

Death Sentence.

By J. David Brackett

6.11.2020

My name is Joseph David Lee Brackett. I am currently 47 years old. Since the age of 16 I have been sentenced by Judges in five Separate States to a cumulative total of over 75 years in prison for crimes that I have (and have not) committed. I am not proud of my "record," but it is a reality that I have come to face. I do not consider myself to be a "career" criminal, or for that fact, a criminal at all; although, understandably, you would likely disagree. This story here is but one of my many experiences throughout the years that I have spent in prison. Only the names have been withheld-or altered- to protect the guilty. The rest is entirely (and verifiably) the truth.

The year was 2003. I had been transferred to Everglades Correctional Institution in Miami, Florida for the 2nd half of a prison sentence I was then completing. I had signed up for the "first-ever" Faith-Based Initiative Program created under then Governor Jeb Bush and his brother, U.S. President, George Junior. I'd had no idea where I would be sent to and, to be entirely forthright, I'd signed up for the program simply to get away from Calhoun Correctional- a podunk, backwoods camp that I'd been stuck in for way too long up in the panhandle. The faith-based program under Chaplain Lam and Chaplain Glau (2 truly exceptional men) was a "life-changer" for me by the way, although this writing is not about that experience.

Arriving at Everglades C.I. was just like you see in the movies- of which, it has featured in one or two of its own films if I'm not mistaken. Parked at the edge of the swamp on the outskirts of Miami, the night sky of the prison glowed bright from the lights of the Micosoukee Gambling Casino 'right next door'- and hummed with the thrum of mosquitos that swarmed through its thick tropical air. The compound itself was fenced off and controlled by gated guard entries into four separate parts: the yard on the East side, the housing

units for the main compound sandwiched in the middle, and Administration, Medical, and the Kitchen/Dining Hall buildings located on the West side. There was also a separate housing complex attached directly to the North of Medical if I recall the layout of the compound and my directions correctly.

The dorms were ovens in the summer and at night, great beads of sweat rolling off the body would wake you up with their tickle-if insects crawling on you didn't-every 20 minutes or so. There were heavy gauge screens (and, of course, a layer of bars) covering the open windows, barely letting in a breath of air, but still not stopping anything that slithered or crawled from getting in. The main compound was large... but these places all become a blur over the years. I think there were close to 2,000 inmates there at the time, with 800 or so being housed separately in the Mental Health-or what we inmates all referred to as "the Bug"-unit, located in the North side housing complex. A good many of those inmates (or, "bugs") were infected with HIV. This, I do know, because I had been assigned to work as a "medical orderly" shortly after arriving at Everglades C.I., much to my chagrin. Nobody in their right mind wanted to work in Medical at that Prison.

"Medical" consisted of a large waiting room, an infirmary with 8 hospital beds, 2 isolation cells, a triage, a pill dispensary, a nurses station and, 2 separate officer stations. There was at least one nurse and one detail officer (but generally 2) on duty at all times. The nurses were mainly Haitian, the officers mainly Hispanic, and the inmates a motley "chex mix" of just about every race of human being under the Sun. Typical Miami-or, typical "South Florida". The only good thing about being a medical orderly was that the entire building was centrally air-conditioned. I ended up spending as much time there as they would let me-especially during the Summer.

MRSA - methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus Aureus* - or, antibiotic resistant Staph infections, had started to rear an ugly head about this time... before anybody really knew what it was I think. I recall a single-man bunk directly in front of mine back in the dorm in particular. We (inmates) all believed that a brown recluse spider lived "somewhere" inside the bunk because guys (3 in a row that I specifically remember) all ended up as patients in the infirmary after developing large festering "cysts" on their bodies within a week or two of sleeping in that bunk. A few of us in the dorm would always warn the "new arrivals" to that bunk to 'check it for spiders' before they got settled in... which did absolutely no good of course. I also remember being called in as an orderly one evening to clean up the triage after a visiting physician had "operated" on a football-sized cyst that a guy had developed on his leg from a MRSA infection. Gross hardly describes my duties that night.

There were four inmates actually assigned as orderlies to work at medical. Sometimes it would be just one of us there. At other times it was a job that all four of us could barely handle together. I will say that we were, at least, all well-trained and, for the most part, provided with ample protection to prevent the spread of infections. We received intensive - as well as continuing - education in bloodborne pathogens, infectious control methods, and everything else that was necessary to handle biohazardous materials. I had even received a free hepatitis vaccination when it was offered while I was there. Next to the triage, across from the nurses station (which itself was attached to the infirmary - but separated by a Dutch door) were the isolation cells... concrete cubes with thick plexiglass fronts and nothing but a floor drain and a stainless steel toilet/sink combo jutting out from a wall in each cell. It amazed me how often one of us orderlies were required to "suit-up" to go into one of those cells and clean off fecal matter that had been smeared over the walls and floor by an inmate who had "nuttled-up"

in one of them prior to being transferred to another (generally, higher Security) prison. To be forthright, Some of the things I witnessed occur inside those two cells defy explanation and are unmentionable - even here.

Mr. Brown was already a permanent patient in the infirmary by the time I was assigned to work there. He was an older black inmate who, as I recall, had a life Sentence and was terminally ill with Some form of Stomach cancer. I remember one of the other orderlies telling me that Mr. Brown's children had petitioned for his release about 6 months or so before he died, but for whatever reason, the Florida Department of Corrections refused to let him go. I ended up writing a poem (after being asked) for a eulogy Service Conducted for him by the inmates at the chapel after he'd passed away; although, to be honest, other than recalling him to be a very quiet and kindly old man, I barely knew the guy.

In retrospect I realize now that Everglades was a pretty wild Camp. I recall one time that one of the "bugs" got loose on our side of the compound, Stripped down butt-naked, Somehow Sealed up onto a rooftop of one of the housing units, and ran around up there shaking his willie and hysterically Screaming like a banshee at everybody for Several hours before they finally captured and Subdued him. Another time I Watched helplessly on the other side of a locked gate as an inmate Slid an 18 inch lightning rod out of his pants and completely ran it through a female Officer more times than I care to recount here. They airlifted her to a hospital, but I'm pretty Sure she was declared dead on arrival. There's a lot of Stuff you try really hard to forget you ever Saw or heard happen inside of prison. For me, this is one of those things. Her Screams that day have left a Scar upon my soul.

The prison ran "pill call" out of Several windows from a locked dispensary inside the medical building. They'd run the main compound

to chow at the same time they were running pill call for the "bug unit". Both buildings (medical and, the dining hall) being located directly across from each other and not separated by any type of barrier - so there was a lot of "mingling" between the 2 populations even though we were housed separately. There'd be a 100 guys - or better - at a time standing in the pill call line - day or night. Every month or so our Detail Officer would escort two of us orderlies inside the "pill room" so we could sweep up all the pills that the nurses had dropped on the floor - dozens upon dozens of them - of every shape, size and color. I remember being amazed by the size of some of them - as big as my thumb I swear. But what surprised me the most was the sheer "amount" that some inmates were given to take - two handfuls is not a stretch to say. I often thought that these guys were perhaps "guinea pigs" for the "cocktails" of medication they were being issued in order to keep them alive.

At 30 years old - and still very naive at the time - HIV was terrifying to me. In the "Chin gang", HIV is often referred to as "that shit", but amongst us orderlies you would likely hear us refer to it as "that ninja" - because of the sudden, severe, and - most often - violent way it would show up in someone as AIDS. In my time there at Everglades C.I. I witnessed HIV turn horribly into AIDS, and I watched as those prisoners died horrifically from it. It was a death sentence declared upon them that could hardly be described with words. I grew to hate this wasting disease as it robbed those men of every ounce of their being, right up until their very last breath.

Carlos Rodriguez came onto the compound a couple of months before Mr. Brown died. He was a high ranking, highly regarded member of a South American cartel whose name I'd care not to mention here. The prison administration shut down the entire compound the day that he arrived - something I had not seen before (nor since then) - backing the transport van they brought just him

in right up to the front door of medical for him to Step off. The on-duty nurse had directed me to get his weight as soon as he came in the door, so I'd carried the Scales up to the waiting room and was sat there waiting for him to arrive. He was given a Walker by the transport officer as he stepped out of the Van and he seemed to intuitively know that we wanted his weight because he made straight for the Scales on his own accord. He was somewhere between 40 and 50 years old, covered in pride, prison ink, and the dry hard husk of one having spent a good many years of his life in prison. And he weighed, as I remember it, exactly 150 pounds. He then shuffled his way down the corridor to the infirmary where he chose his bed in the far corner - next to the restroom - which is where he remained until he passed away in the middle of the night some 6 months later.

How do I describe those last 6 months of Carlos' life with brevity of words? Or can I? Would I have treated him any differently - done anything at all different - if I had known on the day of his arrival that he'd simply been transferred there for us to take care of until he died? I just don't know. He spoke no English, or at least, he refused to, and he owned nothing but an old Bible and a few scraps of paper - rare for someone who'd been locked up for over 2 decades (as I understood it). Every now and then he'd receive a couple "visitors" from the Compound, but these meetings were furtive and discreetly conducted through undisclosed pre-arrangement with the Detail Officer for sure. He refused every form of assistance that he was offered - even that from his own people. As for my relationship with him, I believe I recognized a kindred spirit - one which stubbornly refused to accept defeat in the face of overwhelming odds - and I couldn't help but like the guy from the moment I met him. A month or so after his arrival, Carlos barely possessed the strength to get out of bed, let alone use his walker, so most mornings I would

go up to medical, help him get out of bed and dressed, and sit him in a wheelchair - and put his Bible in his lap. He'd boss my bumbling Caucasian butt around with curses (I'd imagine) rumbling deep from inside his chest the whole time in a Spanish dialect I barely understood. He called me "Cubano" (one from Cuba) after the few Spanish words and phrases I was attempting to learn and speak from the dominant culture there at the prison. I discovered that he'd contracted HIV through receiving a prison tattoo - which he often pointed to or rubbed on his left forearm, shaking his head and repeatedly saying, "Cubano, No"; his way of telling me I suppose, never to get prison ink. The man that he'd contracted the disease from I also learned, was long since dead from it.

I remember there was a nurse who always presciently knew about a week or so before Carlos' condition - which deteriorated in "stages" is as best as I can describe it - would take a turn for the worse. One day she said to me, "Brackett, you're not going to be able to keep sitting him in that wheelchair honey, he's not going to have the strength to hold himself up." So the next afternoon, without obtaining permission from any of the nurses first, I wheeled Carlos out onto the main compound, bought us each an ice cream, and pushed him out to the yard for nearly an hour of fresh air and sunshine. Three things I remember about that day: the cordial throng of Hispanics who practically overwhelmed us both the whole time we were out there; Carlos smiling for the first - and only - time I ever saw him smile; and, he ate all of his ice cream. Well, there are four things I remember now come to think of it: hearing our names called out over the loudspeaker system (which was never used) to "return back to medical" - and the butt-chewing I received when we got back there. The Detail Officer sat and scowled at the floor the whole time the 2 nurses yelled at me, but he didn't write me up and I was able to keep my "job". Truth be told, he was in on my little escapade and the butt-chewing was well worth it. But, as predicted, Carlos didn't get out of bed the next day. Or the one after that. In fact, other than to move

him back and forth to the restroom to use the toilet or take a bath. I never Sat Carlos in that wheelchair again.

There was no tv or any other real Source of entertainment in the infirmary and with all, or most, of the lights turned off (as they generally were) it was quite dismal in there. When I wasn't doing much of anything I'd go sit in the wheelchair next to Carlos' bed and read to him from the tattered Spanish Bible he'd arrived with. I'm Sure my Slow, mutilated Spanish was about all he could Stand to hear, but every now and then when I'd pause in my reading and look over at him, his head would nod slightly - his eyes closed as they often were - and he'd mumble something almost imperceptibly - for me to carry on: "Siguele Cubano... Continue. Toward the Start of the fourth month, Carlos no longer possessed the Strength to feed or bathe himself and I personally began Spending a lot more time caring for him. More often than not I was the only one he would eat for - turning his head and pursing his lips together with a grunt was always his way of Saying he was done eating. Like I Said, he rarely Spoke, but he grew even quieter as his end drew near.

We orderlies had mastered, amongst other things, the art of Changing bed linen without ever removing the patient from the bed. I remember one day I was called up to medical to Salvage a Situation between Carlos and Ricky J. - another orderly who'd become a good friend to me. As best as I can relate it here, Carlos had become completely incontinent at this Stage and Ricky, who was in the process of Changing Carlos' bedsheets, had become infuriated with Carlos who'd had a rather large and messy bowel movement just moments after Ricky had changed his linen. In response to Ricky's outburst, Carlos had Summoned the Strength to fling his underwear in Ricky's direction, making the mess Considerably Worse to Clean up - and - trapping Ricky in the restroom to where he'd retreated (and was cornered by a Still angry Carlos) until I

arrived. As I've previously mentioned, the flinging and smearing of fecal matter was a common occurrence, not just in the isolation cells, but there inside the infirmary as well. I can only rationalize in my mind, at least with the HIV patients we had that is, that "this" was the only way they could "act" out their horror and frustration in finding themselves suddenly and completely incontinent... helpless in themselves to even clean it up. It certainly did not make matters any easier or more acceptable for us at the time, but it is my only understanding of why they would so often do this. Anyway. After that incident with Carlos and Ricky, it was decided by all of us orderlies to keep Carlos from that time forward in a diaper in order to make the entire situation easier for us all. Carlos, of course, had no say-so in the matter, but after that, he almost entirely retired himself into a world of his own creation. I've never spoken on the matter until now, but mysteriously, word of the incident must have somehow leaked out onto the compound because shortly thereafter, my friend Ricky J. had 2 black eyes and a busted nose and never came back to work there in medical. He never would speak on the matter to me and he was released shortly afterward. Such is the way of things in the "Chaingang".

For the last six weeks or so of Carlos' life, he was placed on an IV drip by the medical staff and I was thereafter no longer permitted to feed him - not even ice cream. He lay there motionless, eyes closed, arms folded across his chest in a hug - barely drawing in a breath. I'd often find myself checking him, feeling his body temperature, just to see if he was still alive. He would moan, a deep low rumble in his chest if he wanted anything which, in varying degrees of interpretation, only I seemed to be able to understand. Often, I would be summoned up to medical by a particular nurse who, for some reason or another, could not stand to hear him lay there and moan (but could never figure out what he wanted). Generally he simply wanted a couple pieces of ice to suck on, or for his position to be adjusted. Other times I think he just wanted for

Someone to fuss over him. Or maybe he just simply wanted some ice cream. The infirmary was equipped, thankfully, with what I can only imagine were relatively expensive hospital beds, having all the bells and whistles one might expect for the provisions of patient comfort and care. If I harbor any one resentment toward the nursing staff, it is because they flat out refused to administer a catheter to Carlos after he was placed on an IV drip which, in the balance of his state of incontinence, left his diaper perpetually saturated. Instead, they issued to us (orderlies) a "condom catheter" with instructions on its administration - and - the ultimatum to utilize this method or be prepared to have to continually change Carlos' diaper. In retrospect, it is difficult for me to refrain from judging whether it was "right or wrong" for them to require such action from us, especially in its presentation as an ultimatum as it were. What I can say however, is that I believe myself was to become a better man as a result of the entire experience and, in the words of Forrest Gump, "that's all I got to say about that."

Carlos didn't have "that ninja" because death did not come suddenly - or quickly - for him, and it certainly did not come easy. But then again, I can't say that death came easy for any of the infected prisoners that I met in this experience of mine there at Everglades. The ones I'd see in the pill call line all had that same tell-tale "look": gaunt and ghostlike, eyes flatly gazing out at a world that no longer existed for many of them. Some, but only a small memorable few, were still social animals, shucking and jiving, hooting and hollering and carrying on - as I'm sure they always had - as if they were going to live forever. And maybe some of them did. Then there were the ones who would "go off" their meds - refusing to take the cocktails that had been prescribed to them. And that is when "that ninja" always struck. One day they would be "fine", the next, they'd be deathly ill and a patient in the infirmary. And if they didn't resume taking their medication, they'd be dead within a few days.

after that. Thankfully most of them could be talked into going back on their medication. I do remember about a month or so before Carlos passed away one was admitted to the infirmary from the bug unit who, for all intent and purpose, had simply had "enough" and was just ready to die. And die he did. I don't think he even lasted a full week in there. These prisoners died violently at the end, as though possessed by a demon... Screaming, vomiting and convulsing all the way up until their very last breath. Once "it" began, what we orderlies referred to as "the death walk," they'd be dead within a few hours after that. I've often wondered how many of them knew it would end for them like that. I personally never imagined that such a death was possible and I've even questioned myself on occasion, whether the horror of it all was some figment of my imagination. But I know it was not. Less than a month after Carlos had passed away, I remember being called up to medical early one afternoon to assist with an inmate who'd just been admitted from the bug unit and who was already in the throes of a violent death by the time I arrived. Fortunately, he was the only patient we had at the time. As I rounded the corner and saw through the row of corridor windows into the inside of the infirmary, I recall seeing him lurch from bed to bed, screaming with his head thrown back, and then projectile vomiting before collapsing onto another bed in a series of full-bodied convulsions. Falling quiet, he'd lay still for a short time - before standing to begin the same process over again - and again - and again. Several hours later, he expired. I remember being disturbed with myself for being thankful that he had finally died. It was a death I would wish upon no man. And what a horrific mess it was to clean up afterward. We orderlies would often quietly discuss such things amongst ourselves. We reached a conclusion which, to this very day, I continue to ascribe to - wrong though it may be: that these "instances" went beyond refusals to take medication... that these particular individuals had continued to engage in sexual activities which caused them to be exposed to (and resultantly infected with)

a different "Strain" of HIV than that which they were already infected with, and which resulted in a "Super-Strain" infection... Something very much different - although every bit the same - as the one which Carlos suffered from. As matters such as these were never explained to us by the medical Staff, this was the sum of our "chaingang" rationale and conclusion for all that we witnessed while working as orderlies there in Medical at Everglades C.I. in the earliest years of this 3rd millenium.

The night Carlos passed away I lay tossing and turning miserably on a mattress that was damp with the muggy sweatbox of a late South Florida summer. I'd just drifted off to a doze when the Dorm Officer lightly shook my feet around 1 a.m. and I thought, at first, it was a dream when he asked me if I'd get up and go to medical. A short while later (15 minutes - but it seemed like just a few seconds) he returned and woke me again, saying that the duty nurse was asking for me. Carlos must be moaning again I thought as I got dressed.

The nurse was planted at the Dutch door to the infirmary when I arrived, belting out off-key verses to "Amazing Grace" at the top of her lungs. I was, at first, embarrassed for her and my initial thought was to wonder how Carlos was supposed to be able to sleep with her carrying on like that. She was crying - huge tears streaming down her face - and a glance at the frazzled Detail Officer pacing in the outside corridor told me that she'd been wearing on his patience with her ineptitude for more than just a short while. A defibrillator was sitting on a patient table positioned in front of her. At that time, as I understood it that night, the Florida Department of Corrections had a "resuscitation policy" in place - 3 attempts were required by medical Staff to revive an inmate by defibrillation whose life had expired. Clearly the nurse was having great difficulty dealing with 'the moment' and had lost all nerve to follow through with this redundant - and often inhumane - policy. For this I was truly thankful. Every light

was burning and I remember it being so bright in there that it hurt my eyes as I turned to look at Carlos. He lay there, his forehead glistening with fevered sweat; he was frothing slightly at the mouth and his arms were bent with his fists clenched over his chest. He seemed to be convulsing but it was difficult to tell. He'd weighed 96 pounds a few weeks before when I'd last carried him over and placed him on the scales, so he was nothing but skin and bone at this point. He was struggling just to draw breath and I realized then that he'd be dead within the hour.

I remember my first reaction was anger and I yelled at the nurse, demanding that she tell me why it was like this with him. She straightened up enough to strangle out a response that settled it for me: "Because he's fighting it, Sugar. He's always fought it. He just won't let go." The man had a heart like no one I've ever known. I went and wet a towel with cool water and sat next to him in the wheelchair I'd kept by his bed. The nurse resumed her singing and the Detail Officer returned to his pacing in the corridor outside. I rocked the wheelchair back on its two big wheels and locked the brake - a balancing maneuver I'd mastered over the past several months of sitting next to him in it - and began wiping his forehead and telling him - in English and Spanish both as best I could - that he'd put up a good fight, but that it was time now for him to let go... that it was okay for him to let go.

I wish I had some magical words to describe to you how Carlos' life ended, but I do not. I covered and held his trembling, clenched fists with my hand and I sat there wiping his face, cooling his forehead and talking to him until I felt his spirit leave some 40 minutes later. I told the nurse when it was over with and I stayed and spoke with her, consoling her (I like to think) until the sun came up and the coroner arrived. At that point, I was no longer permitted to be there so I left. Walking back

to the dorm, the morning Sun warmed my neck and Shoulders and I remember Smiling up at the Sky and feeling oddly glad to have met this man I hardly even knew - but had greatly Cared for - named Carlos Rodrigues.

I left Everglades C.I. on April 9th 2004, with all the maturity of a man - and those Skillsets which accompany manhood - as necessary for me to Successfully reintegrate into Society upon my release. Never was I coming back to "this"! Yet here I am again, Writing of this experience while(now) in my tenth year of captivity for a 2011 Fulton County, Georgia conviction by jury trial... with a maximum release date of 2031. What I have gained and lost in the interim is a novel unto itself and this is not the proper forum for that. On this note, what I can tell you is that with nearly ten years "in" and ten years "Still to go", it's been tough for me. I confess that I have considered death a far more appealing alternative on more occasions than I care to recount here. That Sort of tough. But my experience there at Everglades is Something that I remain thankful for. Because my friend Carlos has Stayed with me the whole way - refusing to let me give in or give up. "Siguele Cubano", he says to me. Continue!

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Correspondence Welcome.

1 Corinthians 16:14

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