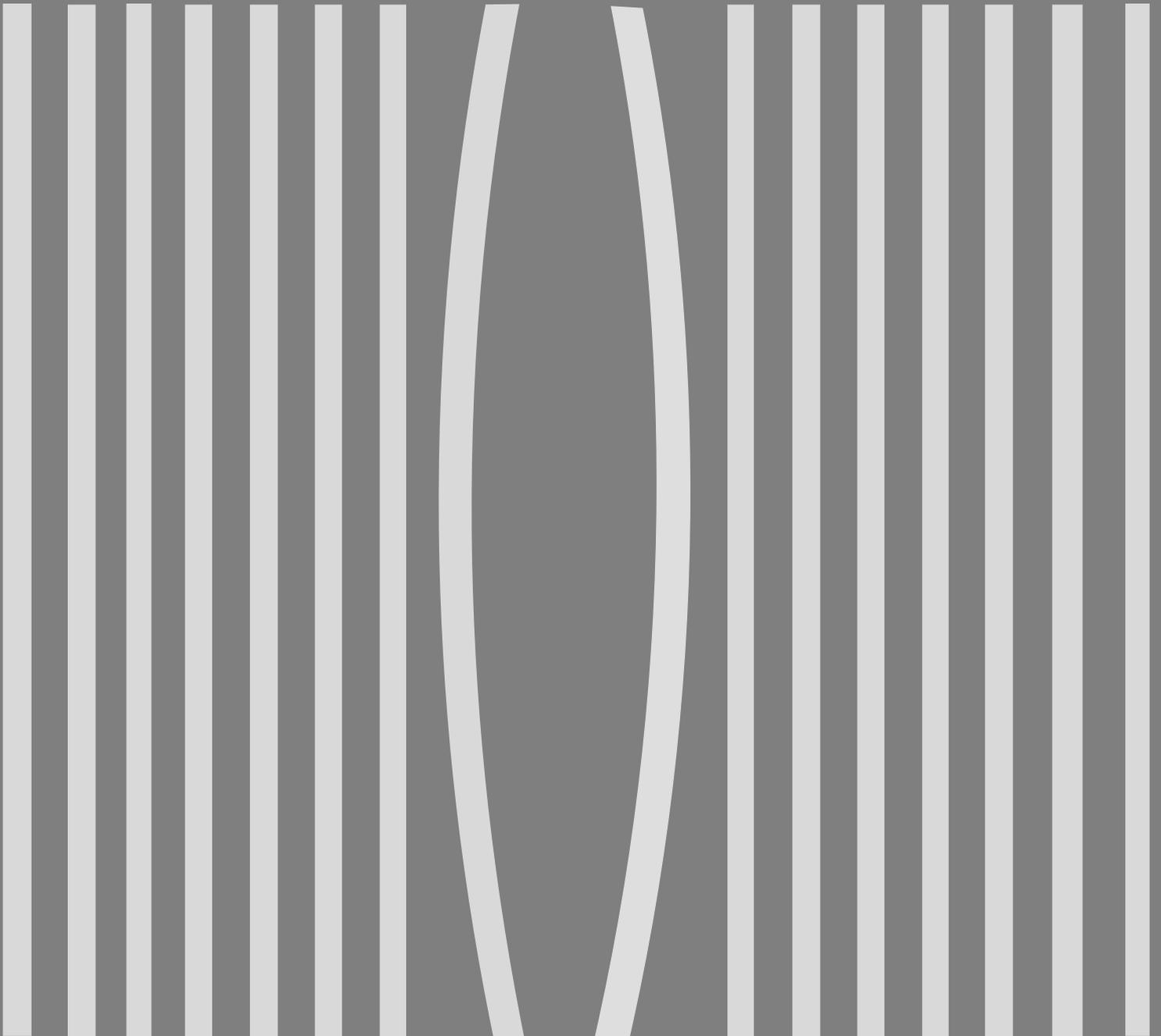


Lifeshare

**M i s c o n c e p t i o n s   A b o u t   D e a t h   R o w**  
with texts written by lifespark members and their pen pals in prison | 2016



November 2016

[www.lifespark.org](http://www.lifespark.org)

lifespark is a non-profit organization founded in 1993 and based in Basel, Switzerland. One of its main goals is to arrange pen palships with prisoners condemned to death in the USA and to offer its members support and advice. Currently lifespark has about 250 members worldwide and has connected about 1500 pen palships in the past 23 years.

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# Preface

Most of us have been confronted with other people's misconceptions about death row.

Some people feel very comfortable in their way of seeing the world. To be able to have a look beyond one's own nose and to give someone a break is difficult for many. Difficult but not impossible! This brochure gives readers the chance to verify their perceptions and opinions and perhaps unmask them as misconceptions.

Inmates in prison often suffer from lack of possibilities and platforms to react to misconceptions. The difficult position of prisoners within society contributes to this situation and further complicates it.

But we believe that different perceptions can be a chance as well! A chance to look at them closely and to find a new position. Because that's how something different, something new is made: a new perspective becomes possible to see something that has before been unthinkable and incomprehensible. To deal with misconceptions opens the door for greater understanding and empathy. This is the reason why this brochure has been made. We want not only our pen pals in prison but also the people writing to them to have a chance to be heard and to show that some things are often different than they are at first sight. Taking a second look is definitely worth it!

And now, enjoy reading this Lifeshare!

For the lifeshare team  
Sabrina Trächslin

with Claudia Dölker, Ines Aubert, Beate M. Wieloch  
November 2016

# Sandra

## **Misconception: only women who don't find a man in the free world write to death row prisoners**

False! I read a lot of comments relating to articles about friendship between women and male prisoners. The majority were negative and they all wrote that only lonely women seek friendship or love with male prisoners, because they can't find a man in the free world. Some wrote that it is the morbid fascination to have contact to a murderer. From my point of view this is very untrue. I live in a steady relationship with my life partner for seven years. When I started writing to my pen pal I asked my partner about his opinion. He said that's okay with him. I told him my arguments and why I wanted to write to a DR-inmate. He supports me, I tell him when I receive letters or ask him for his opinion what photos I shall send. :-) I also told my pen pal that I have a life partner and he is very happy for me. It's a wonderful feeling to get support from both sides.

## **Misconception: there is no fun in a correspondence with a death row prisoner**

False! There is a lot of fun. First, it's always exciting to receive a letter, independent from the sender. It's the thought of the purport of a letter. What will I read? Which stories will share my pen pal with me? How is his daily life? What can I learn through my pen pal? Some letters are fun to read with lots of positive stories and beliefs, some are very profound. A penpalship with a DR inmate is very different compared to a penpalship with a person in the free world. You will get an insight in a complete different world with different rules and views. You will read thing that upset or scares you. But you will also read things that will put a smile on your face and you get the knowledge that your time and correspondence is very appreciated. Just because he is on Death Row, doesn't mean he's boring or always writes the same.

Both parties have to find their own rhythm in their correspondence, but I'm sure that both of them can learn from each other and get a good talk for a long time. It is all about how you and your penpal shape your friendship. I only know T. for a short time but I don't want to miss him and our conversations. He respects me, he cares for me and we are equal human beings. With this in mind: No risk, no reward!

**Misconception: death row prisoners have a boring life and write boring letters**

False! The letters I receive are always very fascinating. I get to know a man and his living conditions which are very different to mine. I get to know a part of the society I never met. Through this I can learn a lot for myself and how I can help my surroundings better. Besides, I like it a lot when he tells some anecdotes from his life or he writes in his slang.

**Misconception: all death-row inmates are the same**

False! There are a lot of differences, because every human is unique. Every death-row inmate has own wishes, goals, life stories and interests. Some want only money, some want love, some want peace, some want a friendship. You also meet such people in the world outside prison. It's not good to tar all death row-inmates with the same brush.

By Sandra Herklotz, April 2016

# Innes

## **Misconception: all death row prisoners claim they are innocent**

Some people talk about death row prisoners as if they were all the same. “They all claim they are innocent!”, “They will all lie to your face!”

There must be a benefit in lumping together individuals and I wonder what it could be. Maybe it has to do with our own incapacity to form an opinion when there are too many different aspects we have to combine and consider. So, we make it easier for ourselves by labelling them “all the same” and disregard the fact that reality is much more multi-faceted than that. Once we have thrown all of the death row prisoners into the same pot, we only have to find one way of coping with them: we judge and condemn them as liars. “They all pretend they are innocent thus they are all liars” Which means that in reality they are all guilty. With this solid statement, we don’t have to think about it any further because who wants to give liars too much consideration?

I’ve been writing to death row prisoners for more than fourteen years and I have observed a very different reality. What I see are different people with varying biographies and individual ways of thinking and acting. Some of my pen pals admit to their crimes and talk about them.

They openly say they are guilty of the crimes they are accused of. I also know of a few who insisted they were innocent and they were eventually released from death row and from prison altogether. So, they had been telling the truth when they said they were innocent. Yet, I also got to know prisoners who lied about their cases; so yes, some obviously do lie.

My deceased pen friend Casper felt an enormous regret about his many crimes and it was his biggest wish to reach out to the surviving victims and the victims' families to apologize. I went with him on a challenging emotional journey listening to the details of his crimes and by trying to get his apology out. Casper had the great wish to tell who he had been in the past and to still be loved as a human being and as the person he had become in more than twenty years on death row. He told me that, many years into his prison sentence, he used to say he was innocent, but not anymore at the time I got to know him. By then he had come to understand that admitting to the crimes would be a better way to find peace and forgiveness. I understand that it's a normal psychological reaction to first say that we aren't guilty of something that we just can't bring in line with how we see ourselves. It is too hard to admit that we are a person who is capable of carrying out a condemnable act and so we deny having done it. In later states of our coping process we might come to admit to ourselves and to the world that we in fact were able to do something that before we thought cut across our own personality.

So, we outsiders and observers might undertake the same process: from a simplified and generalized thinking – they all claim they are innocent - to a more accurate observation and careful evaluation based on facts. Only then can we avoid doing injustice to ourselves and others. Not all death row inmates claim they are innocent.

By Ines Aubert, April 2016

## **Misconception: death row inmates deserve to die**

At first I thought my task was to send postcards and letters from time to time – now we became friends with kilos of letters and some visits. I'm against the Death Penalty!

Society is schizophrenic by saying: "We'll kill you because you killed". Crazy!

It also denies a person's evolution: The life that is ahead of us, we have no right to touch it. And I find it unacceptable and inhuman to force people to live on death row for many years.

We mustn't do that. If I am against the Death Penalty, what can I do? I'm only a woman without power, except perhaps to send a whiff of fresh sea air and a brief view into a different world to an inmate. At first I thought my task was to send postcards and letters from time to time.

However I found a nice, strong, surprising, kindness between Ronald and myself, in spite of our very different lives. Ronald was on death row for thirty years and he managed to remain strong, kind, protective, funny, interesting, with a nice ethic of life. He was a gift of life for me! Impressive!!

We became friends with kilos of letters and some visits. I am very sad, I lost my friend in August, he died of cancer. Who is the giver here?

By Monique Gentric, December 2015

# Paul

**Misconception: death row inmates can have their sentences reduced to another sentence**

The legal issue surrounding death row is 95% of death row inmates are refused a plea bargain that would have gave them a lesser sentence.



By Paul Anthony Brown, January 2016

Florida

16 yrs

# Thomas

## **Misconception: death row inmates only want money**

First, a person must have a mind of their own, and be willing to view things from a realistic and logical point of view, and not from a negative false created belief. On a large scale this is true, but when you view it realistically, you will see that there is nothing wrong or bad about it, but it is made out to be something bad. Let me explain: Here in America the prison systems receives millions, but the prisons do not receive that money, nor is it being used for what it was given to the state prison system for. This means that the Death row inmates are without a lot of things we should have and need to have. For most DR prisoners, we don't have family or friends, and with no way to work for money to take care of ourselves, we are stuck with a lot of unanswered needs that we need in order to live and focus. There for we reach out for help. Now as a person who is willing to write to someone on DR, you may expect this cause you are aware of the situation on DR. You may send money, cause you choose to help a DR prisoner, but also cause you know it is not free to write. A lot of DR prisoners lose their food and trays, cause they sell them for stamps, writing paper and envelopes, just so they can write their new friends. If you have no money to give, that's fine, because two minds are able to work together and find a legal way to make money. There's a lot of talent here on DR. If you are thinking of becoming a friend of someone who is on DR, please do not go into it with a negative „They just want money“ mind frame, because due to our situation that should be understandable. If you keep an open mind, view it like a doctor. You are choosing to go to a place where a lot of people need help. You may meet someone who needs your help, and you may not. Just like a doctor, some days he has to help a lot of people and some days he doesn't. As a friend, what's so bad about helping a friend or someone who can not do for themselves? Nothing!

## **Misconception: the Death penalty is not enough punishment?**

False! For anyone who holds this belief, that person must be blind and lack the true knowledge and understanding of what the death penalty really is, and what it is used for, and if you have the knowledge and facts of the death penalty and you still hold that belief, then most likely you are racist and extremely biased. Facts and history of the death penalty here in America will show you that a prosecutor is two to three times greater to seek the death penalty for a black person than for a white person. Now let's talk about punishment, and what makes it legal in the state of Florida for the last thirty years. This state has been at the top for giving people the Death penalty legally, but as of 2016, it was ruled by the US supreme court to have had a unconstitutional scheme, which made the Florida Death Penalty to be unconstitutional. So realistically, the only thing that made the punishment in Florida legal, was politics, and how do we know this? Because the State of Florida has passed a bill for a 10-2 jury vote to give someone the death penalty which is still a unconstitutional scheme, and a easy way to give someone the death penalty. When you study the history of capital punishment and facts, you will see that people in politics use the death penalty to move up in life and to build a better resume for there future. If you want to speak more facts, you should know that even though it is stated that the death penalty is to be hand on criminals, and by doing so it will cut down on crimes such as murder. Facts are that the states with the death penalty have a higher murder rate than states without it, so realistically the death penalty has nothing to do with justice or keeping society safe, because you have as many prisoners with a life sentence for murder or the same or worse murders than the people on death row. It all comes down to politics, and in which month your crime was committed and when you go to trial. That will play a part on if the prosecutor seek the death penalty for you or not. Fact is, it is easy to judge someone if you never been in that person's shoes, to say what you would or would not do, because people always try to make themselves to be better than the next person. Few humans are honest enough to say I don't agree with murdering someone, but I understand why he/she murdered that person. Everyone wants to be perfect, even though we all know that no one is or will be, so realistically and honestly speaking, no one should want a punishment for someone else if there are not comfortable with that same punishment being applied on themselves. The death penalty is modern day slavery that makes it a easy way to murder black people in a beneficial and legal manner.

By Thomas T. Brown, April 2016

# Blaine

## **Misconception: death row inmates only want money**

The term “Death Row inmates only want money” is a huge misconception. We are kept in a box, by ourselves, with very little ‘free world’ contact. We cannot work and the state provides very little, so yes, money does help, but our main goal is to have a good friendship, people we can laugh with, people we can talk to, to help pass the time, to help keep us sane.

To read that people out there would even think that we death row prisoners live a luxurious life on the expense of tax payers’ work is insane! That is so untrue, although it’s not the worst place, it certainly is not the best! This place is far from luxurious, I do not have enough room on this sheet of paper, to explain to you how unluxurious this place really is! People in the free world can and should write about the beautiful things in their life, we love to hear about what’s good out there. Remember, we have no TVs or computers back here, so you all are a link to the free world.

Most of us will write any & everyone, man or woman just to have someone to talk to.

By Blaine Milam, September 2016

# Charles

**Misconception: death row is a special form of society! - Answer: Incorrect!**

What do classism, racism, bigotry, prejudication, biases etc. all have in common? They are all fruits from the “stereotypical tree”. A tree that judges on silence without ever hearing a word of description. It leaves no chance nor any room to find comfort or factuality.

I once had a girlfriend too whom I was aware of her “promiscuous” background, ask me, “Do you want to know how many ex-lovers I had?” I thought about her question long and hard, before I declined. Reason was, I didn’t like her for who she was, I wanted to like her for who she is, her past was irrelevant to me, and I didn’t want to know about her past which may have lead me to eat from the forbidden “stereotypical tree”.

Being on Texas death row for over a decade plus, I have come to realize that it’s no different than any other form of society. You have your good and your bad, just as you have with your neighbors in the world. Look down the street from your homes, and you will find a neighbor or two that you love to converse with over coffee, tea or a latte. And you can also look across the street and find someone(s) that gives you the creeps. Neighbors that you tried to be cordial, but they were not interested. It’s no different here.

In fact; establishing a friendship with anyone on death row is perhaps the safest relationship that you can ever explore: we are locked up, Dah!! In Texas there is no physical contact, only verbiage, that you will have no discern whether or not it is something that peeks your interest.

I’ve met inmates myself that I have come to know, and respect for who they are and not what they are accused of. You have to be willing to see people from the inside not from outer appearances.

Misconceptions are a life issue, and not solely a prison based one. Here on death row the majority are not innocent of their crimes. Many have been overly charged. Many should have received a lesser punishment by law. Some have not killed anyone, but under asinine laws like laws of party - which means that you can be with someone who does the crime and still be charged. And some are innocent. Regardless to one's plea, the fact is "we all" need that human element that centers us all within the realm of humanity. It's what makes us separate from the beasts of the wild. That gives us that gift of having a conscience and a conscious. We (incarcerated human beings) are invigorated through the kindness of human contact, be it come from a letter, a visit, or any form of kindness. We do appreciate it all.

Because at the end of the day, "aren't we all human beings?" No matter what race you are or what nationality you represent, don't we all breathe the same air? Desire the same happy romantic ending for our lives? Seek a best friend's shoulder to cry on when the going gets rough?

Aabye Søren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, once asked, "Isn't civility the core of humanity?" Take pause to that question. The act of kindness, do not seek conception or disprove misconception in order to decide whether they are willing to become a part of the humanity quilt or warmth. A simple hello dispels a lot.

I don't want anyone to write to me seeking me as an inmate. I rather they write me seeking a lonely human being in need of a friend.

By Charles "chucky" Mamou, January 2016

# Charles

## **Misconception: everybody on death row gets a fair trial and deserves being on death row**

There are so many misconceptions about death row, that I can't name them all and stay under the page limit.

So I'll try to name a few of the major misconceptions.

First! This is not a T.V. movie... a lot of people are influenced by Hollywood's portrayal of the justice system in this country. In the movies, the defendant is always represented to the fullest extent and justice always prevails. This is not true in the real world... Today it's all about the convictions...

People log into the D.O.C. website and what they see is a one-sided view of the person on death row. There is no mention of prosecutor misconduct, false testimony, evidence tampering or the handpicked juries... Innocent people do get sent to death row and the courts turn a blind eye to the issues of appeals. On appeal you get assigned a collateral attorney who is given a script to follow, when doing your appeal, basically these are boiler plate issues... generally these issues are summarily denied, ruled insufficiently plead, barred from raising the issue or they call it a harmless error. Now how can an issue be harmless, when a person's life is at stake? How can you be barred from raising an issue that will prove your innocence??

How can a prosecutor not be held accountable for withholding evidences, soliciting, false testimony and lying to the jury. Just to get a conviction. I'm asking these questions, because one of the misconceptions is that everybody on death row gets a fair trial. Also, people are conditioned by deception, because when you hear the terms "capital punishment and the death penalty" you automatically think of murder or some other horrendous crime... Now the standard for a conviction is guilt by reasonable doubt in this country... but if a jury is only allowed to hear what the judge and prosecutor decides they need to hear... how can a reasonable decision be reached?

If a prosecutor withholds evidence, and solicits false testimony, how can a guilty verdict be reliable? How is this a fair trial? Reasonable doubt - no matter how you define - it "still remains" an assumption of guilt". Now when you execute someone on the assumption of guilt, then you must call it what it is. It's nothing more than a human sacrifice. There are no animals on death row!! "No monsters" or irredeemable people, there are those with mental illnesses, and some that made a desperate act in the heat of the moment. Among these, there are guys that are innocent, "victims themselves of a corrupt system". A system where material value outweighs a human life! Justice was never meant to be an end to a situation. In a civilized society justice should be a new beginning, a chance at redemption and forgiveness.

Everybody on death row is not out to call those that reach out to them. Now I won't deny, that there are those that have succumb to this predatory environment. You have good and bad people on the street too!! This environment is designed to dehumanize, emasculate and destroy the spirit of those trapped within its walls.

But even the lowest of the low can use a friend. In here it's up to the individual to evolve and rise above this madness. Friendship inspires hope. I can look out my window and see the horizon, but the only way I can reach it is through my friends on the outside. They are my guardian angels, my voice on the outside and it's not just my life they're saving, it humanity itself that's in the balance. For me, a letter from a friend is like a breath of fresh air, it's my connection to life... Try to put yourself here on death row. Where death is always stuck in the back of your mind. Every time the door at the end of the wing opens, it could be your day for a death warrant. You've watch friends and neighbors commit suicide, get beaten, lose their mind and get executed over the years. Every appeal is denied and pen pals come in and out of your life.

Family members die or abandon you. Food is always cold and quite frankly "The worst stuff you've ever seen!!" You're in a cell that's cold during the winter and hot a hell during the summer!!! Roaches and mosquitoes run rampant all over the place!! If you don't have a connection on the outside, someone that cares about you, you will lose your mind. So make no mistake! These are your guardian angels...

By Charles Finney, "Chaz", January 2016

# José

**Misconception: if you would let a death row prisoner out to society he would kill somebody instantly.**

Dear Friends/Family,  
Hi,

my name is José Briseno. I spent almost 22 years on death row in Texas. I have been out in population for two years now. But there is not a day that goes by that I don't think about the good people that I left behind. I do not agree with the DP [death penalty] because it is not fair. People make mistakes and killing someone is not the answer nor should it ever be. All the time that I spent on death row not once did I see someone that should be put to death. These guys on the row are human beings, these guys are not animals. They are not someone you just give up on. I have said this before, if they were to let go of everyone on death rows, it is my believe that no one would ever return. Death Row is a life changing experience. I know that during the time that I was on Death Row that was around people that were innocent, and who knows how many. I know that a lot are guilty, but that is no reason for their death. These guys you could give a job to in your homes and they would do the best job that they could. Just look at all the guys that have been exonerated, have they come back to death row? There are people that are on the row because of the law of parties that I don't agree with either, because I know that is not fair. Because the person that committed the crime is not willing to except that he was the one that committed the crime. And so the other guys that are with him, they are really afraid to say anything because they are going to be labeled a snitch, so there goes 4 or 5 guys to death row, just because no one knows what happened. Now you tell me is that an excuse for sending 5 guys to death row, or is it just being lazy of the cops. Now you tell me the death penalty is fair. Since being in the population I have seen alot of guys with far worse crimes than the guys that I saw on the row during my stay there.If I could and if there was such a law, believe me when I say that I would be willing to give my life for all the people that are on the Row.



Because I know that these guys are not like the DA's and the courts paint these human beings out to be. Speaking about myself, and about my penfriends. I know that my time on the row would not have been without stress if it had not been for the friends that I have. These are friends that come to death row with big hearts, as it is not easy being a friend to someone you know is going to die, but that friend will be there for that death row guy through the good and the bad times. They are there even more than our own family. I have a great deal of respect for organizations that are there to help death row prisoners, that help us find penfriends, that later on become our family. I know that it is hard when a penfriend hears about their friend getting an execution date. These good friends go through alot and us as prisoners should always remember that such friends are there for us even when our own family is not, these friends are angels. I know me I don't think that these friends get a kick out of being there for us just because they want to see us die. As we go along through the years with each other we grow to love them and they us and appreciate them. I am know that I am very grateful for all the love I was given by my friends, and very thankful that I did not have to see my friends suffer at the end while they see me die. Penfriends are very important to death rows, it keeps the person sane, it is bad enough that some are going crazy just by the mental torture that they have to endure day in and day out, so whenever a letter comes in by that penfriend all that tension goes out the door, and that prisoner is in a different world at such times. I know that I would always enjoy the times when I would hear the guys talking about their friends, because I like seeing people happy and especially on death row. Because like I said these folks don't deserve to die. The state said that I was an animal that it was a must that I die. Well here I am in population going on two years now are I have not beaten anybody, they don't even know that I am here, because I am not the animal that they said I was. Arid I think that I have said enough, not a writer just wanted to show my love and support for penfriends and for the guys on death rows across the nation, so please excuse my bad writing .I pray for everyone that is on the rows across the nation, every day, just because I am off the row I have not forgotten any of the guys I left behind. I send my love and respects to you all, and I pray that one day you'll be off death row too. GOD BLESS PENFRENDS, GOD BLESS DEATH ROWS AND GOD BLESS US ALL EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD!

By José Briseno, February 2016

# Terry

## **Misconception: it simply makes no sense to share in a prisoner's life**

Consider this: "There's no sense in writing someone who doesn't have a real life ahead of them." Now, it may not be readily apparent, but the idea that prisoners don't have a "real life" is a horrible misconception. It all boils down to how things are perceived: an individual perspective of what a real life is.

In general, the root of how each person approaches life comes from a combination of knowledge and wisdom. Intelligent understanding gained through experience. Values are learned – morals are fleshed out. That isn't to say the process is perfect, but the concept extends to any environment, whether the person is rich or poor, employed or homeless, or in prison. We are all doing time. We are all given life. We are all given the ability to make choices that can define the life we'll live. Of course, society has a template showing what a "typical" life is: go to school, get a job, honor family, enjoy holidays and vacations; save, raise a family of your own, help your children succeed, retire one day, then die. But there are alternate ways to achieve similar results, or an individual can rebel and act out to attain other less savory labels. "Criminal" probably sits at the top of most lists in society.

Once the setting is defined – a farm, apartment, brick home, mansion, prison etc. – it is then up to the person to decide what a real life will be in that environment. To do so, acceptance is important. Simply put: you can do anything if you are willing to accept the consequence(s).

Prison, by design, is atypical, but most people can adapt. It is just a matter of adjusting to new expectations and responsibilities. In here many aspects of what we can control are lost, but there is something that can never be taken: our ability to choose how we react to, or deal with, any situation.

Certain cravings pass away. And the expression “absence makes the heart grow fonder” pulsates in the background as those cravings go screaming into oblivion. Even so, the mind expands while absorbing prison life, which can alter values. Life becomes very regimented and simple, to the point where a good book or letter brings profound comfort. The process of finding some level of contentment – as a foundation – takes time, but once that point is reached, a prisoner usually begins to see their environment in a new light. New hope is found.

I am an “adapted prisoner”, which means the concept of really living has unfolded for me in a dynamic way. Relationships for those like me are critical components that provide comfort, instruction, guidance, and necessary critiques. There is also the idea of living vicariously through others. Most adapted prisoners like myself have developed bonds with men and women within and outside prison. Both promote “community”, a sense of belonging, but in different ways. As a result, I live in two unique worlds, which keeps me actively engaged in the details that form the reality of both. Such awareness has heightened my compassion, priming me to extend lovingkindness. Would it surprise you to learn that there are many in prison like me?

And yet a stigma remains: will the prisoner you write ever be released? Maybe not. But that doesn't mean they don't have hopes and dreams, wants and needs. Because, you see, once “adapted”, living in here isn't hard. Change, however, can be. Your letters can be instrumental in that very process. You in your other world can contribute to the process of helping a prisoner, similar to extending a hand to someone who has fallen. In doing so, you'll plant seeds of goodness, kindness.

Sharing daily activities – simple pleasures – to engage a prisoner's mind, heart, and soul can have a profound effect. As you give you'll receive, and likely help yourself as well. The depth of feeling you convey, the more you invest (in whatever form), certainly opens you up to pain, but when the flower of change blooms, your immersion in the prisoner's life will help you to understand how very real it is. Time and distance will become irrelevant: walls will fall away.

And that initial misconception? Nonsense!

By Terry Daniel McDonald, May 2016

# Albert

## **Misconception: death row inmates don't deserve kindness**

Being housed on death row is like a man being barricaded in a house fire. He has no hope to escape and the cloud of dark smoke is drowning out his vision to reality.

Time is running out and you feel the heat of the flames getting hotter and hotter. So what do you do? You ball up and pray that God will help you or you sit and let death run its course.

Most people look at death row as being the last result of their lives. So they lose hope and allow the flames to deteriorate their body.

Some people believe that there is still hope so they allow the flames to refine them into pure gold and make the best of their situation. A form of hope and a blessing from the most high God is being able to exchange letters with a pen pal while here on death row. It shows me that God loves and cares for us. I can honestly say that it's been a tremendous blessing to be able to correspond with people who really care about who I am as a man and not judge me by what the media betray me to be.

I learned the true definition of a friend and what love, loyalty and trust really is. I'm not going to say no names but this person knows who I'm talking about. She has been a moon that shines in the midnight sky to me every since God has led her to me through the help of the Lifespark organization. So I just want to pay my respects by saluting you all with love and respect. May God bless you and keep you in all your ways. Peace.

By Albert Leslie Love, jr., January 2016

# Michael

## **Misconception: writing a death row inmate is a waste of time and death row prisoners are unintelligent, manipulative and liars.**

I believe the biggest misconception about death row from people who don't know much really about it, except what they see on the news or read about in a newspaper or the internet, is that everyone on death row is the same. That every inmate on death row is sick, sadistic, guilty of the crime, deserve to be there, and deserve to die. They don't have feelings and don't care about anyone but themselves. Many believe that writing a death row inmate is a waste of time. They believe they're unintelligent, manipulative and liars. They hear of gruesome murderers or stories from friends or people that work on death row, that tell them how extremely dangerous it is to work on death row. And it doesn't make it any better, when the media only sensationalizes in the stories of children being raped and murdered. So many people build this perception, this idea, this picture and this belief in their head, that because they are on death row, they must have raped and murdered a child or killed a lot of people, so they are a serial killer.

Have some people raped and murdered a child, yes? But they are not all on death row. Have some people killed multiple people, yes? But they are not all on death row. You have people who are on death row who were college graduates, former teachers, world class athletes, government officials, doctors, lawyers, business owners, stock brokers and respected people in the community. Do they have similar charges, yes? But each of them is different. Unique in their own way. They are their own person. Are they all guilty? Only each of them knows. Florida leads the United States in wrongful convictions, including death row convictions. There have been 26 people released from death row alone in Florida for wrongful convictions as I write this.

For however long these people each stayed on death row, because of other people's misconceptions they were thought of as serial killers, child rapist and murderers, stupid, liars, manipulators, sick, sadistic, guilty and deserving of death. Yet they are set free because of their innocence. If you never write to a death row inmate or talk to one, then that misconception will always live on inside of you, because you will never know the truth if that person is all of these things, some of those things, or none of those things. Misconception is only what you make it to be to you the individual.

By Michael R. Jackson, January 2016

# Patrik

## **Misconception: death row inmates don't deserve our attention**

About 5 months ago I came across Lifespark through a coincidence. From the beginning I was thrilled by the idea to bring light in such a dark place death row must be. I was very curious when I received the address of my pen pal Will. I asked myself lots of questions like: What kind of person is he be? How old is this human being? What is his life story? Etc. To be honest, before I wrote the first letter, I assumed that this friendship will be unilaterally, that above all I will have an open ear for my pen pal and that I will be the part of the friendship who will help and try to be a real friend. That would have been fine for me. I was ready, to share light, my daily life and to help a human being in such an uncomfortable place death row must be.

Of course I had also concerns: What when my pen pal is a monster and if it will be hard to communicate because of his setting? Or also: Is it fair for the victims when I write to their offender? When I received the response to my first letter finally all the worries and thoughts were gone. I discovered that my pen pal is a friendly, open-minded, intelligent human being, which I can still confirm after 4.5 months' lively contact. Moreover, I could recognize that the friendship is absolutely not unilaterally, rather mutually. In addition, I can say that we have developed a close friendship in this short time. I even plan to visit him soon.

When I told my family and friends of my plan to write a prisoner on death row, most of them were absolutely not persuaded. They all have (or in the meantime had) misconceptions about writing a prisoner on death row. As already mentioned even I had misconceptions, but I jumped over the shape and was allowed to make a great experience. For this reason, I have never regretted my decision. Most of my environment changed their opinion when I could answer their questions.

Will and I write about our lives, his and mine environment, the world and much more. The age difference of 43 years we have is a big enrichment in my mind and was and will never be a problem for the friendship. Now I can say that it was the right decision to start a pen pal ship with a death row prisoner. I recommend this to everybody who wants to expand the own horizon. Because Will and I like sharing quotes I will close with the following one:

*„No human being is perfect, but each is unique in its own way.“ – Author unknown*

By Patrik, August 2016

# Helen

## **Misconception: prisoners are treated humanely**

I think, the whole attitude towards prisoners is totally wrong. During my 10-years-pen-palship, I realized that persons responsible are convinced that prisoners must be punished for their deeds; this in many ways.....

They cannot work.

Therefore cannot earn some pocket-money.

They are shut behind bars for most of the time, where they have no privacy at all.

Bad food is „good enough“ for them.

They „can“ wait, wait, wait..... until perhaps their appeal will be answered.

In other words, they are not treated as humans.

I'm convinced that this is the „wrong way round“. They should get help to get „better people“.

We should not put our heads so high, as we all know, we too are doing wrong - by bad doing or not doing well.

By Helen Danuser, February 2016

# Claudia

## **Misconception: death row inmates do not deserve our attention**

From my perspective and from my experience with friends and family I believe many people believe that writing to a person who lives on death row is either a very romantic or a frightening thing to do. It seems that nobody has a more realistic view. Well, but who can blame them? Everything associated with “prison” is a taboo issue. Usually we don’t want to have anything to do with that. But once you open up and let yourself be part of somebody else’s life you realize that this is a normal person. He or she just made bad choices. Admittedly very bad choices in some cases.

Even my best friends reacted very strangely when I told them that I was having a pen-pal. Their faces turned serious and concerned. At the beginning I tried to convince them. I tried to make them see what I saw: just a normal person confined in a cell across the big pond. I have not been able to change their minds. But something has changed in me. It is not important to me anymore that my friends understand my intentions. I am who I am and I believe in values that I believe in.

Many friends asked me if I believed in his words. I am not sure if this questions is accurate. For me it is not about “the truth”. It is about accepting a person. Most of the people on death-row have experienced abandonment because of their crime. They are left alone. Some people may ask “Yes, but how can you know that the person you know is the real person?” The truth is, I can’t. But on the contrary, how can you know that the Claudia you know is the same Claudia my parents know or my colleagues know? Aren’t we all showing only shades of ourselves to a specific person? Of course I hope hearing but nothing but the truth by my pen-pal. But obviously I can never be sure. Even if it turned out that everything was a lie from the start, which has happened to some pen-pals, then it will be another lesson learned. I only want to cross that bridge if I come to it. Being a lawyer has taught me that the truth is a very shy deer. It does not show itself easily but that does not really matter because only facts that can be proven count. To prove a fact can be a very tricky thing. I depends on circumstances, sometimes money and in a lot of

times the progress of science. Many people – even my own husband – tends to say “Well, he probably deserves to be where he is. He should not have killed anybody!” For me, this thought is too easy. We should all refrain from the belief that the one that is in prison deserves to be there.

There is nothing romantic in writing to a pen-pal. To me it is an act of kindness and humanity. Most of us live in a protected environment. We had loving parents, good schools and our friends were just like us. We didn’t need to worry about the future because we had all possibilities. Only in the newspapers bad stuff happened. It takes a while until one realizes that he lives in a protected bubble.

By Claudia Dölker, January 2016

# Robert

## **Misconception: correspondence with pen pals revolves around death and fear**

One of the major misconceptions about death row is that all of our correspondence with pen pals revolves around death and fear. Sure, death is a large part of what this is about and I'm sure that often in the backs of everyone's minds even when it's not being discussed, but it doesn't HAVE to be the center of the conversation. With me, it's far from it.

The fear of death is something I've thought about often in life, especially on death row. From my perspective, the fear comes from attachment to form and resisting what IS or worrying (fearing) what might happen next. Each of us have to figure all of this out for ourselves and find a healthy outlook on it. But once such perspective is gained it really makes no sense to dwell on it. I guess it can come up from time to time when discussing how you deal with it, but it certainly doesn't have to pervade our conversations.

As I said, this isn't how the majority of my conversations go; I don't like to focus on and get entangled in future possibilities, but rather I prefer to make the most of the moment at hand. To me, life is about living, learning and loving, and I try to express this in my correspondence. I would rather talk about an exciting day of reading a good book, listening to some good music, a fun visit I had with lots of laughter, or the various things I have learned or experienced on any given day.

A lot of my closer friends tell me that, for them, the thing they love most about writing people in the free world is reading about their pen pals' travels or adventures in their daily lives.

To them it's a respite to sort of live vicariously through their pen pals. I agree. I know many guys who avoid talking about death and fear and even the going-ons of this place because they live here already and when they write they sort of escape from this place. Me, well, I try to find positive and fun ways of living in here, and I often feel enriched by my interactions with others, have

deep and enlightening conversations about everything from what we've learned from this experience to deeper aspects of spirituality. And I like to share some of these conversations with my pen pals.

So, not everyone here is living in fear and dwelling on their death in their letters. There are some who are, and you just might be writing to such a person. If you are I would encourage you to help your friend find a healthy and positive perspective, to somehow learn to deal with the reality of this situation without being overwhelmed by it. And while you are working on finding that perspective be sure to write about the fun and exciting things you are experiencing, send pictures from your adventures, and/or find other topics to discuss. In time, I'm sure the fear of death will be overcome by many in here and out there. And those doom and gloom conversations will become less and less frequent until they're non-existent.

Fear comes from being attached to form and believing in the illusion of death. Once you come to know your eternal SELF, the undying energy that is the essence of everything, and stop worrying about losing your lower self, your body and personality, well, fear fades away and you can begin to appreciate the beauty of life.... Even in a place like death row.

By Robert Pruett, January 2016

# Sabrina

## **Misconception: it's a waste of time to invest energy into letters to death row inmates**

Yes, it's absolutely right; time can be spent by doing lots of different things such as playing Golf, drinking coffee with friends, doing some sports, enjoying music, seeing a movie in the theater, going for a walk with your neighbor's dog. There's always something you can do in your free time, it's never getting boring, that's for sure! And hey, what about writing letters? But writing letters isn't everyone's cup of tea; writing a letter to a death row inmate even much less. So, what is the use anyhow? Why writing letters to such a dark and hopeless place? Why writing a letter to a person you don't know, a person who seems to be this far away from your daily life? Someone who carries a backpack heavy from the experiences made in life, just as we all do in fact.

Death Row inmates are confronted with lots of different misconceptions. Many of those misconceptions nourish one misconception in particular: That it is a waste of time to write to someone who is incarcerated. There are statements as "There's all about death and fear anyway", "You can't write anything funny and after all it's boring because they have nothing interesting to tell", .... And the list goes on and on. But the worst thing is the despair people link with this kind of penpalship. Why should one write to someone whom you would have to say goodbye to one day? Yes, it's true; it's going to be very hard one day.

So, why do I personally write to a death row inmate? Because for me it definitively isn't a waste of time! It's so good to see, with how few you can bring so much joy into someone else's life. And how much joy comes back

into my life as well! How diversified the topics are that we discuss openly and honestly. To feel, that he's happy to see me happy even when he's going through hard times. Or how precious it is to learn and understand about someone else's view of life. To admire someone, who, despite of the adversities in his life, tries to stay positive, hopeful and fair and by doing so, showing me what real grandeur is.

And most of all: it teaches me to be thankful for the life I am allowed and able to live. To know, that I am a lucky devil and that this luck isn't granted to everybody. It helps me to go on in my life as a human being and to learn to question myself about (my) life.

So, can this be a waste of time?

By Sabrina Trächslin, May 2016

# William

## **Misconception: you cannot find friends on death row**

### **The miracle is that the more we share the more we have!**

As a death row prisoner I do find a lot of time on my hands. Please know that I am grateful for organizations such as Lifespark who have a genuine interest and concern for us, not as a prisoner who is condemned to death, but as a human being, first and most of all. Yes, there are many misconceptions about death row prisoners. I cannot, nor will I speak for other death row prisoners, but my life has not stopped just because I have a death sentence. Life in here to me is the same as it is anywhere else on this planet; it is what I make it for myself. Although difficult and trying, I do my best to live in an appropriate symmetry within this asymmetrical existence. My reason for seeking a pen-friend is for sharing all that is on my mind, and in return, I listen with heartfelt interest to my pen-friends concerns about his or her daily life. To me a pen-friend is a mutual relationship, and one which is unconditional. My present pen-friend, who found me through Lifespark, is a young man of 19 years, and I am in the winter of my life at the age of 62 years. My pen-friends name is Patrik, and I am sure that he will attest, that we are now close friends. From what I have experienced through our friendship I can tell you this: every person who is in the winter of their life, needs a young person in their lives to help balance themselves with todays world.

One of the many things that Patrik and I enjoy sharing is a good quote, so in closing I will share a quote with those who might have some misconceptions about a pen-friendship with a death row prisoner: „The miracle is that the more we share the more we have. “

By William, August 2016



# José

## **Misconception: there is no friendship on death row**

Many people assume that those convicted of capital crimes and sent to death row must be the worst of the worst; stone-cold killers, sadistic murderers, and monsters that don't belong in a prison with ordinary criminals. After all, a carefully picked jury of upstanding citizens found absolutely no redeeming value in these worthless animals and decided that these dangerous animals would be better off buried in a cemetery.

Are condemned prisoners on death rows across the country really so ruthlessly violent, uncaring and callous? From my personal experience of being on death row for 22 years, I did find a few such monsters. However, the vast majority of those sentenced to death were normal human beings who cared, loved, sympathized, and you would never be able to tell them apart from another person in your daily life.

This is my story – my experience of living amongst these wonderful individuals:

Back in 1986, I was barely a young 18 year old pup that had just been rounded up off the streets and sent to the dog pound. When I was in the dog pound, er, I mean the county jail, awaiting trial to be sentenced to die and from there transferred to death row, I met several inmates that were from death row. They were in the county jail on bench-warrant to receive an execution date. These were the first inmates to start showing me that death row is not the evil and hellish world I imagined it to be.

When I finally arrived at the Ellis unit (where death row was housed back then), a group of caring inmates provided me with a “care” package of basic necessities to help me get on my feet right away. This was the first of many genuine gestures that there are caring people on death row. While this tradition happens everywhere, it's not to the degree that I have seen it on death row. Death row is more of a close-knit community than any other place I've been in

prison. Everyone on death row is bound together with the same fate and that naturally creates a friendly atmosphere of unity and the unique possibility of making lasting bonds of friendship.

Throughout the many years I was on death row, I made many friends, whom I call my “road dawgs”. We did everything together. We ate meals together. We celebrated special days together. We would unite together when officers wanted to single-out one inmate for harassment. We would care for each other and sometimes we even took care of each other’s pets (frogs, mice, lizards and spiders!). And we would play games: basketball, handball, dodgeball, volleyball, checkers, chess, scrabble, dominoes, spades, Monopoly, Risk, and sometimes we would have tournaments where everyone would participate in several of the games like a decathlon to see who finished in first, second, and third place. Those were some fun times.

My favorite game, the one passion I had in common and shared with most of my friends, was the role-playing game, Dungeons and Dragons. I still remember the many nights at the Polunsky unit (where all of death row was transferred to) when we would play for nearly 12 hours straight and have marathon sessions that could last for several days before taking a break to do other necessary things.... like answer letters!

Death row created an environment within an otherwise hostile prison system where one could cultivate and foster a really great friendship. But at the same time, death row was also the Terminator of all these friendships because eventually time would run out for some people and then it was time to put them to sleep. I have lost many dawgs to human euthanasia.

I remember the first friend I lost in 1993. This was one of the friends I used to play games with on the outside recreation yard on the Ellis unit. It was a brutal awakening to where I was: death row. Two more friends in 1995. Another in 1997. Then two of my best friends in 1998 – less than two months apart. That really hurt.

On death row you were allowed to request up to ten other inmates that you wish to visit with on the day before your execution. That year – 1998 – was the first time I had been requested to one of these “last” visits. It was an experience I will cherish forever and at the same time it brings sadness and sorrow when I think back on it.

Then the executions just increased over the years to my dismay. I started losing my dawgs at a depressing rate. In 2007, when I received an execution date, I was granted the good fortune of getting housed in the cell right next to another good friend while we were both on “death watch”. That happy time lasted a couple of months before he was... put to sleep. Even after getting off of death row a couple of years later, I still read about the rest of my dawgs I left on death row that continue to be put to sleep.

All those precious bonds I made over all those years, the strands that make the intricate and beautiful web of my life, continue to get severed. All I’m left with are the memories of the great times I had with these wonderful individuals.

By José Moreno, January 2016

# Alex

## **Misconception: death row inmates need to be pitied**

I'm not a Christian person in the context of being a member of a church. I'm trying to live the most ethical and moral way. The question of what ethical or moral means is not easy to answer. I guess everybody has their own definition.

I started writing to a man on death row in Texas, not because I wanted to do something good, but because I was just curious about it. That is far away from being moral. That is nothing else but hypocritical. But then I was surprised by my pen pal. He taught me lessons about life, and he still does. He opens my eyes, about the world and about me. And he lives through my eyes.

Vegetating in a 6qm cell is no fun, that's for sure. He gains through me, too. And he told me that simply being in contact with him is a gift for him, and that is not only nice Sunday afternoon tea talk. "Oh you poor man! What are they doing to you!? You deserve better than this!" And so on and so on. All bullshit. It's about being recognized as a human being.

What would Jesus do? Would he be in a Christian church together with all of the hypocrites and well-to-do human beings? Or would he rather go to the poor, the discharged, the tramps, the addicted, the homeless, the killers and sinners? Oh yes, we are all sinners, cheating the state of the taxes and so on.

Writing to a murderer is a Christian act. The most valuable gift you can give a person is your time. Time cannot be counterbalanced by any other thing. The love you give counts in the time you spend. And every minute I sit in front of the computer writing a letter to Bill is a gift for him. And that is not only the case when talking about pen pals in prison, but the same with your wife and kids and Daddy and Mummy. Give them time and show them that they worth every second you spend with them. Nobody needs flowers and champagne. Fucking hypocrites around the world!

There is no need for me to judge about the person to whom I write letters. He has been judged already, and the state of Texas likes disabling his muscles

with an injection and then killing him with another injection. Why should I think about justice in that context? It's about holding his hand, pleasing his soul, feeding him with thoughts, distracting him from this lousy, bad, boring, and threatening life. I am a tool, and I have a function. And it is allowed to feel sympathy, too.

Most people do not understand why I write letters to a killer. Maybe they never will, and I'm tired of trying to explain. And I don't want to explain because I don't want to justify what I do. Dumb people justify whatever they want in whatever way they want. So I do. There is only one reason to discuss or even argue with people: when I feel they are worth it. So many aren't.....

So Bill and I live capsuled in our own little world. To explain how this world is would be not easy. I would like to invite all open minded people to try themselves. All the others: F+++ off!

By Alex Reinert, January 2016

# Viviane

## **Misconception: writing to a death row prisoner won't change your life**

I started writing a prisoner after reading a book about a death row inmate's case. It was so sad to hear about what life was like for prisoners on death row. I knew I had to do something to help someone over there. The first one did not write for a long time, he said he couldn't spend enough time writing. Then I was given Jose's address. This started a real friendship. How happy I am every time I receive one of his letters. This has gone on for about six years. He has a difficult life with health problems, but always kept a positive attitude and a great faith in God. He's no longer on death row due to the help of a courageous couple of lawyers, and also the friendship of people in England, and of a lady from Oregon and her daughter who lives in California. Jose deserves all of this loving environment, while he has very few contacts with his daughter and grand children (they live far away and they are poor). Jose was so grateful for my letters and friendship that he drew a beautiful butterfly and flowers and had this big picture sent to me with the help of the American friends. This has been put in a frame by my husband, and has its place in my living room. Everyday I admire Jose's gift.

Lifespark asked if some of us were willing to have another pen pal. Since Jose was no longer on death row, I agreed to write also to someone who was still in this awful ordeal. And there came into my life Albert. Exchange of photos, of our experiences in life, little jokes; there are so many ways to feel the warmth of a faithful friendship. We began exchanging letters last year only, but it seems that it's been a longer time. We feel free to write what goes through our mind. He has a mother who comes for a visit when she can, bringing along Albert's 4 years old son. Albert is only 28, and misses his family very much.

Both of them mean a lot in my life; in this century where communication is mainly through the phone and e-mails it is wonderful to send and receive real letters. Indeed this is not at all a one side gift !

By Viviane Soual, February 2016

# Josephine

## Writing to a prisoner on death row means...

true:

- ... has built protection walls around him/her
- ... writing to somebody who thinks/thought a lot about life, happiness, time, family, death
- ... putting colors into his/her life, helping him/her to have his/her mind escaping from the cell
- ... fighting against the death penalty by realizing it's absurdity and talking about it
- ... fighting against the manichean point of view which is not complex enough to describe human beings

false:

- ...GIVE a lot of friendship, it's more about sharing friendship!
- ...doesn't takes much time nor thoughts
- ...doesn't change your life and open your heart
- ...you think it's a good thing to commit crimes
- ...saving his/her life

By Joséphine Maillefer, December 2015

# Ricardo

## **Misconception: writing a death row prisoner doesn't make any sense**

Writing a person on death row is something to help him keep in contact with the outside and what goes on on the outside, in every way. CONNECT!

It's so he won't be forgotten; he will constantly be thought of and be prayed for. A pen friend he can think of as well and occupy time to write to and open up with. Something that will keep him from thinking of other or negative things.

A death row person may really need someone as not everyone here has at least 1 family member to contact or write to and others who have many family members, but they have all refused anything to do with that person further.

Do you think of a person on death row like that? What if he is actually innocent, but was wrongfully convicted and sentenced? That is something that was quick to do, but will take time to undo. If you oppose the death penalty, wouldn't you like to correspond with someone like that? Would you like to help him stay alive and not take his own life due to time it will take for the undoing?

If you oppose the death penalty, would you like to have one as a close friend? Some of those on death row could actually be a "CLOSEST FRIEND" you could ever find or have. Some of those could be a really big help for you. There are a lot of smart ones here.

By Ricardo Gill, December 2015