Guidelines for Communicating with a Death Row Prisoner in Georgia by Mary Catherine Johnson, 404-273-0621, mcjohnson78@yahoo.com

Here are some guidelines based primarily on my experiences corresponding with, and visiting, Marcus Wellons, #91080 on Georgia’s death row. Marcus was executed on June 17, 2014.

• First and foremost, please understand that this is a commitment on your part to establish and maintain long-term contact with a prisoner. It can be devastating for a prisoner to begin a relationship with someone on the outside and then have that relationship terminated prematurely because the person on the outside has lost interest or gets too busy to stay in touch. Please also be prepared for the very real possibility that your pen pal will eventually be executed. Should that happen you will not be alone – I will help you navigate whatever comes with the help of a wonderful and supportive community of death penalty abolitionists who have been through many executions.

• Always include the prisoner's Department of Corrections ID # in the prison address:

Example: Marcus Wellons, #91080
PO Box 3877
Jackson, GA 30233

Always include your full name and return address on the envelope and in the letter. The prison has been known to reject mail without a return address.

• You can send letters, cards and books via mail. I’ve also sent copies of articles and photographs with no problem. A few times Marcus asked me to make copies of something for him, which I did. You cannot send stamps, cash, checks, food or any personal items like clothes or jewelry. I tried to send stamps once and they were returned to me with a form letter
saying that was prohibited. Books must be ordered from the publisher and sent directly to the prisoner from the publisher; orders from Amazon are fine. It is very important to check with the prisoner’s attorney before sending any books. Usually it will be fine, but the prison keeps a record of everything that prisoners receive, and sometimes these items could be used against them in court. The prisoner can put you in touch with his lawyer if necessary.

- Be aware that your letters will be opened and possibly read by the prison. I am careful not to say anything that might bring about negative repercussions for the prisoners (such as making disparaging remarks about the prison or the prison staff). I talk openly about my advocacy work to abolish the death penalty, and often send articles and updates on the abolition movement. Anything with nudity, violence or sexual content will be destroyed or returned to you. I once sent a prisoner a picture of the Pieta by Michelangelo (pictured, left) and the prison refused to allow the prisoner to have it, citing “nudity” as the reason! Overtly political content will also be rejected – one pen pal put a Black Lives Matter sticker on the envelope and it was returned. It should be fine to write something like “I attended a Black Lives Matter protest” or to mention the news or the fact that you support or reject a particular candidate, but just don’t include an anti-Trump sticker or a picture of something violent that occurred. Also, anything that might potentially be used as a weapon will not be given to the prisoner – an example of this is something that is laminated, creating a thick, sharp plastic edge. Things like paper clips are usually not permitted either. A lot of the time it depends on who is in the prison mailroom – something may get through one day and then get rejected the next time. Prison rules are nothing if not inconsistently applied.

There are no rules about frequency of communication or length of letters. I typically wrote Marcus 1-2 letters per month, and sent him cards for special occasions like his birthday and holidays. In return I usually received from him about two letters per month of varying lengths.

- Prisoners now have access to email through JPay. Not all prisoners use email but many do. JPay emails require “stamps” that cost about 30 cents each. You can also attach pictures to emails – each picture requires an additional “stamp.” I like sending

*Self Portrait* by Daniel Lucas, executed by the State of Georgia on April 27, 2016.
emails because it’s easy and convenient, and can be done from my computer or phone through the JPay app, but I also write letters since I know the guys love to receive actual mail. I suggest you start with an actual letter and ask if the prisoner wants to do email.

- People often ask me for suggestions of what to include in their letters. I just write about whatever is happening in my life, and usually ask a few questions about what his life is like. In my first letter to Marcus I included lots of details about where I am from, my job, my family, etc. When there was a pending execution I always asked Marcus if he knew the person, and checked in with him about how he was handling it emotionally. In the beginning I typed my letters and often included pictures within the body of the letter, but later I hand-wrote my letters and enclosed photographs.

- Many people have asked me if Marcus and I discussed his case and his crimes. I waited for him to bring these things up, which happened after we had been writing for a few months, when he felt he could trust me with the details. It varies among the prisoners how much they want to discuss their cases – some talk about it all the time, but I have one pen pal who never wants to talk about his case because it’s too painful. Marcus told me once that a clergy member visited him for the first time and immediately began asking about his crimes, which hurt and offended him. For him (and no doubt for many other prisoners), the day of his crimes was the worst day of his life, and it haunted him every day – it was not something he felt comfortable discussing with strangers. During one of our visits, he told me the whole story of his crimes in great detail, but it took many months of trust-building before he could discuss the crimes with me. I primarily see my role as that of a non-judgmental listener when it comes to discussing cases and crimes with the prisoners, and I always let the prisoners set the tone and agenda for such discussions. I am not there to save anyone, or to force a process of accountability, forgiveness or atonement, but rather to create a loving space where these things can arise naturally if and when the time is right.

Marcus never asked me to help him with his legal case other than to give me his lawyer’s email in the event she needed me to provide testimony about his character or if I needed to contact her, but many prisoners do ask for help with their cases in a variety of ways. Of course the extent to which you help is up to you, but always check with his lawyer first. Also, the extent to which you familiarize yourself with the crime details on your own is up to you. I resisted knowing about Marcus’s crimes in the beginning, telling myself that it did not matter what he had done, but a wise friend suggested to me that his crimes were part of who he was, and integral to my accepting fully who he was, so I looked him up online. But you may feel differently, so please proceed according to your own comfort level.
look, the internet contains many resources for crime details, including articles published by news outlets, trial transcripts and brief filings. Beware of sensational news articles and angry bloggers, and take what they say with a grain of salt – they often get things terribly wrong, or take facts out of context. I set up a Google alert to receive notification when articles about Marcus were posted, so I could stay up-to-date about his appeals.

• The prisoner may ask you for money or to purchase clothing or food packages for them, and I suggest setting a boundary immediately with regard to your preferences. After about six months I began sending Marcus a modest amount every month to offset some of his expenses; I used an online service called Jpay (http://www.jpays.com/) but you can also send a money order by mail (no cash or checks). The money orders go through a central processing center and should not be sent directly to the prisoner. As of 2016, you must be on the prisoner’s “approved senders list” to send him money; the prisoner can tell you how to do this. Prisoners must buy their own stamps, paper, pens, etc., as well as items like snacks and extra blankets – anything beyond the bare necessities. They must also pay for doctor and dentist visits, and there is a fee to file just about any sort of paperwork, whether it is a complaint or a request. In no way am I suggesting that you do or do not send money, although I do not recommend sending money in the first few months.

• You may experience romantic advances from your pen pal. As you can imagine, most of the men on death row are starved for human contact and affection, so a show of kindness from you could easily be interpreted as romantic in nature. As with the requests for money, I suggest that you set a clear boundary at the first sign of any advances, responding in a firm yet compassionate way, and that usually takes care of the issue and the two of you can move on with your friendship. Please do not start out expecting that this will happen, rather I just mention it since many people, women especially, wonder about it. I can help you respond if this scenario arises.

• The prisoner may ask you to visit him, or you may wish to ask him if he would like for you to visit. If that's something you would like to do, he will send you a form to complete and have notarized, authorizing a background check. Once you are approved for the prisoner’s visitor list (which takes several weeks), you can visit any Saturday, Sunday, or state holiday between 9am-3pm. Prisoners are only allowed to make changes to their visitor lists twice each year, in the spring and fall. A special, one-time visit can also be arranged for a specific date. Currently most visits are non-contact, meaning there will be a piece of glass between the two of you, and you will communicate via a phone. Prisoners without any disciplinary actions against them qualify for up to 6 contact visits per year, whereby they can sit across from you, shake your hand, hug you, etc. Dates for contact visits are pre-assigned by the warden,
and the prisoner will let you know when those are. When you visit you can only bring in your photo ID, your car keys, and $20 worth of quarters in a clear plastic bag, to spend in the vending machines, which contain food and drinks that you can purchase for yourself and the prisoner. Death row is located at the Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Prison in Jackson, Georgia, about an hour south of Atlanta, off of I-75.

There is a dress code for the prison, which is strictly enforced – I have seen visitors be asked to leave for not complying with the code. Just to be safe, I always have extra clothes and shoes in my car in case I am turned away. What is considered appropriate clothing is at the discretion of the guards at the security entrance, and their judgment varies significantly; something that was fine one week could get you turned away the next week. Just dress simply and conservatively, and you should be fine. You will find all visitation policies here: http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/InmateInfo/Visitation

• After about a year of writing to Marcus I was added to his phone call list, and he began calling me at least once per week. This may be something you’d like to pursue with your pen pal, but again, it’s up to you and not something I’d suggest within the first few months. One pen pal I’ve worked with has a set time once each month that the prisoner calls him, while others prefer only to write letters. The calls are collect and handled through a company called Securus, a new vendor as of January 2017, replacing Global Tel Link: http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/InmateInfo/GlobalTel

Many prisoners have access to illegal cell phones and may try to contact you by using those phones. **I strongly urge you not to communicate with your pen pal on illegal cell phones**, as this could jeopardize your ability to call, write to and/or visit the prisoner. Possession of illegal cell phones is a major offense, and the consequences are serious if the prisoner is caught. It’s not worth it for either of you!

• If you suspect that your pen pal is a victim of abuse or unfair tactics on the part of the prison, please let me know and we can discuss how to address it.

• Rules and policies change all the time at the prison. The GA Department of Corrections website is one source for updates and current policies: http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/

• Please don’t hesitate to contact me if I can help you with any issues that arise. You are embarking on a relationship that will no doubt contain equal parts joy and sadness – may God bless you and your new friendship. Thank you for undertaking this important journey.
Recommended resources and reading:

Death Penalty Information Center: http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org

Journey of Hope... From Violence to Healing: https://www.journeyofhope.org


If you only have time to read one book... Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption by Bryan Stevenson

The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated.

Bryan Stevenson

Other books:
Dead Man Walking and The Death of Innocents by Sister Helen Prejean
The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness by Michelle Alexander

Movies/Documentaries:
Dead Man Walking
Into the Abyss
Last Day of Freedom (Oscar-nominated short film; available on Netflix): http://www.lastdayoffreedom.net