

Penpals on death row

April 26, 2020 Johanna Senn



We spoke to Ines Aubert, who has been writing letters to people on death row for over 18 years and has also made this opportunity available to others.

Now that we have so much time, why not start writing letters again?

Ines Aubert has been writing letters to people on death row in the USA for almost 19 years. She has many different penpals there and corresponds with them regularly. Her longest and oldest penpal will be 81 years old in the summer. These various conversations were the inspiration for her project “connectdeathrow”, which arranges short-term correspondence with death row prisoners.

“I organize the contacts and neither side knows the full name of the other person,” says Ines Aubert in an interview with RCKSTR. The project is a good opportunity to become involved with issues such as human rights and solidarity. “For the prisoners, the exchanges are a welcome opportunity to ‘give something back’ to society and they look forward to receiving these letters,” she says. We talked to Ines Aubert about why she does what she does and what the contacts have meant for her.

What made you decide to become a penpal with someone on death row?

I'm generally interested in people and their stories, not just prisoners. I lead a safe life with my family and have a good job that I enjoy. So it seems natural to me that I should reach out to those who are less fortunate. Solidarity is a central value in my life. And very importantly, I really enjoy writing.

What touches you most in your communication with the prisoners?

I am always touched by the richness of the correspondence. We both get to know each other's history and everyday life - an everyday life that we will never experience personally. And of course, we get to know a person to the extent that they reveal and share themselves with us. What touches me again and again is also the insight into how much we humans need other people. One single person can completely change the life of a prisoner – or of any other person – who has no one and make it meaningful again.

Is there a romantic component included?

Many prisoners long for a romantic relationship. I have experienced several times that inmates tried to find out whether it was possible with me. Nevertheless, they all accepted the fact that it isn't.

Have friendships also developed with prisoners?

Yes, there are penpals that I would call friendships. But I am always aware that the way we know each other is prison-based; the framework is set by the institution. And paper doesn't blush; I always have to remember that not everything I am told in the letters is necessarily true.

In what ways do you support the prisoners?

First of all, of course, through the letters and through our authentic communication. I don't need to pretend, I can respond sincerely to what they write to me. Sometimes we don't agree with each other – that's part of it. Furthermore, I visit my penpals every year. I have also got to know and met family members of several of them and even stayed overnight with them. My penpals are especially happy when I send them photos of these visits.

In addition, I have had the good fortune to get to know family members of the victims of my penfriends and to meet them personally. I would describe these meetings as 'healing'. I noticed that these relatives treated me as a representative of the prisoner. They wanted to tell me who the person who was killed had been, and how much they missed him. I was very happy to take on this role because I have great sympathy for people who have lost a family member to murder. We probably cannot imagine the tragedy of such a loss. But just listening to them helps a lot.

Which story with one of your penpals has remained special to you?

The story with Casper in Florida has remained very significant for me. He was called a monster by other people. I myself would never use that word, because what we do, we always do as human beings. Casper raped several women and girls and ended up killing a 12-year-old victim. When I met him, he had become another man who regretted his actions and suffered enormously from his past. We had an intense pen friendship in which he told me about his crimes, among other things. Hearing about them was very difficult for me and brought me to the edge of what I could bear. Later I realized that Casper had to tell someone everything to see if he would be loved even with this past. He agreed with this interpretation. I managed to love Casper despite everything, but it was one of the hardest tasks of my life.

Casper had committed many terrible crimes, and yet he had remained human. To experience his suffering and remorse for his deeds – after, with the help of a pastor, he realized what he had done - was very moving. Casper died of cancer after three years of our penfriendship. Later, I met one of his surviving rape victims at her home in Mississippi. The woman had forgiven him and was very happy that I had been in contact with him and had shown him humanity. I find this an extraordinary attitude from a victim. The encounter with this woman is one of the great experiences of my life.

Most of these people have committed a serious crime to be on death row. Have you ever had a moral conflict over writing letters?

It was perhaps more a spiritual conflict that I had with Casper. It was very difficult to hear about his crimes and I felt as if I was looking into a deep abyss. How could a person do such things? How could the surviving victims ever lead a happy life? I wasn't sure how to deal with something like this in a healthy way. But I found a way, and today I count the encounter with Casper and everything I learned through it among my most important experiences, which I wouldn't want to have missed.

If someone wants to write to someone on death row, how does it work exactly?

Anyone interested in a limited exchange of letters via connectdeathrow.org can visit the homepage and then contact me directly at contact@connectdeathrow.org. I will explain everything else that they need to know. It's possible to set up this kind of contact very quickly. And by the way, you don't have to be able to speak English perfectly!