



The following are the complete texts of the people whose stories featured in the October 20, 2020 briefing on the United States' criminal legal system in advance of the Universal Periodic Review of the United States in November 2020. They among works submitted to Exchange for Change by incarcerated people across the U.S. for a volume documenting their experiences of incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Stainless Resolve - Gustavo Guerra

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It's count time. That means I am locked in my cell as security walks around and makes sure we are all still here. It is late evening. And it's hot. Humidity is in the upper 80s. A fact that is evidenced by the beading sweat over my body even though I just got out of the shower.

In the past I'd use this time - hour intervals throughout the day - to either finish some class work or catch up on a book. Since the virus, however, I have been doing a lot more staring. I stare at the walls, grimey with the paint peeling like a bad sunburn. I stare at my cell mates dingy towel hanging at the foot of his bunk above me. And I stare at a stainless steel toilet about a meter from my feet trying to remember if this cell is bigger or smaller than my bathroom at home. It bothers me that after 15 years I cannot recall.

It has been over a month since our quarantine began. That means no classes. No rec yard. No chapel. No programs. No library. Nothing for me to do in my cell during count time. Well, that is not exactly true because I can stew - reminisce, regret, and resent. I can dream and hope and wish. But, in the end, all of my fanciful desires fade away as the stainless toilet drags me back to the reality of my natural life sentence.

So what dreams does a lifer have? You know, the regular ones. Eating a medium rare steak with an ice cold beer. Waking up on a pillow-top mattress. Feeling the lapping water of the ocean on my feet as my toes slowly sink into the wet sand. But that's just the surface.

I also dream of standing on a stage telling people about my redemption and about those still behind the wire. I dream of mentoring at-risk youth and showing them a different way. I dream of book signings and using that platform to address the overlooked issue of mass incarceration. And I dream of returning to prisons as a visitor and encouraging the men to strive for more.

Then I focus on the toilet and the sink right next to it and those dreams disperse behind my reality, streaming down my face as I come to terms with the fact that I will probably never be released from prison. In Florida, life means life.



All of my achievements mean nothing. My certificates. My newsletter articles and published pieces. My upcoming TED talk. My program participation. My facilitating. It means nothing. I will one day die alone in a prison infirmary as some anonymous inmate changes my sheets.

Do I help people when I can? Yes. Have I helped others find purpose and change their lives? Yes. Will that invariably affect society for the better as men going home become productive? Yes. Is that enough? No. And it never will be.

My bipolar heart mourns for the pain I have caused the victims of my crime and yet longs for the freedom beyond the wire. The freedom to live and love and work and build and help my fellow man. The freedom to live my life honoring the debts I have to the victims and society by doing my part to make this world a better place.

Nevertheless, in spite of the toilet and the heat and the cell, I do live that way. I mentor and teach and speak. And I write. It won't get me out of prison. But I have to make my world - this world - a better place. It is purpose. I live my life as I would out there waiting for the day society realizes that redemption and rehabilitation are possible. Waiting for them to act. Waiting for a chance to serve, not my sentence, my community.



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In Memoriam:

2020's COVID-19 Losses to the Death Row Community

By

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(Cowboy)

August 2020.

It's rather sad, and pretty enlightening, being on Death Row. I mean every day you wake up and you know exactly what your reality is. Regardless if it will happen or not, the cold hard facts, at least for me, is that they are going to kill me one day. They are going to take me to a funky room, strap me to a bed, stick needles into my arms, then after opening a "viewing curtain" so people can watch, they are going to pump 5 to 7 grams of liquid fire into my body until I am graveyard dead.

That cold hard reality, however, gives me something special. Facing it, wrestling with it, coming to terms with it, even accepting it, up to point that is, makes each and every moment, each interaction with another person... everything... into something so so special and of value of the greatest worth.

And then, something comes along, something we can't really even square up to and fight. I mean the Death penalty I can fight through the courts. But this new thing from distant shores that just showed up like a thief in the night. Man, you can't even see it, so that you put up a respectable battle. I'm talking about the "Beer Virus," the Chinese Flu, Wohan Flu, the Coronavirus, or just simply Covid-19. It arrived here, threw everything off kilter, and all out of whack. And, it took a heavy toll on those here on "The Row."

Now, most folks see home as a place. I don't. Home, to me, is people. It's where you see those around you reflected in yourself, and yourself reflected in those around you. I've been here at San Quentin since late 1996. Got here when I was just 20 years old. This place will never be my HOME, but it has become sort of home nonetheless. COVID came into my home and left with a few of my friends and associates, heck, since this is a sort of home, it took part of the family. Sadly, it took the following men:

Richard Stitely. An old fella with a bit of Texas in his talk. Called him Godfather sometimes, or Trog (meaning Troglodyte). Played cards with him almost every day for a good 15 years while



he was on my yard. The guys' ears would kinda flap when he shook his head. Guess they done flapped him on home.

Johnny Avila, from down around Fresno. Spent years on the yard with him. Quick tempered, kind of short, but not a bad dude. Used to read a Native American legend or two at A.M.I. services.

Manuel Alvarez. Big 'ole kat from Cuba. Called him Cuba, too, or Elean (after Elean Gonzales from the early 2000s). Ole boy, spoke okay English, but when he got all riled up, man, he couldn't speak a lick of English no more because all the Cubano came out. Used to like the Yankees. Only he could never pronounce "Yankees" right. The man would say Jankees! Ole Elean is swimmin' home.

Dwayne Cary. A good brother from down around L.A. way. Played basketball with him and against him. He had a little game too. Started E.B.A.C. along with him as well. The man was a United States Navy Veteran. Well, fair winds and following waters, I'll stand and salute the flag for you.

Joseph Cordova. Didn't know him personally, but I would see him at the same table and in the same seat on the yard playing cards. He rolled around in a wheelchair, and I believe they called him Geezer. Roll on, old son.

Troy Ashmus. Called him Humphrey for reasons unknown to me, though I wish I could have thought to ask. Creative as all get out, too. Give him some beads and maybe a bit of leather, and the dude would come up with all sorts of cool stuff.

Jeffrey Hawkins. Old school convict. Seemed like he had been doing time since he was just a kid. Good man though, and he had a good heart. He's free now.

John Beames. We called him JB. Big fella with a mane of hair you could see from way way afar and he always had a smile. The guy bought me some art supplies one time for no other reasons than he heard I needed some, and I barely knew him then, too! Things like that help one remember that we are still human after all.

David Reed, Scott Erskine, Lonnie Franklin, John Abel, and Thomas Potts. I can't for sure say if I knew them all or not, then again, they, like so many of us, might have had a nickname and that's what I would have known them by. Nonetheless, they all, I am certain, contributed to the ambiance that can only be found here on Death Row in whatever way they could...

All these men, and maybe more, were taken from us prematurely by a microscopic virus they couldn't even see to go to battle against. In their own ways they will be remembered and missed. See you fellers on the other side of them Pearly Gates, just don't be trying to chip up the streets of gold and go sticking the chips in your socks. Heck, wait 'til I get there at least.

See, these men all came here for whatever it was they came here for. And, after many years, and a whole lot of thought, I've come to realize that whatever it was that a man may have done, didn't do, and left undone in his past life before coming to prison and/or Death Row, no longer



matters in the same way. Maybe they took a life, or two... but after years spent here where they took none, they stopped being murderers. They were no longer to be judged by those honest, maybe, and rather harsh standards that dang near all convicts and ex-cons are so often judged by.

Think about this. I mean, if you once got caught cheating on a test at school would you like to be known as a cheater, along with seemingly forever being judged as such, for the rest of your life, even if you never once did it again? Most people recoil at that and pretty vociferously think, "Heck no!"

Well, these guys came here and, it is my most fervent belief, changed. They grew up and matured, they evolved, and they found some sort of redemption, and rehabilitation that made them into better Men, Human Beings, Children of God, and just plain old decent fellas.

So, it became, or becomes, not about whatever you did, didn't do, and left undone, but about what you do with it. How you honor it in a good and higher way. How you learn from it all and share that learning. How you strive to make it all mean something a little less on the human level and much more on the level of the Divine. I, for one, just have to believe that these men, friends of a sort, even family members in some convoluted way, touched the lives of the men in here and lives out of here, too, especially mine in their own ways, and that they found their own meaning, their own purpose, right here in this dank and dark Earthbound Purgatory. God bless them all for it. May these men all rest in peace, fly with angels, and pop up in our minds now and then.