

Background:

I wrote this essay shortly after the execution of my friend, Gary Green. As his execution date approached, several articles appeared in local, regional, and national publications concerning Gary. The picture they painted of my friend differs significantly from the person I knew. I wanted to capture the best I could, the picture clearly painted in my mind of Gary Green, my friend.

How I Came to REALLY know Gary Green

by Chip Bach

I oppose the death penalty. There, I said it. But this essay is not about my view of the death penalty. It is about friendship. And loss of a loved one. It's about a man named Gary. A friend of mine.

I met Gary Green through the death row ministry started several years ago by the Friends Meeting of Austin (Quakers). A number of us correspond with people incarcerated on death row, and some of us also visit with our penpals. Gary and I met in January 2021.

Gary was executed by the State of Texas on March 7, 2023.

This is the point at which I might tell you about the crime for which Gary was incarcerated and executed. I could describe his trial. Or his schizophrenia. I could talk about the expired drugs used by the State of Texas when conducting his execution. I might talk about Gary's case, or his 'borderline' intellectual disability. Or I might dwell on the horrors of his crime. But I don't want to talk about any of those things. That's the stuff you read in most newspaper or magazine articles you find about Gary. I'm not going to tell you about the vigil that evening either. Or the four Friends from Meeting who drove from Austin for the evening to stand with me outside the Walls Unit the night Gary was executed. I won't describe the dozens of people who gathered in front of the Walls Unit as well as the Texas State Capital that evening either, all of whom were standing in vigil for Gary and in opposition to the death penalty. Instead, I choose to write about the person I knew and a bit about his life when I knew him. Perhaps you will learn some things you didn't from those other articles. There was much more to Gary than that which is found in the newspapers, magazines, or on-line. I would like to provide you a glimpse into the person I knew. I'll try to minimize expressing my convictions concerning the injustice of the death penalty. I already told you where I stand. I do hope however, that if you choose to read on, you will not only learn about Gary, but perhaps by learning about him you might also question the continued use of the death penalty.

Gary Green was the first of several people incarcerated in Texas with whom I have corresponded, visited in prison, or have helped when released from prison. I believe all people have a spark of the Divine within, regardless of their "position" in society. This led me to this ministry and to meet Gary. Being incarcerated on death row in Texas may be as low on our societal hierarchy as one might be.

The men on death row in Texas are incarcerated at the Polunsky Unit in Livingston, Texas. These men live in solitary confinement. They spend at least 22 hours on average per day in a cell with no

meaningful human contact. In Texas, the cells on death row are 6 feet by 10 feet. Within this 60 square foot cell resides their bed, sink, toilet, all of their belongings. There is one window. A slit really that we see from the road as we drive in on visiting day. The slit of a window is near the ceiling of their cell, which is about seven feet from the floor. Men on death row in Texas must stand on something in order to see out. On the morning of his execution during our final visit, Gary told me he hoped that the sky was clear when he was transported over to the Huntsville Unit where the Texas death chamber is located. He said he had not seen the sun since arriving at Polunsky in 2013. Gary often spoke of how the Texas prison system is designed to break men down. But he also told me, even the day prior to and the day of his execution, that through focus he was able to stay positive. You see, Gary often said, "By staying focused, I hope to become a better version of myself every single day". His words.

Gary and I started corresponding in January 2021. He included a picture of himself in his first letter.



Photo of Gary Green from July 2018

Gary's handwriting was very unusual and ornate. It took me a while to learn to read it easily.

Mailed 1/26/2021 (2 of 5) January 25, 2021
Chip, Good day to you, Brother. I pray
that you and yours are well on all
levels. Life, and blessed beyond measure.
Not because I say or believe it but because
"He", has shown me time & time again.
You are glass-half-full, Na!!!
We all on this planet has an "Alone"
to allow bitterness, hate, negativity & so on
to rule us.
I don't & can't because all the above
is worse than "COVID" & twice as deadly.
Thank you, dear Brother & we reach out
to me to make an connection. If you
both be an "Beacon of LIGHT" to each
other.

An example of Gary Green's handwriting

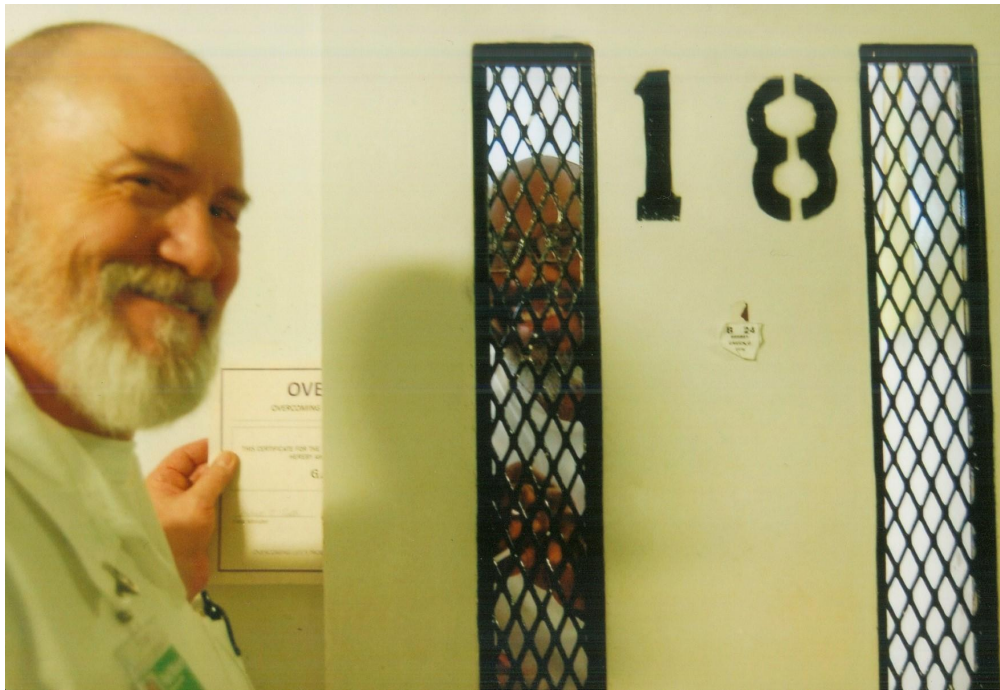
From his very first letter, Gary seemed upbeat and positive as well as reflective and honest. Staying positive wasn't easy and he had to work hard to remain so, and so he did. Shortly after we started corresponding, Gary asked me if I would like to be added to his visitation list. We started meeting together monthly or so in early spring 2021.

One of the ways Gary remained upbeat while in prison was through drawing. Pencil drawings. He sent me many beautiful sketches. I have some of them on my wall. Sometimes he would hand draw a greeting card for me. Drawing helped Gary focus on something creative. I was able to display some of Gary's work in an art show held in Austin Texas specifically featuring artwork from people incarcerated in Texas.



Here is the author holding a hand drawn birthday card from Gary drawn in 2021.

Another way Gary stayed focused was by working through guided study available to him on the faith-based pod within Polunsky. The faith-based pod was established at Polunsky a few years ago. Most of my incarcerated friends speak highly of the program (and Warden Dickerson as well). Men on the faith-based pod live in a separate area of the prison. The faith-based pod field ministers offer and assist with various course work. In the two+ years Gary and I were friends, he mailed me seven different diplomas he had earned through these programs. I framed several, and Gary liked that I hung them on the wall in my music studio.

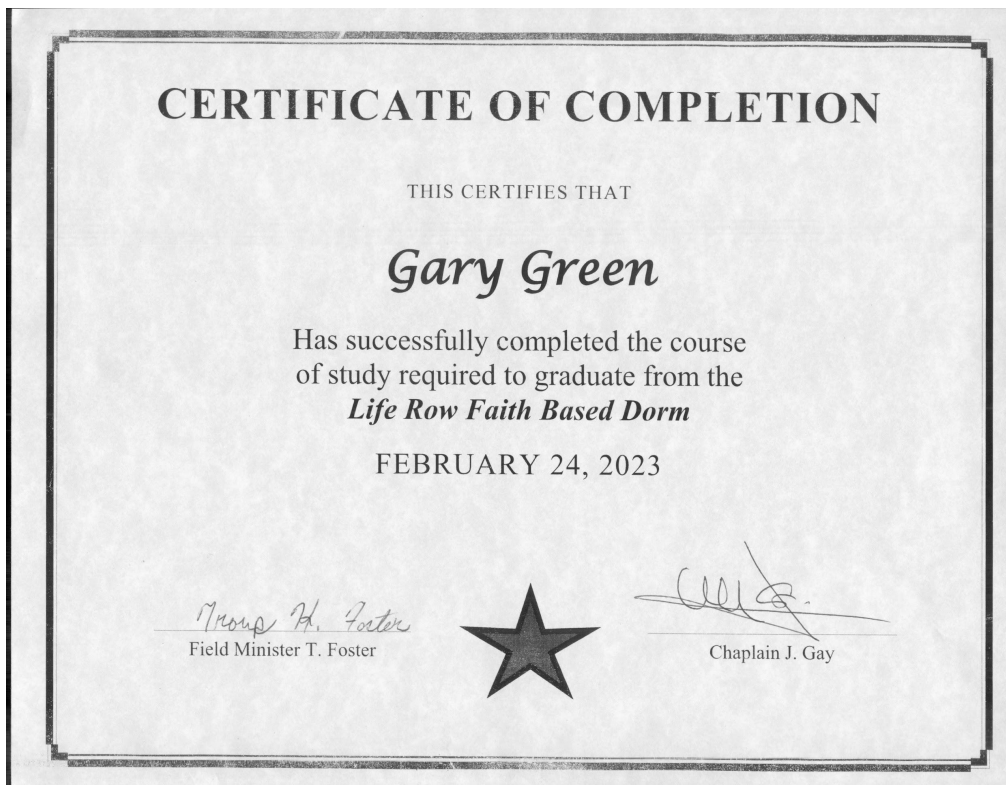


Gary Green receiving a diploma from a field minister. No human contact is permitted.



Picture of Gary Green in his cell. Pizza is a very special and unusual treat for men incarcerated at Polunsky. In the picture, you see the single window slit within the cells on Texas Death Row.

On Monday, March 6, 2023, the day before his scheduled execution, Gary gave me one final diploma he had earned. He said that the field minister helped him accelerate his study so he could complete the course prior to being executed. He was proud of this diploma. I'm thankful for this program offered at Polunsky, but I admit that I struggle calling living conditions there a "Dorm."



Gary Green's final diploma earned less than two weeks prior to his execution.

I want to describe how visits with people on death row are managed by the TDCJ prison system. There is ALWAYS plexiglass between the visitor and the person incarcerated on death row. No contact. Ever. Gary would be brought out in handcuffs and placed in a visitation cell which is about 3 foot by 3 foot. Once locked in the visitation cell, he could stoop down, reach his hands behind him through a small hole, and have the handcuffs removed. One of the visitation cell walls is plexiglass through which we could view each other. We could talk through a very old telephone set. We sat in hard chairs. And I would buy him snacks which would be searched and delivered to him by one of the guards. I enjoyed my visits with Gary, despite all of these precautions.

Early on the morning of Monday, March 6th, the day before Gary's execution, I drove to Livingston from my home in the suburbs of Austin. It's about a four hour drive with two brief stops. I brought plenty of one dollar coins to use in the visiting area vending machines so I could get snacks for Gary. On the way in to the Polunsky facility, I met briefly with "Rev," Gary's spiritual advisor. Rev was with Gary in the death chamber during his execution the next day.

Monday is not a normal visitation day for prisoners on death row. It is, however, a normal visiting day for non-death row prisoners. Because of that, there were many visitors there when I arrived at 1:00. I saw folks sitting together at the tables in the open area with their friends and loved ones in white prison attire. I saw some touch each other and even hug briefly. Visits with Gary were always done with Gary in the small 3'x3' visitation cage, with us looking at each other through the plexiglass and talking to each other with the old crackly phones. But for the first time, we both saw other prisoners sitting freely at the same table with their loved one, in stark contrast to our conditions.

Our visit on Monday was interrupted several times by a prison staff person coming by to obtain Gary's signature on some document. I have nothing against the prison staff, but I guess there must be a lot of paperwork one must sign before being put to death by the State of Texas. Sheesh. Despite the irony of signing documents prior to his execution, Gary addressed each and every staff person seeking his signature in a pleasant and courteous manner. Gary and I talked for about four hours on Monday until visiting time was over and I was asked to leave at 5:00.

After our visit on Monday, I reflected on our relationship and our visit that day. I sent an email to some friends who are similarly involved in death row visitation, and/or death penalty abolition advocacy. Here is a portion of that email:

"Gary and I have been corresponding for a few years now. And I have visited him each month for almost the same amount of time. He is really remarkable. Insightful. Kind. Generous. A good listener. A concerned parent. He stays upbeat and "focused" as he puts it on the positive. He told me that some of the other prisoners around him have told him he must read "guru books" to stay so positive. And he is generous. After he received a COVID stimulus check, he mailed me \$300 as a donation towards one of our Simple Meals. He also tried to send some money to a pen-friend of his from the U.K. who came upon hard times during COVID. The rest he gave to his daughter. He never asked me for money or anything really until about a month before he was put to death. Apparently prior to the date when a prisoner is to be executed, they can do a "Big Spend" when they may exceed the normal commissary spending limit. This was the only time that Gary asked for money. He asked for a bit of money so he could buy ice cream and snacks and gifts for other prisoners on death row and the guards he knows. Especially the prisoners and guards who have shown kindness.

Gary is also quite emotional and prone to show it through tears. He told me in a very recent letter that one of the guards who he barely knew came up to his cell and told him she was so sorry he was to be executed. He said that they were both in tears as they spoke. During our visits, he would often tear up when we would talk. The tears might be sad or happy, but it was Gary's way of coping with his emotions. After the escape of Gonzalo Lopez from a TDCJ transport bus in 2022, the TDCJ system took away all prisoner's shoes which were not completely white. They provided prison shoes that met the all white criteria. Gary's shoes were taken and because he wears a size 13 1/2, they couldn't provide him prison shoes so they gave him shower slippers. Warden Dickerson came and spoke with Gary about it and allowed him to receive some size 13 1/2 white shoes which I found on Amazon. Gary was so grateful to receive those shoes, and never complained about the shower slippers. But when he described how kind the warden was to him, he was in tears.

Very early in our friendship, Gary told me that "You can't know God until God is all you have." I often think this when I think of Gary. I think of Gary as a seeker. He knows that there is a part of him that will live on regardless of what Texas does Tuesday evening. He knows that Love and Light are from the Spirit. And he will be missed.

During our visit today, Gary remained upbeat. The warden had arranged for a phone call with his daughter last night. He met with his cousin this past weekend. This morning he met with the Rev, who will attend to Gary in the death chamber. Gary says he isn't dwelling on tomorrow or his death with fear. And if there is sadness, he says that he is sad that he will longer be able to help his daughter, or others who are important in his life. He has some specific instructions for his ashes which are beautiful. When I told him how supportive y'all have been he got emotional and wants me to tell you that he loves you all and appreciates the kindness you show to others."

I visited Gary again on Tuesday morning from 8am until they told us "it's time" around noon. Because it was early, our final visit was much more private than the previous day. Gary and I sang songs together. We laughed and told stories. We shed some quiet tears together. He still had to sign more paperwork. But at noon, Gary Green and I said "see you later" to each other. You see, Gary didn't say "Goodbye." He reminded me, "I always say 'see you later' instead because 'goodbye' is permanent and I always know I will see you again." "Even this time," he added. Then they took him away in handcuffs..... to become the 582nd person put to death in Texas (over one-third of all executions in the US since reinstatement).

During my drive from Livingston to Huntsville on Tuesday after meeting with Gary for the last time I prayed for clear skies. I hope he did get to see the Sun.

One last thing. As I write this, I am thinking of Gary. You see, his birthday was a few days ago. I miss my friend. The one you don't read about in the magazine or newspaper articles.

.....Happy Birthday, Gary. See you later, my friend.....