

## **Report by Monica Pejovic and Walter Myers on their visit with Roger McGowen on May 4 and 5, 2019 at Wynne Unit, Huntsville, Texas**

At our age of 81 and 87, we had almost given up on visiting Roger again, but it was thanks to the generous offer of Beatrice and Pascal Bernard to organise the whole journey that this much-longed-for encounter could take place.

We never quite know how a visit is going to turn out. The strict formalities of entering Wynne Unit are sobering to say the least, and the waiting always sets us to wondering if the meeting will ever be really friendly or fruitful. But at last we are let into the final room and there sits Roger half way down the line of meeting areas — smiling and pointing to the two empty seats on the other side of the glass-and-mesh separation. We are relieved; yes, it's going to turn out to be "just fine".

Roger looked great, in fact better than he ever has for the past twenty years Monica has known him — sporting a full beard, slightly-dark glasses and a wide, welcoming smile. Is this due to his daily talks with Ron, the regular visits by Beatrice and Pascal, the unfailing support by Pierre, the visits from the international group members or the many dedicated French people, or from his niece, Shamace, who seems to remain the only visiting family member? Or could it be from the respect he now enjoys at the prison? His smile was quite large enough to cover all the possibilities.

For him, the conditions in Wynne Unit, have gone from worse to better; now fellow inmates are benefitting not only from his generosity, but also from having pen-pals, and, most interestingly, having the now-famous, monthly, get-together-meals called "Spreads" attended by over a hundred inmates at a time! The preparation has become a real "community endeavour". Roger tells us that overly large pizza bases are prepared by first crushing potato-chips, adding various powdered soups, and water, and then putting the batter-like mixture back into a cleverly-folded, plastic potato-chip bag, where it's heated in the boiling water from their coffee-pots. After squeezing out the excess water, the resulting dough is pressed and spread out in a large circle, and covered with canned corned beef, ketchup, cheese, some spices — and even noodles!. At this point in the incredible description, we are all doubled up in laughter.

Roger went on to relate that inmates are actually competing to make these "pizzas" better each time. Some amateur bakers are now also adding their talents by producing "sweet cakes" since they had found a little cinnamon from somewhere to add to their recently concocted "sweet dough". Roger was hoping that these "desserts" could be added to the next big Spread. To us, it sounded as though a "Prisoner's Cook Book" was in the making!

A while back, some of these inmates didn't even talk to each other; now they sit down at a common table to enjoy a \*homemade\* meal. The hostile atmosphere has changed: people talk to each other and even happily compete to produce a better Spread. But there have been problems with various annoyed guards; enjoyment is not what prison life is supposed to be about. Roger understands that the inmates have to keep in mind that holding these Spreads is not a new situation to take for granted but a privilege allowed by the prison authorities. In future, the prison chaplain will be negotiating for the privilege each time the inmates plan a meal together. And so, oh-so-slowly, progress is made — and Roger along with the new prison warden are a major part of it.

Our conversation touched on many subjects:

**memories** — Monica and Roger went back over 20 years of memories about each other, "the case", the lawyers, and the people who have appeared and disappeared "along

the way”

**legal representation and “the law”** — Roger has a steadfast belief in the fact that, because of and in spite of everything, he will be freed within a period of a few years

**family affairs** — he enjoys the contact he has with his niece, Shamace, and understands the individual positions of those who no longer visit.

**life in prison** — boring for the most part since the fulfilment of simple tasks can take such an incredibly long time — “most of my time here is spent in waiting”

**the support of true friends** — all of us “out here” give him strength “in there”.

There was an incredibly easy flow to our conversation; it poured out in all directions. The laughter came easily, too — loud and clear. The atmosphere was definitely positive, and the prison circumstances for visiting at Wynne Unit were quite bearable. We were lucky in that the meeting room was almost empty; there was no need for shouting, but touch would have been a wonderful addition to the situation. It is obvious that Roger needs us as much as we need him — a really strong feeling of a truly fulfilling friendship permeated our meeting.

Just before saying goodbye to Roger, we asked him what he would like; his thoughtful answer: first “More donations,” so that his prison work can continue to expand. Then, with a huge smile, “*To be free!*”

Donations have increased. And for his freedom, there are two new, young lawyers working on his case, while some of his close friends also try to find evidence to prove that he was wrongfully convicted. Roger added :”but if I have some more years to spend here in prison, I have work to do!”

Before leaving, Monica asked Roger what more can we do? He confidently pointed to the sky and said: “We leave it in the hands of Him who produces miracles”. Our journey to Huntsville actually ended in Geneva where we stayed with Pierre Pradervand to give him the impressions of our encounter with Roger.

At 4 am the next morning he was off on yet another presentation about Roger, this time in La Chaux de Fonds, where Olivier Tzaut lives. To see Roger free is a top priority in Pierre’s life and the funds he has been able to raise in his arduous battle to provide professional legal assistance, are tremendous.

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