

## Entry Six

I would like to take a bit and tell you about something that a large number of prisoners do and have done for a very long time, each for their own reasons. It's something that has helped me in more ways than I can express, yet it is something so simple and pure, its pen paling.

I first learned about pen paling when I served my 29-month sentence in prison work camp. Mail call quickly became the highlight of my day, hoping that I would receive a letter from someone I was writing to. I've written to people from all over the world and I've created some very special lifelong friendships with some amazing women who have stuck by my side for the past 15 to 20 plus years. It's those dear friends who have always made sure I have not been forgotten in here and who have reminded me that I am still a human being even though I live in such an inhuman place. One of my biggest fears has been to be forgotten in here and lose my reason to exist. I've seen so many people in prison over the years who has nobody out there in the free world and it's caused their existence to be limited to the inside of the prison walls and fences. I may be in prison for a very long time, but this is not where I will stay!!! I have had one constant goal set since the very beginning of my sentence and that is to reach my release date and enter the free world once again. The many different people I've met over the years of pen paling have helped to always keep my goal focused and clear in my mind as they are a constant reminder of a world I'm striving to get back to.

Over the years the networking system for inmates to meet pen pals has changed in many ways. It's gone from word of mouth, to posting ads in magazines and newspapers, to FB's (friendship books), friendship sheets and things like that to placing ads online. Now that the Internet is such a daily part of everyone's lives out there many companies have created online pen pal sites where inmates can post profiles in the hopes of meeting someone to write to. Technology has also changed the way we are able to correspond with our pen pals. It used to be old fashion snail mail (pen or pencil, writing paper, envelope and stamps). But now the prison systems have allowed companies such as "Jpay" to set up kiosks throughout the living units which enables us to be able to correspond through a form of e-mail that goes through their site. We are also now able to purchase touch screen 7-inch tablets that allow us to write our messages then upload and send them. We can also download any messages, photos or 30 second videos we receive to our tablets so we can view them anytime we want to. Our tablets are strictly for use with the Jpay system though.

Even though technology has changed the way we are able to pen pal, the purpose for pen paling will always be the same. Instead of waiting in line for mail call now, I log on to the jpay kiosk to see if I have any new messages waiting for me and it always brightens my day when I see that one of my friends has written to me or sent me photos or a 30 second video to watch. Even to this day, when I read something, I've received from someone I write to, I completely forget about where I'm at as I'm caught up in the words, they've sent to me. It's those small moments of not having to think about this place that help so much!!!

I would like to take a moment to thank my dear friends who I've met through pen paling for believing in me and for staying by my side throughout the years. The lifelong friendships I've created with you hold a value to me that cannot be expressed with words alone!!! I have enjoyed being able to watch your lives unfold and see some of you marry, have children and create families of your own while sharing those special moments with me. It's your kind words, your caring, your love and support that has helped me the most to be able to get through this rough experience. I look forward to the day when some of us will finally be able to meet in person upon my release from prison.