

Visiting the Death House and near insanity

A reporter's notebook

Part three of a three-part series

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During the past two weeks, parts one and two of the Arizona prison tour story were presented to readers of The Wickenburg Sun.

When thinking back to the Special Management Unit II (SMU) of the Eyman prison complex, the word that best describes its conditions is "oppressive." Inmates live in dimly-lit cement rooms and have no real or sustained human contact. In contrast, when thinking about Eyman's Meadows unit, a more positive memory comes to mind. Inmates work in and out of the facility, including the prison bakery, and they spend a lot of time in open spaces with each other. But when thinking of a word to describe Florence Central, the third and final stop on the tour of Arizona's most dangerous prisons, only one word comes to mind and that is "Wow!" Maybe even "Double wow!"



Florence Prison

The Florence prison complex (consisting of three units) is operated by the Arizona Department of Corrections (ADC) but is a separate complex from the eight-unit Eyman complex. The two complexes, however, are located in the same vicinity.

As soon as one steps into the main entrance of Florence Central, its Spanish style buildings reveal its long history. Florence Central contains the state's oldest prison building and one that was built with such rigid reinforcements that it would take an implosion to remove it from the grounds.

When entering any of the state's prison facilities, a person must first pass through a metal detector. Similar to getting through an airport, shoes that beep must come off and be checked. However, the metal detectors at Florence Central are so sensitive that nearly everyone passing through meets with the scanning wand.

To make sure inmates don't escape from Florence Central, its fences are rigged for death so highly charged that an attempt to abscond from the prison would surely bring a loss of life.

Unbelievable sights are witnessed as one simply walks onto the grounds of this facility. Because Florence Central is another maximum custody facility, all security measures must be taken and protective vests for visitors are again required.

On the grounds in the middle of the facility, surrounded by its large cell blocks, are a number of free-standing small cages adjacent to one another where inmates wait for medical care.

Toward the back of the grounds sits the Death House—the place where Arizona inmates are executed. An Arizona man who has been sentenced to death is housed in Eyman's SMU II unit, but is moved to Florence Central about 24 hours prior to his scheduled execution.

Florence Central is fortunate that it employs a corrections officer who has been at the facility for a very long time and is an expert at the facts and figures regarding the entire facility and its Death House.

Something very noticeable once inside the Death House is how cold it is, and apparently it is cold even during the summer months. Inside the Death House are two holding cells. In the past, Arizona used to execute two inmates at a time. Now, only one inmate is executed at any given time, and there has not been an execution since the year 2000.

Inside the Death House is a gas chamber chair and a lethal injection table. There are currently 108 men sitting on Arizona's death row, and about 20 of them still have the option of choosing the gas chamber over lethal injection. Arizona legislation now says an inmate convicted to death can only die by lethal injection. The 20 or so men with the option of the gas chamber were convicted to die before this legislation and basically have this right grandfathered into their sentences.

The Death House is an eerie place, and some believe that seeing it should serve as a deterrent for crime. Sitting on the gas chamber chair, the same chair that has killed about 40 of Arizona's most dangerous men, was an experience not soon to forget. In Arizona, about 20 men have faced lethal injection and about 20 were hung prior to the introduction of the gas chamber.

After leaving the Death House, it was on to Cell Block 2 and the final stop at Florence Central. One would never expect to see and hear the sights and sounds of Cell Block 2 in his or her lifetime unless he or she was watching an episode of either MSNBC "Lock Up" or National Geographic's Explorer series "Lockdown." The only way to try to describe Cell Block 2 are with the words "near insanity."

Cell Block 2 houses 180 men in 180 cells. The cells are built in runs of 30 and are three-tiered, totaling 90 men on each side of the room with an old watch tower in the middle. In fact, the watch tower used to lead to an underground tunnel on the central part of the grounds.

Behind Cell Block 2 are more small individually-adjacent outside cages where inmates go for recreation time. Unlike the SMU units where only one inmate per wing can be taken out for recreation, a number of Cell Block 2 inmates are outside at the same time. However, before leaving for the outside cage, Cell Block 2 inmates are stripped and then re-clothed. So during recreation time, orange shirts and pants hang over the bars of the cells, alerting corrections officers that the inmate is ready to leave one set of bars for another.

Further back behind the cages are more cell blocks, and one in particular is within shouting distance of the Cell Block 2 cages. While outside in the cages, inmates from Cell Block 2 yell back and forth to men in the neighboring building.

With 180 bored men in one building, watching TV, listening to music, and talking back and forth, the noise level was apparent even approaching the building. But once the two visiting females entered the building and were noticed by just one inmate, the volume level picked up a number of notches, and only their experienced correctional officer/tour guide could decipher what was being said. It was almost as if the cameras were rolling and everyone wanted a chance to speak.

After about 10-15 minutes inside Cell Block 2, attempting to get past the noise in order to hear and learn about the building's history, it was time to go back outside and finally remove those heavy vests.

As the tour came to its end, it was easy to say that never before had the visitors seen anything like it. The events of the day left memories that can never be forgotten. Not one note was taken during the course of the tour, and notes were not needed to remember these sights and sounds. There were also no quotes from inmates or prison employees written into this three-part Reporter's Notebook, as that was part of the agreement made with the ADC in order to get the tour. (Skeptics beware: there was nothing incriminating said by anyone that would have put up a red-flag in a crime reporter's mind).

After the tour ended and the two visitors were starving from all the walking and talking, they had a quick bite to eat at a nearby Subway restaurant. Still with the scent of prison on their clothes, when thinking about what part of the tour stood out, it was not hard to get a grasp on the most unforgettable parts of the tour.

The Death House of course was extremely interesting, but it was Death Row and Cell Block 2 that provided the highest level of impact. The conditions of these two units provided an understanding of punishment that one could never comprehend without actually seeing it.

From the perspective of someone who is not completely jaded by the process or the people who make up the process, the ADC does the job it intends to do. Yes, inmates will say differently. Inmates have accused the ADC of not providing what is statutorily required, and some inmates say the programs that are provided are not fulfilling or substantial.

The hope, again from this perspective, is that the majority of Arizona's 35,000 inmates find a way to rehabilitate themselves so that they never go back to prison because even in medium custody, living in prison is no way to live.