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SURVIVING COVID-19 IN PRISON

BY

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On December third, I was scheduled to have a colonoscopy. The doctor and I hadn't discussed the subject. I figured since I had recently turned sixty-five, he took it upon himself to make the appointment.

The day before, a Registered Nurse (R.N.) had given me a gallon of some electrolyte laxative liquid solution with instructions not to eat any solid foods until after the procedure, and to drink the entire jug. It tasted nasty! I knew to stay close to the toilet. This was going to be my third experience with the invasive surgery. I know how important searching for polyps is; untreated colon/rectal cancer causes many deaths.

At six-thirty in the morning, I was driven to the Adventist Hospital in Bakersfield. It was a relaxing two hour drive over the Grapevine (Tejon Pass - Elevation 4,144 feet). After a short wait, I was taken to the pre-operation room to sign various paperwork. A Covid-19 test was given to me. An intravenous (IV) apparatus was inserted near my wrist, The anesthesiologist discussed his part of the procedure. An R.N. began to wheel me towards the actual operation room.

All of a sudden, the gentleman who gave me the Covid-19 test stated that I was positive. I thought he was kidding. I felt completely normal. Everyone disappeared! The guard helped me get back into my prison clothes. I was immediately escorted out of the hospital and down to the car I arrived in. I was driven back to the prison.

This time, the guard was cruising between ninety and one hundred miles per hour (MPH) on Interstate Five (I-5).

I was taken directly to "C" Yard with other men who tested positive. I started to feel a little tired, but thought it was because I hadn't eaten any solid food in thirty-six hours. I settled into my new room. My personal property had been bagged up by my roommate (████████) and taken to the Receiving and Releasing (R&R) Building. Thankfully, he had included all the items that he knew were important to me. R&R is notorious for delaying and holding up the delivery of personal belongings. To my surprise, within twenty-four hours, I was reunited with my property. A true miracle.

That long twenty-four hours without my stuff was difficult. I prayed, meditated and worried. I truly didn't feel ill. I wondered if the hospital had made a mistake. The uncertainty of the situation confused and baffled me. Little did I know then, a time-bomb was brewing in my body.

I was given a torn sheet and a wool blanket with holes in it. I slept in my clothes with my shoes on. I was cold all night. The television in the building was on a Spanish channel. The volume was loud, the voices were muffled. I had no idea when the set was finally turned off and it was quiet.

I was given a telephone call and a shower upon rising. For some odd reason, there wasn't any hot water. I called my sister (████████) to give her the news that I had tested positive for the Coronavirus. Just hearing her voice comforted me greatly. She informed my friends and relatives regarding me contracting the deadly virus. Many friends and family members sent heartfelt get well cards. Unfortunately, all the condolence messages arrived weeks later when I returned to "A"

Yard.

Having my property, including a television, cheered me up. The R.N.'s came by twice a day to check vitals. More men kept arriving; the showers and telephone calls stopped as the building filled up. The guards were trying their best, but clearly were overwhelmed. Two inmates spent the entire day cleaning and disinfecting.

On Day number three, I began to feel very ill. My first symptoms were: fatigue (no energy and exhausted), aching muscles/joints, chills and nausea with dry heaves. No headaches or fever.

On day number five, breathing became an issue. I began to hyperventilate. I couldn't get enough oxygen. When the R.N.'s returned, I mentioned the subject. They calmly stated, "Everyone is having that problem". Their uncaring attitude worried me. They hurried from one cell to another doing as less as possible, showing no sympathy whatsoever and giving no advice, such as lying on your stomach can open parts of your lungs, so I could breathe better. I read this later in the newspaper.

Both my temperature (no fever) and blood pressure were normal. The fingertip pulse oximeter was also given. The normal oxygen saturation range is 96% - 99%. If your blood oxygen level reading drops to 92% or below, it's time to call a doctor, mine was 88%. Again, I read this after the fact. The R.N.'s never were concerned that it was consistently below 90%. I'm sure they knew 88% meant I was supposed to be hooked up to an oxygen machine of some kind. These "so called" health professionals did nothing. I know many deaths in prison could have been prevented.

I was cold, alone and isolated. That particular evening, I felt absolutely awful, completely lethargic and listless. I was curled up

in a fetal position unable to move, I thought the Lord might take me home! I was shaking uncontrollably, breathing deeply and rapidly and totally discombobulated.

I never really realized how sad it would be to die alone. I pondered the idea and reflected on my own life. Surrounded by family members and friends would be a loving and peaceful "way to go". It brought tears to my eyes, thinking of all those souls who were in pain and alone on their final hours. By the grace of God, I made it through the night.

The following day, I felt totally depleted and utterly miserable. I couldn't do anything, such as read or write. Again, the R.N.'s did nothing when I told them. I was dismayed and frustrated. I laid back in my bed wearily.

On Wednesday, (day number 7), I was informed I was being moved to the "B" Yard Gymnasium. It took all my energy to pack up my personal belongings and put them into a cart. The next exhausting chore was pushing it a half mile to the Gym.

The Gym was filthy (unoccupied for a long time). The "healthy" positive Covid-19 men cleaned it up. The bunks brought in were covered with dirt and bird droppings. The twenty-four bunk beds (3 x 8) were spaced six feet apart. The upper bunk was storage for your property.

Being with other men gave me peace of mind, just in case my condition worsened again. About half were from the "Paws For Life" Dog Program. "Paws For Life" is a tight knit family in Lancaster. We share the love and passion to train rescue dogs for "forever homes", instead of being euthanatized. There are approximately one hundred men in the group and between thirty and thirty-five dogs live in our building ("A" Yard, Building Five). Their barking is music to my ears. I never

got to say goodbye to my last dog (Peppercini).

They encouraged me to get up and move around even though it was difficult. Being the oldest, they spoiled me. Checking on me often, giving me hot tea ([REDACTED]) and chicken noodle soup ([REDACTED]). Bryant kindly scrubbed and cleaned my bunk for me. He also attached a line around my bunk (made from a torn sheet). I turned it into a "privacy curtain" by hanging a sheet on it. The unconditional love and compassion shown by these men was truly overwhelming.

Maintenance men installed a new, large screen television for us. It relieved the boredom somewhat. Other men played cards and worked out. I couldn't believe it. This Coronavirus Disease effects everyone differently. Here I am (and a few others) constantly tired and worn out, while others experienced mild symptoms that lasted just a couple of days.

The R.N.'s seemed better and more understanding on "B" Yard. They were concerned and offered to order me certain medications. Acetaminophen (for muscle aches), Ondansetron (for nausea) and Cepacol (for my sore throat). My buddy ([REDACTED]) helped me get the medication fast by asking the guards to call the medical department and bring them over immediately. My blood oxygen level reading improved to the 90%'s.

Sharing common showers and toilets didn't bother me, it reminded me of my high schools and college days. There were two telephones, I was finally able to re-connect with family and friends. They were all worried about me.

My next symptom (day number nine), was constipation. I hadn't had a bowel movement in forty-eight hours. A constant pain in my intestine/tummy area. Eventually, the toilet called my name. The

excitement was short lived. Now, I developed diarrhea (day number eleven) and was a frequent user, every few hours. What a roller coaster ride. All this, on top of nausea, fatigue, aching muscles, chills and dry heaves. My breathing was better, but my lungs were injured and sore from hyperventilating.

After a week in the Gym (day number fifteen), I returned to my original room of five years on "A" Yard. being "home" helped my mental state. Slowly but surely, my health improved. Even after a month, I'm still not fully recovered.

Without a doubt, this Coronavirus was the most miserable, frightening and agonizing disease I've ever experienced. I felt completely helpless, vulnerable and powerless with no cure (vaccine) available at this time.

This abnormally, contagious, wide spread pandemic continues to wreak havoc around the globe. A few vaccines look promising. Only time will tell how effective they run out to be.

Take it from me, this Coronavirus is no joke. People are dying daily. I've personally known a half dozen men on this yard who have died of Covid-19, close friends of mine. My name could easily have been added to this list. I feel blessed to be able to share this story with you all.

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