

ALL MY FRIENDS ARE FELONS
By: Jeffrey McKee, Washington State

"Hey Jeff I saw your buddy get out!" Benny shouts as I hang up the phone. "I know I just got off the phone with TJ" who is sitting in the prison parking lot. "TJ said he saw Derek walk out with some boxes then went back in." I reply. "Probably went back to hug the guards goodbye" said Brian. And with that we saluted the end of an almost 30 year sentence.

I met Derek in the law library of Stafford Creek Corrections Center in 2007. At the time we were of about four prisoner "legal beagles" in Washington State, known for challenging the prison administration through the courts and various state representatives. As a result we have been transferred numerous times to various prisons, a practice commonly known as "diesel therapy", crossing paths over the next decade.

These last six months I have been encouraging Derek to keep up the good fight in getting out of prison. He had been held nine years forty days past his early release date and was beginning to doubt he would ever get out of prison. While trying to encourage him I was battling my own future and doubt of release.

A few days before Dereks release while we were walking the prison yard he told me "until last week I didn't think I would ever get out. I have been where you are. But you will one day walk out the prison gate." He gave me some good common sense advice then said "knock off your shit, quit screaming at the sergeant, forget about cleaning supplies and other irrelevant shit. None of that matters, only you walking out the prison gate." I hate it when he's right.

I met TJ in a private prison in Arizona in 2006 when Washington State transferred several of its prisoners due to the then prison overcrowding. TJ, myself, and two other legal beagles were speaking out against the prison doctor who was molesting us and others under the guise of medical care or by direct threat of segregation. The warden requested and paid for our return to Washington where we were separated because, according to the Corrections Counselor, we "are to litigious." TJ was released about ten years ago.

TJ, after picking up Derek, drove across the state to Seattle, where they spent the night in a hotel. Derek was required to report to his Community Corrections Officer (CCO) the following day and provide an address where he would be living for approval.

Derek made plans to stay at Karl's house until he could get readjusted to society and off Community Custody, Washington States form of probation.

Karl was my former cell mate at Coyote Ridge Corrections Center (CRCC) between 2012-2014. He was released to Community Custody in 2014. I have called him every Saturday since and we have stayed good friends.

When Derek submitted his proposal to stay at Karls' his CCO said it sounded like a stable place but he would have to be homeless until his and Karls' CCO could have a meeting the following Monday.

So Derek spent the week renting hotels at night and spending his days with Karl learning technology, creating a resume, and learning how to drive again.

I happened to call Karl while he was giving Derek his driving lesson. Karl was very patient with Derek explaining how to parallel park and not run over the hordes of homeless people roaming the street.

The following week Derek's CCO denied his proposed living arrangement telling him he would have to roam the streets at night and could not stay in the same spot for more than 24 hours.

I called Joe and told him about the situation. Joe picked Derek up and helped him get a truck so he would have better transportation and a place to sleep at night.

I met Joe at CRCC in 2011. He was the best prison chef I had ever known and we bonded over time. We had discussed and planned for years to start a company that helps prisoners re-entergrate into society, providing housing, individualized treatment, and employment. Joe was released in 2019 and has been working to put the company together.

After about two months Derek was approved to transfer his Community Custody to the other side of Washington where he is living in a camper, on his own property, he purchased from one of his former cell mates who had been released over a decade ago.

The friends I had prior to going to prison stopped writing and answering my calls after my third year in prison. I doubt any of them had ever been to prison, let alone had a felony conviction.

The friends I have met in prison have stayed close through distance and time. It may be the common bond of understanding a world many have never known. It may be the close personal space you share with each other twenty-four hours a day seven days a week forcing you to get to know the true person. Maybe a little of both.