

Being a young pen pal

Interview by Elisabeth Deutscher

Lifespark has set up a minimum age of 18 for penpalships. I wanted to know what it is like for a young person to write to an inmate on death row, and six people who have started a penpalship at a very young age gave interesting answers to my questions:

1) For introductory information, please tell us how old you and your pen pal were when you wrote your first letter. Why did writing to an inmate on Death Row seem to be a good idea to you?

***Ina Vollhüter:** My name is Ina and I wrote my first letter two years ago at the age of 19; my pen pal was 24 years old. I read an article in the magazine “dran” from Elisabeth Deutscher describing her penpalship with an inmate on Death Row and was fascinated by the way she described it, but was also in discord with it. The idea was always on my mind though, and so I decided to venture this step, although doubtfully. I was not sure if my English skills were sufficient to maintain a conversation, and I knew that my pen pal could be much older than I am. I can’t identify “the one” aim that motivated me; I think a big part of it was my gut decision to brighten somebody’s life a bit.*

Lucien Scherly: When I started writing to my pen pal I was 21, he was 64. That was about two years ago. I discovered lifespark when I was helping a friend do a research paper about death penalty in the US in high school. We interviewed a girl who was writing to an inmate and I was impressed by her engagement because I knew that even if she was not spending so much time on it, it made a difference for someone somewhere on death row who needed someone to write to. I had this idea that someday I would write to an inmate, too; not really because I'm against the death penalty actually, but because I knew that someone, a victim of this bad justice system, would strongly appreciate writing to somebody that has this chance to be free.

***Nadine Knab:** I just started my penpalship about 9 months ago when I was 21; my penpal is 40. I am really concerned about justice and related topics; I am interested in the fact that people have a huge inter-individual variance concerning perception and behavior and how this works on a cultural level. So I asked myself how people punish others who do not obey social rules and arrived at the fundamental question: Why do we on one hand set the rule not to kill anybody else but on the other hand do it ourselves? This triggered a big contradiction and I don’t think that a government has the right to decide about other people’s lives. Aside from the “normal” or logical commitment such as informing the public about the facts about the death penalty, I wanted to go deeper; and having contact with an inmate and thereby knowing about his circumstances and feelings could make it possible to respond in an emotional way as well. So I contacted Ines Aubert and we had a bit of contact via e-mail. Then I took 6 months to think about possible dangers, responsibility, if this action is really a sign against the death penalty, or if one should rather focus on the victims instead of the perpetrators. My answer was that we should focus on both sides. My hopes were that I would be able to show an inmate that there is another world and that I will allow him to participate in parts of my life without any bias or regard to the fact that he is a convict. Then I called Ines and we talked a bit more whereby I tried to make clear that I won’t donate any material things to my pen pal and if this is required I can’t start it.*

Sarah Gekeler: I was almost 18 years when I started writing, and my pen pal was 22. This was seven years ago. I was always and still am a person who is very interested in people. What I like most is to get in touch with the less fortunate such as handicapped or homeless people. I guess that’s one of the reasons why I started reading books and watching films about the topic "Death penalty". Then I found lifespark’s address and really liked the idea of getting to know a person whose life has turned out to be

the exact opposite of my life, which has been formed by a great family, great friends, good grades at school, and lots of possibilities. I thought that I could, maybe, share my good experiences with an inmate, let him be a part of "my" world, of the outside world, listen to his story and let him learn from mine. Yes, I was quite sure that such a penfriendship would be good for my own development and for my view on things. And, to be honest, it was of course a little bit exciting. :) Yet sometimes all the euphoria was gone and I was not very convinced about all this anymore. I began to wonder how I would deal with all the "dark" things about Death Row: execution, murder etc... Would I be able to handle that? Things which, luckily, haven't affected my life so far. And what would I write to a 50 year old? How could I "help" a person who is so much older than I?

Magdalena Hubmann: *I started to write to Alfred, my pen pal, at the age of 19 (almost 20) and he was 28 at the time. Two years have passed now, and it's absolutely crazy to reflect on him facing trial as old as I am now. I came across an interview with a lifespark member on the Swiss TV video portal. I've always had a strong opinion why capital punishment is barbaric, a helpless attempt to make up for something that simply is irremediable. Killing to show that killing is wrong? Answering violence with violence and cruelty with cruelty instead of countering hatred with what we stand for. Can this be justice? Still, to directly contact a murderer – it's something else entirely. After some time of struggling and looking for further information, I felt like giving such a friendship a chance could not only become an affecting and tough assignment, but also an opportunity to try to see a human behind a publicized monster, which was difficult for me, too. I wanted to take this opportunity and I'm very glad I did.*

Sonja Rettenmaier: When my pen pal and I first connected seven months ago I was 19, and he was 33. The first time I came across the idea of writing an inmate was in a magazine article years ago. At that time, I figured I was too young (I was around 14 years old). Last year, I again became interested in finally taking up a pen friendship myself, but waited until I gathered some information about safety issues, experiences etc. When I came across Lifespark, I had the feeling it was the right thing to do. In terms of expectations, I did not really expect anything. As an aspiring doctor, I believe there is a strong moral component in my motivation, because I do not believe that people have the right to take another human's life and therefore see hardly any justification for death penalty. However, I was of course also curious about the road the experience would take me on, so I just went along with it.

2) How did your family and friends react when they heard of your involvement?

Ina: *My mother was not very pleased. She couldn't understand why I wanted to get in contact with "a man like that". First she tried to convince me to let it go, but I did it nevertheless. I don't think she's happy about it today, but she accepts it. I'm a Christian, and most of my friends are Christians, too. Interestingly, they were the ones supporting me in that step without questioning my intentions. The others, well, I don't think they understand it, but they accept it.*

Lucien: Actually, I don't discuss this subject with my friends and family. Of course, in the beginning I explained the process to my parents and to some really close friends, but I don't really share my penpalship with others because I think that it is part of my very private life. It belongs to me and my pen pal only.

Nadine: *It was really hard to tell. During my decision making process, I only involved my boyfriend because I thought he was the only one with the right to veto. He didn't, but also said he wouldn't do it. So, he supports my idea, but doesn't want to get involved. My friends were kind of shocked and reacted very differently. Some were negative and scared that something dangerous might happen, but some thought it to be a very genuine action.*

Sarah: My parents have always supported me in the things I like and want to do. But with regard to this penpalship, my mother in particular was quite skeptical. I understood that because she had the same concerns I had: She feared I was too young to handle this heavy, dark topic and that it would affect my life in a negative way.

Magdalena: Well, my family/friends were taken by complete surprise and were more shocked than delighted. But this soon changed. I remember Alfred being very surprised when I told him that my friends were asking about him for the first time. It was always very important to me that my family and friends understand what made me arrive at this decision. And it's so great to have them standing by and giving valuable input – also questioning me.

Sonja: My mother was (and is) very skeptical and concerned about what influence friendship with an inmate could do to my sanity, as she words it. My father and sisters do not know that I have taken up a pen friendship with an inmate. My boyfriend was skeptical at first, but supported me all along the way. With him, I can share the letters and my experiences without having the feeling of being judged. Some friends of mine know about it, others don't. Reactions were very different, the spectrum ranging from admiration to disgust.

3) What do you think your pen pal thought when he learned about your age?

Ina: The age gap between David and me is not very big, only 5 years. And I'm very happy about that. I guess it makes a few things easier, like common interests or things like that. But I could be wrong, too.

Lucien: We discussed this in our first letter as I wanted to know if my young age is a problem for him. He said no and asked the same question about his mature age. We agreed that he would give me tips about life since he was three times my age, and that I would give him freshness about my life as a young dude.

Nadine: Honestly, I thought it wouldn't be a problem and I just told him my age in the third or fourth letter. When he learned of my age, I had the feeling that it changed the way he perceived the things I wrote in my letters (in a rather negative way).

Sarah: Luckily, there wasn't really an age gap between us, only about three years. When I heard his age in his first letter, I was really really happy, because that meant we could be something like friends on the same "level".

Magdalena: Oh, I'd like to know that, too! Hopefully, he wasn't shocked too much ;-). Actually, the age gap is only eight years, so this probably made it a little easier to be outgoing with each other. He didn't really dwell on it, but one of the first things he let me know was that he worried that I would stop writing him after a few letters and hoped instead that we could become friends. And I think this is what we did.

Sonja: I did not give my exact age. He knows that I am young, and I believe he figures I am in my early twenties. I never had the feeling that he was uncomfortable or too comfortable with this age difference, if you understand what I mean. It has not been an issue so far.

4) How does your correspondence work out? What is special about it?

Ina: David and I write one letter per month on the average: sometimes more, sometimes less. I learn so much from this friendship. When I started this correspondence, I had no clue that I would be able to make a person so happy by just writing him a letter. I have developed a new consciousness for the little things in life. David is a wonderful person, very advised in his beliefs, and always open for mine, although we have different convictions. His reality seems to be poles apart from mine, and with

exactly that fact he expands my horizon, that there isn't only the "ideal world" I seem to live in, compared with his. I'm very pleased with him and the penpalship we have.

Nadine: At first I thought our correspondence worked out really well. Yet, since I made it clear that I won't pay for any goods for him and only send him a picture when our penpalship is more personal, our "relationship" has become a bit ambivalent. He perceived that as my wanting to set up a shield. I still think that I've made the right decision though. Our age gap resulted in a different way of writing, and so I think seeing a young woman may change the way of writing even more. In my last letter, I told him that I will only send him stamps (since he told me he has to sell his food trays), but that I thought that any other material interaction shouldn't be a part of our penpalship. Another complication was the question about innocence and guilt. Actually, it never was a question for me, because I initiated the penpalship regardless of his criminal conviction, and I was prepared to write to a person who did awful things. I told him that he does not need to tell me about his crime, at least not in the first year or so, because I want to know him as a person and not as a convict. I left it open to discuss his convict-identity, too, if he wished. But he saw this as a kind of attack that did not allow him the possibility of saying that he is an innocent man who was ripped off by his ex-girlfriend. Although there is the possibility that he is innocent, I am not able to determine it from my position. So I won't build on a penpalship in which I say I believe him, when I actually don't and can't. This is a problem we will have to face in the future.

Sarah: Sometimes I don't hear from him for months, and then I get a 5-page letter ...:) I would say we don't have much contact - I think that's because of the circumstances (he lives in Texas) - but when we have it, it's always great. Good stories, nice and friendly wishes or greetings. At the beginning of our friendship, we wrote more often, told each other almost everything. He got lots of pictures from my family, my friends, the area I lived in etc...He also sent me some pictures of himself and on Christmas or my birthday he sent special cards, and sometimes there were cute stickers glued to his letter...:) I am really content with our penfriendship. I really like learning about his life there in Texas, about the things he worries about, wishes, or dreams. I think he also knows almost everything about my life with all of its ups and downs. He was there when I finished school, left my home for a voluntary year to work with mentally handicapped people, and when I was homesick there. He was there when I came back home and started studying, got to know my new friends and my boyfriend (sometimes he tells me to say Hello to him), when I went to Berlin, and he is still with me as I am finishing my studies right now. And thanks to the postcards I sent him from all my holiday trips, he was everywhere I was...:) I would say we have a very solid friendship. Once he told me that I am the little sister he never had... :) Sometimes I am sad that I can do nothing more than write to support him. He says that's enough for him; he has only once asked for money, but it wasn't possible for me to give any, and we never talked about it again. But sometimes I just want to fly over and get to know him, talk to him, and see if there's more that I can do for him. And I'm quite sure I will do this if there's time and money...:) Sometimes I feel so small in this world of American justice, which I don't always understand, too small to move something, too small to push something forward for him.

Magdalena: Well, the first complication is the fact that my pen pal couldn't read or write properly and therefore he was/is dependent on a neighbor to help him with his letters. So when there's no one around he trusts in, it sometimes takes a long time until he is able to respond. I was a bit stumped at first, but nowadays we manage these situations very well. He's already started to write letters himself! It's great to see him forging ahead. What is the special thing about it? Well, one tries not to have too big expectations or clear conceptions, but then does it anyway only to finally find out that everything is totally different. Two worlds are clashing. I'm sure Alfred and me would have never become friends if we had met somewhere in "normal" life. I don't claim to really know him, but from what I know of him now, he's a really good friend whom I'm glad to have.

Sonja: Our correspondence experienced some difficulties due to mailing problems in my district at first, but we established a rule that I send him letters on fixed dates, so now everything is going fine! If I feel like it, I send little messages in between regular mailing dates, such as postcards, a funny card I found in the mall, and so on. In return I receive drawings of his. The pen friendship has become very comfortable for me. I await each letter eagerly, and am always happy to hear from my friend. We have not spoken about the reason he is on death row, however, that is something that I do not deem important to our relationship. By the way, the pen friendship has shown me the value of handwritten letters in times of email and multiple social networks; it proves personal appreciation and so I have started to write various kinds of letters or notes to friends and family members, as well.

5) How does the age difference affect your exchanges?

Lucien: Sometimes it's not easy for him to understand some things about my life. He's been in prison since 1992, and is 66 years old. For instance, he doesn't really get the impact of internet and high tech in my everyday life. He also doesn't seem to understand some of my choices, because when he was a young guy like me, things were completely different. Sometimes he's a bit rude because he says things that are "normal" for him, but with which I don't agree because I see things differently; for example, the attitude men should have toward women. But the age difference is also sometimes very useful for both of us. For instance, my pen pal always tries to give me his views on choices I make about which I am not so confident. He always tries to give me "wise" advice, giving me the chance to acquire a different perspective.

Sarah: I think that our really small age difference makes communication and discussions easier than with a 60-year-old. So we talk about the music we listen to, about our love-experiences :) and our dreams for the future.

Sonja: So far: Not at all. We might have different points of view on things, but that has not been apparent in any discussion so far.

6) I started a correspondence when I was 20 years old. People sometimes said: "You are so young, why would you want to burden yourself with such heavy topics, and with a dying and condemned person instead of enjoying your freedom light-heartedly?" What would you reply?

Ina: If I was in his situation, I would be glad if there were someone interested in me and my situation and give me support, no matter what I've done or not done.

Lucien: I always answer this question by saying that there is no age to be a militant for or against something. I have always had a problem with the death penalty, and I am convinced that someday the death penalty will be abolished if people like us fight against it. We have to show people that the death penalty is cruel and inhumane. I tend to be a precocious person anyway, so it was not a surprise when I told my parents and friends that I wanted to get involved in fighting, in my way, against the death penalty.

Nadine: I would respond that the world is not just concerned with funny topics like what Princess X will wear on the next gala, but also with some dark topics which are perhaps more difficult to think about. Nevertheless, as a part of the world, I am resolved to engage in both parts of the world: the light and the heavy. Besides, I think I am lucky to have been born in an environment which provides me with everything I need in order to live a happy life. Other people are born, by chance, in another environment, so you shouldn't take your belongings (psychological and physical) for granted.

Sarah: Funny, at first I had the same concern about the penfriendship. First I would say: Yes, you`re right, and I am worried about it. BUT: Life isn`t always happy and light-hearted. That`s just not life: if yours is that way, maybe you`re one of the lucky few. Be happy, but don`t keep it to yourself. Let other people who aren`t as lucky as you are be a part of your luck, be a part in your bright world. They will change your life, because through them you will see how lucky you really are, how grateful you can be to be free, to be able to go wherever you want at any time, although you haven`t earned it. Make your life brighter through contact with a person, because for him you can be a window to the world. Share special moments and learn how life has treated other people and how they have dealt with it. Maybe it will help you when you experience your own “dark hours”.

Magdalena: This doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. Maybe enjoying my freedom light-heartedly whenever possible gives me the strength to deal with this situation, a tragic one however you look at it. I see it as a privilege to have the freedom to get to know and approach this condemned person on a totally different level.

Sonja: First of all, freedom should never be enjoyed light-heartedly. Freedom is a privilege that one must cherish every single day. Second, one cannot know what real freedom means until they have spoken to a person whose freedom has been lost. I believe that a pen friendship with an inmate is not a burden, but a chance to attain a different view about life, friendship, and all the things we take for granted.

7) Given your experience, would you recommend that a person younger than 20 start a correspondence with an inmate?

Ina: I was younger than 20 when I wrote my first letter and did it without thinking about what I could have been doing. Now, two years later, I'd say you need the ability to distance yourself from certain circumstances or experiences of your pen pal. To feel with them is okay and important, but to suffer with them is destructive for both sides. You have to be aware that your pen pal can stretch you to your limits. And you have to be conscious of the fact that the “worst case” you can imagine concerning your pen pal is possible. I think when somebody wants to venture that step, he is also able to do it, as long as the intention is not only the “zoo animal” effect.

Lucien: If a person wants to start a penpalship, I think it shows he or she is mature enough to begin correspondence with someone. Prior to my engagement, I had a conversation with someone from Lifespark which was very useful because it gave me a better idea of what it means to write to inmates. I think if a young person wants to do this, he or she should speak to another young member who already does.

Nadine: This is a difficult question, because I think (as stated above) that personalities differ so much, and you can't tell a person younger than 20 that this is too young to start a penpalship, because perhaps this specific person is not. I think you really have to be attentive to other people's motivations and feelings, which mainly comes from experience. I think you should converse by telephone with the person and ask about motivations and hopes so that there is the option to evaluate and see if you might think it is too early. But if you decide it's too early, I would offer the person another option to engage in the organization aside from the penpalship, so that they learn and stay in touch.

Sarah: I would recommend this for a young person who has a strong and caring family to support her in this penfriendship (as I have) and who does not do it for sensationalism, but with a deeper sense and aim. There`s a human being on the other side of the ocean you take care of with this penfriendship, not

only clothing you can throw away when you don't like it any more, or when it requires too much work.

Magdalena: I think it takes time, energy, a healthy degree of self-trust, critical thinking, persistence, and sensitivity to start and maintain such correspondence. These properties are more a matter of character than of age or gender. But it entails responsibility to maintain the correspondence and not misuse it for any personal exploitation, because such a pen pal may turn your life upside down. In my mind, however, minors should be encouraged to further campaign against capital punishment so that they'll see whether they want to start a correspondence later.

Sonja: I would not recommend it to anyone who considers engaging in such a task for fun or solely for curiosity. It is a commitment, and I believe that the person considering to write to an inmate has to be mature, responsible and caring - which, sadly, cannot be said for most 20-year-olds.

Dear Ina, Lucien, Nadine, Sarah, Magdalena and Sonja – thank you very much for your openness and effort to answer all those questions. I wish you all the best for your penpal-ship.

Very young new members - how do we inform them?

Lifespark comparatively often receives requests from very young people (20 and younger), mainly women, who are interested in having a pen pal on death row. Although lifespark was founded to benefit death row inmates, we want our members to have a positive experience, too. In the best case, the pen pal-ship is a rewarding and wonderful experience for both parties. Because of this, it is - without wanting to be presumptuous - our obligation as well as a matter of integrity to give the "young cases" special consideration.

As always, when a new member initially contacts us, we provide him/her with about 10 different documents which address writing a death row inmate and about lifespark in general. We also want people to be informed about the difficulties which might occur in a pen pal-ship because this helps them to be less vulnerable. After the new person has read these documents, the responsible contact person from lifespark talks to him/her on the phone. They answer questions that are still unanswered and also ask about any hesitations or fears that might be present. On the phone, the question of motivation for starting such a commitment can be a topic, too. Sometimes people are not aware that they will write to real people who have feelings and personalities, as well. We remind all new people that there is always the possibility to get back with us should questions arise. Whoever has a question or a problem should always be able to communicate with someone within lifespark.

Once a woman said her motivation was to know what somebody feels while killing another human being. I answered that she should better read a book about the topic, as her interest was obviously very specific, and this wasn't a good reason to start a pen pal-ship.

If the interested person is very young, the contact person asks whether his/her parents agree with their commitment and if they would support their son or daughter in case the pen pal-ship becomes emotionally intense, for example, when the pen pal receives an execution date. If we see that a young person doesn't seem to be really aware of what they are about to start, we suggest to them that they wait a couple of years and then get back to us. In the meantime, they could join, for example, an Amnesty group and get involved in the cause in a less personal way.

Actually, we have set 18 years as the minimum age, but of course younger people might be as mature as a 20-year-old, and older people might still be very immature. So, this can only be a guideline. Some inmates express in their letters to Lifespark their wish to write to a middle-aged person. Generally, it's better to have some life experience because this kind of commitment can be very challenging. Knowing how to set limits and how to use emotional resources can be crucial. In Lifespark, we do what we can to support our members and pen palships.

Ines Aubert