



# The ties that bind

*A woman's journey into an unlikely friendship whose time is running out*

BY BROOKE ANDERSON  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Brooke Anderson is originally from Portland but is studying for a master's degree in social work at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, specializing in issues of mental health.

Today I anxiously await the mail to arrive. Although I only recently sent out my last letter, I never know when I may randomly receive a note from Bobby Wayne; our correspondence is never consistent, nor timed. As soon as the mailman steps off the porch, I quickly examine the pile of mail on the entryway floor to see if any are postmarked from Mobile, Alabama. My spirits sink a little when I notice only one bill and an advertisement from Safeway. No letter from Bobby. Oh well, there is always tomorrow. However, the familiar and persistent voice in the back of my head reminds me that with every passing day he inches closer to his execution, causing each day and each letter to be quite sacred. After all, at 33, Bobby has been sitting on death row for 14 years, and the national average is currently 17 years before execution. I decide not to linger on that statistic today and remind myself that at least he will receive a letter from me shortly, which I know will help to lift his spirits as his letters do mine. Recently he was struggling with the fact that his TV broke (which is one of his only connections to the outside world), and that "(his) days right now is dim." In the midst of these feelings he wrote,

*"But I'm here, and you are there for me, your letters really brighten my day and make me smile ... your friendship means the world to me."*

I began writing Bobby nine months ago, after I learned about the Death Row Support Project, or DSRP, through my local church. Although I've always held a stance in opposition to the death penalty, I never considered writing to an inmate. However, after browsing DRSP's website, I learned about the close bonds that form between pen pals, both on the part of the inmate and their pen pal in the "free world" (as Bobby calls it). This aspect of the project appealed to me since I believe that it is through personal relationships that society learns to humanize and forgive those locked up for violent crimes. Also, since I've been an advocate for the social justice ministries in which my church and spiritual community participate, I saw the Death Row Support Project as a way to contribute to one of these ministries, never considering the impact this "ministry" would have on me.

In the short time I've been writing to Bobby Wayne, I have learned the sacred details of one man's struggle, and triumph

to survive life on death row. Convicted at age 19 for a double homicide, he has had 14 years to, as he writes, "own up" to the crime, but:

*"I'll never be able to come to terms with my crime because it was a very horrible thing I did. I was a young kid on drugs and I took two peoples' lives that I loved very much; two people who raised me as their own child. I don't think I can ever forgive myself. I'm so embarrassed and broken for what I did. I took my grandparents' lives. I look at their picture every day and I miss them so much."*

The more we write to each other, the more I am inspired by Bobby's ability to continue to grow as an individual on a personal, emotional, and psychological level in prison. He spends 16 hours a day caring for the aged and infirm men in the prison nursing home. Through his work there he has developed close relationships with men such as Paw Paw and Honeybee, whom he writes about frequently:

*"Honeybee is doing well, as mean as always. I love him to death. I just hate that he has Alzheimer's. He don't even remember me. He always calls me "Pete." I know that's gotta be someone from his past. I just wonder who ..."*

When asked what he enjoys most about working at the nursing home, he replied, *"The smile on their (his patients) faces when I make them happy. Just knowing that I'm needed, and helping them to have a better life, giving them comfort as they prepare for their death. To hear Honeybee tell me he loves me blesses my heart. Their love is genuine for me as mine is for them."*

Discouragingly, whenever I mention Bobby, or more specifically, that I am writing to an inmate on death row, there is always a lull in the conversation. It's as if the person, or persons, I'm speaking with aren't quite sure whether this is a good or bad thing to do. Often I feel like I have to explain in great detail about Bobby and the Death Row Support Project so people can rationalize why I'm writing at all. I find this to be quite exhausting. I continually attempt to define individuals, especially those who have committed horrendous acts, by their spirit and soul, not by past behavior; I understand that this is incredibly difficult for many. However, I believe it essential to reach out to those who society has deemed unworthy; not only does it humanize criminals, it offers an opportunity for redemption and hope that is so critical given the injustices we face every day.

Through his letters I have discovered that Bobby is a thoughtful individual, frequently

reflecting on various aspects of his life. For instance, at the time of his crime he was addicted to crack cocaine and was high when he committed the crime. He quite frankly points out that being addicted to crack is like "living in a tunnel, and your only destination is to find more crack." Although Bobby was a successful wrestler, he lost all his possessions within four months of his crack addiction, and he and his wife had to move in with his grandparents. He acknowledges that it was his addiction to crack that led to the murder of his grandparents, and after 14 years, "the pain is still in my heart ... I still feel it every day." In my friendship with Bobby, I see that through acceptance and humility about his circumstances, he has been able to grow on an emotional and psychological level.

*"(Prison) has made me a very humble man ... yeah, I hear rumors about me sometimes but I don't pay them no mind. I built a very good character in here for standing on what I believe in. There's no middle ground in here. You can't show weakness or you'll be exploited. It's sad but true. I love to socialize with others, love to help people, so to be in that position I have to demand respect in here. I'm a very strong man for the things I've endured in life ... I've learned a lot, and sure I'll learn much more as I carry on."*

He also recognizes that because of his crime, "(he) lost everything (he) could have been in life: a wrestler, husband, father, grandfather. I'm gonna miss out on all that." Despite all his pain and regret, he is committed to his volunteer work in the prison, recently completing the Alabama Department of Corrections "Dignity" Hospice/Palliative Care Volunteer Training Program.

What I've found most inspiring about Bobby is that he gives me a fresh perspective on life through his seasoned lens. He encourages me to follow through with my goals, do well in graduate school, love my family even when they are driving me crazy, and take nothing in my life for granted. Recently he wrote:

*"I'm just trying to find a reason to smile every day. Smiling always makes me feel better. So, remember Brooke, if I can find a reason to smile in here every day, I know you can find a reason to smile out there."*

In all honesty, I can't argue with that.

For more information about writing to a death row inmate, contact the Death Row Support Project at [drsp@brethren.org](mailto:drsp@brethren.org)

Or write:  
Death Row Support Project  
PO Box 600  
Liberty Mills, IN  
46946

Or call:  
260-982-7480