

Visitation Situation in the U.C.I. in Raiford, Florida

The pen pal relationship between Brett and I began in October 2004. He was the first person I had written to on "Death Row" in Florida. I discovered the homepage "Alive" and thought that to make a prisoner's day nicer by writing to them would be a good thing. I came to know "Lifespark" after having met Ines Aubert, who was visiting her pen pal Paul Hildwin and I found the organization to be a genuinely good thing.

Visitation Situation in Raiford:

After the visitation request is approved by the "Classification Officer" to be placed on the pen pal's visitors list, one can ask for a "special pass" for an extra visit. That means that someone who has a journey of over 200 miles may visit the prisoner not only on the regular visiting day, but also on a second day. These passes are granted only every 60 days. Since I traveled from Austria whenever I was to visit a friend there, I always applied for such a pass.

As one can imagine, while waiting to enter there is some envy which spreads amongst the visitors who live in America and who visit their friends or husbands every weekend (for one day). I have a difficult time understanding that envy as these special passes could get me in to see my friend approximately 12 days in the year, whereas the others could see their friends approximately 60 days per year (including holidays). I don't see a reason for envy and jealousy, but it is apparent that it is there amongst some of these women towards the European women.

The time varies when one should appear at the prison to start the visitation process. You might find yourself there in the middle of the night if it is a heavily visited time period (such as specific occasions or holidays). For example on Thanksgiving weekend one might arrive there at 4 in the morning (or even earlier). On weekends that there are no holidays, as there are less visitors one can get to the prison at about 7 or 8 am and you don't need to meet at the gas station beforehand (see below).

The prison area cannot be entered until 7 am, so a line of visitors forms at about that time in front of the main entrance. Again and again new rules are set up concerning visitation procedures. Not only new rules from the prison, but also amongst the visitors themselves. For example there is the rule amongst the visitors that on heavily visited weekends, everyone parks their cars in a row at a local gas station near the prison. This procedure needs to be followed so as not to displease the other women. Shortly before 7 am this convoy of cars sets itself into motion and proceeds to the prison. This procedure is probably because many are afraid (often groundlessly) of not getting a table in the visitation area.

To get a good picture in your mind, it is important to know that in the "Visitor Park" (it is not a park, but just a large room) there are 24 tables given to "Death Row" visitations. The rest have to go to see their friend in the "Non contact room" where there is a windowpane separating the prisoner and the visitor. So if you are the 25th visitor there are no more tables for you in this "Visitor Park"! Naturally no one wants that, therefore there is this "rule" regarding the line starting at the gas station. The first time visitor generally has no idea of this as they are not informed officially about it.

Starting at 7am one can go to the main entrance of the U.C.I. and in accordance with the rules at my last attendance, those visitors are allowed in once a Prison guard gave the starting signal. Everyone is then given a form to fill out (name and signature of the visitor and their car license plate number). You then receive a print out of a photo and the data which is then given to the lady behind a glass window. She then entered this date into the computer and the visitor puts a pin code (you get a small yellow card on

your first visit with a 9 digit number) into a machine. You get the printout back with the photo and the date of the prisoner as well as the photo and date of the visitor (the visitor's photo is done on the first visit) and then you go through a set of bars into a second area (a kind of waiting room where there is a restroom that visitors can use).

After this "waiting room" there are two areas for visitors to be search; one for men and another for women. Depending on your sex you wait in one of the lines. Up until this point things go quite rapidly, but waiting for the "search" can take awhile, depending upon how exact the searcher is. Each time it was different when I visited Raiford, sometimes there was only one employee conducting the search and sometimes there were two. But having two did not mean that it went any faster.

Usually the money you have with you is counted and written down (\$50 is permitted), then the car key, jewelry (what type and what it is made of), sunglasses and hairclips, and the kind and color of your shoes. Your body is then searched (with your back to the officer and arms outstretched) and then your shoes are taken off to be searched. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes you have to move your bra around to show that there is nothing in there. Occasionally your hair is gone through (beginning at the neck) and if you are wearing a slip under a dress or skirt that may have to be shown. But as mentioned before, it depends on who is doing the search.

After this room you go through another gate with bars on it and go to a table where three guards sit. There you have to give your Passport (or ID card) and you receive a tag that you fasten to your clothes. Your right hand is stamped and then you pass through a metal detector.

Yet another gate is opened and for a short time you are in the open air that is a pathway surrounded by bars, then you go inside once again. This leads to an auxiliary building. In this building are the visiting room ("Visiting Park") and also the cells of "Death Row".

At the end of this long fenced in pathway, you can see the windows of the visiting room which are one sided mirrors. You can't see into the visiting room but those inside can see out. You enter the building through the last set of barred doors and through another door and you are in the visiting room. You then have to give the officer your computer printout that you got at the very first desk window and the officer puts the information into a book and assigns you a table. Sometimes you can choose your own table, but that depends on how nice the officer is.

The prisoners are normally brought into the visiting room at about 9 am. The last time it happened that some came already at 8:30 am which is very nice as the visitation ends at 3 pm. In Florida (compared to Texas for example) the visiting times for prisoners are fixed and the visits take place at the same time.

There are two vending machines in this room where you can buy snacks and beverages, or you can purchase things from the canteen which is in an area with a small window. You are served there by a friendly prisoner and it has quite a large selection of snacks. There are two microwaves available for frozen food or popcorn. The employees in this visitation room are very friendly and try to make the visitors feel at ease. At least that is how it appears.

You are able to have a photograph taken with your friend (1 Polaroid costs \$1, 5 Polaroids are permitted per visitor). To do this you have to go to the canteen to purchase a ticket, the officer then checks it and another prisoner whose job it is takes the picture.

The visitor's restroom can be used at any time, but on days when there are lots of visitors the toilets get

stopped up and you have to ask an officer to unblock them.

At about 11am there is a "Count time" when the prisoners have to stand in a line and two officers count them. You are able to move around the room freely and talk amongst the other visitors and prisoners (although that is seen as strictly against the rules). All in all there is a very pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. According to the visitation rules the visitor and prisoner are allowed to embrace and kiss upon first greeting each other and when parting.

I come now to the end and hope that I was able to give you a small idea of the world of visitations at Florida's "Death Row". Perhaps I have even motivated you to visit your pen pal! In general I can only recommend a visit in the U.C.I. It isn't as bad as you might have thought before reading this!

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