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# Kerik, Out of Prison and More Subdued, Seeks to Rebuild His Reputation

By COREY KILGANNON FEB. 23, 2014

The burly Bernard B. Kerik of old may not have recognized the newer, slimmed-down version who showed up to speak to an impressionable group of aspiring police officers in Queens on Saturday morning.

This Mr. Kerik was subdued, clean-shaven: not exactly the hard-bitten law-and-order man whose cocksure approach fueled an unlikely rise from beat cop to corrections and then police commissioner, jet-set consultant, and the Bush administration's choice to lead the Department of Homeland Security in 2004.

He showed less of the lock-'em-up bravado, the swagger during his law-enforcement career, before a series of ethics violations led him to plead guilty to fraud charges in 2009 and he spent three years in a minimum-security prison in Maryland. Released from prison in May, he is now on probation.

"Today I'm a convicted felon," Mr. Kerik, 58, told the class.

After several years avoiding interviews, Mr. Kerik is now seeking attention. He has ideas for reforming the federal criminal justice system — easing mandatory minimum sentences, for example — that are born of personal experience. He wants to rehabilitate his reputation and build a new career as a speaker and consultant.

"Will people stay away from me now? I don't know," he said outside the classroom at Queensborough Community College, adding that he would speak to a conservative group in Washington this week about reform.

His life on both sides of the prison bars gives him a singular perspective into

the criminal justice and prison systems, he said.

He sneered at ruthless prosecutors, criticized overly harsh prison sentences, and urged humane behavior while arresting offenders.

His own sentence, he said, opened his eyes to deep flaws in the criminal justice system.

“Now I’ve seen things that, in many ways, I wish I’d realized before,” he said.

Invited to speak Saturday by Evy Poumpouras, a former Secret Service agent who teaches Criminal Justice 101, Mr. Kerik, who now lives in Franklin Lakes, N.J., brought along his daughter Angelina, 11. She critiques his talks and wants to be a Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

He told students about his work as an aggressive New York City police officer, calling it “the best job you’ll ever have,” but also one that carries heavy scrutiny of the sort that helped uncover his financial entanglements and ethical problems.

Regarding the presumption of innocence, he said: “I got news for you — it doesn’t work like that.”

“The assumption of guilt is immediate in the public eye, in the press’s eye and in the prosecutors’ eye,” Mr. Kerik said.

He charted the arc of his career: how working for Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani’s security detail helped him become corrections commissioner in 1998 and then police commissioner in 2000 — without a college degree, he noted. He oversaw reductions in crime and witnessed up close the terrorist attack of Sept. 11, 2001.

He told of being sent by the Bush administration to rebuild the Iraqi police force, and being nominated to lead the Department of Homeland Security, but withdrawing because he failed to pay payroll taxes on an undocumented immigrant he had hired as a nanny.

Mr. Kerik criticized federal sentencing guidelines, and described meeting behind bars many first-time, nonviolent offenders with long prison terms — people who had essentially made a mistake, he said, and were made to pay too high a price.

Mr. Kerik insisted that he had not gone soft on crime, adding that the

offenders he arrested as a police officer were mostly dangerous criminals who deserved substantial sentences.

But for the most part, he warned, prison does not rehabilitate. Rather, he said, it teaches inmates to “steal, cheat, lie, manipulate, gamble, con and fight — that’s what you learn.”

A student asked Mr. Kerik if he felt “grateful” for his jail term.

“In some strange way,” Mr. Kerik responded, “I’m glad I got to see what I did.”

But as a felon, he said, “I can’t work for the government anymore.”

“All the stuff I had success in doing, I’m not allowed to do,” he said.

Despite his entanglements, Mr. Kerik said he felt qualified to lecture on ethics.

“Some people question the messenger, but I don’t think there’s a better messenger than me at this point,” he said outside class.

Mr. Kerik, whose scandals were seen as embarrassing to Mr. Giuliani, said they had not spoken in years.

“We created a distance,” Mr. Kerik said. “I didn’t want him to be impacted” by controversy.

After the talk, students applauded and asked to take photographs with him.

“Was that good?” Mr. Kerik asked his daughter. She responded with a high-five.

Before walking out with her, he said, “My only hope is that people remember me for what I did for the city and the government.”

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