding Ken that Dan Phillips initiated illustrates, there are many mini-mes (like me) to Ken's full sized heroic figure in our corrections world. Many who said Ken had an indelible influence on their life, many who say he mentored them as no one else had. Many who acknowledged that he is the go-to guy if you have questions about jails. For these reasons, Ken Kerle is Dr. Jail (did you know he has a doctorate, too?) and the direct and equivalent descendant of John Howard!

#### **Note**

1. This tribute was read to Ken Kerle at the Academy of Criminal Justice Science's Corrections Section tribute for him held on March 13, 2009, in Boston, Massachusetts.

