

Interviews with members who joined lifespark only after writing to an inmate that they didn't find through lifespark

The question were asked by Ines Aubert

Answers from Stephanie Ch. (France), Denise McN. (Australia), Michael S. (Switzerland), Dorothea B. (Switzerland), Magdalena H. (Switzerland), Dorthe A. (Denmark), Ruth H. (Switzerland)

Can you tell us in a few sentences how long you've been writing to your pen pal and how you found him?

Stephanie: I have been writing to my pen pal for three years now. I had a pen pal before him who got executed and I heard that my new pen pal was in need of pen friends so I decided to send him a letter.

Denise: On July 31st 2014, I will have been writing for one year. I probably spent 4 years building up my knowledge of how penpalships work by searching the Internet. I found various pen pal sites like "CCADP" where I read inmate "adverts". Then I found sites like "Minutes Before Six" with inmate writings. Then I looked up various texts of those writers like Robert Pruett and William Van Poyck and found their individual blogs. On Robert's site I saw Ines's name. Then found Lifespark. Then I found other DR pen pal support organizations. Then I found the Death Row Support Project. I only had to click once to indicate my interest. I was sent a letter of instructions and a letter from my pen pal a month later.

Michael: I have been writing to my pen pal for almost seven years. I found him through the Community of St Egidio in Rom, which is a Christian Community active against the death penalty; several members of St Egidio write to death row inmates in various parts of the world. I am a member of St Egidio Lausanne.

Dorothea: I found my pen pals on the website of a German death penalty abolition group. They provide addresses of inmates for free. It was a spontaneous decision to write to DR inmates. After I had started writing, I also became more and more interested in death penalty abolition groups, and I informed myself about them. I knew about lifespark shortly after having started my penpalships. I have been writing my pen friends for 4 years.

Magdalena: In 2009, I came across an interview with a lifespark member on the Swiss TV video portal. I've always had a strong opinion about why capital punishment is barbaric, a helpless attempt to make up for something that simply is irremediable.

Still, to get in direct contact with a murderer – that's something else entirely. After some time of struggling and looking for further information, I felt that 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 being behind a publicized monster, which used to be difficult for me too.

I found Alfred's address on the website of the German organization "Initiative gegen die Todesstrafe", on which I was reading through all the pen pal requests out of curiosity. The one that was placed for him was written by a friend of his, saying that he was helping Alfred out because he can't read or write. And that made me send him a post card.

Dorthe: I have been writing Thomas Miller'El since 1991 and found him through an ad in Amnesty Denmark's member magazine.

Ruth: 18 years. A friend had a list with inmates who wanted a pen pal to write. I don't know where the list came from.

How long had you been writing to your pen pal before you joined lifespark?

Stephanie: Two and a half years

Denise: I had been writing for about ten months before I joined Lifespark.

Michael: About one year.

Dorothea: I had been writing to my pen pals about 6 months.

Magdalena: One and a half years.

Dorthe: 22 years.

Ruth: 18 years.

How did you find lifespark and what made you become a member?

Stephanie: A friend of mine is a member. She told me about Lifespark and since I liked the concept of the association, I decided to become a member.

Denise: I found Lifespark by coming across Ines's name in association with her pen pal. I found the information on the website extremely helpful in showing me how a penpalship gets established and evolves. I really wanted to see what was behind the "member's only" section.

Michael: I already knew of the Lifespark association by name. St Egidio has contacts with Lifespark through the organization "Cities for life, Cities against death penalty" which each year on the 30 of November organizes several events against death penalty.

Dorothea: I found lifespark because of my interest in death penalty abolition groups. It appeared to be a more reputable group than the German groups I knew first. Plus it is a Swiss organization and I live in Switzerland. I became a member because I soon realized I had to visit one of my pen-friends, and I wanted to get some good information about visiting an inmate. Lifespark seemed to offer plenty of know-how. In fact I got very good advice and information.

I also wanted a possibility to buy Money Orders in Switzerland. It had always been pretty complicated to order them in Germany. As a member I can get MO's easily.

Magdalena: After the first couple of letters, the contact was suddenly broken off. After a couple of months I contacted the German organization to ask what they would recommend me to do now. It was they who then introduced me to the corresponding Swiss organization lifespark and it was you, who invited me to join the lifespark autumn meeting in Berne. I felt like the close dialogue with other members and the wide range of services were not only highly appreciated but also an opportunity to become active to support the abolishment of the death penalty.

Dorthe: I knew of Lifespark long before joining, thanks to meeting Ines A. and Margrit S. in Texas when visiting Thomas on death row and staying with his wife in Huntsville.

Ruth: A friend told me about it. Curiosity, and the wish to attend meetings.

In what ways does it make a difference for you to now be a member of an organization instead of writing your pen pal without such a background?

Stephanie: Being a member made me meet people who also have a pen pal on DR. I know now more people with whom I can share my experience and friendship with a DR inmate.

Denise: Already I have had the invitation to have my pen pal contribute to the next regional meeting in Basel. So by being a part of an organization, there may be more opportunities for myself and my friend to participate in events. Also I think I'll become a better pen pal having role models from within the organization. Also I think it may be useful to have people that can act as sounding boards if any issues arise that challenge me.

Michael: It gives me some support. I have met other people who write to death row inmates. You can share your experience and listen to the experiences of others. You feel less alone. When I planned for the first time to visit my pen pal, I was glad to talk with others people who had visited their pen pal. It helped me a lot to prepare myself mentally for this event and also for the concrete organization.

Dorothea: Even though I was already writing my pen pals for some months, I got some really good advice concerning a penpalship with a DR inmate. To me, it is of great value to have various possibilities to meet other people writing to DR inmates and sharing our experiences. Family members and friends often don't really understand our reasons for doing such an impossible thing like writing a DR inmate. Meetings give a lot of new inspiration and self-confidence. Plus, an organisation can do more to fight against the death penalty. An organization can raise many people's awareness for death penalty abolition. I feel much more supported.

Magdalena: I'm lucky to have my family and friends standing by me and understanding what made me write to him.

Being a lifespark member also makes you part of a network of people who do the same. The knowledge of having support and access to detailed information about the US judicial system made me feel more comfortable to go along with Alfred to whatever may come.

Dorthe: I have tried to start a similar organization in Denmark - but without any luck - because I realized how much it means to be able to communicate about the problems and situations one encounters when writing to and visiting someone on death row; so this is what Lifespark provides and it means a lot; you can learn so much from each other and get the support, information and encouragement you need.

Ruth: Before my visit to the prison, I received information from a Lifespark member that was very helpful.

What is the service in lifespark you enjoy most? Maybe you can tell us about a concrete situation where it was helpful for you to have lifespark?

Stephanie: I went to the first French meeting of the year and it was very interesting to listen to other people who also have a pen pal. I got lots of information about prison systems, some DR inmates' actual situations. It was also a great opportunity to present the book that I wrote about my friendship with the DR inmate who got executed.

Denise: I find it useful to read about the personal experiences of members with their pen pals, ranging from visits to attending the execution. At first I only read the website. Now I can access all the previous newsletters and still focus on the personal accounts.

Michael: I think about the money orders. And also about my visits to my pen pal.

Dorothea: I enjoy mostly meetings and getting hints. It was great for me to get addresses from other people having visited inmates in the same prison I was intending to go to. I also appreciate the Money Order service and the regular newsletters about death penalty related subjects. I like being a part of a network, getting hints from others and being able to help others as well!

Magdalena: For me, it's both, the network of people you can swap ideas and thoughts with, as well as the access to information, such as the weekly press review to keep me posted.

Dorthe: I have often been contacted by people who were thinking of writing death row inmates and have referred them to Lifespark; I'm not really sure what has come of it, but I hope it has established some correspondence for a death row inmate. Also, I just now read about Ines' interview with David Dow and didn't know that they do provide pro bono services, also for regular inmates; I'm in touch with two who are claiming their innocence and surely would need the help of the Texas Innocence Network.

Ruth: See above. I'm also looking forward to attending the meetings.

What do you think prevents people from becoming a member?

Stephanie: In my opinion, the only reason could be the membership fee, even if it is not expensive.

Denise: I am not sure about other people, but my obstacle was the joining fee as I am not working at the moment. Also, I was a little hesitant because the organization is run by voluntary participation. I wasn't sure what I could contribute.

Michael: People have prejudices about associations in general. They don't want to involve themselves in an association.

Dorothea: Why pay an annual fee for something you also can get free in the Internet? This is the first thought. But thinking so means ignoring all the precious background service given by an organization.

Magdalena: I personally think that this is due to the online availability of contact addresses or pen pal requests, thus the benefit of becoming a member is not necessarily evident in the first place.

Dorthe: For me the membership fee was a little high; other than that, I think it's a general trend that people don't become members in the old-fashioned way, but are active on the Internet (Twitter, Facebook) taking action and getting in touch there. And for them the cost is an issue too, especially for young students, who are often interested in these issues. Plus, it could be that some are saying, "We already have Amnesty International, why this organization too?" "Why don't they just work with/join Amnesty?"

Ruth: Maybe people do not know about Lifespark?

How would you convince a person to become a member who says they didn't think it was necessary?

Stephanie: I would tell her/him that it is very helpful and interesting to be a member because Lifespark gives a lot of information about the Death Penalty. It is also very important to be able to share what we go through with other people who don't judge or criticize, simply because they do the same thing and understand. The regional meetings are also very useful to get answers to any question that people might have regarding visits, trips, legal questions etc.

Denise: If the person was really interested in the issue of the death penalty and writing to a DR inmate I would suggest membership is a good way to keep abreast of issues. And also to join a group of like-minded people. Also imagine being able to go to Switzerland to meet everyone!

Michael: In Lifespark you find people very much involved and open to share their experiences. It is a good occasion to find new acquaintances and even new friends.

Dorothea: I would talk about all the numerous benefits of being a lifespark member. I also would talk about the problems and consequences, which might result if you are writing a DR inmate without an organization's support.

Writing a DR inmate is a statement against death penalty. Whoever is writing a DR inmate should also be a member in a DR abolitionist group. Opposition against the death penalty is much more powerful if it comes from a group and not only individuals.

Magdalena: I think writing to someone on death row does also call for thoroughly acquainting oneself with all aspects of capital punishment, including the functioning of the judicial system and the way of dealing with the fact that that your pen pal has committed a horrible crime and that he/she will most certainly pay for it with his/her life. An organization like lifespark offers valuable support and, at the same time, offers the opportunity to participate actively in the movement against the death penalty.

Dorthe: That they could meet people in the exact same situation with the exact same interest, being that it's a difficult issue/area, both with regards to knowing people who may be executed and with regards to arguing against the death penalty, in addition to dealing with prisons, courts and politicians that are biased against death row inmates.

Ruth: You might be a less isolated writer...

Do you think that it is justified that lifespark requests a membership fee?

Stephanie: Yes, it is. An association which provides such a service can not work without money.

Denise: I assume it costs money to run the organization at a professional level. The website is viewed all around the world so it is important to present it well. However, I imagine there are other people in my situation. At certain times in life money cannot be spent on "luxuries". Maybe there could be a waiving of the fee in appropriate circumstances

Michael: Yes, it is not a lot.

Dorothea: Of course!!!! Services provided by Lifespark are worth much more than a simple membership fee.

Magdalena: I think of the membership fee as not only a funding for maintaining demand-oriented services, but also as an assignment of a continuous improvement of a professional and sustainable commitment against death penalty.

Dorthe: Yes, to cover the necessary expenses. But a lower fee may give more members.

Ruth: Yes.

On our homepage under "pen pal-ships" [questions about lifespark](#) you will find a paragraph about the membership fees:

What happens with the membership fees?

At lifespark, all active members are volunteers, i.e. unpaid. A part of the membership fees is used for our expenses which are mainly for postage and printing costs of the newsletter which comes out three times a year.

With membership fees, lifespark regularly supports US organizations which are opposed to the death penalty. In doing so, the money is better used than by initiating actions from Switzerland.

Under "links", the websites of the organizations which we support are marked accordingly.