

## John Paul Minarik

### What Can A Lifer Accomplish in Prison?

I am one of the lifer-dinosaurs still in an American state prison in Somerset, Pennsylvania, after 36 years. I am innocent, but that is subject of other writings. I came to prison after already being a mechanical engineer, graduating from Carnegie Mellon University, and working for U.S. Steel in Construction Engineering. Early in 26 years at the State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh (formerly known as Western Penitentiary), I performed clinical duties in the hospital and was re-educated in college programs, in English and Psychology. I taught college courses for 20 years for the University of Pittsburgh and the Community College of Allegheny County and won awards for my writing: listed in A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers, Contemporary Authors, International Who's Who in Poetry, and more. I have contributed to literary magazines in America over the years, and I have only recently started submitting writing internationally. With five books published, two college degrees, having taught over 100 college courses to fellow prisoners, having worked as a Poet-In-The-Schools for the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, having co-founded the Academy of Prison Arts (the only prisoner-created writing program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts for a decade), being the first prisoner ever certified the National Council of Engineering Examiners (NCEE) examination as an Engineer-In-Training, becoming a full Member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (possible only after showing a minimum of 5 years of "responsible charge" of engineering work), this essay could be about accomplishments like reinforcing the laundry floor or designing, constructing, and erecting a new make-up tank for the boilers at Western's Power Plant, or about a redesign and rebuild of the coal handling system, a \$150,000.00 project we prisoners did for \$25,000.00. The green coal elevator still sticks above ~~W~~alls at Western. This writer was literally forced to design a new main gate for the prison, which we built.

This essay could be about mobile bear traps designed for the Pennsylvania Game Commission, trailer-mounted to harmlessly catch and relocate bears who strayed too close to people. After we manufactured more than 50 of them through Correctional Industries (C.I.), once a bear was loose in Carnegie, Pennsylvania. The bear defied capture. The Warden said to me one day: "Minarik, those bear traps of yours don't work." I said "Warden, the problem is the bait being used. Everyone knows donuts will only catch cops."

Or this essay could be about the four roll-over simulators designed and manufactured at C.I. for the Pennsylvania State Police, used to demonstrate seat belt safety at State Fairs. There is a letter in this prisoner's jacket from

the Commissioner of the Pennsylvania State Police, acknowledging work on that project. Or this could be about the design and manufacture of 1.5 million dollars worth of steel furniture for five new Pennsylvania prisons built by Rotondo-PennCast.

Yet one accomplishment means the most to me: starting a play area for children in a prison visiting room. In 1972, a group of students studying Child Development needed a practicum. Our idea of creating a special space for children in the prison's visiting room, a carpeted play area with toys, was unheard of at the time. Fred "Mister" Rogers, a well-known children's television personality in America, visited our class. When we could not convince the Warden to allow creation of the play area, Fred called the Commissioner of Corrections. As when Fred approached Sears & Roebuck Foundation for money to sponsor his Public Broadcasting System (PBS) show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," children of decision-makers were excited to hear how Daddy talked with Mister Rogers, so it was with the Commissioner's children. When the Commissioner called the Warden asking: "Don't you think this would be a good idea?" the only answer he could give was: "Yes." The Rogers-McFeely Foundation gave money to remove concrete-block pillars, to put down carpet, and to buy toys and toy cabinets. Prisoners studying child development served as play monitors, where we learned: to carefully observe children's behaviors, to play with puppets to elicit children's inner worlds, and to listen carefully. The idea caught on, and today, in prisons across Pennsylvania and across America, there are areas in prison visiting rooms for children to play. American academic journals acknowledge the first prison visiting room play area for children was created at Western Penitentiary. Fred Rogers was a good neighbor to the children of prisoners.

Many people do not know that this writer enjoyed a long friendship with Fred. To share one less-public story about Fred's help, when I was chosen by the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in juried competition among Pennsylvania writers to be a member of the Poets-in-The-Schools (PITS) program, there was a sticking point. The grant award did not cover the transportation costs to another prison. Suddenly, to resolve the problem, an anonymous donation to the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts appeared. Although no one would confirm this, I always believed that Fred made that anonymous donation earmarked to cover those transportation costs. When I spoke with Fred immediately afterwards, all he would say was that he hoped it would be the beginning of many good things. It was, and my teaching in PIS program continued through 1983. Fred Rogers loved me into being a Poet-in-The-Schools. This is the kind of man Fred Rogers was behind the scenes: and when I watched on television when President Bill Clinton awarded him one of America's highest honors, I thought of how Fred was a good neighbor to me. In 2003, Fred passed away. I miss him dearly, and I recommend to you his posthumous book: *The World According to Mister Rogers*.

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One of my former students published a book which was later made into a made-for-TV-movie on Showtime, and several of my former students have published extensively. What can a lifer-dinosaur accomplish in prison?

Why, he can write this essay while sitting in a prison cell, typing on a typewriter, for you to read after it crosses the Atlantic Ocean.

### Freedom For The Private Parts

I hope I still know  
what freedom is.  
I've held so much in my gut,  
and twisted the brutality  
and asshole peeking  
Into "necessary"  
that I wonder  
if I still know  
what is real.

I imagine my wife  
some night saying:  
"Bend over and spread 'em,"  
and in half sleep, I say:  
"Yes sir."

There should be a law  
on the number of times  
a man can have his asshole  
inspected for contraband.

### One Night In Bed

One night in bed,  
I met a poem;  
it made me want  
to jerk off,  
being a man  
who can appreciate  
good literature.

One night in bed,  
I met a woman;  
she made me want  
to write a poem,