

## Life on Death Row

by: Patrick W. Bearup

Crime and punishment in the modern American Justice System runs on the motto: “lock them up and throw away the key”. Government agencies therefore have endless budgets to incarcerate their citizens. Those citizens are also not given the needed funds to retain adequate legal counsel and/or experts to aid in their defense. This is mostly seen in those cases where people face the death penalty.

These citizens who were denied an adequate legal defense are then locked up, under some of the most draconian conditions known in modern America. The following is a first-hand experience upon entrance into the Death Row wing, on the Browning Maximum Custody Unit, located in Florence, Arizona.

In February 2007, I entered a drab concrete and steel building. I was stripped bare, searched for contraband, clothed in prison orange, and then photographed. I was placed in a 3 foot by 3 foot dingy beige holding cell, as prison staff processed my intake. After what seemed like hours, I was taken to medical to be seen by a nurse. I was asked basic health questions, then the nurse’s focus moved to mental health and suicide. While I have my issues, I did not want to kill myself. So I was processed and declared ok to enter Death Row.

Walking down a dimly lit corridor, I remember seeing a sign above a door that read “Condemned Row” in red letters. Walking in, an eerie silence was present as I neared the Henry cluster entrance. The door opened and I walked through. Staff directed me to Pod 5 and told me to go into the open cell, which was number 45. I felt eyes staring at me from those men sentenced to death up to decades before my arrival. My cell was bare and poorly lit. The cement walls were unpainted, decorated only with the occasional scrawl of some death row inmates years before. The bed was metal holding a thin mat, the sink and toilet were one unit made of stainless steel. A small writing desk was welded to the wall, and a weirdly placed stool bolted to the floor. There were no windows, just concrete and metal. Despair almost broke my spirit.

I recall the noise as the cell door rattled then banged shut. I was lost in thought as the prison guard removed my cuffs through a tray slot on the door. I rubbed my red wrists and stared at the bare walls.

Later, to my surprise, the man next door to me asked a guard to pass me some food. It was a small token, a bottle of soda and a bag of popcorn. I actually almost shed a tear over the kindness of that man, as I drank the soda.

The next day I was woken up for recreation and shower. I was stripped naked and visually searched over every inch of my body. I was then handcuffed and taken about 20 feet from my cell to my “rec. cage”. It was a 20x10 foot cement rectangle with a metal ceiling about 25 feet high. The sun barely crept in during the hours of the day, so exposure to natural sunlight was rare. Once uncuffed, I sat in the corner and thought about how I ended up here.

Death Row can break the spirits of a person. When I arrived, I was isolated from a human contact. All activities were done alone, visits through glass, and no state sponsored education or programming was allowed. Three times per week, if prison staff wanted, I was offered recreation for up to two hours, then a cold shower. My wife could visit, if space permitted. Medical care is a joke, as their most common response is: “drink more water”.

Move forward about a decade, from my arrest in 2003, my mental health had degraded so much that suicide was my way out. I had several unsuccessful attempts, but was spared only by the grace of God.

Move forward a few more years and I am doing better. Myself and another inmate filed lawsuits over conditions in the prison and access to religion. In a surprise turn, the prison folded and instituted programs that allowed some men on Death Row more freedom and unrestrained movement. However, there are still issues as the government will not allow education, unless one pays for it himself, as I was blessed to have opportunity to do via scholarship. (Earning 4 college degrees without any tax-payer money.)

I bear witness that long-term isolation will create mental health issues. There is also no reason to cage a human being all day long, for decades upon decades. Especially when that individual, like myself, has not committed any violent act while in custody of the prison system. Something must be done, the time is ripe for real change.

More information is available about the author: [www.freepatrickbearup.org](http://www.freepatrickbearup.org)