

A Death Row Reunion

Well today is Thursday, December 11, 2008 and I am making my fourth cross-country trip to Oklahoma's Death Row in McAlester, where tomorrow I will spend my day on 'the row' locked down with a client who has grown to be a friend. Honestly, I can't think of many people who would eagerly travel to death row even once but for me, it seems almost normal if that can be possible. On the way here to McAlester, I tried thinking about how others could consider it strange (at best) and absolutely horrifying (at worst) when I try to explain that I enjoy spending my time locked up in what is basically a cell on the row in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary. As hard as I try to find it a strange thing to do, and even though my brain somehow knows that it is not normal; I can't think of my actions as weird, or in any way crazy. To me, I am going to visit a client who is my friend, and he just so happens to live in what is basically an underground bunker. This bunker is his home and unfortunately he is permanently confined to it, possibly for the remainder of his life. If you have already read the first three journals about my friend "Bob" then you should know a bit about him and how our friendship developed. If you haven't read my first three journals, you may want to stop here and go back and get some history on us and how we met as it will help you to comprehend how our relationship developed.

The past few months have been difficult for Bob because he caught a case (got an infraction) for being involved in an altercation with another inmate. For that infraction, Bob lost what few privileges he was afforded in his underground home. Basically, the few things in his life that he has to occupy his dreary 23 hour a day existence of lock down were lost to him for a period of one year, and this makes life on the inside slow down from a crawl to a stop. The privileges lost included his television (which I purchased for him so don't worry about it being a taxpayer burden) and his hot pot (to heat his instant coffee and cup of noodle soups), so these things are now a thing of the past for many months to come. Since Bob's eyesight isn't too good, that left him with 23 hours each day to squint as he attempted to read, or to do his exercised that include a daily routine of 1000 jumping jacks, 1000 pushups, and 1000 sit-ups. What better way is there to make a man with 'nothing to lose' become even more desperate? Personally, I can't think of too many.

This visit to OSP's death row began when I met our investigator in the visitor area near the deputy warden's office. She had my latest visitation request that was drawn up by our attorney and now that I am working for my fourth attorney and second investigator since I began working with Bob, she rightfully wanted to make sure that there were no issues with my entry. The funny thing is that this latest trip makes my seventh daily visit on four different trips that I have taken, so the warden's assistants, the receptionist, and even two of the unit sergeants know me and are very kind to me. As a matter of fact, some of my greatest culinary experiences in Oklahoma came about because of the staff at OSP, and I have to say that after eating in incredible restaurants from New York to California, and Texas to Washington, I have found no better Italian food than what is offered in McAlester and Krebs Oklahoma. The Italian food in these two small towns would make

the finest NY Italian restaurant goes proud without a doubt; and at much more reasonable prices.

After the investigator was satisfied that my paperwork would gain me entry, she asked if I wanted her to accompany me to H Unit where the death row inmates are housed. While I told her that she was welcome to come with me, I also assured her that there would be no access problems and that I was confident that my two thousand mile trip would not be made in vain. I then donned my visitor badge, picked up my 'barrier-free' approval form that was signed by the deputy warden and began my journey to the unit that many non-staffers only arrive at as their last stop in this world. The 'barrier-free' visitation release form is basically a document that I sign stating that I know I will be in a restraint-free environment with 'Bob' and that I choose to do so at my own risk. With no pun intended, this is the Department of Correction's 'Get Out of Jail Free' card should I get injured or killed while on my visit with Bob and was quite a confidence builder for me on my first visit to the facility. Then again, it sure beat the signs at the TX death row facility in Livingston that read "Hostages Will Not Be Allowed Past This Point".

Arriving at H Unit, I power-smoked two cigarettes, parked my car in the dirt parking lot across from the unit's entrance and walked over the little bridge to entry door. If you remember, in my last journal I described a little fish pond that was more of a large puddle, and the very nice sergeant that was hoping to save the fish before the pond dried up. Well, the pond was still there a full year later, but because it may have dried up since my last visit, I did not see any fish in it and I couldn't help wondering if the sergeant had been successful in her aquatic rescue mission. I was happy to see as I was buzzed into the entry way that the fish-loving sergeant was working at the front desk and remembered me from my last trip. Unfortunately though, after our friendly introductions, she informed me that she had not been able to save the fish that she was so concerned about last year. I guess that in a way, the little pond was right at home at the death row unit entrance since like the people inside, the lives of the fish ended just as tragically as those of the human occupants of the death row wing of H Unit. I couldn't help but thinking that the little pond was on the west side of the bridge just as the execution chamber was on the west side of the unit. It only seemed fitting.

The guard in the entry bubble (control room) remembered me from my last visit and greeted me warmly. During my last visit, as I was exiting the smoke-filled corridor before the SERT Team (i.e. SWAT Team) entered with their dogs and weapons, this guard had informed me that the cause of the fire was due to a pedophile (transferred that day from jail to the non-death row segregation unit) had started a fire in his cell and assured me that they were 'fixin' to kick his ass'. I almost asked him if they had indeed kicked the guy's ass but decided that it would not be politically correct to do so. The guard asked if I minded my female sergeant friend patting me down because she was a woman and all, and after I assured him that there was no problem with that, I removed my shoes, got patted down, had a metal detecting wand run over my body and proceeded through the airport-style metal detector. Finally, the guard buzzed open the entrance to the sally port and I began my entry into what is the last stop for many who enter H Unit. For those who are new to my journals and have not heeded my earlier advice about starting at journal

#1, a sally port is like a cage with two electronic entries that cannot be open at the same time. Think of it like an airlock on a space ship or a submarine; but in prison. Once inside the sally port, my guard-friend let me know that they were running canteen (store purchase delivery) on the row so I should wait until that was over before I tried to get in. He suggested that I wait in the unit manager's office until canteen run was over since it is basically more advisable to try to poke a grizzly bear in the eye than shut down a canteen run. That made a lot of sense to me since the only thing with more meaning in the dreary life of a prisoner than mail call is when canteen items are delivered every two weeks.

Once securely inside H Unit, I stopped at the last available restroom which is conveniently located across the hall from the execution chamber; and then signed in with the unit manager, letting her know that I planned to hang out in her office until canteen was done. She didn't seem to care if I stayed there or not, so after 15 minutes of waiting I told her that I was going to use the restroom (better safe than sorry) and then see if I could get on the row without causing a disruption to the canteen run. I then made one last pit stop at the restroom, again marveling at the proximity to the execution chamber, and headed to the entrance to the death row wing of H Unit.

To give you a view of death row in McAlester Oklahoma, the first thing that you need to picture is that as you enter the wing, there are no bars as you see in movie prisons. The bars of the runs, gates, and over the windows of each cell are not vertical as you see in the movies, but are horizontal. And, they are much thicker than those from your favorite prison movie. To give you an idea what the bars look like, in addition to being horizontal and about ten inches apart; they are also about the size of an average man's forearm so you would not be bending them, cutting them, or in any way squeezing between them as a method of escape. Also, as you enter the wing, there is a large bubble or control booth which looks remarkably like an air-traffic control tower positioned about 6 feet off the floor. From here, the guards can view both sections (section 3 & section 4) and both tiers (upper and lower) without doing more than swiveling their chairs. Each of the two sections are identical, with two tiers that each contain five cells across the back wall (A-E on the lower tier and AA-EE on the upper tier), and seven cells along the side walls (F-L on the lower tier and FF-LL on the upper tier). There is a shower area in the near corner by the L cells on each tier and the 'barrier free legal visitation room' on the front side on the lower level. Finally, there are two small exercise yards beside the visitation rooms which give the inmates their only view of the sky since the unit is basically covered earth. Of course, there are no windows in the cells since the cells are all underground.

Even though canteen was still running on the row, the guard in the bubble asked me over the intercom if I wanted to wait in the 'legal visitation room' (i.e. cell) and I assured her that would be fine. She then buzzed me into the sally port that allows entry to the row, and after the first gate closed, I entered into the small area behind the control bubble, and finally the house of the damned. Since canteen was in progress, none of the guys were in the yard as I walked by, and I was then buzzed into the run where inmate workers were passing canteen items through the food-tray slots to the death row inmates in each cell. Finally, I closed the gate to the run and was buzzed into my temporary home where I had

to wait for Bob until the run was cleared and he could be released from his cell to walk down the run and join me.

Since I hadn't seen canteen run before, I decided to watch out my little window to see what the procedure was. In short, any of the inmates who had enough money on their books had been allowed to order items a week before today's scheduled delivery by checking boxes and entering quantities on a little store list. These requests were then filled and the lists were returned to the inmate with the items that were ordered. I would soon learn that if something was out of stock, it would be replaced with a similar item if possible. Those that had the funds to make their purchases were easily identified because I could see their faces peering through the food-tray slots that were about a foot off the floor as they waited excitedly for things like peanut butter bars, oatmeal crème treats, Fritos, and Big K brand soda. Eventually, the inmates' orders were filled, boxes were broken down, and the trash was removed from the run. Once the inmate workers had left the run and the run gate was securely closed, it was time for Bob to be allowed out of his cell to see me. I was stoked!

As I peered out my little 10"x10" window, I saw the familiar form of Bob coming down the run in his white t-shirt, blue surgeon scrub pants, and white deck shoes. I also noticed that in his right arm he appeared to be carrying a bag of some kind as he made his way to our cell and was buzzed in by the guard in the bubble. I couldn't help but grin from ear to ear as he did the same, entering our cell with the words "My brother". He then put down his bag and we gave each other a big hug. After hugging him, I told him that he was getting all burly and I would soon have to be calling him Hulk. You see, Bob has been working out a lot over the past 3-4 months to ease the pain in his bad back and also to keep himself safe around the other inmates because 'inside' any sign of weakness will be unmercifully taken advantage of in the same manner that a pack of wolves look for the slowest or injured wildebeest to pounce on. Bob was determined to not be taken down by the younger, gang-banger types that are increasingly present in our prisons.

Once we sat down at our table, Bob pulled out his bag and when he opened it, I didn't know whether to be happy or cry. What Bob had done was brought food for us to share during our time together. Since Bob has no contact with family members that could provide financial or even emotional support, each item that he purchases from the store is a treasure to be relished, and I felt both honored and saddened that he would share his treasures with me. He excitedly pulled out two cans of black-cherry soda, two oatmeal crème cakes, four peanut butter bars, and two bags of Frito corn chips. Then his face lit up and he asked me if I had ever had chili cheese fries. When I told him that I had, he wanted to know if I liked them. I told him that I did like them so Bob pulled out a small silver pouch and told me that it was the chili spice packet that came with Top Ramen soup and that he would show me how to make chili cheese fries, prison style. Opening our bags of Fritos, Bob sprinkled half of the packet in each bag and began shaking his bag. As I followed suit, he laughed and told me that my punk-ass bag-shaking wouldn't mix the seasoning right and instructed me on the proper shaking technique that was necessary to create prison-style chili cheese fries. Being a quick learner I quickly caught on and soon our delicacy was ready to eat! While I thought that the 'fries' were great,

Bob explained that he typically puts the whole chili packet in his Fritos so today they wouldn't be as spicy as he typically liked them. Again, I felt the familiar pang of guilt in knowing that I was being offered one of Bob's scarce culinary treasures. I have to say honestly that when I get home, I am going to have to treat my friends and family to 'prison style' chili cheese fries because I was very pleasantly surprised by the treat that Bob shared with me!

Just as we have done on all of our previous visits, Bob and I quickly ended up in deep and animated conversation about a broad range of subjects, moving from politics, to black holes, to my family in general and my daughter in particular. To Bob, my daughter is like his niece and to her, he is her uncle. They talk on the phone almost every week and she has released a gentleness in Bob that I had not seen before their friendship developed. Since Bob comes from a large family and has been incarcerated for many years, in his eyes, my 12 year old daughter is not much younger than his sisters were when he last saw them. Because of this, it is amazing to watch him show so much kindness to her after so many years of incarceration have supposedly hardened him.

Eventually it was lunch time and as always, I asked Bob to guess what would be on the menu. So far, he had only missed one prediction and on this day, he predicted that we would each get a corn dog on our tray. When we found out we were getting hot link sausages my initial reaction was positive (because he was wrong) until he explained that the hot link would be like no other hot link I have ever tasted. Being skeptical with his exaggerated disgust, I asked him, how anyone could screw up hot links? Soon, our door buzzed open and we received our trays that featured an obviously dyed, bright red, hot link that seemed to have jumped right from the package since there was not a trace of warmth in it. Also included on our lunch trays were a few pieces of lettuce, two pieces of bread, a bit of canned pears, and something that I think was either a small piece of cake or maybe a brownie. Even after eating it I am still not sure which it was, but if it were any dryer it would have crumbled to dust. I truly believe that it was mummified. As always, our eating instrument consisted of a plastic Spork that had been dipped in mayonnaise that was to be used as both salad dressing and condiment for the hot link. Even though I amaze Bob that I come from 'the world' and have eaten the cold corn dogs and grayish bologna sandwiches that we had been served in the past, after two bites of the 'hot link' I had to call it quits and settle for the canned pears and dust-bowl cake/brownie. And even with my reduced menu, I still ate more than Bob because he didn't touch his tray. At least we had the treasures that Bob had brought with him from his cell for which I was even more incredibly grateful for than before.

After lunch was served and the run had cleared, I decided it was time to visit the restroom, have a smoke or two, and make a phone call, so grabbed our trays, and buzzed the intercom for the guard to open our cell. Because Bob had jokingly given me a bad time on our last visit because I didn't know the proper way to scrape and stack prison trays, I grabbed his, and as I began scraping the 'food' off it, told him that I didn't have time to teach him the ropes and carry his lazy ass. We both cracked up at that though he claimed that he didn't remember saying those things to me on my last visit. I still don't believe him though because Bob's memory is much better than mine. This time, as I

walked by the yard, there were six guys there as I passed, and one of them exchanged waives with me. I then had to hold in my laughter when one of the other guys saw me with the trays and made an eating gesture to inquire how I liked the food. After grimacing (and him laughing), I scraped our trays into the garbage and was buzzed through the sally port so I could leave the wing. Eventually I made my way back to the entrance to the unit and was buzzed out the front door into the sunlit day. It was about 60 degrees outside and much warmer than when I had entered the unit. The warmth felt good as I walked to my car to enjoy a couple of much wanted cigarettes before I returned to the unit to be patted down and follow the same entry routine that I had gone through in the morning. I have to admit that security is very thorough at H Unit as I am sure that it should be considering the nature of what the unit was built for. It is my understanding that after a prison riot in the main facility, H Unit was built as a super-maximum facility to house 'the worst of the worst' which would include those who received the ultimate sentence of death. This time, as I entered the unit I decided to ask the guard about the guy who had received the 'ass kicking' during my last visit. When I asked about the individual, I was told that he was just returning to the unit from the hospital. It seems that he had cut himself in a suicide attempt that had failed. I also learned that the 'ass kickee' was in his sixties which really surprised me since I had always thought pedophiles were younger people. So much for stereotypes I guess. The guard and I discussed that because of his age, the long sentence that he was serving, and his history of self-destruction since he has been at OSP, he wouldn't make it too long before he ended up dead. In the world of prison life, this person didn't stand much chance of surviving his sentence.

After one more pit stop at the rest room, I headed back into the unit and saw that the guys in the yard were playing handball. Handball in prison is literally a game where the guys bat a small blue racquetball style ball against the wall with their hands, each trying to make the opposing players miss the ball. It is a fast moving sport and a great source of exercise. Since everyone was engrossed in the game, I just walked past the yard and waited in our cell until Bob returned a few minutes later. When Bob came back, he brought with him a book that he had just finished reading. As I have said in my earlier journals, Bob is an avid reader and prefers historical or scientific topics as opposed to fiction material. His latest read was "Papyrus of Ani – The Egyptian Book of the Dead", and while the subject of ancient Egypt is of great interest to him, he felt that this particular book was more focused on stressing the religious context of the documents than that of the society in general and therefore omitted many of the historical facts around the creation and use of the documents. In short, Bob was disappointed with the author's work as he felt it was incomplete.

The rest of our afternoon went by too quickly as it always seems to do near the end of our visiting time and before I knew it, it was 4:00PM and time for me to leave my friend in a world that very few have seen and even fewer would understand. As I stood up and shook Bob's hand, he gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Patting him on the back, I told him that with what his exercise routine was doing to his muscular growth, he was now officially the Hulk. Bob laughed at that and said "I love you brother" and I replied in kind; giving him a kiss on the cheek before I reached over and pushed the intercom buzzer that would provide me with the all too familiar click of the lock that allowed our

door to be opened. Since Bob and I are not allowed to leave our cell at the same time, as I walked through the door and onto the cell block run I told him that I would be seeing him soon and pulled the door closed behind me. The gate to the run then buzzed open and as I entered the common area and then the sally port that separated me from H Unit's death row, I felt the all too familiar feeling of sadness knowing that I was leaving my friend until I was able to return again on my next visit. For me, the hardest part of every visit is walking alone back into the world, knowing that if the state has its way, Bob's only exit from H Unit will come after poison has been injected into his body and he is placed in a bag for delivery to the morgue. While my thoughts may sound morbid to anyone who has never experienced life on the row, those condemned to death would shake their heads in agreement as they have seen others make that final journey from their death row cells to the execution chamber. They understand.