

CONNECTIONS THAT MATTER: VISITING AMANDA

Section 5: Living Ghosts

Not to be confused with the county jail, Amanda referred to solitary confinement as “jail” during our conversation. This is one of many slang terms that were brought up throughout the visit, including inmates in prison for life as “lifers” and the newest in-prison drug craze, “wasping.” Amanda described lifers she met at the Annex as wise and experienced, always knowing what to do or expect within the prison.

Her cell window there faced death row, where inmates awaiting execution reside. Death row inmates are kept separate from other inmates, in solitary confinement all of their own. Amanda would watch three women walk and talk together, a number that has since decreased to one, the previously mentioned Tina Brown. The first woman, old with long gray hair, had been recently put to death, and the other woman had her sentence lowered to life. Having them so close and yet so far is an experience that can only be described as haunting. A living ghost, right outside your window.

Death row inmates aren't the only living ghosts in prisons, as Amanda, who teaches COMPASS, a mandatory education course for those getting out of prison, noticed that many inmates look forward to leaving prison so they can engage in the substance use that led to their incarceration. Many of these women have resorted to spraying paper with wasp spray, letting it dry, and smoking the paper as a new way to get high, the aforementioned “wasping.” These chemicals are strong and kill brain cells, resulting in many inmates being non-verbal and zombie-like in demeanor across Lowell facilities.

Amanda put the severity of this situation into perspective when I asked her what she would do if external circumstances, like a car crashing through the gate, made escape possible. She told me that being caught attempting escape is an automatic additional five years to your sentence, and that since her sentence is three years from being up, she would sit outside with a cup of coffee and watch the chaos ensue.

The people who would try to escape, she said, are women inside for drug-related charges who are desperate for their next fix. It doesn't matter if their sentence is up in a day or a year; they will risk the additional five because they lack long-term thought beyond chasing the feeling drugs provide them. This is a tragic reality that explains why many inmates spend their lives cycling in and out of prison without addiction treatment.