

“A piece of normality”

The story about a penpal-ship between a German woman and an American inmate on death row in Florida and about how this woman deals with emotional stress day by day, just to color a man’s cell with life.

Anna-Lena is biting her lip. She is nervous, her fingers dancing around her silver ring. She is turning the jewellery back and forth in her hand, while her voice fades: “For me, no matter what somebody did, death penalty isn’t the solution. Nobody has the right to kill someone.” Her eyes sink to her lap and her hand pulls back a strand of hair behind her ear.

Anna-Lena Gruenagel, a 34 year old self-reliant woman, originating from Germany sits in her Montreal backyard, telling the story of Renaldo, a 25 year old inmate in Florida. He will be facing death penalty for first degree murder. They are pen friends.

“I want to give him a little bit of normality in there”, says Anna-Lena with tears in her eyes. She is apologizing for being so emotional but the story of Renaldo always gets to her. The young inmate and she have been pen friends for 1,5 years. A thick blue folder of countless letters attests their friendship. “First I was all nervous and didn’t know how to deal with him but then I started to realize he is really only looking for a friend out there”, explains Anna-Lena as she continues to talk about “other inmates who don’t seem to be interested in a friend but in financial support from their ‘pen pals’”, she sighs.

Friendship on time

Anna-Lena is a member of Lifespark, a Swiss non-profit organization, established in 1993. Originally three women started this first experiment and by 2012 the organization had 320 members. Lifespark members have maintained 1300 pen pal-ships in the past 19 years. Anna-Lena was always looking for beneficial work, but wanted to have her own time-schedule. “I heard about Lifespark years back but forgot about it again, right until the day when I read an article in SPIEGEL ONLINE about such a penpal-ship. I had to cry when I read the article, and knew this could be my contribution to society”, she says. Since the young woman likes to write and is good at listening and against the death penalty, as she states about herself, “this was the right thing to do.” So she wrote Lifespark and they “sent me detailed material, where you can read about these penpal-ships. It’s not always easy and you have to be aware of one thing: that this pen pal-ship is limited in time.”

The inmates know about Lifespark and are desperately waiting for “a friend from out there. We also had difficult times, Renaldo and me”, she smiles and shakes her head. “I tell him about all the parties I go to, events and when I meet other men. Oh my God, he even reminds me of partying reasonable”, Anna-Lena grins and after a while her gaze slips skywards. “We also talk a lot about our childhood and how and where we grew up. His story is so different from mine”, she says in a gentle voice. Renaldo grew up in a poor black neighborhood of the Florida suburbs, with 3 brothers and sisters. He met his biological father for the first time when he was sentenced to death.

Renaldo was only 18 years old when he took the life of Villages resident Diana Miller in July 2006. Two years later, a judge has decided he will pay for that crime with his own life. Renaldo, who just turned 20 at that time, became the youngest person to join the 398 people on Florida's death row and one of the youngest men since 1976 to be sentenced to death in the US-State. He is housed at the Union Correctional Institution in Raiford, FL. Prison life for inmates on death row is even more strict than for "regular inmates". "The cells are 6 x 9 x 9.5 feet high. Inmates get meals three times a day and have to be counted every hour. They are escorted in handcuffs and wear them everywhere except in their cells, the exercise yard and the shower. The inmates may shower every other day. Death Row inmates can be distinguished from other inmates by their orange t-shirts", states the Prison Homepage.

"The hardest part is the insecurity. You don't know when your friend is going to be executed. Some inmates wait over 15 years", knows Anna-Lena from her own researches. Renaldo has been on death row for 5 years and "is studying his case in there. He hopes to find evidence for his innocence." Anna-Lena's voice breaks as she struggles to find words: "He got his death sentence the day I arrived in Canada." Tears fill her eyes, and she tries to stay calm, comforts herself with silence and wraps her arms around her upper body.

The visit

As Anna-Lena finds her speech again, she talks about her first visit in Florida. Her eyes come back to life when she talks about the moment, when Renaldo and she met for the first time in person. "As soon as he came through that door he twinkled at me and pointed at me with a huge grin on his face. He comforted me, and took away all my nervousness and fear in a second."

Anna-Lena bought a flight ticket for a weekend in Florida, rented a car and drove to Jacksonville, rented a room in a motel and prepared for the "most exciting two days" in her life, as she says. "At first I was so nervous, and I just wanted to drive to the airport and charter a plane home, but he was waiting for me", she says with a smile. The next day, Saturday, she was awake at dawn and decided to drive to the prison early. Three women were already waiting outside for the administration to open. "They open at 8:15am and before you can see the inmate you have to register and go through metal detectors." Anna-Lena's face smoothens, as she talks about how "comforting everybody was. All those women, who visit their beloved ones, talked to me and tried to distract me from my fear." She is amused by the memory, as she is speaking about one lady who was talking about the weather and flowers in her yard, "just to make me forget where I was."

Renaldo and she hugged each other and she says the feeling "was just wonderful." He took away all her fear in an instant and she says she "is very thankful for this experience." For Anna-Lena, the visit of her penpal was more like "visiting a friend, whom you didn't see for a long time." Her face lightens up when she talks about Renaldo's family. "His mom and sister were there too, they knew about me before but when his mom asked him who I was he put his hand on my shoulder and said: 'Mom, this is my very best friend, Anna-Lena.'" She leans back as her fingers find the edge of the wooden table. Her gaze is absent. After a while she continues: "They came to see him to tell him about his brother's funeral. He died of a heart attack. He was only 28 years old."

On a visiting day the inmates have 6 hours with their families. In the room with 23 tables there is a little kiosk, where you can buy food, drinks and snacks. The "Visitation Park" is painted white, no pictures on the wall, but one. A wall has been painted with a landscape scene, which is used as a background for photographs with the inmates. "It is a surreal picture – trees, grass and a field in prison. I guess the administration tries to bring a little normality into these grey walls", Anna-Lena says. Everybody has the right to bring 50 USD, so people can buy some food and pay for their photographs. When Anna-Lena starts to talk about the "frisky atmosphere, with children running around their dads, laughing and playing, wives holding hands with their husbands across the table, flirting with each other", this visit could have also happened outside of prison walls.

The end of the first visiting day arrived and Renaldo turns to Anna-Lena, his eyes big in anticipation: "You're coming back tomorrow, right?" "He knew I was coming back, he just wanted to make sure, I guess." She grins as she continues to talk about the second day: "The first five minutes were awkward, but as soon as we got used to each other again, we talked about everything and nothing. We just get along great. Renaldo has become a very good friend of mine." Suddenly, Anna-Lena sits up straight and taps on the table, wanting attention: "A funny story. Renaldo managed to burn bread in the microwave, and I had to make fun of him the whole day. Men! Also, he wanted to cook something for me that day. So I bought stuffed chicken, which was already prepared and macaroni and cheese in a bag. Turns out, the macaroni were still hard, the sauce was a mess! He was embarrassed that I had to buy something else for us to eat."

Renaldo had his appeal coming up. Since last October the appeal has been re-scheduled twice. "His latest appeal was supposed to be a few days after I left Florida, so I am sitting on needles, because he promised he would call me from court as soon as he has news." She is rubbing her fingers against each other and knocking on the wooden table in front of her, trying to hide her anticipation. "I guess they re-scheduled his appeal again", her voice cracks. Tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow his letter will come.

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