

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 2, 2013 at 12:12pm

A visit to a man who's spent 24 years behind bars

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NCR Today

The Friday before Christmas, I drove south three hours to Missouri's bootheel town of Charleston, where one of the state's maximum security prisons is located. I traveled with the mother of an inmate there and visited Kenneth Carter, 38, incarcerated for murder since he was 14 years old.

When I was the director of Project COPE, a released prisoner re-entry program, Kenneth applied to us. I rejected him, telling him he needed a parole date before we would consider even sending him an application form. He wrote back, saying he'd been in prison since he was 14, his family relationships had deteriorated, and he needed a home plan to present at his parole hearing. He was 32. I said no, and he was denied parole.

Then he sent me a 50-page autobiography, describing the murder. He was working for a farmer, and he knew the farmer had a roll of bills in his pocket. Kenneth, one of nine children, wanted the money to give to his mother and to buy alcohol. He took the gun from his brother's car, fired one shot -- the first time he'd ever fired a gun -- and it hit the farmer in the head.

Kenneth also wrote about his violations in prison, drug use and having sex with a woman who worked in the kitchen. That violation put him in the hole, also known as administrative segregation, for a month. (A side note: Only Kenneth and one other man have described to me being in the hole. They both say the time alone and the drug withdrawal changed their lives. They came out resolved to stay clean and sober and build new lives within the prison. They are both smart men with inner resources, and Kenneth had access to books. Neither of them ever went back to administrative segregation. This is not to say I think isolation is a good punishment, just that these are the only stories I know.)

At any rate, after reading Kenneth's biography, I went to my board of directors and proposed initiating an application process. The board agreed. So I sent Kenneth an application form. I went to the prison and

interviewed him. He signed an information release form, and I interviewed prison staff about whether what Kenneth told me was true -- his violation history (no fights or gangster behavior), his mental health and education scores, their scored assessment of whether he could adjust to society if released, their candid opinion of whether he would be a good Project COPE client. I spoke to his institutional parole officer and his case worker, and they both strongly recommended him. Two years later, I went to his parole hearing on his behalf. He was denied parole.

Kenneth has been denied twice more. In October, the parole board gave him an additional setback, telling him he cannot apply for parole again for three years instead of the usual two-year wait. Since a parole date is usually two years into the future, that's five more years in prison for Kenneth, minimum.

Kenneth's been in prison 24 years now. Six years ago, he wrote the one letter of sorrow to the family that the prison restorative justice program allows. He doesn't know if any family members even opened the letter. He doesn't know if they oppose his release. On Dec. 27, he received a certificate for five years violation-free. He hasn't slept through count or missed hearing his name called for a drug screening. Five years without a single violation.

My visit

I've been to a lot of prisons and jails. But this is the first time I've ever been a visitor on an inmate's approved visiting list. It was the Friday before Christmas, and it was a food visit. Kenneth asked for barbecue and strawberry cheesecake, so that's what I brought -- a slab of ribs and four pieces of cheesecake for him, and half a slab and one piece of cheesecake for me.

The regulations say you can bring in four 9-by-9-by-4 clear plastic containers. The guard poked the barbecue sauce containers with a knife, turned over the meat, and poked at and separated the cheesecake slices, saying it was too pretty to cut into. But before we got that far, he made me leave the prison, drive to a store and buy a T-shirt. My dress blouse had an inch-and-a-half V-neck, and the new rules since October say you have to be buttoned up to the neck. So I lost half an hour of a four-hour visit.

It's been two years since I saw Kenneth, and he's much thinner. Stress, he says. He ate everything and enjoyed it. That's good. But best of all was our talking. He calls me a few times a year and he writes once in a while. But the long visit was great.

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He wants to hear about the outside, what free people do. I told him about the Haitian tin sculpture of a row of musicians I bought for my brother-in-law, the name I drew for Christmas. I told him about my lobbying strategies for prison reform and that I had applied to be a Parole Board member after he got rejected this time. There's no chance, but why not try?

He told me about the warden he's known since she was a case worker 15 years ago, when he participated in a six-month drug program, Intensive Therapy Community at the Jefferson City, Mo., prison. The warden wants to start an ITC program in Charleston and has spoken with Kenneth and some other graduates about serving as counselors.

He talked a little about his crime, some about his pain at the denial and the extra year setback. He'd talked on the phone with his mother the night before, and he brought me up to date on his family. He told me a little more about his struggle against addictions and the point where something changed inside him and he

felt released from addictive thinking.

He makes a small income drawing greeting cards for other inmates and he sent me a spectacularly beautiful one for Christmas, of a sailboat taking passengers on and off a lighthouse. The sister I live with, a retired art teacher, says I should frame it. It reads, "May the blessings of this season light your path and bring you joy."

We talked too about religion. For a while he prayed with the Muslims and his letters to me always begin with the blessing of God on my days. He investigated Wicca, because he had the time and he was curious. I told him about the Catholic church taking Wicca seriously, condemning it for its spells that threaten free will.

Three and a half hours goes quickly. My passenger and I were back on the road to St. Louis by 1:45 p.m. She talked about her son, who's been locked up 20 years and still insists he's innocent of murder. And she sang. She'd been a blues singer with one of her brothers and her father, and I asked her to sing. Her voice was old and creaky but in-key with catchy rhythmic hooks that sounded great. In the morning, we'd had a gorgeous sunrise, and the sunset on our way home. It was the winter solstice.

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