

# One Small Voice Through the Wall

by Martin G. Gann

In this writing I hope to convey my experiences as they relate to two things. The first is dealing with a disability and trying to survive or exist in the Washington prison system where empathy or compassion does not exist. The second experience being the most important thing to me while I serve my time and that is my family.

I preface this writing with a short description or back ground of myself for a better understanding of who I am, where I was, and where I find myself now.

I fell 2 years ago at the age of 56. I was at the time married, am still married and have now been married for 18 years to a wonderful wife that has remained spiritually and mentally by my side. We both have children from previous marriages, but have none together. We love each other totally and she is the only stable element in my life. Therefore, she is the most important thing in my life.

I had always been an upstanding citizen and a contributing part of society. I started working when I was 14 years old and had never been unemployed until I fell. I have been a property owner and tax payer. I served my country in the U.S. Navy during the last years of the Vietnam War. I have been a member of several fraternal organizations and was an active member and participant of our church.

During my lifetime, I have worked and played around very noisy equipment. In the Navy, I worked on and around attack jet aircraft. I ran chain saws for many years cutting firewood. I shot many guns for sport. In my many years in the hydro industry I worked around extremely loud equipment. All of these items combined have resulted in a profound loss of hearing for me. I was fortunate enough to be working for a responsible employer that was able to provide me with good quality hearing aids a few years prior to being incarcerated. Without using my hearing aids it is very doubtful that I would hear well enough to understand what is being said to me. Because I had never been in any correctional system of confinement, I was not, and could never have been prepared for what I am now experiencing. That brings me to the first of the two subjects, living or existing in a correctional institution with an extreme hearing disability.

Being hard of hearing is tough enough for anyone, anywhere, anytime, but being hard of hearing in jail or prison is enough to drive a person into a constant state of nervous fear. If you don't hear or if you misunderstand something said by a fellow inmate or a corrections officer it can result in immediate reprisal or unexpected discipline. In county jail, I was denied batteries

for hearing aids. They 'allowed' me to keep my hearing aids, but refused to give me any new batteries when the ones I came in with went dead. This is like letting someone have their glasses to see, but then removing the lenses. I was finally allowed to have batteries, but only after my wife supplied batteries to be passed on to me. I then had to give up the old set of batteries and wait sometimes more than 24 hours for someone to bring me the new batteries from the properties room where they were stored. During those times without batteries to work my hearing aids, I was at the mercy of those around me to know and/or remember that I am unable to hear. I made the choice, out of fear, to mostly keep to myself to the extent I could in a small confined area with three people that was designed for two.

Even now, here in the Washington state correctional system, at times I find myself without the use of my hearing aids due to dead batteries. AHCC policy does not allow me to keep a spare set of batteries. When hearing aid batteries go dead, there is but a mere few minutes notice. They are unlike batteries in a flashlight that as they lose power they 'dim' giving me warning of the pending lack of function. To me, a spare set of batteries only makes sense. That way, I would always have hearing abilities, even while I awaited the specified times for battery exchange. Before incarceration I carried spares in my wallet, my vehicles and my wife's purse. I have been told that I cannot have any spare batteries because a person can get some kind of high from ingesting the contents of the batteries, and someone could use the batteries to energize a tattoo gun. My batteries are a mere 1/8th of an inch wide and depending on the quality will only last 5-7 days. I personally believe neither of these reasons to be true. It is my opinion that it's nothing more than a power and control decision that no one on the staff is willing to question.

At this time, I am allowed to exchange (give them my old batteries for new ones) at the issuales pill line at noon or 6 pm Monday through Friday provided the line is not too long or I am not at work, visiting or programming. Outside of these times, I am also allowed to make the exchange in the normal pill line on Saturdays or Sundays.

Additionally, there are other times that I am unable to hear. I remove my hearing aids when I'm in bed and when I go to the shower. If an emergency occurs it is during these time I can only hope that someone will let me know what is going on or that a corrections officer does not speak to me and assume by my lack of response that I am being disrespectful for which I can be punished.

When I became a ward of Washington State and I was issued a picture ID the words "HEARING IMPAIRED" were printed clearly and visibly on the bottom. This was great in that both inmates and correctional staff are aware of my disability. I have been told that the facility I am currently assigned will not add anything like this to my new ID when my original ID is no

longer usable leaving me without this simple notification. This is another example of an unreasonable restriction.

The personalities or behaviors of the officers and staff range from power hungry and narcissistic on one extreme, to somewhat compassionate and caring on the other. Fortunately, there are fewer on the narcissistic end that I come in contact with than I can count on one hand. Still, the majority of the officers and staff are heavy on the power hungry end with just a few landing on the caring end. I must say I am fortunate enough for my assigned counselor to be one of the few on the caring end. For this I am grateful and it has made a difference. Recently the 'block' or living unit I am in had a fire drill. This caring counselor made it a point to go to everyone's cell that has a hearing disability to make sure we were aware of what was happening. It never even occurred to the corrections officers to facilitate something like this.

I now move on to the second, and by far the most important subject of my writing; my wife, my family and my friends. Visit days are what I live for. I am blessed in that the location of my correctional center is about a 20 mile drive for my wife. Here at this facility, the inmates are allowed to have an approximately 3½ hour window of time for visiting each Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. As long as an inmate is not 'programming' (programming is working or going to any class or organized assignment), he is allowed to meet with his visitor(s).

When my wife and I first began visiting, we found that I could not hear or understand most of what she or my other visitors were saying due to the volume and constant chatter of the other visitors that completely surrounded us. Hearing Aids are not selective for what they amplify. They amplify all voices on all sides of you. They are not directional and therefore make crowded environments such as restaurants, meetings and informal gatherings of groups of people uncomfortable and annoying. The visiting room is exactly like a restaurant environment.

On our second or third visit, we were placed at a table in a corner where there were other people on only 2 sides out of the four. I found, or should I say, we found that being seated in this area made all the difference in the world, and we were able to carry on a somewhat normal conversation. My wife began requesting this type of seating to the assigning officer. This was accommodated several times. Then she was told by a different officer that they don't take requests for seating. After explaining the hearing situation, my wife was then told it isn't a medical reason and that there was no difference in hearing ability wherever we were placed.

I then sent a 'kite' (written communication with the staff) to the Visiting Sergeant explaining the situation and for the next three or four visits we were placed in seating that affords better hearing due to several factors (lower ceiling, acoustical tiles and other visitors

not on all sides). This was great until the Visiting Lieutenant got word of this accommodation and put a stop to it. The reasoning was that no one could receive special seat assignments except for medical reasons. We explained that lack of hearing is a medical reason to no avail. At the time there was a sign at the assigning desk explaining that a medical reason would be if a visitor or inmate had an allergy to someone's perfume. It was immediately after questioning this that we began being seated directly in the center of the visitor's room. Here again, another action of power and control for no reason.

After attempting communication with the facility superintendent my wife was so frustrated with the situation that she went directly to the Washington State head of the prisons, the Secretary. Her correspondence was directed to a designated Family Visiting Advocate. After several weeks of discussion between this facilitator and the institution a decision was made and we are now seated in the area where hearing is best accommodated. This entire process from first reasonable request to intervention took almost 5 months. During this process we felt the Family Visiting Advocate cares and her actions on our behalf made this apparent. It was not long after these events that another Lieutenant was assigned to visiting and she did everything possible in her short tenure (she has recently been transferred to another facility) to make the visiting environment more efficient and friendly for all. My wife currently serves on the local facility visitors committee and is working directly with the staff in attempting to improve the atmosphere in visiting, but in all aspects for maintaining the inmate and family connection during incarceration.

A couple of months ago another situation that relates to family and visiting came about and is still ongoing. I was and am currently employed in a correctional industry job working in the optical division making glasses. My hours of work are 7 am to 3 pm Monday through Friday with some sporadic overtime until 5 pm and some Saturdays. Until a couple of months ago I was also attending college credit classes studying interactive multi-media and the 3 other required support classes. I have maintained a 4.0 average for these classes for which I am very proud of my accomplishment. Once I began working, the I-media class available to me was Monday through Friday evenings from 6:20 pm – 9:15 pm. I had been regularly excused from Friday evening class by the teacher to go to my regular visits with my wife and friends as the visiting time and class time on Friday coincided. I never missed an assigned deadline despite attending these visits.

One day an internal memo went out to all work locations and schooling advisors stating that inmates cannot be excused from 'programming' to attend visiting. At this time, my class instructor regrettably informed me that if I did not show up for class on Friday evenings that I would suffer the consequences of an 'infraction'. Since this class was not required I was forced to drop the class in order to keep my record clean from any infractions and to be able to visit

with my family and friends. I was put in the situation of making a choice and naturally my family comes first. I am still actively pursuing my return to this educational class, but on a Monday through Thursday basis with needed family and friend visits on Fridays. This is a cumbersome and time consuming grievance process for something that seems such a 'no brainer'. That being, let an inmate that is not only working fulltime, but is also using his down time to further his education and nurture the family relationship to its fullest continue to accomplish all these things as he has been.

My wife and I continue to work toward improving these situations not only for ourselves, but the others that find themselves in similar situations. If only a few narcissistic individuals could be moved to positions where they can't abuse their power and control these strides to improve the outcome of incarceration would be so much easier.