WHAT'S IN A NAME?

I was sitting on my bunk in my cell, watching a bug crawling across the floor, when someone called my name? It was mail call. I never got mail.

The guard handed me a letter with somewhat of a surprised look on his face. I sat back down, looking at the letter. I don’t know how long I sat there when another inmate said, “Are you not going to open it? Who is Mary Marks?”

I opened the letter, the first I had received in 10 years. She wrote she had gotten my name from your ministry and wanted to be my friend!

A friend? something I had not had in years.

She told me a little about herself and her family. She said she had seen you and your wife on TV and was impressed to get involved. I found out later a guard had sent my name in, but not who.

Did I have family? was one question. Frankly, I had no idea, as all my ties to kin had been broken by my lifestyle.

What was prison like? another question. What was Prison like? I had never thought much about it as it was now my lifestyle. Prison: a sewer somewhere in the middle of Texas. A place where the smell equals the madness. I went back in my mind to my crime and coming to prison. I grew up in the madness of lower class America. Had brothers and sisters of different fathers. Got into gang lifestyle at about 12, already into drugs. Saw friends killed, and had been shot and stabbed myself. In and out of jail, finally to prison for murder. Going to prison was no big deal. All I did outside I did inside. Drugs, gangs and worse. I had been in Administrated Segregation for 2 years, the prison’s way to break up gangs.

What are you going to do when you get out? Getting out! That is something until that moment I had not even thought about. For ten years I had, like others, become a robot. Got up and went to bed when told. Showered once in awhile. Getting out? I was given 45 years, so my nearest out date would be in ten more years. Ill be 48 if I make it.

I put that letter down and picked it up dozens of times. This person, a stranger, had entered my space. Was there room? I got some paper and a pencil and started to write a letter to a friend?! Past terrible, present not very good, future worse. A friend brought some pruno to my cell (home-made prison booze). I took the plastic bag and shoved it into the toilet to hide it. I closed
my eyes and tried to remember outside.

I sure did not want to go back to that. I finally said, “Lady, I have no idea, but maybe you can help me.”

Help me do what? I had never worked a day in my life. The gang life had been my home. Some guys here in the joint did work; me? Well, I sent off a bit of a letter and she wrote telling me about Jesus. No, not me. But a line in her letter said Jesus saves, and to be free in Jesus is to be free indeed. I knew some dudes in here who had become Christians and others that used Christians for stuff. No, not Mary.

For five years now, this lady and family members have shared with me. I have a Bible and I read a lot. Mary’s son sent me some magazines and I started taking an interest in my own education. Here in prison it is tough, but I did get a GED. I got a job with maintenance and learned a bit about air conditioning and furnaces. I got in touch with a friend and he is looking into finding my family, not a top priority. Thanks to a stranger, now a friend, my life seems to have some purpose. The future, that’s up to me.

Ralph

CALL IT AS IT IS

The following is a problem with our churches and most of the world. I am shocked and a little angry; the sun will set and it will be gone. I received the following.

“I am giving up on your paper sunshine. I have been matched with two black inmates and they did not answer my letter. What is the idea of matching me with Niggers anyway?”

This person also sent a check. We returned his check, rematched both inmates, and removed his name. This pressure point is not getting better in prison. When an inmate gets an application, we ask, “Will it bother you to write someone of a different race than you? I have about 80 inmates waiting for Pen Friends. Going through the applications, seven said “yes” And is there racial pressure in prison? YES.

Don

IN TODAY’S PAPER

The inmates had to use heat to draw out the message in invisible ink. Their orders were clear. Within hours, members of the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang killed two black inmates as part of “Go to War With Blacks. Thirty-two murders or attempted murders by the White Aryan Brotherhood Gangs. Communication often is done using invisible ink made from their own urine.

If we tried in every newsletter to explain these rules of inmates, we could not. To break their code, we cannot. To help them change, we have.

Don
WAY BACK WHEN

When I left home I went to New York and lived almost in Harlem. I grew up with many Negro friends. On returning to California I was told by a Judge: “Prison or the service.”

I chose the service. I went to Texas with a man from Oakland, a Negro, and we became friends. We were in the same unit. There was a war going on called Korea. We got a weekend pass and decided to go to town together, in uniform. We got on a bus. We both sat. The bus driver stopped the bus and told Sam, my friend, to get to the back of the bus. He got up and so did I. Well, things got out of hand and I ended up in the brig for slugging a bus driver. Sam died a year later saving 6 white soldiers. By the way, remember Jesus on the way to Calvary, dropped the cross and someone helped? Guess his color.

Don

PRISON IS A PLACE

You would think, after years of problems, the prison systems would make adjustments to correct problems. A young boy, sent to prison, was raped and beaten. As badly as he was hurt, he could not do what the guards wanted. They said, “Tell us who did it.” If he did, he knew they would kill him.

Another was threatened because he was in debt to a gang member. He tried to get protective custody, but the guards said “Tell us who.” He could not, for his own safety. Jim was 18 when he went to prison for car theft. Raped and beaten, he hooked up with another gang and got even. This got him status, and today he is a hardened convict who will spend the rest of his life, or die, in prison.

Don

YVONNE AND I CARE

We have fought this system, and for all intents and purposes, beaten it. We have seen cold, hard criminals turn to Christ and change.

The Pen Friend program has beaten all the odds and changed many a life. We also realize, as we get bigger, we deal with a scary problem. When we’re on radio or TV we make appeals for folks to write inmates. Not “Christian” inmates, but inmates. The luck of the draw chooses who writes to whom. Or should we try to handmatch each free person? We think not. Since the risk is not there, we can handle any problem but one.

Margaret is a neat lady and we matched her. The luck of the draw, she drew a real convict. Her first letter was too preachy and we sent it back with suggestions, which she took. The inmate tried the best he could to hustle her. She did not give up and the inmate got the message and quit writing. This happens often. But Margaret asked for a new name. Too many of you write, get no answer, and quit, Thank God Jesus kept keeping on.

If you wrote an inmate and got no answer, write again, or get a new name. You may write your inmate through us even when they are released.
PLEASE

All mail to us should have your name on it; The mail to your Pen friend should NOT have “Someone Cares” on it anywhere. Do not put stickers on envelopes, inside or out. That is a way to get drugs into a prison. Do not send cash. If you want to help your prison friend, find out what the policy of the prison is. Inmates may sometimes use bad words. Don’t quit, tell them.

We have grown so big, and once in awhile we can’t read all the letters. If an inmate makes a pass, correct them, don’t reject them.

We do not read your letters to inmates, but if you have questions, leave the letter open. If not seal it. If you write via Email, start the Email with your full real name; sign it with your full Pen name. If you use a pen name, make it a two-name pen name. Prisons may reject a one-name letter.

Please help us by claiming some of our “orphan” problem letters languishing in our Problem Box, next column.

Please. Emailing us with questions before a problem develops can help. We need Pen Friends

Don.

YVONNES CORNER

I really do not want to address the problem of race but I will! My Father, Elder Clyde Groomer, who was a Minister for years, was born and raised in Southern California. He graduated from Los Angles Academy, attended most of his Class Reunions and really enjoyed them.

As he got older, it was more difficult for him to attend since he was in Michigan. I called home to let my parents know that Don was speaking in Los Angles, Dad said, “Good. Go to my Class Reunion for me.”

I said we would go, we did go and we saw a lot of friends and had a great Sabbath. What some of you do not know is, that it is an all-Afro-American school.

When I grew up and did not know anything about racial tension, I was taught that we were all God’s children: “red, and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God’s sight!” Now, I must admit when we first started going to prison, I was very confused, so I would just make the rounds and talk to each group and find out what was going on. Today I still believe in the way my parents trained me and I am ever so thankful for that training. Please try to get to know your pen friend, and go to the heart of the person.

Yvonne

THEN THERE IS CAROL

Don, you matched me with a white inmate, and hard as I have tried, we don’t have anything to communicate about. He is a neat guy; can you rematch us both since I’m Black. How about one
of your bad guys my color? Last month’s letter hit home—I grew up in Watts. Been there, done that. Thanks.

**OUR PROBLEM BOX**

Most of this came from not sending back the Blue information sheet we sent you, or using a pen name and not telling us.

Ann Ball from M Gordon,  
Sue Bedford from L Perez,  
Elsie Bont from J Smith  
Johnson Brethren from Jay Manning,  
Betty Brown from Bonnie Valdez,  
Rachel Butler a bunch,  
Rachel C from Jame Emmrick,  
Carolina from Kenny Green,  
Andy Cast from ?  
Nadine Clark from K Gross,  
Anne E from R Lopez,  
Ruth E from Carolyn Payton,  
Mary Eileen from A Hernandez,  
Kay Fox from Jack Hamons.  
Frances from Michael Man  
Linda Fried from A Saylor,  
Guillermo From R Rodriguez

FOLKS THIS IS A FEW, IF YOU WROTE AN INMATE, SEND US HIS OR HER NAME, PLEASE. BETTER YET, WRITE AGAIN

Don

**TO SOMEONE CARES**

Enclosed is my donation for the year 2006. God Bless you in the wonderful work you do for Him! My Pen Friend and I have written for several years now (he is a lifer). As I have utter trust in him, we do write direct. I know, but no problem. It appears Prison has been good to him and for him and he patiently holds out hope for parole some day. He loves the Lord and does what he can to help others.

Margaret P

**KNOCKED MY SOCKS OFF**

When I went to a Prison Ministry Seminar held by you and Yvonne at Andrews University, it was not my intention to get involved.

But Don got to me and I decided to write an inmate. Since then I have had almost thirty, half of which were out for something not on my plate. But eight brought a blessing to me, and my family. One night my husband read a letter asking about getting a job in his field. George
decided to answer, He now has written a dozen inmates.

Yvonne, a real sweetheart, really helped us a couple of times. We were too preachy, often offended by prison slang. Turning the other ear, we did not give up or give in. My message to your readers is: if you get a rotten apple, don’t throw it away; give it back to Don & Yvonne and get a fresh one. My daughter and son-in-law went through a whole bunch and ended up with five. Because of Someone Cares, we care. I thank God for the chance to help these men, and several women, to know they had a friend in us and a future in Jesus.

Darlene and family

THANK YOU FOR YOUR MINISTRY

To me and so many others, you gave me peace of mind by being the middleman for my pen friend and myself. When I left college, I went to work for Pendleton Reformatory as a mail censor. I was so innocent, and that job made me fearful and suspicious.

Only a few weeks later, I was transferred to the women’s prison at Indianapolis as a receptionist. I lived on campus in one of the cottages. This changed my personality from positive to negative. I was threatened with death by an inmate. I then quit my job and never thought I’d have anything to do with prison ever again.

The Lord and your testimony over the radio changed that. I can truly believe in the power of the word of testimony. God Bless you richly.

Constance.

[Maybe we can get her to share some of her experience with mail to and from inmates. Don]

JEAN’S JOTTINGS

Wow! We’ve just journeyed from the storm before the rainbow to the pot of gold, in this issue. Kudos to pen friends who “hang in there” as they learn to lead inmates to Jesus. Since this is “Oscar” season, I want to thank Jesus, who cared so much for us and refused to give up until the lost lambs were all safe in His arms and all the Pen Friends said, “Amen!!”

Then, there’s dear, bubbly Carol, with her sweet, joyful humor and exuberance.

Darlene and family, you’ve blessed this ministry with a deep commitment to make inmates’ lives more livable. Thank you.

Margaret P’s “I know” lets us know that she understands the potential risk she’s taking by writing an inmate direct. We don’t recommend it. Please keep her on your prayer lists.

“CALL IT LIKE IT IS” topics always make me wonder how folks call themselves “Christian” when their actions shout against them. Jesus NEVER acted like that! We were created to treat ALL our neighbors with love, and love their color. We each have a guardian angel who records our successes and failures, and some days there must be teardrops on the page where he writes our thoughts and deeds. I was raised as Yvonne was, and it makes me very upset when I hear
anyone being insulted because of their color. Anyone of any hue can be a jerk. A jerk is a jerk. Anyone of any color can be a sweetheart. A sweetheart is a sweetheart. We all have good and bad days. After reading the story, however, I should have gone to the prayer closet instead of the broom closet. I’ll confess to picking out the industrial size model and taking a few laps around the house.

Jesus was ever careful to point His followers to Heaven. With gentleness He led His “lambs” in the straight paths, beside the still, living waters, drawing them with love and gentleness toward Heaven.

He followed me and my sister each for 40 years and brought us back to His fold. ?? ?? ?? ??

Someone Cares Home Page