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Book Review

A Former Insider's Guide to Parole: A Manual for Anyone Trying to Get Out of Prison

By **Gerald T. Balone**

GTB Speaks, LLC, 2009.

by **Alan Rosenthal and Patricia Warth***

Entitled *A Former Insider's Guide to Parole*, Gerald T. Balone's self-published book is just as much about surviving the prison experience with your humanity and sense of hope intact as it is about successfully getting paroled.

Balone served 37½ years on a 25 to life sentence for convictions stemming from the 1973 burglary-murders of three people in Buffalo. When he initially began his incarceration at age 20, after spending most of his life in Buffalo's foster care system, Balone, by his own admission, was a "cynical, bitter, thickheaded, institutional thug living the prison culture and not doing a darned thing to improve myself or my odds of someday getting out. I flat out didn't care what happened to me." It was not until 18 years into his sentence that Balone decided to "play the game and start attending therapeutic and educational programs," "signing-on" despite his belief that these programs were "worth a bucket of spit." To his surprise, Balone began to buy into this "game," and slowly positive messages began to take hold. As Balone describes it, "a whole new world opened for" him, and he began to ask himself if he had potential for real change and growth. To his wonderment, Balone discovered that the answer was a resounding "Yes." By the time he was released from prison at age 54 after his seventh appearance before the parole board, Balone had achieved five college degrees, including a Master's Degree in Healthcare Administration and an Urban Ministry Masters from New York Theological Seminary. He had been a facilitator and coordinator for nearly all prison-based programs, the Resident Director of his facility's Pre-Release Center, and a role model to anyone who was ready to reject the myth that change is impossible. His release sent shock waves of hope to many of those in prison who despair about ever being released.

Against the backdrop of his own personal journey, Balone's 100-page book offers eighteen lessons (or chapters) designed to enhance one's potential for being

released to parole. His lessons are not legal advice, and he quickly warns readers that he was never a "jailhouse lawyer." Rather, these lessons contain Balone's hard-earned wisdom as he pours his heart out in an attempt to share his experiences with the men and women who are locked behind prison walls. It is much more than a book about how to prepare to make parole; it is a book about change and self-improvement.

As attorneys, we have a combined experience of preparing over 100 people for parole board appearances. Balone's book does not overlook any facet of the essential documentation and preparation. For example, Lesson Two outlines the importance that documentation plays at a parole release hearing, and several chapters are devoted to obtaining, reviewing, and where possible, correcting documentation such as rap sheets, pre-sentence reports, disciplinary records, and volunteer, educational, therapeutic and vocational programming. Balone also offers advice on how to respond to the very difficult questions that repeatedly are asked at parole board hearings – questions about responsibility, remorse, rehabilitation, and release plans. Each chapter concludes with a section of questions and advice. After reading this book, we were struck with what an excellent tool it is to help systematically prepare for a parole release hearing, providing information that is of great value to lawyers and people in prison alike. Balone's insights cannot fail to help anyone meet the harrowing experience of a parole board hearing with more confidence.

The journey of a 19 year old with a fifth grade education whose self-image was that of "a criminal and nothing else" and who "really didn't care about anything or anyone, not even myself," yet who manages to become a counselor, teacher, and motivational speaker with two masters degrees is a lesson in change and how to prepare yourself for a successful and productive reentry and reintegration back into society. For that reason, Balone's book is a gem for anyone who is in prison (even the men and women serving determinate sentences who will never see the parole board), for lawyers who have clients in prison, for individuals who have family members or loved ones in prison, and for anyone who cares about the criminal justice system and believes in the power of hope and transformation.

This manual can be ordered for the very reasonable price of \$20.00, payable to GTB Speaks, LLC. Orders should be mailed to: GTB Speaks, LLC, 1200 William Street, P.O. Box 686, Buffalo, NY 14240-0686. Order forms are available at www.gtbspeaks.com.

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