

An Extraordinary Experience

(my first visit to Ely - Nevada in October 2004)

The feelings I had before my first visit to the type of place as where I met my pen pal for the first time were extremely powerful. Sometimes intense elation other times a deep pain.

During the months that preceded these moments, time dragged. First of all, I had to wait to get approval. Weeks of waiting which were a determining factor for the future of our friendship. Then, once approved, a long list of "do's and don'ts" plus a very complete inventory for clothing. Finding something adequate to wear was really tough. As we all know, you never get a second chance to make a first impression! I finally chose something simple that reflected the kind of person I am and that would be acceptable to the prison authorities. John had suggested that I bring a change of clothing in the car, just in case, so I prepared that too. Time went by, sometimes full of doubts, fear and anxiety. I was travelling there alone and despite some people's discouraging attitude, counterbalanced by the unconditional support of my husband, I knew it was right for me. All I needed was to overcome my limiting beliefs.

Finally, the big day came. The visiting time started at 9 o'clock and John had suggested that I arrive at least 30 minutes early in order to avoid wasting some of the precious time together. I got there even earlier and the guards immediately took my car keys and my passport. To my surprise, everyone was very nice and respectful. I underwent the body search and metal detection and was ready to enter the unknown, frightening world in which he lives. My heart pounded as the first visit was about to become reality. Would he recognize me? Would we have enough subjects to discuss during the following six hours? These questions had been in my mind for a long time, but at this specific moment, they were overpowering. Luckily, everything went very fast and as I sat down in the visiting room, John arrived with a big smile on his face that immediately conveyed how much my visit meant to him. We recognised each other straight away and he walked, hands free, directly to me and hugged me. We looked at each other for a few seconds and contact was established. We talked and laughed, holding hands over the table that separated us and kept eye contact for all the six hours. We had a few things to eat and to drink out of the vending machines, which I had to heat in the micro-wave as inmates are not allowed to use it. His courage and his good humour during the entire first day almost made me forget where I was. Only when the guards suddenly asked us to start clearing up did I realize it. The visiting room, shared by all visitors to death-row prisoners at the same time, has neon lighting; therefore it's easy to lose sight of reality. We hugged again and I left the prison. Once I got back to my motel room, I felt really confused, with all my beliefs turned upside down.

The second and last day (for this visit) was spent in a similar way but with the additional pressure that the countdown had started and the situation of my friend became more and more evident. Thanks to his determination, I managed to concentrate on the present time, so as not to lose an ounce of those precious moments. We have had the privilege of sharing some of our respective life experiences, anchoring our friendship and developing a sincere relationship which enriches our lives now. Inevitably, the end of the visit arrived, and after a last hug and a few tears, we separated, in the firm belief that we would meet again soon.

Each and every moment I spent with him retain a magic quality in my mind. So much emotion, so many memories, and most of all a great lesson about life. His courage, his good humour and his strong spirit are an example for me. Since that time, our friendship has become stronger and I can really say that it was an extraordinary experience.

This experience has opened my eyes to an important thing: when motivation is strong enough, one is capable of going far beyond one's limiting beliefs. Before this trip, I sometimes asked myself why I was willing to face so much hassle, but today I know that thanks to this meeting I have recovered the self-confidence I thought I had lost, I am now a much richer person with different beliefs, and this has considerably widened my horizon.