

My penpalship with Leroy Bockover in Potosi, Missouri

Part 1: August 2003: The first visit

Part 2: May 2006: The story goes on

Part 3: May 2006: Interview with Leroy

Part 1: August 2003: The first visit with Leroy Bockover

This spring I visited my pen pal, Leroy, for the first time. He is an inmate in Potosi Prison in Missouri. Lifespark only arranges penpalships to inmates on death row, which Leroy does not belong to. Penpalships with inmates who have long sentences are very similar to penpalships with death row inmates.

Leroy "only" has a life sentence. In Missouri, "life" means that a petition can be filed for release after 15 years. Leroy hasn't been released because he didn't comply with the legal conditions imposed on him. Leroy has another chance to petition for release in March 2005.

The prison at Potosi is perhaps the most friendly prison in the States. Inmates - on death row or not - are allowed to leave their cells for many hours a day. They can use a gym to train or play team games in a sports hall; and they also stand a chance of getting a job. If this happens, they can earn \$7.50 or \$12.50 (US) a month, depending on their education. Every dollar thus earned is very precious to the prisoners.

Leroy believes that I am the only person in his life who really cares and likes him. For Leroy, I am the center of his world. As he once wrote: "You're the world for me". Leroy doesn't want to ever lose my friendship and has promised to stay in touch with me - even after his release. This promise both touched and surprised me at the same time. Of course, I will not stop writing to him - not even after his release!

Leroy and I have always written to each other on a frequent basis. After a while, it seemed natural for us both to want to meet each other. Not many members of Lifespark write to inmates in Missouri and as far as I know, nobody from the organization ever has been there for a visit. I had to start by gathering all the information necessary for my planned visit to Potosi, as each State has different regulations relating to visiting procedure.

Since Leroy had no members of his family on the visitor list, I therefore became a "significant other" and could profit from the privileges as a family member. I was allowed to see him on 2 days on a weekend, for 10 hours each day. That meant two 5 hour visits per day with a break of one hour in between. It was only natural that I was nervous and curious when the time drew near - but, at the same time, I was looking forward to the visits. How would it be to finally meet Leroy and be able to hug him after all we had shared in our letters??!"Will you let me have a little hug?" he had asked very shyly in one of his letters. Leroy is 35 and hasn't had a hug in 17 years! In the first year of imprisonment only, he got a few visits.

By comparison, the ones who visit their friends in Texas also have a wish to hug - but there it is not possible even for those on death row. In Missouri it's all different - but not without consequences on the day of the visit. For instance, I noticed that my visit was much more controlled and there were also more rules than in Texas. The reason for the strict rules is because the inmates and their visitors are together in the visiting room. I was given one of the many small tables where Leroy and I had to sit for the duration of the visit. It was very exciting to wait for him. Would I recognize him immediately? How would

it be to embrace a man who is unknown to me in spite of all those intense letters? The inmates came without handcuffs - one after the other - and I recognized Leroy right when he came in. He made his way directly towards me but I wasn't sure if he had recognized me, as he didn't look or smile at me.

We embraced each other and I felt his enormous tension and fear. I felt a strong compassion for him. We sat at the table with our hands on it (as prescribed) and began to talk. As the time passed, Leroy relaxed more and more and dared to laugh sometimes. We were allowed to take Polaroid photos and did this several times. An officer surveyed the scene each time while another took the photos. I had to laugh about the first photo because Leroy had a very serious face. When I told him that he replied in a low voice that he thought he was smiling. I realized that he had forgotten how to laugh.

It was wonderful to embrace Leroy several times and it was nicer each time as we became more relaxed. In spite of all this, there was an immense grief and longing to show my affection in more spontaneous ways. I felt very clearly that one embrace per welcome and farewell was really not enough!

In our letters I have discussed thoroughly with Leroy about the kind of friendship we have and he knows that we are not lovers and will never be, even when he will be released. Many prisoners dream secretly or speak openly of getting married to satisfy their enormous yearning to belong to somebody. It has always been very important to me to talk to Leroy about our feelings in a very open and honest way. Leroy knows that I like him very much and that I like to embrace him. Again and again we took each other's hand which was allowed during the whole visit.

But the hours in the visiting room were also a burden for me in spite of all these nice feelings. Only if we went to the food vending machine could we get up from our seats; for the rest of the time we had to sit at the table. There were no other games but cards - no pen and ink, and nothing to do. During the visit, I was not allowed to remove any clothing such as my thick pullover. Food like chicken wings, cheeseburgers or pop corn could be prepared in the microwave, so the room was constantly filled with an oily smell. That, and having my movements constantly controlled, plus the sadness of Leroy at the beginning, depressed me.

As time went on, Leroy became more and more talkative and began to make jokes and to laugh. Both of an evening and morning he was allowed to phone me at my room in the motel. On the phone we were constantly frolicsome; we only talked foolish things and laughed. And then we had to say good-bye.... Leroy phoned me in the morning before I had to go to the airport. It was very, very sad and I had a cry after the phone call. It was very hard for me to leave Leroy all alone.

In his first letter after the visit, Leroy told me about his endless sadness and how lonely he felt. He also told me that my visit had been the best time of the last 17 years and that he would not laugh any more during the next years. It hurt me to read that. Of course I encouraged Leroy to look for someone in the prison to laugh with. But Leroy is distrusting of friendships in prison and does not believe they can exist in that environment.

I am very happy about my visit with Leroy. After meeting him our friendship is closer and I can understand better the circumstances under which the inmates live; and even though I cannot know the reality of prison life as the inmates experience it, I have an impression of what it's like.

My visit to Missouri gave me a lot of pleasure, but also lots of things to think about. I realized once more what a big responsibility it is to take on a friendship with an inmate.

Ines Aubert, lifespark

Addition May 2006: Leroy's request for parole was denied in March 2005 and he got a "set back" of two years.

Part 2: May 2006: The story goes on

The report about my first visit to Leroy, although a few paragraphs longer than the present one, has been on our webpage for more than two years and has touched the hearts of many people. I am now writing a sequel because the story took a somewhat sad and unexpected turn.

The reason I had to remove some paragraphs from my original report is because the yarn Leroy had been cooking up over a long period of time suddenly tore apart and several of his pen pals were confronted with the fact that they had been writing to a deceitful person.

It's hard to tell what goes on in the heart and mind of a human being who has cheated and who has lied to even his best friends for a long time and who has made them lose a lot of money. Could all of this have been prevented and, if so, how?

After a long period of time, during which I had considered Leroy to be my friend, I found myself in a situation that posed many questions.

What does one do with a person who turns out to be a cheater after being considered a friend? This was a question that I had to think about often and intensively. Should I take revenge? Should I pay him back? Should I give him another chance or simply close "Chapter Leroy?"

For me it is very clear that a penpalship is not only about getting to know a new person, it's also about confronting ourselves with our own personality and our own values. It's about fundamental themes - solidarity, trust, love and the meaning of life. How to act in view of such a crisis - and this definitely was a crisis.

What happened to my feelings of closeness for Leroy, feelings that despite of everything existed? In the meantime, I had visited with him once more and this second visit was also very nice and touching. What does trust mean? Where do lies come from? Do lies have any meaning? What has love got to do with it?

Even though I saw the crisis coming due to the fact that Leroy's lies were getting more and more obvious, it still hurt when the moment of truth arrived. Why does it hurt when you discover a lie?

How would I go on with a friendship that was based on lies? In the midst of all my anger and sadness, I could still perceive positive feelings for Leroy.

That's why, with the help of his urgent pleadings, I did not drop him altogether. However, I did adapt myself to the new situation and set up conditions. There will be no more financial support, no more pictures about my daily life, and no more frequent letters. All of this did not seem suitable for our relationship anymore and it would have to stop.

Leroy agreed to my conditions and was willing to accept the fact that from now on we would have to talk about what had happened for a long time and work it out.

Since then many letters have been going back and forth and, to my surprise, Leroy did not end our contact even though the main topic of our correspondence was far from pleasant and easy for him. This made me discover a new Leroy.

There is no happy ending. It is, for the time being, a continuation of our relationship that could have been a friendship. I still possess the warm feelings that I had for Leroy over the previous years. They turned from feelings of friendship to feelings of hope. Hope that this person, to whom I once felt close, will understand what trust means and hope that sometime in the future he will be able to understand what it means to have a friend and to be a friend.

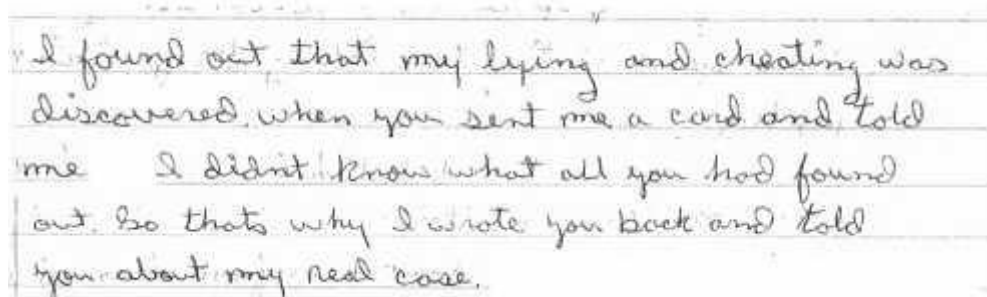
While I was working on this text, I received a letter from Leroy that filled me with great joy. Leroy reacted positively to my earlier suggestion to help correct the untrue version of my original report about him and he answered the 15 questions that I had asked him in my previous letter. Leroy is aware of the fact that this report and the interview will be on this webpage and that everybody will have access to it. By answering my questions, he wanted to mark a new beginning of his life.

Part 3: May 2006: The interview with Leroy

There is a typed version of the interview [here](#) if you have difficulties reading the handwritten parts.

1. Leroy, last fall a big crash occurred among several of your pen pals. A bunch of them realized that you had been lying to them for many years in an extreme manner. How did you realize that your cheat was discovered?

1. Leroy, last fall a big crash occurred among several of your pen pals. A bunch of them realized that you had been lying to them for many years in an extreme manner. How did you realize that your cheat was discovered?



I found out that my lying and cheating was discovered when you sent me a card and told me I didn't know what all you had found out. So that's why I wrote you back and told you about my real case.

2. You used to tell each of your pen pals that you had only him or her and nobody else besides them. Why did you do that?

I told all my pen pals that they was the only pen pals I had, because I thought that if they thought I had other pen pals, they would stop writing me, I know now that I was wrong.

3. Why did you give each of your pen pals a wrong account of the crime you had committed?

I told all my pen pals I did a crime that wasn't true because I didn't want people to know my real crime, and also with the crime I told them I did I could get people to feel sorry for me.

4. What was the real crime that brought you to prison?

The crime that brought me to prison is I robbed and killed a lady so I could get money for drugs.

5. Look at the previous report I wrote about you. What else is not true?

first thing is my age when I came to prison. I wasn't 17 years old but I was 18 years old. My sister wasn't beat by her husband that was a lie, and I didn't kill him that's a lie. my mother and father isn't dead as I said they was, but I don't hear from them at all. I have seen my mother 1 time in 20 years and that was when I first come to prison. I haven't seen my father in over 20 years, and I don't hear from any of the friends I had when I was out.

6. When I wrote the report, I believed what you told me about your past. Didn't you feel bad about cheating me that badly?

At first I didn't feel bad because I didn't tell you the truth about my past. But as time past and I really started to get to know you, I did start to feel bad because I had lied to you, and I was still lying to you, I didn't think my lies would hurt you, because I didn't think you would find out about them, and then I thought if I did tell you about the lies then I wouldn't have you in my life any more, so I had to tell more lies to cover up the old lies, and as time past I did start to feel really bad because I was lying to you, Its only now that I can look back and see how wrong I was and how many people I hurt with all my lies.

7. How did you feel visiting with a person - me - who you had lied to already in your first letter and in most of the following ones?

To visit with you was really nice, But to see you face to face and still lie to you it didn't make me feel good, and after the visit I would think to myself how wrong I am, But I still just could tell you the truth. In my heart I thought we had a friendship, But now I know that I was wrong, you was a friend to me, But I wasn't one to you, friends don't lie to each other.

8. After more than a couple of years of penpalship you started asking for money all the time. You came up with all kinds of stories to make your pen pals send you money. Fortunately, I realized that something didn't add up and resisted, but others didn't. What did you need the money for?

well to start off just as money to buy stuff out of the prison store, most of it was going for food out of the store so I didn't need to eat the prison food, then as time passed I started to play cards and that's why I started to need more and more money, because playing poker I would lose more and more money.

9. We found out that you got more than \$3000 in about 10 months while still claiming that you didn't even have money to buy stamps with. At this time some of your pen pals still believed that they were your only contact to the outside and you needed the money for a lawyer or other very important things. They wanted to help you. How do you feel about that today?

How I feel about lying to my pen pals for money, I didn't really think about it then, but today I do feel a really bad about it.

I can never make up for what I did or how I hurt them, but as I have already did, I have wrote them and told them I was sorry, and that one day I will pay them back the money I got from them. It won't make what I did right, but it's a start.

10. You wrote a lot about friendship and honesty. You often told me that honesty was the most important thing in every friendship. I really wonder how you could write that.

I do feel that honesty is really important in a friendship. at first I never thought about hurting people or using people. I only thought about myself, and how I could get what I wanted. But I don't feel that way any more, now I do care about other people.

11. After the crash you lost some of your very close pen pals. Can you blame them? I'm still here, but we aren't close anymore either.

yes I lost some really good friends with all my lies, and I can understand them. I don't blame them at all for not staying my friends. what I can't understand is why that after I lied and hurt you as I did you would still write me?

12. You told me you wanted to change now. Do you think you'll be successful in that? How do you want to change?

yes I do want to change now, and yes I feel that I can be successful at changing.

people, my lies has cost me some really good friends, and I know that real friends are hard to find.

I won't tell a person anything if I can't prove it is the truth.

13. You know that I won't send you money anymore. Why are you still writing me?

you don't owe me anything, after you found out about my lies you didn't stop writing me, I do care a lot for you, and I want us to have a friendship.

14. Now, looking back at the previous years, what thoughts are going through your mind?

I look back over the past years and think that I wish I never would have lied, and I would have had some really good friends now if only I would have told the truth from the start.

15. Is there anything more you would like to mention here?

if some one feels that things just don't add up, then they should look into it, never let one thing slide by. call the prison and find out as much info about your pen pal as you can, and I hope this helps people not to get hurt as I have hurt people.