

DOIN' TIME

It's 3pm, shift change. I'm locked in my cell, but if I press my face against my rust stained screened window I can make out the wrinkled uniforms of the guards as they drag themselves out the prison gates. They're slumped over still carrying a piece of this place with them.

Officers are tethered to this place with golden handcuffs. Most prisons are located in small rural towns with limited job opportunities. Correctional officers don't need any experience or quantifiable skills; high school diploma and a heartbeat suffice. Their union guarantees them a living wage and excellent benefits, but all that stability comes at a price.

Prison guards have some of the highest rates of depression and suicide. Their life expectancy is worse than that of an inmate after release. You don't think they're counting down the years until they earn their freedom? Or do you believe they dreamt of growing up to work as a glorified babysitter checking ass cracks for contraband? They know prison changes them -- the only question is how much?

I think I heard it best by an officer close to retirement, 'We're surrounded by society's garbage for decades. We witness or are subject to violence and manipulation on an almost daily basis; until we're numb to it. The other day an inmate killed himself by pulling out his own guts. All I could think was, I wonder what's for lunch? That's not normal. That's some PISD-type shit.'

They're so miserable I almost feel sorry for them. They never laugh and hardly smile. I wonder if that's part of their training -- look hard and they'll leave you alone. At least we can find joy in the mundane: a game of cards with our friends, a call with our family, commissary, a walk in the yard, etc. Although, I don't allow myself to pity them; they choose to be here.

In prison, I see pain and suffering in the eyes of everyone regardless of the color of their uniform. These walls have dark magic capable of taking so much from a man, any man. So, I pray for ALL of us. I hope we can all leave this place as soon as possible.

The reality is we should be looking for ways to work together and make this place more bearable and lessen the damage. If we could only humble ourselves and see each other as the poor, ignorant, bastards we all are -- put our humanity first -- then maybe, one day, I could look out my window and see happiness and hope in the eyes of everyone.

By Leo Cardez | Permission granted to edit as necessary; no further approval needed.

