



## Travel update, summer 2019

By Ines Aubert, Switzerland, 2019

The Travel update was written during the trip to visit inmates in Texas and Florida.

### **July 19<sup>th</sup>: Travel update – Being passionate**

The first part of this summer's trip to visit my pen friends in prison we spend in California where I have the opportunity to personally meet people I know by only talking by e-mail. Meeting them in person is something I have been looking forward to. Plus, being in California gives me the opportunity to meet El Capitan, the majestic mountain in the Yosemite National Park. It was important for me to hike close to it so that I could touch the granite and personally greet it. Looking at the top from the bottom is breathtaking. El Capitan is closely linked to someone whose passion can hardly be topped: Alex Honnold, who is the first climber who climbed El Capitan alone and without any ropes. You will find the three-minute long trailer to the film "Free solo" about Alex [here](#). Ten minutes about how difficult it was to film Alex's climb you will find [here](#).

Alex's passion is extraordinary and extremely dangerous and there's no need to go as far as he does. Yet, I encourage everybody to live out their individual passion and give it a space in their life, even if it's only a small one. Being passionate about something helps to not let go and instead overcome obstacles bigger than we thought we could conquer. It also brings us closer to what we are meant to be, I'm sure. I've always had the passion to write and to learn more about people in other situations, often in situations shaped by sorrow and helplessness. Showing solidarity, reaching out and being creative makes me happy. For the past 18 years, the focus of my passion has revolved around topics related to the death penalty. I feel whole when I'm working on a project, connecting with likeminded people, and supporting some while at the same time learning from others. Watching someone who is passionate about what they do invigorates my own passion and so I benefit from knowing passionate people. You rock, Alex!

### **July 24<sup>th</sup>: Travel update – Gang violence is about a lethal absence of hope**

Our three days in Los Angeles were much about gangs. I was able to interview Melvin, a 62-year-old man who helped found the gang Crips in Los Angeles, and spent 37 years in prison by going in and out over the course of more than 40 years. Today, he's very active as a volunteer in various fields with the goal to help and support juveniles so that they don't join a gang. I learned a lot by listening to him talk about the gang and all his experiences.

**Father Gregory Boyle and Homeboy Industries:** The day after I met Melvin I had the luck to attend a speech with Father Boyle (short G.) at the Islamic Center in Los Angeles. He spoke from his heart and with wisdom about the extension of our compassion until everybody is included, also "the folks at the margins" with a "no matter what-ness" (G.'s words).

***Wikipedia about Father Gregory Boyle and Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles: Father Gregory Boyle is an American Roman Catholic priest of the Jesuit order. He is the founder and Director of Homeboy Industries, the world largest gang-intervention and rehabilitation***

program.

*In the face of law enforcement tactics and criminal justice policies of suppression and mass incarceration as the means to end gang violence, he and parish and community members adopted what was a radical approach at the time: treat gang members as human beings.*

*In 1988 they started what would eventually become Homeboy Industries, which employs and trains former gang members in a range of social enterprises, as well as provides critical services to thousands of men and women who walk through its doors every year seeking a better life.*

*Boyle is the author of the 2010 New York Times-bestseller [Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion](#).*

I recommend watching the six-minute long video with Father Gregory Boyle [“I was taught everything of value by gang members”](#). The video also talks about Mario, the “kindest soul” at the Homeboy Industries.

Prior to his speech, I had the chance to talk to father Boyle and tell him about Melvin. He said Melvin should absolutely get in contact with him as he might be able to get a job at the Homeboy Industries. Around 500 ex-gang members are employed there.

**Homeboy Industries, Los Angeles:** The following day, we booked the 9am guided tour at the Homeboy Industries. Every morning before work, the employees gather for a thought for the day and visitors are welcome to mingle with them. We watched an ex-gang member give a tearful speech about a friend who had recently died. Our private guide Omar (we were the only two people at this early tour) – an ex-gang member who was shot and is still partly paralyzed – told us that being open and re-finding one’s emotions is much encouraged in the 18-month training at the Homeboy Industries. The whole concept of the program is very convincing to me, and the brief glimpse I got into it confirmed to me that the absence of hope can be conquered with love, which is the basis of Boyle’s vision.

After the tour, we had a cup of coffee at their restaurant. There, we met Mario – the one from the video – and had a short chat with him, also. On the back of one employee’s shirt was printed “Homeboy Industries gives us a place and a face”.

Seeing the faces of Melvin, Omar and Mario made the gang-related absence of hope and the way out of it real to me.

### **July 30<sup>th</sup>: Travel update – Visiting the son and the parents**

Over the weekend, I twice visited my pen friend Daniel in Texas. He can only have non-contact visits behind a glass window and we talked through phones. The visitation setting was uncomfortable and physically exhausting, both for him and for me, but having a face-to-face conversation was great. Sharing and discussing in real time adds a lot to the bond that has been created through letters.

His father Terry is the most important person in Daniel’s life, and he greatly misses him when he doesn’t hear from him for a longer time. Terry’s new wife Angie, who brought three daughters into the marriage, considers herself Daniel’s parent, also. Both Terry and Angie are no big writers and, in fact, often don’t write to their sons at all, Daniel’s brother being at another prison. At first glance, one might think that parents who don’t write or visit don’t care too

much. Why would they otherwise leave their sons without any message for so long? Yet, having to care for other needy family members and going through and healing from their own sicknesses, including surgeries, have kept them from visiting Daniel and his brother at times. We have visited Terry and Angie before, but this time they invited us to stay overnight at their big farm on the countryside. We were welcomed very warmly and they absolutely wanted us to feel at home and to take or use anything we wanted.

Terry does not always speak much and can even be a grumpy man as Angie told me (to which comment he just nodded). Still, I had in mind to ask him about his feelings with regard to his two sons. Much to my surprise, Terry opened up and told me about how it is for him to have sons in prison whom he can't touch or hug or see spontaneously. All of that bothers him a lot. "His heart hurts", Angie said. Terry told me that his dream would be that both sons were with him on the farm so that he could teach them all the skills they need to help him run it. According to Angie, he's a good and very patient teacher and I have no doubt about that. They are both very loving people who really care, and Angie told me several times, "We consider them all our kids; we have five children; three daughters and two sons."

When I helped Angie to water the vegetables and pick tomatoes I asked her why there were photos of only the three daughters in the living room and kitchen when they actually have five kids in all. Angie looked up and said "Oh, thank you for pointing that out to me. You are completely right; it had just never crossed my mind. I'm so glad you said that!" After we had returned home she quickly went to their bedroom and came back with two framed photos of Daniel and his brother. She put them up between the photos of her daughters and thanked me again for making her aware of that. She explained that acknowledging their presence in their family through the photos was the right thing to do.

From our previous visit, Terry knew that I would love to once smell a skunk – from afar. Many people have told me already "No, you don't want to smell that!" But still, yes, I DO want to experience it so that I can form my own opinion. So, after having fed the animals on the farm, Terry sat us on the buggy, which is an open car with large wheels made to be used off road. He started driving through his property crisscross, through the groups of trees, along ditches and fences, through the high weed and across huge grass fields, opening and closing many different gates and scaring jackass rabbits away in all directions. As it had grown dark, he used, in addition to the buggy's headlights, a flashlight to sift through the bushes with one hand. Several times I worried we would tip over because the ditch was so steep. After a long time of speeding through the property in the warm summer wind (with Angie saying that Terry would not give up until he would find me one and me wondering whether it would ever happen), we finally spotted a skunk. But by the time Terry had stepped out the car and tried to locate it, it had disappeared. So, after 1 1/2 hours of an exciting skunk hunt that I won't ever forget, we gave up and finally, after touching glasses because of their 13<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, went to bed around midnight. Both Terry and Angie appreciate my friendship and my support to their son greatly, and by opening not only their door but also their hearts, they more than clearly showed me how much they care.

PS: The olfactory experience remains on my wish list.

### **August 2nd: Travel update – The victims’ family members**

By googling my name, my contact information is easy to find on the net. I also welcome being contacted by people who disagree with what I do. It has happened a couple of times already that I was addressed in an unfriendly way by people who are in favor of the death penalty. They actually affronted me for being a friend of a particular inmate. Yet, the communication, without exception, quickly changed into a respectful and friendly one after I responded in an understanding way. I have already personally met with three different family members of the victims of my pen friends in the past, and a meeting was planned for this trip, as well. A long time ago, Sarah started her first message to me with “Friends with this animal, are you serious?” I encourage all inmates’ pen pals not to shrink back when they receive such an e-mail, but consider it a chance. I would not ignore such an attack nor respond in any negative or cynical way. The sender is probably a person who is hurt and concerned about people murdering other people.

It’s the fourth time now that I experience just that: when I take the person seriously, they open up and talk about what is really on their mind, namely the grief over the loss of their loved one. Sarah mainly wanted to talk about her dead cousin. She stated several times that she wanted me to know what a great person he had been and what a gap his death had left in their family.

When we had lunch together, Sarah told us about earlier days and how she and her cousin grew up like siblings. She misses him greatly and said that he had been an important person who had kept the family together. The atmosphere at the meeting was very relaxed and even funny at times. Sarah still thinks that my pen friend should be executed and doesn’t accept any mitigating circumstances such as the lack of guidance or love in his upbringing. She says that everybody has choices no matter what childhood one had and that there is no excuse for killing someone. So, according to her, my pen friend deserves nothing but death. I told her I didn’t mind her having that opinion and that we didn’t have to agree on this to get along well. With this, she agreed.

In case you face a similar situation and think I can be of any help, don’t hesitate to contact me. It’s often easier to think about a course of action together.

Below you will find articles about meeting the victims’ family members of my pen friends.

#### [Interview with Debbie – a victim raped by Robert Power](#)

An interview with Debbie, who was raped by Ines’ pen friend Robert Power in Florida and has forgiven him

By Ines Aubert, 2011

#### [Over the bridge – Meeting with the relatives of the murder victim](#)

Meeting the father of the victim in the first case of Robert Pruett in Texas

By Ines Aubert, 2013

[Talk with Jake Yarbrough – A living memory of a taken father](#)

A talk with Jake Yarbrough with the son of the victim in the first case of Robert Pruett in Texas  
By Ines Aubert, 2013

**August 7th: Travel update - Contact visits**

For last weekend's special visits, José and I tried again to have a contact visit. See also [last year's travel update](#) when we tried in vain. I would be eligible to be José's "significant other" as he doesn't have any family members visiting him. After I requested the special visits and asked for them to be contact visits, I was told they would check on it. But when I arrived at the prison on Saturday, they said we were not granted one.

José told me at the visit I should call the prison and ask to talk to the warden. I should absolutely say "acting warden" as the head warden himself might not be there.

So, after the Saturday visit, I called the prison.

*Dial number of the Ward Unit.*

Female voice: Ward Unit – How can I help you?

Can I please talk to the acting warden?

Female voice: Hold on a second. I will put you through.

Other female voice: Hello, how can I help you?

I'm calling about a contact visit. I had a special visit with my friend today and will have another one tomorrow. We requested a contact visit as he doesn't have any family anymore and I'm the only one who visits him. We didn't get a contact visit today and I'm asking whether we will be granted one tomorrow.

Female voice: You will need to talk to the duty warden.

That's what I'm trying to do.

Female voice: You will have to call in again and ask about him.

Okay, thank you.

*Dial number of the Ward Unit.*

Female voice: Ward Unit – How can I help you?

Can I talk to the duty warden, please?

Female voice: He's on the phone. Please call back later.

Ten minutes later.

*Dial number of the Ward Unit.*

Female voice: Ward Unit – How can I help you?

Can I talk to the duty warden, please?

Female voice: I think he's in the visiting area. Let me put you through.

Other female voice: Hello! How can I help you?

I'm calling about a contact visit. I had a special visit with my friend today and will have another one tomorrow. We requested... etc.

Female voice: The warden is not here. You need to call the front desk.

Okay, thanks.

*Dial number of the Ward Unit.*

Female voice: Ward Unit, how can I help you?

Can I please leave a message for the duty warden? It's about ....

Female voice: Hold on a second. I will put you through.

*Silence. The line is dead.*

*Dial number of the Ward Unit.*

Female voice: Ward Unit. How can I help you?

I did not get to talk to the duty warden. It's about the contact visit.

Female voice: You will need to talk to Warden Berg, he's the only one who can answer the question.

So, can I talk to Warden Berg, please?

Female voice: No, he's not in the house right now.

Needless to say, we didn't get a contact visit on Sunday.

I experience a lot of questionable procedure and miscommunication inside the prison, already when I call in. I am told I'm not on the inmate's visit list although I've visited many times, at the check point they say that I don't have a special visit and so on. This weekend, one of my pen friends was first led to the contact section instead of the non-contact and I had to wait until he was brought over to me. At another visit, the wrong inmate was brought first and had to be escorted back to his cell before my pen friend was led to the visiting booth where I was waiting. In all of this, I usually don't see any ill intent, but I feel sorry about the prison system not having the means to better educate and train their staff. I believe they try to be helpful, but they simply don't know what to do and how to offer the required help. It amazes me that there is so much helplessness in a system where you think security and professional work should be of high priority. By the way, I think that treating the inmates respectfully would be a professional feature as well and should be enforced within the prison system.

**Having a contact visit:** I've been pen friends with Kenny since 2007 when I made an [interview](#) with him about his death sentence being overturned. At that time, as a 24-year-old, he was still very confident he would get out soon. But his first parole date was denied. The victim's family members strongly opposed it and became active in preventing it, which I think is very sad. Kenny was convicted under the law of parties and has not killed anybody nor helped the offender in any way. He is 36 years old now and still hopes to get out soon; I hope that for him too. With Kenny, I was allowed to have a contact visit. It is wonderful if you are able to give a hug and also to hold hands during the visit. This has nothing to do with romance but only with humanness. Kenny wrote to me after the visit: *"I had to go through an interview of sorts with both wardens here. They asked me a series of questions and at the end, they granted the contact visit. It felt so great and comforting to hug you."* Kenny has a son who is a young adult now and he longs to get to know him in the free world. I hope that his dream will come true on the next parole date.