

## **Clotilde's visit report**

When I arrived, Gloria, my friend from Houston, offered to drive me from the airport to Huntsville, where Roger's prison is located. Huntsville is a small town about one-hour drive from Houston. It is called the "city of prisons" because there are at least seven prisons in this city and a big part of the inhabitants work there!

I spent two nights in the "Hospitality House" - a free home for families of prisoners when they come to visit. This house is run with care and kindness by the volunteers of a local Baptist parish. It's a place where you feel like you're in a big family.

I had to wait in a line for 30 minutes in the cold before entering, passing the metal detector and a careful search - as it should be - with guards doing a verification of the ID, before heading to the visiting room.

Then, there is always a waiting time while the prisoner comes to the visiting room, which allows us time to buy something from the vending machines to offer him a 'mini meal' (chips of all kinds, dried meat or sausage, mini cake, chocolate bar, beverage, etc.). Then we are directed to a numbered place in the visiting room. Roger is radiant. Our hands and foreheads on each side of fine wire mesh. We are so happy to meet again!

And here, we go on for four hours of nonstop conversation. I am always amazed that we have so much to tell each other! We are talking about friends and family, our lives, politics, environment problems, his life in prison ... passing from laughter to deep reflection, from lightness to intimacy. Roger is always aware of the latest world news. And he has an amazing general knowledge. He spends hours reading the dictionary!!!

Unlike my previous visits he was much less focused on the difficult living conditions in the prison. He has become much more peaceful since the prison changed to a new Warden, and as his fellow prisoners gather around him in support of his actions of solidarity and brotherhood.

The climate of the wing of his building has totally changed, from a habit of forming clans, gangs and acting with violence, to a functioning based on mutual aid and support, without expectation of anything in return. It may sound unbelievable, yet it is this energy that Roger was able to instill, and which is spreading like wildfire in the prison.

He of course talked about these meals (Spreads) organized, once a month, by the small group of friends he gathered, served to all the prisoners in his section, thanks to the financial contributions of his International Support Group. I laughed a lot about his pizza recipe! (They have no flour or oven but make pizzas for over 100 people !!!). It's amazing the inventiveness of a human being!!!

Of course, there are "resistant", prisoners who are unable to understand and embrace this approach which is so unusual and full of brotherly love - because love scares many of the guys around him. Most have only experienced violence, abuse, and poverty.

But many prisoners join to support these much-needed initiatives. However, mentalities are not easy to change. Thus, the last time, the "organizers" of the Spread needed 3 tables to make and present the feast, a prisoner did not want to leave the table where he was sitting. The desire of many of them was to get it through violence but Roger objected immediately explaining that doing that would be in contradiction to the spirit of the shared meal.

While we were talking, one of his friends came to the visiting room. He has his cell in another wing and is responsible for the month-end shared meal in this part of the prison. They exchanged a few words. To see the respect that this man had for Roger was really touching. Roger is respected for what he gives off, for what he is and affirms in his daily life, but also because he comes from death row and, after so many years in that infamous place, he kept a cool head and open heart. Many guards also respect him and call him by his first name. Roger is amazingly aware of what he is experiencing and generating around him, with great humility.

Conversation is sometimes difficult when the visiting room fills up and the decibels of the general hubbub increase too much.

The next day my visit was similar to the first, with sometimes more personal conversations. But still much light in this exchange of incredible intensity.

Each time I have these meetings with Roger, with another culture, with other sufferings, it leaves an imprint that opens my heart and my conscience to more light.