



Death row made me feel as if I were part of a Family

By José, 48 years old, 28 years in prison, 22 of which on death row in Texas, 2016

As I write this, I'm sitting in a cell at the Michael prison unit in Texas. I've been here for the past 6,5 years but before that I used to be housed on death row – where I spent more than 22 years of my life. The two buildings are uncannily, completely identical and sometimes it seems like I'm still back on death row. Luckily, I'm not. But sometimes I wish that I was.... Only because I miss the many friends I left behind.

There are many similarities between doing time in prison and on death row. What I would like to tell you about, is differences.

The biggest relief getting off of death row brought me, was the obvious absence of all the stress and anxiety that comes from knowing that one day I will receive an execution date and be taken to the execution chamber to be put to sleep forever. (A much nicer way of saying “murdered”.)

No more do I have to dread an officer telling me that the major needs to speak with me – to tell me on what day I will die. No more having to watch the 90 days vanish, one by one, as the execution day comes nearer. No one should ever have to go through these experiences.

Another difference is that death row prisoners hardly ever go home and only a few lucky ones – like me – leave to go to a regular prison. So you always see the same people all the time and only when the executioner does his job do you start seeing your friends disappear.

Death row is a close-knit community, unlike a regular prison where everyone is divided into many groups based on race, gangs, jobs, or other common interests. Everyone on death row is there because they were found guilty of killing someone. Prison, on the other hand, is a panoply of criminals, from non-violent offenders, petty thieves, drug dealers and users to serial killers and mass murderers. Everyone on death row has the same punishment – and faces the same outcome. That commonality creates a friendlier atmosphere where friendships can foster. On death row you also have the time to develop a friendship, where in prison you may only get to know someone for a short while before they are moved, transferred to another prison, or released to the outside.

Death row made me feel as if I were part of a family, unlike here at the Michael Unit where I am just another prisoner.