

LIFE ON DEATH ROW

by: Charles Raby

Livingston TX, Polunsky Unit is where they house Texas Death Row (DR). We, I, came to Polunsky Unit back on November 18, 1999 from the old Ellis One Unit in Huntsville TX. Ellis Unit was a much different prison, first it is over 100 years old, and built like many of the old prisons. Plus over there, we were allowed to work, had group recreation and TV, had church service, and could make outside art supply purchases from a public vendor.

But then the big escape happened. 6 Inmates tried to escape and one actually succeeded in getting over the fence and making a run for it, Texas Death Row prisoner Martin Gurule, I knew him. He was a good guy, he out of all the rest was the only one to hit the fence and kept going, the rest hit and at as the first shot was fired from the guard towers, they hit the ground while Martin had his mind dead set on getting over it or getting shot trying to get over it. I think out of all of them, he was the only one who was serious about it. So he made it, was grazed by a bullet but kept on going, made it to the woods and to my belief, he had all that extra clothing on and a bunch of card board so he wouldn't get cut up on the razor wire. So once he came to a river, tried to swim it with all that stuff on and drown. He had all that stuff still on him when they found him over a week later. But he made it. So as a result for those guys trying to escape, they shipped all of Death Row to this hell hole. It used to be called Terrell Unit, but later they changed it to Polunsky after the guy Mr. Terrell which the unit was named after, said he didn't want his name associated with the Death Penalty.

I have been here ever since. And it is nothing like it was at Ellis. Polunsky Unit has general population (GP) and DR (special housing where they also house Administrative Segregation). Death Row and Ad seg are all housed on 12 building which is total lock up, meaning everything is single man. Cells, single man, recreation, shower, and we are handcuffed everywhere we go. If I am to step out of my cell for anything, even just for a moment, they must handcuff me. Miserable way to have to live. There is no work, no TV, no group recreation, and that is the way it is. There will never ever be any work program or TVs. They always talk about it, but the reality is, once TDCJ takes something away, they don't give it back.

12 Building consist of 6 Pods, each Pod has 84 cells, A-Pod to F-Pod and each Pod has 6 sections, from A-section to F-section. Each section has 14 cells and a dayroom and two showers. 7 Cells on 1 row, 1-7 and 7 cells on 2 row, 8-14. We normally shower on the row we live on. But we can go to rec in different sections. We get 2 hours of rec 5 days a week, Monday – Friday, while there is no rec at all on Saturday or Sunday. But that could change, they are always changing the rec schedule. It seems like every time we get a new warden or major, they want to change something just to change it, so they feel their way works the best. They like to show they are in charge. Me? I could care less, just give me my 2 hours out of this cage and put me into a bigger cage which is either the dayroom or one of the outside rec yards. A 'Pod' is just another way to say 'cell block'.

Each day room is about 30 x 20 feet. With a table and toilet in it, as well as a pull-up bar. The outside rec pretty much the same thing but no table. Instead there is a basketball and goal out there to shoot the ball, where we play, run, and shoot.

Everything about 12 building is pretty much dependent of General Population, meaning it is the inmates from GP who do all the cleaning back here. Who make our trays; they send all the food to 12 building from the main kitchen and have a serving line here on 12 building and the inmates make the trays and load them into a hot food cart that is then taken to the pods. The guard will than pass out each tray, wake us up and ask us if we are going to eat. They have to write everything down, so if you don't eat or do, they write it down, same with rec and shower and laundry. Everything is logged.

A typical day for me personally starts at about 4 am. That is when they start feeding breakfast, well actually they start at around 3:30 am, but sometimes a little later or in some cases a little earlier. All depend on how fast the trays get made and passed out. So after I eat, I wake up and clean up my cage and I then start working out. They start asking us one at a time if we are going to rec or shower at 5:30 am. The first round of rec is usually pulled out at around 6 am, we are supposed to get two hours, but sometimes it is longer. Mostly longer. I have been in that dayroom 3 and 4 hours at times. But never less than 2 hours. They will either set me up for rec 1st round or 8th round, depending on just how many guys actually decide to go to rec on any given day, so you just have to wait your turn. For those that don't go to rec, they will start showering those guys, one at a time, filling up each shower, one guy at a time, they try and get in as many showers as they can and then by that time it is time for the next round of rec to start. But the guards are always having to stop showering or stop in the middle of what they are doing to escort someone around, like the nurse, or mail room, chaplain, or are get called off the pod in the event there is a use of force. If one of the guards is on the 'suit up team' that day, guys could get trapped in the shower for well over an hour at times. And stuck in the dayroom far longer than 2 hours. But they try and keep things moving as well as they can.

By the second round, it is then time for lunch. They normally feed lunch here about 10 am or 11 am ... but again it all depends on what is happening. Anything could happen, someone dies, kills themselves, tries to kill themselves, a guard gets assaulted, an inmate gets assaulted, an inmate gets gassed for refusing to come out of the dayroom or shower, or refuses to give the tray back, or doesn't allow them to close the food slot. Like I said, anything can happen to cause things to come to a standstill. After all, it is prison; it is full of hardheads...

Then there is supper, it is normally done around 3:30 pm or until whenever they get to it. That can also depend on what is happening at any given moment. For the most part, things here on 12 building run pretty smoothly, more so with DR than it does with GP Ad Seg... they are a total different breed of convict. They never used to be here on 12 building, at one time 12 building was nothing but DR inmates. They had a lot more of us here then, over 400, but they have cut that number in half. So with all the extra beds, they had to have somewhere to put the overflow of Ad Seg inmates, so they shipped them here, and let me tell you, they are wild! Those cats will get to go home one day, but they are half crazy, following no rules, staying in trouble and are 99% of the problem here on 12 building, I'm not complaining but it is just fact. But I can understand them, I was just like them once. I was wild, real wild. But I have mellowed out some.

One thing is certain, the guards do not like working with them. They can see the difference between them and us. And there is a vast difference.

DR is very laid back, GP just don't care. They build fires, flood the walk ways, assault the guards ... not that there aren't some on DR that do that. But the difference is, when a DR inmate goes off, it is

because one of the guards really pushed his button. But yes, there are some who act a fool. Hell, I can be one of them. I'm not going to sugar coat it and make it seem as if I am Mr. Good boy. I try to be ... but there are times if my button is pushed, yeah, I can and will let them know the best thing they can do is go mess with someone else. But I am one that stays to myself, I know me, and they think they know me. So I go out of my way to show them respect and really say nothing to them. And the assholes who work here... surprisingly, there are very few. I just don't ever speak to. Again I know me and I have learned, why even talk to them? Does no good. So again for the most part, there are some decent people who work here. They just do their job and handle business. I cannot do anything other than respect that. But yeah, they really don't like working on the GP Ad Seg Pods.

The Guards here do everything, unlike in general population, all a guard has to do out there is open a door and send the inmates wherever they need to go, Chow hall, shower, medical, whatever. On 12 building, it is different, the guards have to take us everywhere and to do so, before all else, they strip me down, going and coming, no matter what I am not leaving this cell, or the day room, visit, or anywhere else they take me without first being stripped searched. Go to rec? Strip searched, coming back from rec, strip, going to the shower, strip, going to medical, strip, I'm a professional stripper! I can get naked in a blink of an eye! Hell, sometimes when I know they are coming for me, I am standing there naked waiting on them. I mean hell, I already know it is coming right? Just one less thing they have to tell me to do. There are some times I will have to get naked, man, 7-8 a day! But I am used to it and it don't bother me in the least. Some guys bitch and moan about it ... why? You're going to do it in the end regardless whether you want to or not. Shy? Not me. It's prison, it is a rule. Rule # 1. You're gonna mind. Rule # 2. Or else.

So that is a typical day for me, wake up, eat, work out, read, write, draw, and wait for my turn to rec and then wait some more for shower.

But yeah, the guards do everything here on 12 building, they escort us to and from rec and shower, they feed each and every cell, they pass out mail, they pick mail up, they pass out paper work. 12 Building guards are always on the move.

But then they have a different set of guards for the escort teams, they are the ones who come on the Pod and take people to visit, medical, court, etc. The guards who work on the Pod never leave the Pod unless they go break, turn in count, the restroom or if they are on the suit up team.

The suit up team is a 5 men team. They are dressed in riot gear, football type helmet, vest, shin guards, gas mask, etc. Then there is always a ranking officer or two with them. Who will repeatedly ask an inmate to come out of the cell, dayroom or give the tray back. It isn't like they just show up at an inmate's door, gas him, roll the door and run in. At least not here on DR. They may do that to guys in GP Ad Seg., but I don't think so, not on this unit. I mean once they gas an inmate, not only the inmate gets it, but it gets all over the guards as well. Get on their clothing, and that in turn gets in their car. They don't like it, so yeah, I have seen them damn near beg an inmate to come out. But there are some ... once their mind is made up, nothing short of gas and getting run in on will do. Me? Never been gassed, never will. Unless they just hit me with it to be an asshole. But I will never intentionally allow them to gas me. They tell me get naked, I will tell them, I already am! And they record each and every use of force by law.

But I have been next to guys a few times who have been gassed. And let me tell you, I thought I was gonna die! I was on fire, and that shit doesn't do anything but get hot, hotter and hotter. It gets everywhere; you cannot escape it when they're gassing your neighbor. And it lingers to so with just that little taste ... it is enough to having me standing naked waiting on them to come and get me. I want no part of it.

But I have to give it to those that can take can after can of that shit and it not even effects them. And to be gassed in this small cell? It fogs it so bad, I don't see how anyone can even breath.

I have seen some guys wire themselves up and they'll get gassed. But man, oh man, they can't wait to get handcuffed after that first blast. "I can't see, I can't see, oh man, I am on fire, I can't breathe"... Yes, they are on fire and can't breathe! But I know some that can take that shit and tell them: "In my mouth, spray it into my mouth"... And then there are some that they don't even use the gas on anymore, it has no effect on them whatsoever. Me? That stuff makes me feel as if I am dying! But for me? I am not (hopefully) ever going to put myself in a position to get gassed. I never have, so I should be good on that in the future. I have had friends tell me: "This is how you do it". I listen and listen, and say: "Yeah, sure sounds like that will work" ... But I'm going to be there standing butt ass naked if I know they are coming for me. You cannot win, I know of nobody winning. You cannot win against 5 men in riot gear. Well, I am sure there are some who can ... but I am honest with me, and I tell myself, I would be a dumbass to even try to take them on. No riot gear and no gas? I don't think I could win that either, but I would like to try a round or two of that. Just to see, you know? I have something inside me they don't. That much I do know. But in the end, they would whoop my ass. Still I think that might be worth it. One on one? Yes! But that will never happen, so I'm not about to let them beat the crap out of me ... if I can help it ... although. I did something foolish back in 2012 ... long story, too long to tell. Short version, got my ass whooped! I was handcuffed though.

Lockdown is something that happens every 90 days for 12 building. Never used to be like that but a few years ago TDCJ had a few escapes. One guy used a cell phone to have some chick come pick him up. He was in Ad Seg at another Unit, and I guess it is designed like this one. Well, he got his hands on a hacksaw blade and every time they would allow him to go outside, he would climb the bars and start sawing away. He had a plan, so one night he got out, climbed the razor wire fence without anyone seeing him had this chick pick him up and away they go ... caught them soon after.

The other one, the real serious one was with this guy who was in a wheel chair. He had a gun smuggled in and one day they took him to the free world hospital and as the guards were doing something, he pulls the gun and holds one hostage while he made the other get out. He took their clothes and gun and drove away in the van. Went to Houston of all places, that is where he was from and where very law enforcement agency in TX was looking for him. It was winter, he was hiding in a school bus, and someone I guess one of the bus drivers showed up to work that day saw him and called the police. And he took off. They caught him a few miles down the road. They said it seemed like he was happy to get caught. I guess it was too cold for him and he wanted to get back to his warm bed and get a hot meal.

So that is why we now get hit every 90 days, it isn't just Polunsky Unit, it is every Ad Seg in the state of TX. So it isn't due to just DR being special.

And now every 90 days like clockwork, they hit us, lock it down and shower every other day, 3 times a week, they feed us nothing but sack meals that wouldn't even fill up a 12 years old boy. And throughout the years the meals get smaller and smaller. I think the word they like to use is 'Budget cut'. Each sack is supposed to have a meat sandwich, a peanut butter sandwich for lunch and dinner, and some type of dried fruit, raisins or prunes. Breakfast is pancakes... They love feeding us pancakes. All week long, damn near every morning it is pancakes ... me, I like pancakes ... but not 6 days a week. I eat them anyway, eat or starve. Most guys don't even get up at 3:30 am for them, I do. Breakfast is the best meal to me, even if it is pancakes. But man, these peanut butter sandwiches ... they are anything but. Yes, they are made with peanut butter and jelly, but they take two perfectly good items, blend it all together so bad that it is a runny mess. And you can no longer taste the peanut butter or the jelly. It has this very strange taste, I just cannot eat them. I will if I am really hungry, but I will usually eat half my sandwich and drink a cup of water to hold me.

There is no rec or commissary on lockdown ... although we still get visits. And if they do allow us to make commissary, it is usually for stamps and hygiene only. So we are stuck in these cells for 7 days on a 90 day lock down, may shower just two of those 7 days, so it is a lot of time to get caught up on reading. Me? I work out, read, draw, and stare at the walls and kick myself in the ass.

When they do 'shake down', meaning hit each and every cell on each and every cell block or pod, they will do one pod at a time. On 12 building there are 6 pods, each pod has 6 sections, each section has 14 cells. So they will pull everyone out of the cell on one row A-section, put them in the showers, then start searching all their property. They go through everything, they will take our mattresses out to the hallway where there is an x-ray machine, the kind you see at an airport, as the guards are going through the cells. I have to admit, for the most part they are pretty respectful about going through our things. The only time one has to worry is when one of these miserable bitches who work here hit your cell. I have had that happen a couple of times, but for the most part they are pretty good about handling things with care. Once they are done with one row, they put the mattresses back in the cells and then take everyone out of the showers (single man showers) and put them back in their cells. They will then bounce on up two row. Once two row is done, they will bounce over to B-section two row and do it like that until they hit F-section. Once they are done with us, they will truck on over to the next cell block / pod. They can usually knock out a pod in one day, two days at most. Then all you have to do is put your cell back in order and do whatever it is you do, read, work out, write, draw, whatever. So, that will last about 7 days. After that, it is back to normal until the next 90 days.

However, there is still the 'Unit lock down' we have to deal with as well. That is when they lock the whole prison down, and it can last 21 days or longer. This is a pretty big unit. I think it houses over or right at 5000 convicts. It is big, so they do the same thing out there, hit each and every cell. But it is a bit different I would guess. I think they make them take all their crap to the gym. Guards in the gym search the convicts property while guards remain behind to clean out the cells.

For about 10 years now, they have been having us put all our property inside this red plastic crate, it is 2 ft x 2 ft. Everything you own has to fit in that box. They started this due to many guys, and I am sure, the women at the female prisons being pack rats. Everything has to go into the box EXCEPT any electrical items, shoes, one dictionary, one bible, legal work, a small amount of writing supplies. I think it's something like 6 writing pads and 150 envelopes. Electrical items are fan, typewriter, radio, headphones, booster, hot pot and night lamp. We are allowed to have two pair of foot wear, either

two pair of shoes, or two pair of boots, or one shoes and one boots. As for clothing: 2 T-shirts, 4 Boxer shorts 2 pairs of socks, 2 Gym shorts, 2 Thermal shirts and pants. These must go into the box as well.

That's about it as far as lockdown. It is dull and boring ... more so like now when I don't have a radio ... I broke it. Oh well, not the first one I have broken. I like trying to rig it up for TV. But can't do that anymore, they don't sell those kind. So since I can't listen to TV anymore, I recon this one will last me until the day they murder me or set me free. Unless they start selling a different kind that will allow me to pick up TV, if so, I will buy one. Until then this may be my last.

I do wish they sold us better art supplies. They sell us trash and those little kiddy water color sets, I make due, and some guys have mastered them, there are some outstanding artists here on DR. I ain't too bad, I know if I stuck with it I would be better, my mood comes and goes. I am going to try and stick with it this time. I was on a roll there for a while, drawing a full board almost every week, but then I hit a bump in the road of life. More like I got kicked in the nuts; so it took all the wind out of me. I was trying to help someone with some money I came in to, and she wiggled out on me over absolutely nothing and instead of doing the right thing and giving me my 535 dollars back, she kept it. Said I gave it to her ... to steal from a DR inmate who was trying to help someone is a rather low thing to do.

So, to my wonderful friends who help me, thank you. They send me their hard-earned money when they can afford to, write me, buy me books, magazines, they are what helps keep me sane. They would help me do all the things that need doing, but they don't have that kind of \$. For what they do do, I say thank you!

Speaking of friends, there are many of us, if not most, who rely just as I do, on friends to help. If it wasn't for the pen pals who come into our lives and shed some of their light in to our darkness, we would all be a little on the wild and half-crazy side. If not full blown crazy.

It is the letters, cards, friendship and helping, willing to help us any way they can, what makes a difference. It makes the world of difference between DR Seg and population Ad Seg, world of difference. Those guys have nothing and you can tell, no books, no magazines to read, no newspapers, no radio, no family writing them, no one writing them at all. So they are WILD! Sitting in these calls day after day with nothing to do but stare at the walls. No books to read, no radio to listen to, it is no wonder they are always entertaining themselves. They flood the walkways, they build fires, they assault the guards, each other, beat and bang all night long, yell, sing, go crazy. Try and kill themselves, cutting themselves up, anything for same type of attention.

But Death Row? We have many of the people out there, supporters against the Death penalty who care, who take the time to write, who will give their hard-earned money to buy books, mags and newspapers, commissary, radios etc. And that I truly believe is the dividing factor between us and Ad seg. We have things to keep us busy, to take our minds off the day most will surely have to face. We share with one another here on DR as well. One guy will have a book sent in and I assure you no less than 20 – 100 guys read that book. One guy will get 10 different type of magazines and damn near everyone will, read them, newspapers, we look out for one another when we can. Unless someone is just greedy and tight fisted. But most look out for the next man. But we are able to help one another due to you people out there who write us, who take time to reach in and offer some type of support. Some just write and then you never hear from them again. I for one understand that you folks have

lives, but still you reach in, and for that, I am sure I am speaking for everyone here, thank you, thank you very much.

It is the same way with commissary, if some guy doesn't make store, trust me, he is going hungry, once guys find out he didn't get to go or is on commissary restriction, he will not do without. We help one another when we can. Me? I prefer to help those that really need it, I always have soups and coffee for those mentally ill guys. I just have this soft spot for them. I don't let anyone fuck them over either not that there are many who would, but there are some... There are always those few who are just greedy and chumps. I used to have a friend, whom I was helping this guy, she was a goodhearted woman too, we just drifted apart. But she knows firsthand at how mental some of these guys are. I had this one guy write her ... she couldn't even understand the letter, there are some real mentally ill guys here. But yeah, it is due to our friends who write us here on DR and I'm sure every Death Row in the States, that keep us from going insane and as wild as can be.

I can just imagine how it would be here if we didn't have support from you folks out there. I already know how I would be ... I was that way in the county jail. I was pretty wild, and why? Well, for one ... I was a dumb ass at that time but also nothing to do, nothing to look at, no newspapers, no books, no letters, no TV. So I would entertain myself by fighting with the guards and inmates.

And being sentenced to death? I think if it wasn't for the support of the people out there ... this would be a place worse than I can imagine. We would be like Ad Seq, but worse, because most of us know we are going to be executed. And that would make men who have nothing to lose turn into something that these people wouldn't want to deal with. And there are 250 of us. But they would in the end, I believe realize: "Hey, we need to give them guys something to be good for, TV, free books, newspapers"... Yeah, they would not like that, but really they have all of you who write to us to thank for that! You give us, I know speaking for myself, a reason to be good. Now, I know my actions affect those that love and care for me. Granted... I can still be a dumbass, but not as often. I still get in trouble, but I try not to. I know my friends don't like hearing I am down on F-pod a level two or three where I have to stay that way for 90 days. With even less than I have now as a level one.

I am truly grateful for all my friends, the old ones who no longer write, to the ones I have now and to any I may make in the future. But anyway, writing helps keep me sane. My friends keep me sane. I care deeply for my friends as I know they do me. They share their lives with me, new born kids, grandkids, everything, they make me part of their lives. Me, a total stranger, they welcome me into their lives and share with me. And that means the world to me, more than I could ever put into words.

More about Charles Raby:
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