



I was a different breed of guard - Interview with Keith Jones about his Friendship with Billy Tracy

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, 2025

Billy Tracy, a mutual friend on death row at the Polunsky Unit gave me your name and said you would be the perfect person to interview. What is your motivation for responding so quickly and agreeing to talk to a strange woman from Europe whom you've never met?

Can you tell us who you are and what you do for a living?

Hello Ines! Glad to meet you! My name is Keith Jones; I'm 40 years old, and I am a welder/fabricator. I have been married to my wonderful wife for 22 years, and we have three beautiful girls. I worked many years traveling in the oilfields of Texas, New Mexico, North Dakota, Montana, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. In 2015 the oilfield suddenly crashed, leaving me desperate for work. Those are the circumstances that drove me to take a job with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

I am never hesitant to answer anyone who my friend Billy Tracy tells me are good people that do great work to bring awareness to his situation and give him a voice. Thank you for what you do.

I worked in an all but "secret" area at the Unit where I first got to know him. It's an area of solitary confinement with only twelve cells which houses the most dangerous men in the state of Texas.

You see, I was a different breed of "guard". Because I had never planned to be in corrections, but was forced due to a failing oil industry, I was there to do my job and go home.

While I never once brought anything illegal into the prison for inmates, nor even stepped outside of the rules in the least for them, they had respect for me because I treated them as human beings. The prison would like you to think that I was being "groomed" by these "horrible people" who were just waiting for the right amount of trust to get me "on their side" so that they could gain something from me.

I guess in a way they were right, because three of those "monsters" gained a true friend. Someone who didn't judge them. Someone who cared whether they ate a meal or not, someone they could talk to and confide in. Simply put, "true human connection", and that was more valuable to them than anything you could have ever brought inside.

Although some of their crimes are very violent, the past is the past. I'm not wired to hate people because of their past. We all have them, some are just dirtier than others. Now to be clear, I treated the other 9 inmates just the same; and while they treated me with respect, they weren't as "friendly" or personable as the three I became friends with.

Wow. I'm so glad to have met you. It's very surprising and heartwarming to hear you, as a prison guard, talk about offering real human contact and being someone that those on the other side of the bars can talk to and confide in. That you have become a true friend is proven by the fact that our friend Billy always speaks of you in these terms and even connects me with you.

Can you tell us exactly what your work consisted of?

My basic day to day duties included: conducting security checks every 15 minutes, feeding the men their meals, shackling and handcuffing them whenever they left their cells (showers, recreation, visitation, medical, etc.), searching cells, dayrooms, and showers for contraband, and doing a physical count of them periodically to ensure they were all present.

That sounds like a routine with clearly defined tasks that I assume all the guards adhered to. So, why did you write in your previous response you were "someone who cared whether they ate a meal or not"?

I guess if you've never worked in a penal institution, you assume that all guards perform the duties assigned to them. Unfortunately, that's not the case. The kitchen often did not send enough meals, or the wrong meals (special diets/religious requirements), and it was up to the person assigned to the area to make it right. For many guards, it was easy to throw the blame on the inmates in the kitchen and act like they had no control over the situation. There were some who thought it was "funny" that certain people didn't get their meals. When this situation arose on my shift, I made sure that they got what they needed. However, I had to go about it. Many times, going to the Officer's Dining Room to get them food. It may seem like a small gesture out here, but there it meant the entire world that a guard cared enough to make sure they were fed.

I imagine it means a lot to them that you care! It is unbelievable to me that we can bring so much misery to people who depend on us and who are in a dire situation anyway.

How did your friendships begin? Did you ask about the inmates' well-being, or did they start telling you?

It takes much time and observation on the inmate's part to earn their real trust. They watch your every move and listen to every conversation you have within earshot. They have been treated as animals for decades of their life, so trust isn't easy to gain. Eventually, I believe curiosity got the better of them, as they started to ask me personal questions, and ask why I was "different". At first, they had a hard time believing that a guard cared about them, but with time and many conversations, I earned their trust, and they earned mine. Then, the "prison masks" were removed, and they spoke freely. At times, I felt like a counselor to them. Not that I had any answers to their problems, but they seemed to feel better just talking about the past, both good and bad.

So, tell me, too: Why are you different? Or the other way round: Why are the other guards different than you, not treating other human beings fairly?

I assume that the main reason that I was “different” is because of the amount of empathy that I carry for all humans. If a person respects me, I reciprocate that respect. If a person loves me, I show them love as well. It’s easy for me to put myself in other’s shoes and imagine what they’re going through or have been through. We all make mistakes, although some mistakes can be worse than others. In God’s eyes, sin is sin. In my eyes, all humans deserve grace. These men are already being punished for their crimes, so why should I add to their misery?

I cannot answer for the guards who constantly wished bad upon the inmates; but it seemed to be a power issue within those guards that I didn’t carry inside myself.

How did the other guards react when they saw that you had a different work ethic?

Other guards often called me an “offender lover” and would swear that I was “dirty”, meaning that I was doing something illegal to make money from the inmates. While this wasn’t true in my case, I could see why they would think that it was due to the number of guards who actually were “dirty”.

But the guards who really knew me knew that my heart and intentions were pure.

What was it like for you to go home after a day’s work and leave the men behind, some of whom you had become friends with?

Most days I was relieved to go home due to the harsh summer temperatures, and the hot uniform/protective gear that I wore. I often thought of them as I spent the evening with my family in the cool comfort of my home, realizing that they would never have what I did, and it gave me a deep sense of appreciation.

Like you, I appreciate everything I have even more since I began writing to my pen pals on death row. I try to share my life with them by sending photos and talking about my daily life in my letters.

How did the friendship with Billy develop after he was transferred to the Polunsky Unit?

I left TDCJ in 2018 and took an outside sales position with a security company for a brief time before getting back into welding and fabrication. I am currently the General Manager of a fabrication company. The policy was that I had to wait two years to contact any inmate, which I did, and then I sent a letter to Billy at the Polunsky Unit just to say hello and let him know that he had not been forgotten. He responded almost immediately, and we have written countless letters to each other over the last several years, with our friendship growing more every day. The common problem in these men’s lives is simply a lack of love. Most of them were not shown love at a very early age. My understanding of this helped to shape our friendship as well.

What do you suggest could be improved in the prison guards' training to ensure they treat the prisoners fairly?

To ensure the guards treat inmates fairly, one would have to revamp the whole system with more emphasis on rehabilitation rather than “punishment”. Compassion and grace would have to lead the way, from the wardens, down to the lowest ranking officer on the unit. Unfortunately, this isn't the way Texas runs its prisons, nor do I believe they ever will. But if it were possible, I believe the violence among the men of sane mind would be greatly reduced.

Do you think about the victims? Have you ever been in contact with a family member whose loved one was murdered? And have you talked to Billy about it?

Yes, I have thought about the victims many times. I also have empathy for them and their families, just as the men that I associated with did over time. Billy and I have spoken about his innocent victim many times over the years. Even though his actions led to the death of his victim, his intentions were never to kill him. His anger took control, and he just took it too far. It's something that he regrets deeply but knows that he must pay the price for it.

I have not personally been in contact with any murder victim's family, but I imagine that they have a hard time understanding my point of view, just as the other guards did. It's definitely a hard thing to explain to someone. Especially someone who holds hatred towards a person for taking their loved one away from them. I knew many men in there who were not remorseful for what they had done, and as a result, I steered clear of having any kind of relationship (other than a professional one) with those individuals. The prison is full of very bad men with hearts full of hate. I pray that one day God will cleanse their hearts of that hate, just as he has done with my friend Billy.

Keith, here comes a surprise for you: Billy is speaking to you in this interview!

Billy: Why did you decide to talk to me?

I spoke to you because I could sense that you are really a good person. After some time being around you, I realized that you had just as much potential to be a good person as you had to be a dangerous one. All the other guards only saw the “dangerous side”, while I got to see the good, personable side of you. You are a good person, and I could feel that! I realized not only with you, but also with (most) other inmates, that if I treated you as a human being, I had nothing to fear.

Billy: Did I ever tell you that initially I thought that you were trying to get me to say something to be used against me at my upcoming Capital Murder trial? I was suspicious because you were so different from a typical TDCJ guard. I mean you looked the part - a bulky built, country sounding white guy, but you obviously didn't see us inmates as your enemy but saw us as humans. Your mentality didn't fit, although you were 100% professional and never crossed any boundaries with any improper behavior with us, such as giving us contraband or whatever. I and the

others all liked you, not because you broke rules for us, but because we could tell that you didn't judge us as being beneath you.

I remember you “jokingly” asking me one time if I had been placed there to get incriminating information from you. I believe my response was “I’m here to make a check and go home man, you ain’t gotta worry about me getting in your business unless you want me in it”. After that, you never brought it up again. Not to me anyway. But I could totally understand why you would’ve felt that way. The State of Texas was after your life, and I wore the same uniform as those who wanted to take it from you. I can see where that would be confusing. Thankfully, you saw past my uniform, just as I saw past yours.

Billy: Did any ranking officer ever tell you to stop talking to me or give you any explicit warnings about me?

Everybody that worked that area was constantly warned that you were a dangerous man who was just waiting for an opportunity to “take out your next victim”. So, for a time in the beginning, I had a healthy fear of you. But small talk turned into bigger, more in-depth conversations, and eventually I knew that you would never hurt me. And yes, I was constantly being called to the Major’s office to review a video of us talking and was always chastised for it. I was often called “dirty” by the old guards and ranking officers because of it, but I didn’t care what those miserable souls thought of me. I knew, we knew, that there was nothing wrong with what was happening. But in their eyes, there was something very wrong. To them, I was on the wrong “side”, no matter the reason. So, “why did I decide to talk to you?”, because I liked you as a person. You deserved a friend just as much as every other person does. You were easy to talk to, and as uncommon as it was for you to find a guard with a pure heart, it was just as uncommon for a guard to find a respectful inmate who wasn’t filled with hate for everyone who wore the uniform, and I appreciated that very much. You’re a good man, brother, and I love you!

Keith, here comes my second “wow!” in this interview! That is by far the most beautiful ending to an interview! No wait – not the end yet! Let’s give Billy the word again!

Billy: All my life - ALL OF MY LIFE - up until a few years ago when I became a Christian, I hated authority, specifically abusive people in authority, but I had issues with even decent people in a position of authority.

Because of all of the bitterness I felt towards cops and guards and the like I never ever, ever thought I’d find a genuine brother who was a guard. It seems surreal! But you are my friend, my brother and I am blessed to know you and your family. I love you, too.