

Roger McGowen: A leader in the Power of Love and Brotherhood in Prison

--By Ronald Radford, Administrator of the Roger McGowen International Support Group.
(I wrote this report as a Press Release before the Covid-19 pandemic started.)

After over 30 years in a Texas prison (for a crime, that those who know his case, believe he did not commit) Roger McGowen has demonstrated the power of love and brotherhood to rehabilitate and transform the lives of prison inmates and an entire prison culture – perhaps providing a model for the world. With the financial help of an international network of supporters, Roger helps to organize monthly fellowship meals called a “Spread” on many different cell blocks at the Wynne Unit Prison in Huntsville, Texas.

“Spread” is a prison word for a special fellowship meal prepared by inmates in their cells from items purchased at the commissary, combined with creative prison recipes, and shared with other inmates and usually ‘spread’ out on tables in the Day Room, the main inmate gathering place. Traditionally in the US these Spreads are a way to break the monotony of the prison food and to create a sense of community among the inmates. Typically, the Spreads are small and done by gangs for their members or done by racially separate groups for those of their race: Whites with Whites, Blacks with Blacks, and Hispanics with Hispanics. But that is changing at the Wynne Unit!

This change is best described by an inmate who wrote:

It's amazing how something as simple as a dormitory spread can have the ability to change a man from the inside out. It's such a joy for a man to discover something deep within himself that he never knew he had. There are simply no words that can adequately describe the love that each of these men emanate towards one another on a day-to-day basis. I've now come to realize Mr. Ron, that people can never give you what they have never received. Some people don't know how to give love because love has never been given to them. This bridge that you and your members provide for my dorm has enabled me to realize, know, and understand that the most hardened of criminals can be shown how to love in ways that words alone could never explain. – Adrian Eleby

The “gourmet” Spreads Roger arranges are prepared on each cell block with great love and care by the inmates and then served in their Day Room for everyone - open and free to all inmates without regard to race or gang affiliation - something the inmates and guards have never seen before. As one inmate wrote, *“I've not experienced anything like this in my 40 years in prison!”*

One of Roger's inmate friends wrote to our group:

It's people like you that give people like me life and hope. Life has been so hard on me the thirteen and a half years that I've been here but yet I keep on pushing on until I find my way. I truly thank the Creator for Rock (Roger). It's like he has seen my struggles through my eyes and all my pain. I have no one in my corner familywise, I'm on my own in this place with no support system and sometimes these people here can get out of hand! It's like no one that matters hears the cries of the world. All they ever think about is themselves. I was lost, but you reached and found me and gave me life – hope! So, I thank you and your support group – because light is all the world needs! – Carlton Mitchell

The observations I hear are that our financial support to indigent inmates, and especially the funding of the Spreads, is creating more genuine inmate rehabilitation and transformation than any other program we know about. While it's true that we provide the money for the Spreads, the truly unusual thing about it is that the inmates themselves plan it, select the foods, prepare the dishes and serve their fellow inmates with an open and inclusive spirit that breaks down barriers and reveals the love and brotherhood waiting to be brought out. The genius and simplicity of it is that the inmates simply respond to Roger's and our love and care for them by showing love and care for each other – and thus transforming themselves and their prison community." This is clearly documented in the letters from inmates below.

While Roger McGowen was on death row, he started a tradition of always celebrating his birthday by finding a way to share a small Spread of snacks with everyone: White, Black, and Hispanic inmates around his area. In the last six years - since leaving death row Roger started enlisting the help of several trusted inmate friends to receive extra funds so they could work with him to create a much larger Spread on his cell block – a feast for over 150 guys in the Day Room on the last Friday of each month. Soon this became known throughout the prison, and before long many inmates at the Wynne Unit wanted to be transferred to Roger's cell block to be a part of this transformed and friendly culture he had created there.

Last November, with the encouragement and additional funds from our donors, Roger recommended trusted inmates on other cell blocks to receive funds from us so they could put on their own Spreads. The results have been astonishing and have led us to now fund these Spreads on 7 different cell blocks (with up to 160 inmates each) and in 5 smaller dorms (of 50 inmates). We have also begun a new project of free Spreads of hygiene products such as deodorant and toothpaste for inmates in need. The prison requires inmates to pay for these personal hygiene items at the commissary. Most inmates have no outside financial support and so they go without! In addition, their accounts are charged up to \$100 per year for medical services so that if a family member does make a deposit to their account, the prison takes it to cover their debt for medical services! So, receiving free hygiene items is a really big deal!

It has been so long since I was cared about. The funds you sent helped me to get hygiene stuff that I have needed but just didn't have money to get. Now that God has finally heard my cry, he sent me an angel to look out for me! It finally feels like I'm not alone. Thank you for everything you do for me. I have seen men come together because of your organization. I pray that it continues to be a blessing in our lives. Well, it did make a difference in my life! I know I have a true friend and not somebody who will turn their back on me. I had to recognize that I was blessed, and not just some trash that people don't care about. Please continue to be in my life – and others as well. – Larry Ashley

When Roger left Death Row after 27 years, he and all his supporters were thrilled that he was going to be in a General Population prison with many new opportunities such as being able to make phone calls. However, our hearts sank when he arrived at the Wynne Unit Prison and said it was worse than being on Death Row! They had one of the worst Wardens in Texas who was proud of the prison's reputation of being one of the most horrible in Texas. She trained her officers to treat inmates as "the enemy" and any officer who showed even the slightest kindness was branded as "collaborating with the enemy!" In spite of this atmosphere in which Roger found himself, I was able to feel empathy for some lower-level administrators who could feel that I understood how difficult and painful it was for them to implement policies that actually dehumanized themselves as well as the inmates. They could see that I was not attacking them personally but only working to change the system.

On occasions when inmates had labored for two days cooking up special dishes and artistically displaying them on tables for the Spreads in the Day Room, an officer would come in and rake it off the tables into a trash can! The guards never missed an opportunity to degrade and dehumanize the inmates. Their policies and actions gave me many opportunities to call, email and write letters to the Warden, the Office of the Ombudsman and the Texas State Senate to lobby for the inmates. I found a way to connect with the Texas State prison system by showing them that our group was working to support their Mission Statement which includes the purpose “to improve the behavior of offenders.” I made common cause with them by helping them see that what they were doing at the Wynne Unit was making inmate behaviors worse! I worked to help them feel that I was there to help them live up to their own Mission Statement. I followed Roger’s example of gentle power which may have helped them see that the notorious female warden was a liability to their system. She was removed.

The new enlightened and progressive Warden now at the Wynne Unit is supportive and wants to allow all these Spreads to go on without interruption. He sees that these monthly gatherings are transforming the attitudes of inmates and officers and changing the entire culture at Wynne Unit for the better – with Black, White & Hispanic inmates all joining together with high-five’s, hugs and friendly greetings that transcend race or former gang affiliation.

I am just one out of many that are incarcerated without family or any supporting cast. Sometimes it gets hard to carry-on when no one loves you. Nevertheless, you guys have lifted a burden and help make this time a lot easier with your contributions. And with every contribution I find someone else who is less fortunate, and I contribute 10% to that individual. – Joseph Freitas

Roger feels that he and his International Support Group are creating a model for personal transformation and community building that could be replicated at other prisons. As Roger said, “Some of these guys are going to get out of prison, and we feel that what we are doing will help make them better people and someone you will be happy to have as your neighbor!”

“We are forever indebted to you guys. You make us feel adequate and of great worth. Many times, the fear of rejection tends to close the heart of a man because of his unbearable hurt and pain. He becomes bitter and hard-hearted to a degree. I’ve lost a lot throughout the course of my incarceration. But little did I know that I was being shaped and molded into the person that I am today.” – Adrian Eleby

After Roger’s big birthday party on his cell block last December, as well as successful Spreads being shared on other cell blocks, Roger has many guys tracking him down to thank him and give him a hug! Roger is constantly being stopped in the halls, Day Room and chow hall by guys who just want to shake his hand. Sometimes in the gym so many guys want to talk to him that he does not have time to do any exercise! One time, a group of guys gathered around Roger in the gym and a young man asked, “Hey man, why do you do it? Why are you and your International Support Group helping people you don’t even know?” Roger saw that he had the attention of a large group and said: “I started sharing what little I had with friends back at Ellis Unit Prison over 30 years ago simply because I saw that they had nothing and no one supporting them. And, because I could help – I did. Also, I want to tell you that you do not know, and I do not know, the many people in the free world who donated the funds to our Support Group that helped you. I know some of you are going to get out of prison – and when you do, I want you to remember one thing. When you are out in the free world, if you ever get the idea to try to cheat or steal from someone, I want you to remember that person might have been one of

the people who donated the money that you received.” In that moment, Roger’s wisdom and love touched many hearts in that group of guys and left many with tears running down their face – as everyone looked at Roger in amazed silence! Roger is known by the nickname “Rock” but recently some have also been referring to him as “Prime Minister” of the prison!

In a letter to a donor, Roger wrote a clear statement of how he views what he is doing:

We are fighting hate on the front lines. And many of the guys who we are helping will one day re-enter society and we want them to take the love that they found here with them instead of the hate that came with them. We want them to spread the love that they now know instead of the hate they once knew.

So, I think I am where I am meant to be for the moment. When God thinks this task he has set for me is complete, perhaps there is nothing that will hold me in prison any longer. But until that time comes, I will continue to spread love as far and as wide as I can. And I thank you all for making it possible. You are the unsung heroes. I am, and all of us are putting forth the effort to make life better here. Our efforts are being written on the hearts of everyone to whom we have shown that love is the greatest power there is. We are making a difference and that is what counts. Again, I thank you. There is so much more to say but I want to keep it simple. Love is not complicated, and I do not wish to make it so. I simply say thank you for the love. You are family now. We are related in love and bound by efforts to fight hate. We change minds by changing hearts and we change hearts by changing minds. And we can change the world one heart and one mind at a time.

How did this amazing 55-year-old Black man end up in prison, and what are his prospects of getting out? Some of this was explored in the award-winning 2013 documentary film “Roger McGowen Condamne a Mort #889” by Swiss Filmmaker Nicolas Pallay. Over 30 years ago Roger was arrested in Houston, Texas, for a robbery and murder which was most likely committed by his older brother who had borrowed his car. After an intense and lengthy interrogation, the police prepared a confession which they coerced him to sign. By the time of his trial, his brother had been killed by police during another robbery. There was no evidence linking Roger to the crime, and despite his protests of innocence – with a drunk public defender who fell asleep at the trial - and the notorious racially biased Texas court system, he was given the death penalty and sent to death row where he endured the dehumanizing treatment and constant harassment for which Texas prisons are famous. Roger became another statistic in the criminalization and mass incarceration of Black men in the United States.

In a hopeful sign, the new Warden at Wynne Unit Prison is working to implement a rehabilitation model of prison which is based on the idea that a man is more than the worst thing he has ever done, and so it treats him as a full human being capable of improvement. The punitive model, which the previous Warden practiced, and which is prevalent in most Texas prisons, is based on the idea that a prisoner is less than human and should be punished every moment of every day with disrespect, anger and deprivation leaving inmates feeling like they are being treated worse than animals. Because of the appeals system in US courts, some inmates have been known to stay on death row in these conditions for 20 to 30 years before the appeal process is exhausted, and they are then executed.

From the time he arrived on death row and for the next few years, Roger undertook, alone, a long spiritual journey that led him from rage at the system and victimhood to an awakening to compassion, forgiveness, freedom, and unconditional love which he shared in his correspondence with Swiss writer and sociologist Pierre Pradervand who started writing to him

through Amnesty International. When Roger was scheduled to be executed in 1997 Pierre and some Swiss friends, who also wrote to Roger, hired a US attorney who filed an appeal and stopped the execution. Roger's letters to Pierre, along with Pierre's commentary, were published in 2003 in the book *"Messages of Life from Death Row."*

The book, published in French, became a bestseller, and with the income from the book and with donations from many people touched by his story, Pierre and I hired a new attorney in 2006. At the same time, we formed the Roger McGowen International Support Group. This Support Group has grown to include three organizations: "Association Suisse Roger W. McGowen" (Pierre Pradervand in Switzerland); "Les Amis de Roger McGowen" (Pascal & Beatrice Bernard in France); "Les Roses Sur Le Bitume" 'RRSB' (Bernard Montaud & Sanjy Ramboatiana in France); and an international network of private donors.

All donations are sent to the Roger McGowen Fund Trust in the US where I, as Administrator and Trustee, disburse the funds in collaboration with Roger and the donors. Roger also provides inside information to help the Support Group advocate for prison reform, justice, and fair treatment of inmates. In addition, Roger and I work with the RRSB group in France to conduct a pen-pal program that has matched over 140 inmates with group members in France, and 40 of them flew from France to Texas last February to visit their correspondents! This was an unprecedented, large-scale visit which caused the Warden and other prison officials to recognize the amazing transformation that has been going on and prompted them to make unheard-of changes to prison visiting rules to make it all happen smoothly and with great success.

After ten years of work by Roger's legal team a US Federal District Judge finally ruled that Roger should not have been given the death penalty. Then a plea agreement was made, and Roger was moved from death row to the Wynne Unit, a regular Texas state prison, with a possibility of parole in 2036. Currently, a new team of young tech-savvy attorneys have digitized ten boxes of legal documents and continue to analyze, research and interview witnesses, in a major attempt to prove his innocence and get him released from prison.

However, when I talk with Roger on the phone, which is almost every day, it is clear that while he hopes the work of proving his innocence is successful, Roger's main focus and passion in life is the work he does with our International Support Group to help hundreds of individual inmates in need. Most importantly, he arranges the monthly fellowship meals (Spreads) for around 1500 inmates – which is literally transforming the culture and the mental, emotional and moral atmosphere of the prison.

It could be said that Roger lives in a state of spiritual surrender and present-moment awareness which is represented in his statement above: *"I am where I am meant to be for the moment. When God thinks this task he has set for me is complete, perhaps there is nothing that will hold me in prison any longer."* In one of his letters, Roger – who considers himself to be "spiritual but not religious" – wrote, *"Love is just one thought away. Remember to use it often. It can never be depleted!"*

Addendum Feb. 2021: The last Spread for a large group in the Day Room was served in February, 2019 just as the pandemic started. Since then, the various medical lockdowns and quarantines have prevented the inmates from gathering in the Day Room for Spreads. However, we have continued to provide funds for individual inmates to buy food and hygiene products at the commissary to share on a smaller scale with inmates in their immediate area. The spirit of

brotherhood and camaraderie persists undiminished among the inmates. We have continued to provide an expanded list of services for the inmates, including helping them file with the IRS for the \$1200 stimulus checks which a federal court ruled must be made available to prisoners. The checks are just starting to arrive, and I just received a \$600 check from an inmate as a donation to our work to help inmates in need. Many other inmates plan to send part of their stimulus checks as well. Quite a testament to the love and brotherhood awakened in the inmates!

-A new website about Roger is being developed at: www.rogermcgowen.org

-For specific questions you may email Ron in any language at: ron@ronaldradford.com.

-Donate anytime at: <https://www.PayPal.me/RogerWMcGowenFund>

Below are a few of the letters from the inmates at the Wynne Unit Prison:

I'm writing to give you a brief update on what's happening here on my dorm. Things are really and truly changing for the better, Mr. Ron. It's amazing how something as simple as a dormitory spread can have the ability to change a man from the inside out. It's such a joy for a man to discover something deep within himself that he never knew he had. There are simply no words that can adequately describe the love that each of these men emanate towards one another on a day-to-day basis.

I've now come to realize Mr. Ron, that people can never give you what they have never received. Some people don't know how to give love because love has never been given to them. This bridge that you and your members provide for my dorm has enabled me to realize, know, and understand that the most hardened of criminals can be shown how to love in ways that words alone could never explain. We experienced that each day that passes.

Brothers on my dorm have taken the initiative to create their very own dorm spread in honor of the love and kindness that the members of your organization have shown to us! And we'd like to thank you guys for what you've started on our facility. We can't thank you enough my friend. Peace and harmony sir - that's what it's all about.

-Adrian Eleby

Thanks for all you do for the guys and me. Honestly, for me "Thank you" seems too small a phrase to meet a generosity so grand, yet not even a thousand "Thank yous" could express a gratitude this great! In this way it seems that your kindness has not only captured my heart but has conquered my language as well – for I am rendered speechless! "Thanks a lot Ron!" LOL!!

But seriously, you must know that it is both an honor and pleasure to share this connection with such like-minded hearts. We all embrace our duties and this opportunity (blessing) with a very high level of integrity and sincerity, which we express through the preparation and serving of our fellowship meals.

We challenge ourselves and each other to grow, and in this way, we are made better brothers, better people, and ultimately better chefs! LOL!! Each event is always better than the last one. So much so, that even would-be adversities such as disgruntled officers and commissary complications all seem to dissipate in the wake of our movement.

How amazing it is to witness these brothers, separated by an assortment of differences made equal by kindness and appreciation! How blessed I am to be joined with my brothers in their moments of great joy. Once more, my words defy me as a joy of this magnitude cannot be explained. Sadly, I am reduced to a simple "Thank you!"

-Lakim Guild

I just want to say thank you for the blessings you have given me. Without your organization's kindness and generosity, I would be without hygiene and other needed things. I do not have a family nor friends out in the world to help me, so when I receive a JPay from you and your International Support Group I know that someone somewhere cares about me. It makes me feel like I'm not worthless.

- Michael Moose

Last night we did another spread and had probably the biggest turn out yet. It seems like anytime you have people spreading love, blessings, and just getting along, there's always some form of opposition somehow someway. We do things in an orderly fashion to where we have three tables that are set up in a row, and people can come straight down the line and then go take a seat. The capacity of the day room is 84 and there were over 100 people that turned out last night – so we had a line pretty much going around in a respectful manner. Even the officer in the block came to my little "Nacho table" with a big smile and said "Oh my God, that looks good - and it's a lot!" This time, I was able to more than double the meat I usually put out as well as add extra condiments. As usual, I got nonstop praise for the nachos! The other tables were able to step it up a notch as well and we definitely had enough food!

About halfway done serving, the lieutenant came and started screaming about sitting down and racking everyone up if we didn't sit down. This is probably the biggest anti-inmate officer we've got, but instead of putting a stop to it all, she allowed it to go on! No one was disrespectful, and no one shouted profanity - nothing. Which shows quite a bit about the environment that we have created. When all the food was gone, we cleaned up and the atmosphere was joyous, with countless handshakes, and expressions of "thank-you" and "God bless you!" I always make it a point to tell people to please not thank me, but thank God, because it's him working through other people that makes this possible. Once again, it was nothing short of a blessing and an amazing experience. I am always humbled by the feelings that overwhelm me every time I can help make this happen.

We greatly appreciate the love and generosity from you all. It has been the greatest blessing to be a part of this, and all of you are true examples of God working through people and answering prayers! There just are no words to describe the love and appreciation I feel for you all and all that you do. We love you!

-Edward Hughes

While I was incarcerated at the Wynn Unit, I lost loved ones who had supported me financially, which made doing time bearable. Then death came upon them and I felt as if I did not have a friend in the world. I am a practicing Christian and my faith is what I leaned on. I've met some good people in prison that would lift my spirits - which brings me to write this letter.

Caught totally off guard one evening, an inmate whom I only encountered on occasion, spoke to me in the chow hall on one of those days when the meal alone would break down your spirit. He said, "Hey Dave, how are you doing?" My response was, "I'm holding on." His response was, "My condolences to you and yours. I heard about the loss of your family members." My response was, "Thank you. That means a lot." In prison, it's not every day you find other inmates showing sympathy! This guy went on to say, "I'm going to send you a gift!" And I said, "Oh yeah? What do you mean?"

He went on to explain how he was associated with a group of individuals who help guys while incarcerated by bringing them a ray of hope with a gift. Now mind you it has never happened to me while incarcerated for 15 years, that anyone would give you anything without asking for something in return.

Now this ray of hope became real to me letting me know that there are people, total strangers, that don't know me from the man in the moon, so to speak who actually care! That

God has angels in place (for real!) – that he has people about his business, working, showing love, bringing joy to one’s heart.

Under the circumstances of incarceration, this Angel told me that I would receive a JPay deposit in my name, after giving him my information. Now, mind you, I have never received a JPay in my life. To receive one, as I did, telling me a deposit was made on my behalf... I had no choice, it brought me to my knees thanking God with the tears for the people he used to bring that joy. His Angel was “Roger W McGowen – a.k.a. “Rock!” He did not know me, and to this day I think he only knew me briefly. But the kind gesture will live in my mind and heart for the rest of my life, letting me know that there is a God who cares, and that he is using people who care: His angels spreading his love, giving guys who are incarcerated a ray of hope!

To those that are involved, “Thanks!” I was released from prison in January and If I can be of any help to continue the work, I too wish that work would be available to me. This is the influence that the gift from you all had on me!

-David Bolar

I want to share with you how the spread went and how it really created a lot of brothers in here, and how it has changed my life for the better. First and foremost, on behalf of the Wynne Unit I would like to say thanks to all the brothers and sisters who have help to provide the funds for the spread. You all just don’t know what this really means to us! By you all showing love to this unit, it has brought a lot of people together. At one point of time no race could eat with another race. But now, all you see is smiles when we sit all together with one another and enjoy the good food. What really touched me was when this 70-something-year-old man was almost in tears because he said he hadn’t felt this much love in years. Not only that, but he hadn’t been to Commissary in years. So, for me to bring him some food, let him know that some still care for him.

Brother Ron, to be honest with you I have been through some bad things and those things caused me to lose my way in life I was just living my life from day to day and not caring about anyone but myself. I never had any responsibility to do my best. I don’t have any children and I’ve never been married and remain single.

So, going from not having any responsibility to be the one that is over my cell block to make sure the spread goes right, turned that light back on in my heart that was out. I’ve been incarcerated for six years now, and by you all doing this for us really put a new outlook on life for me. Even though my family is not here for me, I still make it my business to help others even if it is just a hug or a warm smile.

The only two things that keep me sane are 1. God, and 2. helping with the spread every month. Doing the spread gives me something to look forward to. Seeing the brothers smiling faces around here bring something out of me that I thought had died a long time ago, and that is love, hope, joy, peace, and happiness. Brother Ron, I would love to keep this going once I am free. Back home, I never gave myself a chance. All my life I’ve been a failure and that’s something I just don’t want to be anymore.

I know I won’t be locked up in prison forever, and I really would like to keep this going when I get out. Ron, thank you so much. Now I can shine my light through me to others. Between you and me, I believe I have finally found my purpose in this old world! When you get this letter, just smile – because that’s what you’re doing for a lot of brothers. And again, thanks so much to you all!

-Demarcus Osborn

I want to thank you guys for your support. You have truly motivated change in my life in more ways than one. Ron, “Rock” is truly a motivational person. Just being around him is a life-changing blessing. I can’t explain it in detail, yet he gave me something of myself back. Something that I had lost. God knows what you guys are doing is truly amazing! Since being

moved to the Goree Unit, I miss him. When I felt down all I had to do was see him, and I'd say to myself, "Man, quit tripping. You control your happiness!"

-Samson Winn

PS: Quick update on what's going on with the hygiene donations here on the Wynne Unit. Everything is moving according to plan. With the help of you and the loyal members of Roger's International Support Group I was fortunate enough to buy numerous tubes of toothpaste, soap, powder, lotion, deodorant etc. I still have a few items left. I'm taking care of business – honoring what you guys told me to do.

Everyone sends their love and appreciation to you and everyone involved in this very beautiful movement. Ron, sometimes I ask myself if you are heavenly sent for the sole purpose of helping others in need of support. It is such an honor and pleasure to have you guys so deeply involved in our situation. Your kindness and generosity towards us have enabled us to put aside our ethnic differences and has forced us to operate in Love, Peace and Harmony! We just can't thank you guys enough for what you all do for us.

-Adrian Eleby

PS: I'm glad I got to be part of something so special, even though it is in prison. Coming to this place saved my life. I never felt more alive than now. I get to help change lives by helping to make sure the Spread goes well: taking food to older guys who can't come out; making cakes out of cookies; and just sharing laughs! Ron, I don't really know what I'm going to do when it is my time to go. I am going to miss this time that I'm sharing with my brothers. I want to take this with me to the free world and share with others how it brought brothers from different walks of life together. I just want to share the love I have in my heart with others. Brother Ron, when I get out, I now have another chance to right the wrongs in my life by giving back to people with the time that I can't get back. I can't wait until the next Spread! Please tell everyone who donated funds – and even those who want to but can't – that the brothers at the Wynne Unit prison said thanks for everything.

-Demarcus Osborn