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Anthony escapes: Free from cell in just 3 minutes

by Matt Johnson

Escape artist Todd Anthony Martin, Saturday afternoon, attributed part of his ability to get out of security devices as simply a "gift."

"Anthony," the name he goes by professionally, used that gift and an amazing amount of knowledge about locks to escape from a straight jacket and a cell in the old Vernon County Jail in three minutes and 10 seconds.

The escape was hosted by Vernon County Crimestoppers, which set up the event to draw attention to the fact that those who report crimes, or call to stop a crime before it occurs, can remain anonymous, Vernon County Sheriff's Department Deputy John Spears said.

While Anthony said the escape was "equivalent" in its difficulty with the dozen other jails he's escaped from in the past, he said the Vernon County escape presented a fairly unique challenge — he had to use his left hand to work on the cell door lock.

Anthony, 42, Sheboygan, benefits from being able to set up his escapes without observation. However, he did not practice his escape in the jail before it occurred.

"Obviously guard observation would stop a jail escape," Anthony said after freeing himself from the straight jacket and the 8-foot-by-10-foot solitary cell. "What I do comes down to knowledge of the lock, time and determination."

His escape from the straight jacket also required another skill, an ability to hold his breath.

"Once you start working out of it and get about half-way through, you have to hold your breath and you really just want it off you," Anthony said. "So, that's motivation."

Spears searched Anthony before the escape, patting him down, taking off his shoes and looking in his mouth.

And after he was done, Anthony put on another straight jacket, and escaped from it in front of the half-dozen officials and members of the media gathered at the Banta Building for the event.

Anthony said his partnership with Crimestoppers was a good match.

"Just as I have to overcome fear, people can see that through Crimestoppers they can overcome their fear of stopping crime, because Crimestoppers protects their anonymity," Anthony said.

Spears said the ability to keep an informant anonymous was critical for Crimestoppers.

"Because people can remain anonymous it has helped decrease the property crime rate," Spears said. "Some people aren't even interested in the reward —they just want the ability to remain anonymous."

Anthony is the fourth man to escape from the 97-year old Vernon County Jail. In 1973, an inmate fled out the front door when a maintenance worker left the main gate open, said Chief Deputy Jim Hanson. The man was caught near Parkview Manor. In 1985, a gate wasn't shut properly and two inmates took off from their cell, pulled down a wire mesh enclosure and escaped from the basement. Then they stole a car and headed south. Vernon County's current sheriff, Gene Cary, helped apprehend the pair as they neared Readstown. Hanson said Cary executed a pit-type maneuver with his squad car and moved the escapees' vehicle off the road where they were captured.

Anthony has been featured on numerous television shows and several times in the syndicated print illustration "Ripley's Believe It Or Not." He has a website www.anthony-escapes.com, which highlights his career and also forwards his ministry. He founded the ministry as a way to use his talents as an escape artist to "present the gospel of Jesus Christ," he said.

"I feel compelled to do what I do to help save the heart of someone," Anthony said. "I could take what I know and be the greatest thief who ever lived. I could be a huge problem for law enforcement, but I feel I have a responsibility to teach people that they can be saved."

Anthony is known by "Tony" to his friends and makes his living as a registered safe lock technician. He was interested in the inner workings of locks starting when he was six years old and he was 13 when he first escaped from a jail.

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