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Recommended Citation

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ARNOLD SCHMIDT, EX-CONVICT, IS
STUDENT AT UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

by Crystal Wong
UM Information Services

Editor's note: Following completion of this article, Arnold Schmidt learned he has been accepted by the Peace Corps to serve as a construction worker in the earthquake-damaged area in Peru. He will leave for Peru early in November. He plans to return to the University of Montana to finish his education in two years.

MISSOULA --

Arnold Schmidt is a tall, lanky Indian who walks with long, determined strides. Deep-set gray eyes watch from half-closed lids. Big calloused hands fold and unfold, then reach for a cigarette. His leathern face is lined with scars and wrinkles. He looks tough.

"Say whatever you want to say, I've got nothing to hide," he says.

Schmidt, who is part Indian, is a sophomore at the University of Montana majoring in education. He is also an ex-convict who served 5 1/2 years in the Montana State Prison at Deer Lodge for second-degree assault.

Schmidt had a drinking problem. That is how trouble found him. He recalls the incident which cost him 5 1/2 years of freedom:

"I was a landlord on Hill 57, a predominantly Indian district in Great Falls. My father and I built 30 houses and rented them out. Since I rented to a pretty wild element, I was accustomed to carrying a gun.

"I was my own man in those days. On this particular night, I had done some drinking and came home to find my girl friend with another guy. I blew up and started shooting. I hit the girl. I never would have done that, you see, if I hadn't been drinking. I probably would have just walked away."
(more)

And now:

"I don't drink anymore. I am an alcoholic. I have taken the 'cure' but there is no cure. I just don't drink anymore, ever."

Schmidt has much to say about justice, the penal system and his time in prison.

"I don't think prisons are the solution," he says. Then, he smiles: "Of course, like everybody else, I don't have the answer either."

Concerning his own imprisonment, he says: "I don't think I was handled unjustly or abused by society. I was a violent man. I guess I am still a violent man. I just control it now."

Schmidt was 45 years old when he entered the prison in 1964.

"I had an advantage because I was more mature. I took a long, cool look at things."

He says he thought then: "I'm here is prison. I might as well take advantage of whatever opportunities I'm offered. He decided then to go to college.

Like many of the other inmates, Schmidt had only eighth-grade education. The youngest of 11 children, Schmidt was born in Choteau and later moved to Great Falls. After seven years in white society, the Schmidt family moved "up on the hill" (Hill 57) and Arnold Schmidt quit school to work. He later joined the Army and spent several years in Germany.

Being a prison inmate wasn't easy. Schmidt completed his high school education at the State Prison and received his General Educational Development Certificate, equivalent to a diploma.

In January 1966 he was paroled and went to Maine, where he lived a fairly "straight" life for a year. He returned to his native state, and his old nemesis, "demon rum", caught up with him and he was in prison again six months later. He later taught in the prison school, where classes were held in a large room in groups.

All the teachers were convicts when I first came," says Schmidt. "Now they are bringing in teachers from the 'outside'."

(more)

John W. Jaksha, director of education at the prison, won Schmidt's admiration.

"The accent is on education at Montana State Prison," says Schmidt, "and the program under Jaksha's direction is growing and improving. He is able to establish a real rapport with the convicts."

Schmidt is free now. He has done his time. Released from prison Sept. 12, 1969, he enrolled at the University of Montana a week later. He expresses gratitude to Sister Providencia of the College of Great Falls and Dr. Robert R. Zimmermann, a UM psychology professor, for help in achieving his goal.

"The University has been very good to me," says Schmidt. "When I came here, it was kind of like coming home."

He has earned a 3.15 or nearly a B-plus cumulative grade point average while at UM. He carries all his grade reports in his wallet and displays them proudly. His best quarter was last summer when he earned a 3.73 and his worst was a 2.66, "A quarter when I took a lot of math," he smiles.

"I work hard at it," Schmidt says. "I don't get it by being brilliant. I'm competing with younger minds."

He has a single room in Elrod Hall, a campus residence hall, and he laughingly says he lives "like a monk!"

"Actually, I do lead a pretty serene life. I study and I work, read and listen to a little music -- opera and rock-and-roll. The kids listen to a lot of it and I kind of got to like it."

Schmidt puts out his cigarette and begins gathering his books. It's almost time for class. Long, work-worn fingers run along the edge of a book. Arnold Schmidt has covered some ground. A carpenter by trade he has worked on the railroad, in car shops, sawmills, hospitals and restaurants.

"When you spend 50 years on the open market, you do whatever comes along," he says. Now, instead of just doing whatever comes along, Schmidt has a goal. He hopes to be accepted in the Peace Corps and to go "wherever people need help the most."

Schmidt is also working to get a full pardon for his crime and regain the rights he forfeited.

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