

The Altruist

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In the newsroom of the San Quentin News, Steve McNamara '55 works with journalists who produce the paper.

Tony Avelar/AP Images

In San Quentin State Prison, a newspaper serves up self-respect with each issue

When Steve McNamara '55 steps out of his silver BMW coupe in a Northern California parking lot, he looks like the average alum of his vintage. His vanity plates spell out the name of the company that defines him (THE SUN). His uniform is as preppy as permissible in Marin County: charcoal slacks, green-and-blue plaid oxford shirt, black Patagonia down jacket, gray Nikes, and baseball cap that says "Mill Valley."

He walks briskly up a long ramp to an imposing entrance marked by large columns, flashes a badge, and makes a beeline toward a collection of wood-and-stucco fortresses jutting into San Francisco Bay. He signs in at a formidable metal gate, greeting the guard by name. He's also on a first-name basis with a gardener stooping over plants near the chapel, to whom he reports on geraniums the gardener recently gave him.

He continues his march through the architectural mayhem, which includes the Italianate facade of an 1885 hospital as well as The Dungeon, an 1854 crypt with an iron-latticed door. Then he descends a long driveway and crosses the infamous lower yard of San Quentin State Prison, packed on this patchy-skied day with burly, tattooed men walking in pairs, shooting hoops, and playing dominos.

Sometimes called "the walled city" or "the Big Q," San Quentin is the oldest prison in California and the only one with a death row. This alone gives the prison a fearsome reputation. The 3,806 men incarcerated here have been convicted of everything from petty theft to brutal murder. Most, however, have an opportunity to participate in more than 70 programs designed to rehabilitate them. Many of the programs are run by an army of about 3,000 volunteers, of whom McNamara is one.

After signing in at the final desk, in the Education Building, McNamara makes his way around a bed of agapanthus, marigolds, and alyssum. "The guy who does this does a great job," he notes. He ends up at a bunker-like building in the far corner of the yard. It has concrete walls, high windows, and one heavy door. Inside, waiting for him, 12 men sit around a rectangular table in the center of a room ringed by five computer stations. The men — black, white, Asian, Hispanic — all wear blue uniforms stamped in black with "CDCR," for California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. But there is little uniform about these men. Not their crimes: burglaries, assault with a deadly weapon, bank robbery, second-degree murder with a firearm. And not the habits that drove those crimes: drug addiction, anger, gang membership.

Three women — Jan Perry, Nikki Meredith, and Linda Xiques — join McNamara at the table. Like him and four other journalist-volunteers, they are the advisers of the *San Quentin News*, the largest prison newspaper in California and one of the most robust in the United States. The monthly *News* is produced entirely by 13 inmates, with help from the eight advisers and one parolee-researcher. It's distributed to every prison in California, as well as to a number of elected officials and independent subscribers.

For their work on the paper, the men earn an average of 25 cents an hour, compared with up to \$1 an hour they might earn in other prison jobs. But no matter: The sense of mission is palpable, expressed in the energy around the table and on a whiteboard high overhead, on which are hand-printed the paper's "company slogan" ("Moving Forward"), the current print run (26,000), the print-run goal (36,000), the prisons served (35 plus one out of state), and the account balance (\$19,078.65).

Editor-in-chief Richard "Bonaru" Richardson starts the meeting, letting the assembled know that the administration OK'd the content of the next issue so that it can go to a final edit: "The paper is cleared," Richardson says, beaming. "As soon as Catfish get done, he going give it to Linda," he adds, referring to Keung "Catfish" Vanh, huddled at his computer, as well as to Xiques.

None of this would be happening, the inmates say later, if not for McNamara.

McNamara arrived on the Princeton campus in 1951 with a pedigree: His grandfather was a member of the Class of 1903 and later established the Princeton University Store; his father and uncle were graduates as well. Nonetheless, it took a while for Steve McNamara to feel at home. "I was thrown in with a bunch of boys from Andover and Choate," he says. "I was the village radical." Soon enough, the underclassman became known as McNam, settled in at Holder Hall, and became the publicity manager of the Triangle Club. He would spend Christmas vacations touring the eastern United States in Pullman cars, gaining a girlfriend in Atlanta. A Vassar co-ed, she edited one of the school's student newspapers.

McNamara graduated with a bachelor's degree in history and a minor in American civilization. He had harbored ideas of becoming a diplomat, and for his thesis interviewed a family friend in the diplomatic corps. McNamara recalls sitting in a cramped Washington, D.C., office and watching pneumatic tubes crisscross the ceiling. "We hear this 'shoop, shoop' as brass cartridges go racing through the vacuum tubes," McNamara remembers. The man noted the Foreign Service's "upsides and downsides."

Between the "shoop, shoop," the specter of banal postings, and the glimpse of a culture that was as upper-crusty as Princeton, McNamara's career plan withered. A family friend put him in touch with the publisher of the *Winston-Salem Journal*. McNamara thought that might impress his girlfriend. He was hired at \$60 a week and moved to North Carolina.

The relationship with his girlfriend didn't last, but the new career did. From the *Winston-Salem Journal*, McNamara went on to *The Miami Herald* and *Car and Driver* magazine. He covered sports, he tracked auto racing, and he wrote profiles. He bought an MG sportscar, married a Danish woman, started a family, and moved to San Francisco in 1960, rising to be the Sunday magazine editor at the *San Francisco Examiner*. But McNamara itched to do something more adventurous.

He had heard about the *Pacific Sun*, run by a couple and their combined 11 kids in the backroom of Ed's Superette in Stinson Beach. Grandiosely calling itself the second-longest-running alternative weekly in the nation, it was conceived as a West Coast version of *The Village Voice*. In 1966, McNamara bought it for \$20,000, taking out a second mortgage on his house.

He soon learned that the 2-year-old paper was foundering in almost every aspect of the business. "The *Pacific Sun* had its heart in the right place — championing education, the environment, the arts," he says, laughing. "But it was a pretty ratty-looking newspaper."

Still, 10 months after McNamara took over the *Sun*, the paper won a first-prize award from the San Francisco Press Club. McNamara turned the paper around by emphasizing good writing. He set his staff free to follow their interests, pursue important stories, and focus on literary merit. Technological developments in printing, he adds, allowed his staff to produce "better graphics than the daily paper."

Soon McNamara founded Marin Sun Printing, bought the 4,000-square-foot property that housed the paper, and even started an investment company. He did stints as president of the California Society of Newspaper Editors and as founding president of the National Association of Alternative Media. By 2004, after 38 years, he had increased the *Sun's* circulation from 1,800 to 36,000, benefiting from a vast increase in population in Marin County. He sold the newspaper for several million dollars ("structured creatively") and started casting about for something to do in his retirement.



McNamara advising two San Quentin News staff members.
Tony Avelar/AP Images

When he first laid eyes on Steve McNamara, in 2008, Bonaru Richardson says he had only one question: "What is this guy doing inside of a prison?" Richardson, now 43, was serving 47 years for robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. He worked in the print shop, where one of his jobs was to run the presses for the *San Quentin News*.

"I kept my distance at first," Richardson says. "I'd see Steve in meetings, discussing stories." Richardson noticed how McNamara communicated with Michael Harris, a drug kingpin and founder of the gangsta rap label Death Row Records — and one of the newspaper's early reporters. "They used to

argue like cats and dogs,” Richardson says. “I could hear it over my machines. But they never stayed mad at each other. I said to myself, ‘Y’all can disagree but ya’ll can still sit and have a laugh together?’ I liked that magic.

“Black men grow up not being able to trust white men,” Richardson continues. Lanky and agile, with a soft voice and a serious sense of humor, he perches his wrists on the surface of the newsroom table such that his long, thin fingers curve like the front legs of a praying mantis. “Seeing Michael Harris able to trust Steve — someone who wasn’t a prisoner, who was out in society — changed my outlook on how I could be treated and how I could treat other people.”

“Newsroom decision-making can get dicey,” notes Watani Stiner, describing how McNamara operates in a room of strong men. “Steve deals differently with each person.” Stiner is now paroled from a life sentence for his involvement in the murder of two Black Panther Party leaders, but he credits McNamara with turning him into a “more critical” writer.

“I was very resistant to Steve’s editing, to his tampering with my work of art,” Stiner adds, chuckling. “Steve does not throw his weight, or say how much experience he has, or argue with you and try to change your opinion. He invites you in. He finds out where you are and he moves to you. He finds a way — maybe with humor — to pose an alternative to you, and then you come up with the solution. It’s kind of hard not to like him.”

“There are those who would want to run the newsroom like a yoga class or a gardening class — top-down,” McNamara muses. “They tell you what is and what isn’t a Page 1 story. I prefer bottom-up. The inmates decide what’s on Page 1. They make a mistake, we discuss it later. It’s a process.”

Richard Lindsey, a convicted murderer now out on parole, stays connected to the paper by doing research on the internet, which prisoners don’t have access to. He says McNamara taught the men to ask questions, write in a journalistic style, take pride in the presentation of the paper, trust readers, and get people to respect what they say.

Though McNamara treats those skills seriously, he points out that his purpose is not to train journalists. “We are presenting an opportunity to work in a certain environment,” he says, “an active, mixed-race environment, with deadlines, with decision-making power, and with individual and collective responsibility.”

That is not small stuff. But, for the prisoners, the newsroom experience cuts even deeper, and McNamara has much to do with it. McNamara, Lindsey noticed, was nonjudgmental, didn’t brag, “dressed as a regular Joe,” and took the time necessary to earn their respect.

“Most of us, early on in the newsroom, were lifers,” Lindsey continues. “You are a castoff, just a prisoner, you have no meaning. To Steve, each one of us had great value, and he demonstrated concern for us.”

Other staffers describe McNamara as a father figure, including Arnulfo Garcia, the paper’s longtime editorial leader. The East San Jose native — a heroin addict at 16 who in 1999 promised his terminally ill mother that he would never again touch drugs, and hasn’t — is serving 65 years to life for crimes including burglary, robbery, and skipping bail.

“I used to look at people differently — I would think they were ‘too smart’ or ‘too good’ for me,” Garcia muses. “I would say, ‘I’m just a heroin addict.’ With Steve, I developed a relationship of openness and complete trust. I wouldn’t hesitate, when I got out of prison, to go sit down with him for dinner.”

About 8 miles from the cells of San Quentin, Steve McNamara lives in a classic Mill Valley house — up 44 steps from a winding street, perched on a hillside, surrounded by redwoods, and boasting, from the porch off the living room, a straight shot of Mount Tamalpais. When he and his third wife, Kay Copeland McNamara, bought the place “as is” in 1994, it was “almost a ruin,” McNamara notes. The two hired an architect, who added a ground floor and turned the 1896 structure into a graceful example of the Arts & Crafts style. It has been home to the couple, the five children they raised together, and the sixth they informally adopted after the girl’s mother died on high school graduation day.

Most septuagenarians with successful careers, happy marriages, abundant families, and custom homes might rest on their laurels — go to the theater, perhaps, but not to prison. In fact, McNamara never intended to volunteer at the *San Quentin News*.

He wanted to write a book. His first idea was to profile Sen. Barbara Boxer, whom he had known since the early 1970s, when she was a reporter at the *Sun*. Then he explored writing about altruism, curious about non-Jews in Holland who defied the Gestapo in World War II and about “Subway Samaritan” Wesley Autrey, who jumped to help a stranger who had fallen onto a New York City subway track. What motivates some people to do good things? McNamara wondered. He talked to 40 or 50 “altruists.” He pondered the “pariahs.” What causes some people to do bad things? Then he thought about the 4,000-man-strong control group “just up the road.”

In the spring of 2008, Warden Robert Ayers Jr. allowed McNamara to enter the prison with a tape recorder. “I soon realized, this is a no-brainer,” McNamara says. “All the good people I talked to, almost without exception, were raised with examples of good behavior. And all the people who had done bad things, almost without exception, had had unbelievably crappy lives. You are not forced to kill somebody because your parents beat you up, but it certainly shoves you further down that road.” He realized he had a paragraph, maybe, but no book. “The answer is parental example,” he explains. “I’ve just told the whole story in two minutes.”

But that, it turns out, wasn’t the end of the story. Ayers was retiring at the end of 2008, and, believing the best way to stop prison gossip was to replace it with accurate information, he wanted his legacy to include reviving the prison newspaper, which had been dormant for nearly 25 years. Ayers enlisted the help of the prison’s vocational printing department and a handful of incarcerated men. He also approached four professional journalists to serve as “advisers,” including McNamara.

McNamara devised the paper’s design and typography. After state budget cuts shuttered San Quentin’s print shop in 2010, he became the paper’s acting publisher, taking the role of CEO of the nonprofit Prison Media Project, which now pays for the paper’s printing and distribution. (McNamara started the project by securing \$5,000 in seed money from the Marin Community Foundation, then raised funds from other donors.) He also made a deal for bargain print rates with Marin Sun Printing.

The monthly *San Quentin News* (<http://sanquentinnews.com>) bills itself as “The Pulse of San Quentin.” It has the feel of a small-town paper, with reports on sports, arts and entertainment, babies born and prisoners released, and man-in-the-yard interviews. An editorial might be printed in English and Spanish.

But its ambitions are greater. It focuses on issues of utmost concern to those within the prison walls: crime reports from the FBI, stories from other newspapers on criminal sentencing, federal cost-cutting efforts, the ethics of prison architecture, and state ballot propositions. Richard Lindsey says that much thought is given to avoiding polemics while garnering support for the end of solitary confinement, life in prison without parole, and the death penalty.

In 2014, the Society of Professional Journalists chose the paper as a recipient of its James Madison Freedom of Information Award.

What’s significant about the *San Quentin News* is much more than the headlines, the articles, or even the accolades. It’s the physical space, the people, and the energy, says Lindsey, adding, “There is the feeling of ‘this is pretty important.’”

"I never thought in a thousand years I would work on a newspaper," says Richardson. "Here we're a family; you learn to trust each other." He credits McNamara with making him a leader and making him responsible to others. "This is a steppingstone. It's teaching me more about myself. And now I see how I can teach new things to my children and their friends.

"We don't want people on the outside to see us as the crime that we committed," he continues. "We want them to see us as the person we can become."

McNamara praises the inmates he knows as among the smartest and most motivated people in his life. "Once some friends of mine were starting a men's group and invited me to join," he says, taking a sip of his black coffee in the sunny breakfast room off his kitchen. "I have one," he told them, referring to the men at San Quentin. "And they're way more interesting."

"Many people would not spend day after day of their retirement in a prison," wrote inmate Kevin D. Sawyer, managing editor of the *San Quentin News*, in [a profile of McNamara that ran last July](#). That McNamara does so, he continued, "is a testament to his character and his willingness to make society safer, one felon at a time."

Ask McNamara if this is what he's up to — influencing one felon at a time — and his voice picks up, his cheeks flush. "There are 36 prisons in the state, with 110,000 prisoners. A crucial but overlooked step in the criminal-justice system is, what do we do with criminals once we've convicted them and locked them up? Eighty or 90 percent of inmates are going to be back out on the street some time. And what happens when they get out?"

The question is more than academic. But it's not exactly at the heart of his continued involvement. "I've come to really like these guys," he says, simply.

He encouraged Kay to visit the prison. "After we left," he recalls, "she said how amazed she was at the guys she had met — [at their] intelligence, immense energy, and startling self-awareness. And this is from a therapist!"

He also invited his daughter Marisa, an assistant district attorney in San Francisco. She has called that meeting "a life-changing experience." And she has convinced her boss, San Francisco District Attorney George Gascón, of that view. She brought him to the prison in 2013 for the first of what was called the *San Quentin News* Forums. The innovative program allows officials in the criminal-justice system to sit with selected inmates and exchange frank views. Arnulfo Garcia, now a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, helps organize the forums.

To date, the forums have included the sheriff of San Francisco, district attorneys of several Bay Area counties, congressional representatives, mayors, Superior and Appellate Court judges, as well as groups of high-school and college teachers. Gascón asked the 17 managers in his 300-person department to attend a forum. And in January, he hosted a gathering of 45 district attorneys from the largest jurisdictions in the United States.

"This will make a difference," McNamara insists. "I see a chain reaction."

Then he pauses and adds, emphatically, "But if it were only one felon at a time, that would still be worthwhile."

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