

Prison Journal No. 8, May 9-15, 2006

Federal Transfer Station
Oklahoma City, OK
May 9-15- 2006

After 35 days in the Jackson County Jail, the call came out from the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) that there was a place in the system for me. It was time to move. Mercifully 12 of us were packed into the two Jefferson County Jail vans and driven to the Kansas City, MO, Airport. We waited over an hour in a deserted area of the KC Airport for the Con-Air 727 jet to pick us up and take us to the BOP's Federal Transfer Station at the Oklahoma City Airport.

We arrived just after the 4 PM count, 110 of us from all over the country. This Federal Transfer Station is the only one of its kind in the country. It is a seven story building in a remote part of the Oklahoma City Airport. This was my fourth time through this facility. My first visit came in 1987 on my way to the FPC in Marion, IL. The Transfer Station holds three types of inmates. The vast majority is Federal inmates on their way to Federal prisons, either just coming into the system like me or they are inmates being transferred from one Federal facility to another. Some of these inmates are going or coming from court appearances, often times as snitches to be government witnesses against former associates. You can't tell the rats from the regular fare. There are also Federal inmates who are assigned to the Transfer Station and work as trustees for the place doing cooking, cleaning and laundry. And the facility serves as a Federal holding facility for the Oklahoma City Federal Court District for people awaiting trial.

The 7th floor serves as the "shoe" which is the lockdown unit where inmates are housed in two-man and single-man cells. These inmates spend 23 ½ hours a day locked up. The first floor houses the inmates who are assigned to the facility and serve as trustees. The 2nd floor is the Receiving and Departing (R & D) area. Coming or going inmates are processed in and out through this 2nd floor R & D area. It has its own airport gate and ramp. Floors 3 to 6 house all the inmates who are in transit. Over 92,000 inmates come through this facility each year, a figure I got from the warden who happened to come through our unit. Most transfer inmates are flown in or out of here on one of the BOP's five 727 jet planes. Some are bussed in and out also.

The average stay for inmates in transit is a week to ten days. Some inmates stay as little as a couple of days and others over a month. In the process of being processed through R & D, I found out that my destination in the system was going to be the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, SD, a place I am familiar with having done time at this camp three times in the 1990's.

By 10 PM, we were all processed, issued clothing, given a bedroll and sent to the units that would house us during our stay. Not a lot has changed in the units since the last time I went through the facility in 2002. I was placed in Unit D, a two-tier unit with 60 two-man cells, holding 120 inmates. There are four TV rooms, four phones, four two-stall showers (very clean!), a large common area with tables and attached benches, two book racks and enough area to exercise and walk. Three meals a day were served. The food was adequate. There was no commissary available. Most people are not there long enough to need anything. There are plenty of toiletries available and a change of clothes twice a week. My meds were given to me. The whole place was clean and well kept up. Compared to the Jackson County Jail, it was a Holiday Inn.

The inmates were from all over the country. The majority were in the system for drug-related crimes. The racial mix was in thirds divided between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics. The conversations inevitably turned to the cases that brought these men to this place. And no matter what part of the country or what race they were, their stories began to sound all the same, especially the drug-related cases. In a strange way, the place had a feel like I was attending a large national professional conference, only the profession was being defendants in Federal criminal court.

In our unit, there was a visible presence of the "Serrano 13" Hispanic gang. They are a large international Hispanic gang that originated with El Salvadorans in Los Angeles, CA. They occupied the same corner of the unit where my cell was located. They pretty much controlled the in-unit trustee activity and always seemed to have extra food trays. They had a corner on the tobacco products that made it into the unit. Tobacco is no longer allowed in any BOP facilities. So whenever tobacco gets through is a highly valuable commodity. They never gave me any trouble but then I never posed any threat to them either.

One afternoon after lunch, a fight broke out, one against three, between Hispanics. Seems that a rival Hispanic gang member was placed in our unit and three Serrano 13 gang members went after him. Shanks (jail house weapons) were produced into the situation. The young rival gang member ran to the officer on duty for protection. The whole unit was locked down for the rest of the day. Each individual inmate was taken out of his cell and interviewed by an officer. Luckily, I was in my cell when the fight occurred and I had nothing to report. When we were let out into the unit, 8 Hispanics were moved out and replaced by 8 new inmates. And there was no longer any visible gang presence in our unit.

It was not easy to get to know anyone well since we were all so temporary and in transit. I did get to know my cellmate, Kevin. The first thing he did when I came into the cell was to give me his bottom bunk. He said it was out of respect for my age – a class act for such a young man.

Kevin is a 25-year-old African American from Virginia Beach. Like most everyone else in the unit, he was there for a drug charge on his way to the BOP facility in PA. Kevin was dealing with a 25 year sentence. He was the unfortunate person in a drug case who was one of the last people the Feds picked up in a four year investigation that brought over 20 people into a criminal conspiracy case. He was unfortunate because by the time the Feds came to get him, there was no one left for him to turn over to them. All of his suppliers were already in custody, some of them turning on Kevin and naming him as the "King Pin" leader of the criminal operation. The Feds ended up accusing Kevin of selling ten times the amount of drugs he ever saw and laundering huge amounts of money he never had. When the Feds finally raided his home and business, they found no drugs and no money. They gave this young man a 25-year prison sentence based on the word of another drug dealer trying to get the best deal he could get from the Feds.

Kevin is married and has three small children. He had his own little service business cleaning outdoor siding on residential homes. He lost his business and his young family is fighting to stay out of poverty. He has a remarkably positive attitude, determined to make the best out of his difficult situation. He is a young man who is on a mission with a goal. His sentencing Judge told him that if he keeps himself out of trouble in prison, takes every opportunity offered to improve himself and better his education, she could strongly consider a sentencing reduction in this case after a couple of years. This could be the difference of Kevin doing 6 to 7 years instead of the whole 25 years. For Kevin, that will be the difference between him saving his marriage and helping to raise his three children or his losing his wife and never having much of an influence raising his kids. He desperately wants to get that

sentencing reduction and is determined to do what he needs to do to get it. He has turned his life over to God. His plan is to avoid all the negative energy and people who fill these places, stay focused and in God's Word. Not an easy thing to pull off. He will be a young man that I will keep on my prayer list and I ask you to do the same.

Early Monday morning, May 15, I was awakened by the guard and told to roll up. I was being shipped out. I said my goodbyes to Kevin. It ended up being a six-day stay for me at the Federal Transfer Station, considered on the short end of the spectrum. I joined 90 other inmates on a Con-Air 727 jet plane that stopped in Memphis, TN, then at an airport close to East St. Louis, IL, before landing at the SD National Guard Airport in Sioux Falls, SD. Five of us were let off the plane and picked up by a Yankton Federal Prison Camp van and driven the hour and a half to Club Fed Yankton.

Note: This prison journal is a re-write. My first effort was made while I was in the Federal Transfer Station in OK City. But the text never made it to Des Moines. We were allowed to mail only three letters a week and only on Wednesday. I left on Monday and left my letter with the text of my journal from Oklahoma City with Kevin to be mailed out on Wednesday as one of his three letters. Since the letter never did make it to Des Moines, I can assume that Kevin was transported to his designated BOP facility in PA Tuesday or Wednesday morning before he had a chance to post my letter. I'm now two weeks into by FPC Yankton experience. My next prison journal will give a report of my initial impressions of the Federal Prison Camp that I used to call my "preferred place of incarceration" back in the 1990's.