

## My First Day on Death Row:

In 2006, I was allowed to spend a couple of days visiting a death row inmate in the State of Oklahoma. What was different about this visit was that I was going in at the request of his attorneys due to his 'volunteerism' as they called it. Basically, this inmate (we'll call him Bob) had contacted his attorney's office demanding that all of his appeals be dropped and that the state be allowed to execute him. Why? This man had nobody in 'the world' who kept in contact with him as his family had deserted him and his friends had long ago abandoned him. The bottom line was that he preferred the silence of death to the pain of his life. Now I am not a writer, but I want to give you a taste of what it is like on the row from the unique perspective of an outsider who was allowed to spend time literally on death row.

I guess that I should first explain how I got to be offered an opportunity to spend some time with a man who had no non-legal visits of any kind in years. It all began with a friend of a friend so to speak. I have a very good friend who is on the row in TX and through him I have developed friendships with several other guys on the row in Livingston's Polunsky Unit. A friend of mine named Dr. Mark Heath who is very active in testifying against lethal injection suggested to me that I contact an excellent attorney that he knew in the State of Oklahoma for the purpose of advice on how to handle my friend Arnold's appeals. Eventually, this attorney and I got to know each other pretty well and found that we both truly cared for the people whom we were helping. When her client decided to end his appeals, his attorney attempted to find someone who would be able to work with this man and show him that his life was worth living. Due to Bob's personal beliefs and trust issues that he had, there was not a local person whom the attorney felt Bob would accept and open up to. At that point, the attorney got a very unique approval from the Warden and the DOC for her firm to hire a lay person to begin working with their client as part of their legal team. That person was me. Before I go into my experience, I will state that every person at the McAlester State Penitentiary that I had contact with treated me with a respect that I was never shown in the units I visited in Livingston or Gatesville TX.

On my first day on the row, I completed the paperwork in the Deputy Warden's office and headed to H Unit where death row is housed. H Unit is interesting as it is built into the side of a hill so if a person tries to escape, he will end up digging his own grave as much of the unit is underground. I entered the main door of H Unit and handed my Driver License and State Approval Letter to the guard who was behind the glass. I also was required to complete a disclaimer stating that I was to have a 'full contact, barrier free, and restraint free' visit. The disclaimer stated that I agreed to hold the State of Oklahoma and the DOC harmless should I be injured or killed during my visit. I then had to remove my shoes and ensure that I had nothing in my pockets as I was frisked by a male correctional officer. After the search, the sally-port door slid open and I was told to enter. A sally-port is basically a cage where only one door opens at a time to prevent unwanted entrance or exit.

After I exited the sally-port, I was in a long corridor that reminded me of any hospital that I had ever been in and I proceeded down the hall mentally remembering that I was to take the second corridor on my right. I think I remember my attorney friend telling me that the first right led to the execution chamber. I thought that it was strange that I had no escort, but figured that it wasn't like I could really go very far since I was now locked in the H Unit. Just for fun though, I saw a restroom sign on my left and tried the door. Yup, it was unlocked and since there was no lock on the door, I understood why. After finishing my business (and washing my hands with a little green bar of soap) I headed out and took what was now my next right. As I did, I could see another sally-port at the end of the road. Once I entered that sally-port, I would find myself literally at the end of the road for most of the men inside.

I pressed the button on the wall and the guard who sat in the row's bubble pressed a button that slid the entry to the sally-port open for me. Once I was inside, she closed my only retreat and opened the other gate. I was now on 'the row'. As I entered Oklahoma's Death Row, I was in a large open area, with the guard bubble raised and toward the center. Across the open area were cells hidden behind steel doors with small windows and pass-through slots. Within the windows I could see faces looking out at me; with some of them waiving hello. I immediately had a very strange feeling as I realized that many of these people were going to be dead in the next few years if the state had its way. It was a very empty and lonely feeling.

As I walked to my visiting room, which was a cell that had been converted to a room for special attorney visits; I passed an area on my left that was the yard. Inside, were about a half-dozen guys sitting around just enjoying the day. My first thought was since I could see the sun, at least I was not underground! A couple of the guys looked up and nodded to me and I nodded back as I continued on my way. So far, not one person was foaming at the mouth or trying to cut my throat and honestly, the people that I could see looked more like the guys that I would go have beers with at my local bar than the 'worst of the worst'. While I knew that in my mind, being in their house made it even more apparent.

The CO buzzed me into the 'special visitation' room and I entered a small room (about 8' x 10') that had two chairs, a table, two telephones connected to the CO room on the other side of a rectangular window, a pass through hole beneath the window, and a panic button. I sat down to wait for my soon to be new friend. By the way, until this day, I had never spoken with Bob, gotten a letter from Bob, or had any contact in any way with Bob. I only knew him by some files of the case for which the state said he had to die.

After a few minutes, Bob walked in, I stood, and we shook hands. Bob is about my age and had been in and out of correctional facilities since he was an early teenager. With exception of his state-issued jump suit, he looked just like any person that I would see on the street. Bob and I started chatting, and for the next few hours we never stopped. I found him to be intelligent, extremely up to date on world affairs, and more knowledgeable about African, Middle-Eastern & Asian history than anyone I had ever met. Bob had also read more Stephen King than I had which in itself was amazing. BUT, I had more ink (tattoos) than Bob which we both laughed about. Since I was allowed a 4-

hour visit, we got to spend quite a bit of time together that day, though it didn't seem like enough. Eventually, it was time to go, and Bob explained that I had to leave first, and after I was outside the sally-port, he would be let out. I buzzed for release and eventually, the door clicked open.

I felt sad as I began to leave the row, and wished that I could have spent more time with Bob and some of the other people there. As I walked by the yard, I again was given the nod of hello from some guys in another group out to rec. Of course, I gave them the nod back and hoped that they didn't sense my sadness. The CO hit the button and let me in the sally-port, which for a moment I shared with a couple of trustees who had food trays for the guys on the row who of course, have to eat in their cells. One asked me if I wanted a tray and I laughed and said no. Now I wish that I had taken it and had gotten a taste of what Bob experienced day in and day out. I was allowed to leave death row, and then the sally-port closed behind me with the trustees still in it. I headed back down the corridor, took a left to the main corridor, and again stopped at my bathroom. Hell, it had been 4 hours and it was definitely time.

I approached the sally-port at the entrance to H Unit and an unfamiliar CO (behind the glass) opened the first gate and let me in. For a minute, I waited for the second gate to open but it wasn't happening. Then, a voice over the speaker asked for my name, and wanted to know who I went to see. I answered the questions and waited for the gate to open. Nope. I was then asked what company I was representing, what my title and purpose were, and when I replied that my purpose was mitigation work, she wanted to know the definition of mitigation. Something is not right here I thought. Finally, since the guard desk had my driver's license, she checked my photo and opened the gate to my freedom. As I approached the bubble to get my ID and authorization form, she laughed and told me that she had never seen me before and because of my shaved head and all my ink (tattoos) she figured I had knocked someone out, stolen his clothes and was trying to escape. Nice eh? Talk about being stereotyped? I was told I looked more like a death row inmate than the death row inmates I had seen! The first thought I had was that Bob had fewer tattoos than me so maybe he could have gotten out more easily than I!

Well, my first day was over but I still had a second day to visit with Bob. Though both days were great, I have to say, that it was the first day that changed my life forever.

D.R.