



Visiting the Forgotten

By Anne Scherer

A shared ministry of Rich and Marian Van Dellen

Rich and Marian Van Dellen have resided in Rochester for fifty years. They have touched the lives of many people through family and professional lives and volunteer work. Rich is a retired Mayo Clinic physician. Marian is a homemaker who, with her husband, raised four children. Rich and Marian don't sit back, they do.

The couple shares a prison ministry, but in separate ways. Marian visits inmates at the Federal Bureau of Prisons Federal Medical Center in Rochester, Minnesota, located on former state hospital grounds. Rich writes letters to those incarcerated in state prison death rows.

In her twenty-sixth year in this

type of ministry, Marian's work began in 1989, just a few years after the prison opened. The facility houses individuals who need surgery, medical or psychiatric care, as well as general population prisoners who form the work cadre. The prison population consists of people from all over the United States and some foreign countries.

Over the years, prisoners told Marian this facility is less stressful than others. Prisoners are given necessary medications and receive good medical care. They live in a room, rather than a cell. Yes, the facility is locked and enclosed by a tall fence. There are guards, lock downs and solitary confinement, if necessary, but when Marian visits she is able to shake a prisoner's hand. This is called a "contact visit." There is no glass barrier; the individual talks and Marian listens. Meetings take place in the visiting room, with two officers present. The room is also a place for family visits. Children are able to hug their fathers.

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Upon entering the facility, a visitor leaves his or her ID and keys at the desk, then walks through a highly sensitive metal detector. Those who volunteer with prisoner visitation and support (PVS) are able to bring money in a see-through bag for prisoners to buy snacks from the vending machines, but nothing else. PVS visitors never ask inmates what they have done to be imprisoned. Sometimes, the information is volunteered.

"Visiting prisoners is really good practice for being non-judgmental," Marian said. Many have few, if any, visitors. PVS brings outside human contact to someone's life. For that hour, the inmate does not feel so alone. He is able to share his life and struggles with another person—in Marian's words, human-to-human interaction.

A convict may hear about the program through the chaplain, a medical or psychiatric provider or a fellow prisoner. Advertising is by word of mouth; sometimes a poster is put up in the prison. Participation is strictly by choice. If an inmate attends, it is because he receives something from the visit. PVS visitors bring no religious or political agenda.

"It's a very small world out there," Marian stated. "I started visiting because I was asked by

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the organization to do this.” She is now the Rochester area co-coordinator for PVS. When a prisoner is referred, the staff liaison contacts Marian, who contacts a volunteer. In addition to that responsibility, she continues to visit five prisoners monthly, for about an hour each. The commitment also involves attending a mandatory training session. PVS has an annual training meeting, which volunteers are asked to attend at least every five years. There are currently four PVS visitors, including Marian. The waiting list of prisoners wanting a visitor is long. Volunteers are very much needed.

“If you are led to volunteer with PVS, just do it!” Marian said. The reservations she had twenty-six years ago no longer exist. Her children are grown and the fear factor that it would be scary to go into a prison has dissipated. “It is not as scary as one would think;

The Federal Medical Center, located at 2110 East Center Street in Rochester, Minnesota, is operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a division of the United States Department of Justice.



there is no reason to be afraid,” is a common comment among volunteers.

Rich Van Dellen began writing letters to a man on death row in 1996, and to a second man in 2006. While attending a Quaker gathering in 1996, Rich heard about a program based in England called Lifelines. Through letter writing, persons in England, Scotland and Ireland are connected to death row prisoners in the United

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States. After doing some research, Rich learned that the Church of the Brethren had a similar program called Death Row Support Project (DRSP). As a result of that program, Rich began corresponding with Demetrius at San Quentin State Prison in California. Rich has visited Demetrius twice and continues to correspond with him through letters and by phone.

Rich sends Demetrius an occasional book and a package of food every three months. Demetrius is confined to his cell for periods of twenty-three hours or more. "San Quentin is not a 'happy' place," Rich said. In 2006, Rich began writing to Marvin, who is on death row in Texas. Introductions were made through a friend who could no longer write, due to his wife becoming ill. Both Demetrius and Marvin became friends with Rich. Marvin was granted a stay of execution in 2006 because he was deemed mentally deficient. Before being granted the stay of execution, Marvin saw his mother and brother. Prior to that he had no family visits.

Over the years, the friendship between Rich and Martin grew. Marvin took a great interest in Rich and Marian's handicapped granddaughter and enclosed drawings for her in his letters. He had a spiritual renewal in prison and became a devout Christian. "Marvin loved the

Bible," Rich said. The two exchanged biblical verses and questions via mail. Marvin memorized Psalm 119. Rich and Marian travelled to Texas and visited with Marvin on two occasions. Unlike Marian's ministry, though, these visits were far from contact visits. They took place through glass and by phone. Since the Van Dellens live such a distance from the prison, they were able to visit for four hours each time. In early 2012, Marvin was given a second execution date. He wrote to Rich, wanting him to be a witness at the execution. "I felt honored to be asked to accompany him on his final journey," Rich said.

Marvin had not seen family since his first execution date. This time, he saw his son, mother, brother and three sisters and met his grandchildren for the first time. "We have not walked in their shoes" Marian said, "so we don't know why the family didn't visit." Prisoners on death row do not get many visitors. These are the truly forgotten. "I did not realize how painful loneliness could be until I got here," Rich quoted one prisoner as saying.

The day before and the day of the execution Rich visited with Marvin. Again, these visits with his friend were through glass, by phone—no touch. Marvin was executed on August 7, 2012, by lethal injection. He had

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been on death row since 1994. Afterwards, his body was taken to a church and Rich was able to touch his friend for the first time. "I grieved and still grieve for Marvin," Rich said. It is helpful for Rich to be able to write and have the opportunity to speak about this experience.

Rich wishes that he could have visited more times with Marvin, and would also like to visit Demetrius more often. Demetrius has few visitors. Anthony, from England, who is also corresponding with Demetrius, recently came to visit him.

It is not difficult to write a letter to someone. The first sentence on the DRSP fact sheet states, "If you have not had much contact with people in prison, perhaps a few suggestions would be helpful: Please forget any preconceptions or stereotypes you may have of people in prison. They have much in common with those of us outside."

Prisoners often have family. Prison is multi-racial, multi-cultural. Prisoners represent many faiths, but many also have none. The very poor and the rich are behind bars, sitting in cells in state and federal prisons and county jails. Some have been convicted justly, and some have not because of poor legal representation or prosecutors refusing to allow evidence to be submitted.

If you are poor, a court-appointed attorney is often given the case and sometimes cannot meet the needs nor give the case his or her fullest attention. Persons convicted often take plea bargains to receive a reduced sentence.

In addition to the lives of the prisoners they visit and write, Rich and Marian believe that their own lives have been enriched by the experience.

For those interested in PVS, information is available at www.prisonervisitation.org. Information on the Death Row Support Project is available at www.brethren.org/drsp/.

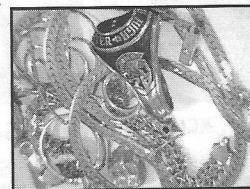


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