

Things you learn as a Convict on Death Row

Approximately every convict on death row insists that it's all a big misunderstanding or a frame job, but for some of them, that stuff is true: Since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976, almost 8,000 convicts have been sentenced to die in the United States. Of those, about 1,400 have actually been executed, while about 140 have been exonerated by DNA evidence after their trial. So, yeah, sometimes the system does just screw people over.

Nobody knows that better than Nick Yarris, a man who was stuck on death row for 21 years before finally being exonerated in 2003 thanks to the magic of science. That is just about the worst thing we've ever heard, so we immediately wanted him to tell us all about it:

It's Every Bit as Brutal as You Probably Think

Picture this: Two muscular death row inmates dancing around each other like sweaty, tattooed ballerinas. They swing mallet-sized fists into each other's faces, turning nose cartilage into pudding and teeth into Tooth Fairy smoothies. Inmates cluster around, shouting out bets, while guards do precisely crap-all to stop them. It might sound like the Gulag as depicted in a Cold War-era spy movie, but it was actually just one of the many cruelties Yarris says he encountered on death row in Pennsylvania:

"One captain came up with the idea where they would just pick out a white kid and a black kid and let them fight in a cage for five minutes once a month, and that's how it was done. I had to fight like this on two different occasions. Even though I didn't want to do it, I knew that if I didn't, the guards would just take out their sticks and beat both of us senseless. So I fought."

The whole thing, Yarris says, was a misguided attempt to release racial tension in the yard. If it sounds too horrible/ridiculous to be true, note that in the California prison system, it was discovered that the guards were betting on these "gladiator fights" between inmates (there they'd do it with members of rival gangs).

Yarris says there were other, entirely pointless cruelties as well, like guards plain ol' messing with you for their own amusement. One perennial favorite was the old "fake visit from mom." They'd start, he says, by telling an inmate he'd gotten a surprise visitor. Since that can be the bright spot of a convict's whole month, it made for easy bait:

"They went to his cell, they got him all dressed, they told him in 15 minutes he should have himself cleaned up, and he did. He got all dressed up, and then he stood at the door with his belongings in a neat pile. They took his belongings, made him strip down, and then go ahead. And then they said, 'Oh, wait, it's the wrong Johnson, darn.' And they would laugh and laugh ..."

Yes, Innocent People End Up There

Yarris would eventually be exonerated for the crime that put him on death row. Eventually. First, he had two freaking decades in the slammer to sit around and wait for somebody to invent DNA testing. Yeah, he was inside longer than Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

It would turn out that the only thing he was guilty of was being a drugged-up 19-year-old and arguing with a cop when he pulled him over. The shouting match turned into a scuffle before sanity cracked through the haze of his drug helmet:

"I stopped at that point, yelling, 'OK!' and he put me in the car. He then sat in the car and calmly composed himself before calling dispatch and telling them he was now under attack, that there were shots fired and he needed assistance, because he was still under attack. And then he looked in the mirror at me with a smirk, like, 'Now you're gonna get it.'"

Awaiting trial in solitary confinement for kidnapping and attempted murder of a peace officer, facing 20 to life on what he says were trumped-up charges, Yarris found a way to make a bad situation even worse. He picked up a newspaper and read about a recent unsolved murder and had a really terrible idea:

"I sat there and began obsessing about having some way of using this information to barter for my way out of this desperate situation. And I went forward three days later and told the police that I knew something about this crime, like an idiot. Once they found out I was lying, they put me back in the maximum security prison."

And here was where karma came back to bite him. See, Yarris wasn't the only convict willing to throw a story to the cops in exchange for favors. Once his story about the murder fell through, the police started looking at Yarris as a suspect. And soon they had a witness against him:

"They went and put a prisoner named Charles Catalina in the cell next to me, who said I confessed to him that my blood would be found on the victim. Because back then, all they had was serology. And serology would look at people's blood type from their biological materials only. And I am B-positive. I share the same blood as 15 percent of the population -- and with the murderer."

And that sealed his fate -- he was actually acquitted of the charges that got him put in jail originally (the fight with the police officer) -- but now was on trial for this unrelated killing. One three-day murder trial later, after three hours of jury deliberation (over a relaxing meal at a local restaurant), 19-year-old Yarris was sentenced to death. But hey, the judge had promised the jury they'd all be home for the Fourth of July weekend.

You Pick Up Some Horrifying Skills

Following his conviction, Yarris spent the next two decades essentially in solitary confinement. And it turns out that when you take an innocent man and lock him up with nothing but his own thoughts, things get a little ... dark.

"I can kill you with a magazine and a pair of old underwear. And I don't have to leave my cell. I unroll the waistband and make a very good corded catapult. I take a magazine, take a metal staple out, take some of the threads from my underwear, wrap it around the staple until I've made a dart, and further it with the card from some of the interior advertisements in the magazine, until I have a three-and-a-half-inch really good penetrator. I dip that in a solution made of nicotine and human feces that I've been letting

sit in a cup of urine that I've heated again and again over a period of days until I've extracted a very dangerous poison.

"I then roll up the magazine until it's two inches in circumference and attach it to my bars with the rest of the underwear and I wait for you to walk by me. As you walk down the tier, I retract the catapult, insert the deadly dart, and shoot it right into your neck. The sepsis will take over in the next three days and kill you."

We're still not sure whether it would actually work, and it's not the kind of thing the MythBusters would try to replicate unless they decided they wanted to run off all of their advertisers. But we're willing to take his word on this one.

On the lighter side, he and his fellow prisoners had plenty of time to develop a sort of "sock semaphore" communication system in which they'd cover their hands in tube socks and manually spell stuff across the yard (since talking was verboten), in addition to organizing a football betting pool that paid out in postage-paid envelopes. Yarris tells us he also passed the time by organizing a powdered-doughnut smuggling ring. You're probably hoping "powdered doughnut" is a euphemism for something cool, like cocaine or cream-filled donuts, but nope, we're just talking about regular old powdered donuts.

And then, one day, everything changed. Sort of. Ask yourself: If somebody in prison asks for a DNA test they know will get them off the hook, how long do you think it would take to go from there to walking free through the front gates? A year? A couple of years? Well ...

If You're Wrongfully Accused, Good Luck Getting It Overturned ...

Try 15 years.

Having grown up with 31 flavors of *CSI* on TV, most of us probably take DNA-based forensics for granted, so it's easy to forget it's a science that's been with us less than 30 years. When Yarris was convicted in 1983, the concept of DNA evidence didn't exist, much less the idea of being exonerated by it. And he may never have heard of it if he hadn't been lucky enough to get his hands on a local newspaper in 1988:

"The Forensic Science Convention in February of 1988 was held in the Philadelphia Civic Center, and the headline had a double-helix on it and it said, 'New DNA science proves guilt' -- and then underneath it said, 'Also used to prove innocence.' I was shocked."

Seeing as he had never even been in the same room with his alleged victim, Yarris immediately realized the potential of DNA forensics to clear his name and requested it -- a ballsy move, seeing as no one in history had ever made that request before.

"But when I asked for DNA testing, lo and behold, they threw away all of the autopsy materials."

Yarris studied the police records and court transcripts for more than a decade, trying to track down the bits of evidence that remained, since the cops and the court system weren't all that excited about

helping him prove that they'd made a mistake. His bad luck, though, was the stuff conspiracy theories are made of. In one case, a cop removed some evidence from a lab without a warrant, only to leave it in a desk drawer until it rotted to the point of being unrecognizable. In another, evidence was shipped properly to the right lab but then dropped and contaminated once it got there.

That sort of thing happened half a dozen times.

You have to admire his pluck, but after 15 years of making no progress, you can hardly blame him for giving up. Finally, without a shred of hope left, Yarris demanded the only right he had left:

"I wrote a letter and asked to be executed in 2002. Judge James Giles in the Federal Court of Philadelphia heard my appeal. I had one right left, and it's called the 'dead man's right.' I had the right to ask for my own execution at any time."

Be Ready for the Long Haul

Judge Giles agreed to consider Yarris' request for execution, but only on the condition that the remaining DNA evidence -- which comprised about 3,000 cells -- be examined first (if 3,000 sounds like a lot, keep in mind that a square inch of human skin is about 9.5 million cells).

In an 11th-hour twist worthy of Hollywood, this last test consumed all the evidence, but it conclusively proved Yarris was innocent of all 21 charges. Huzzah for justice!

Sort of. The prosecutor still had the right to retry him.

Said prosecutor spent the better part of 90 days hemming and hawing before realizing that he didn't stand a chance in the face of, y'know, #SCIENCE. In the end, Yarris was spared the tedium of yet another trial by jury but was instead subjected to something we'll call "trial by bureaucracy."

Eight months. He sat in prison for another eight months while paperwork was shuffled back and forth, filled out incorrectly, tossed in the trash, re-filled out, corrected, uncorrected, and thrown out again, proving once more that the only thing more popular in America than executing prisoners is filling out reams and reams of paperwork.

"Meanwhile, I was put into a mental derelict cell," Yarris says, "where they have the people who have broken down mentally, where they're not trusted with anything other than a paper cup -- and they made me wait out the last eight months in complete and total isolation.

"Even on the last day, they got in one more 'joke.' They put me in the van at 7 a.m., drove me up to the gates of the prison, and let me through the first gate -- and then stopped me, saying, 'Oh my, we made a mistake, the paperwork's not been done. You gotta go back.' And they literally put the van in reverse, and some of the guards talked in made-up reverse voices, and took me back into the prison and put me back in holding. They didn't actually release me until that afternoon."

Wait, are we sure he was actually in a prison, and not on the set of some wacky sitcom about prison guards?

Nearly Ruins Your Ability to Live on the Outside

So, after 21 years in solitary confinement, what would you do? Travel the globe? Challenge Muhammad Ali to a grudge match? Binge-watch *Real Housewives* while stuffing your face with pork rinds? (We don't judge here.) How about spend seven months violently ill because your body is now literally allergic to freedom? That's what happened to Yarris.

Keep in mind, prison had meant 21 years of eating garbage-food, breathing recirculated farts, and living in constant fear for his life and safety. And you might think that after that, the outside world would be a sudden relief. But the weird thing about the human body is that it adjusts to pretty much whatever environment you present it with -- spend 21 straight years in a combat zone, and you'll learn to hate the peace. Now that Yarris had become accustomed to the hazards of prison life, it was home-cooked meals, fresh air, and emotional honesty that he couldn't handle. It was like, in his words, he'd become allergic to the world:

"Over those last dozen years, I did all my time in hermetically sealed, climate-controlled units. They had the air conditioner pumped on, they had the heat going, but there was no air. You can imagine how often they changed the filters, so for years I was literally breathing the cast-off skin cells and farts and bad breath of my fellow prisoners. There were no molecules of moisture, and therefore after a while, I became allergic to fresh air. My first seven months after my release were actually torture. I would get blinding headaches just from breathing fresh air, just from the sun on my face."

So, just do the TV-and-pork-rinds thing, right? Nope:

"And I was allergic to real food -- well, not so much allergic, but anything I ate just ran through my system. Everything I ate was so rich I couldn't eat anything other than bread for months without getting painfully sick."

Even the stuff about food and air, though, was easy-peasy compared with readjusting to basic human interaction:

"Y'know what else I was allergic to? Human emotion. If you say something in prison, those words are taken to the nth degree. If you say, 'Man, I'll kill you,' there better be blood splatter."

"See, anger and tears and happiness and joy, those are luxuries that you have as a human being that's allowed to interact with other human beings. I didn't know this world for so long that when people in my family and people around me had arguments, I would jump to arms waiting to go to war, or expect them to kill each other. But then two minutes later they're making each other a cup of coffee. And I'm thinking, 'Wow, how can you do that?'"

Still, even with all the physical and emotional misery, finally being declared innocent must have had its perks, right? Financial compensation from the state, a phone call from the governor, maybe a written apology? Nope!

"Pennsylvania offers no compensation. Because I was exonerated, not paroled, I was not eligible for all of the normal assistance even a parolee gets. I had no halfway house, no healthcare, no job search assistance, no cash assistance, nothing. In fact, when I walked out of the gate of the prison, in all the chaos of the press attention one of the guards stole my prison ID and I couldn't even board the commercial airplane to fly home because I had no way to prove my identity."

And, obviously, most employers are loathe to hire a former inmate, even if said inmate was wrongfully imprisoned. So Yarris found employment in the only career that society lets pretty much anyone do: motivational speaking.

"In England, over the last nine years, I had the great honor to give over 300 speaking appearances at Cambridge, Oxford, high schools; I spoke before the British Parliament; I spoke to the U.N. General Council standing next to Kofi Annan. The response from children and adults is the same: they're shocked by my story, but more importantly, inspired to live their own lives more fully."

Going through such an experience will teach you a thing or two about life. According to Yarris:

"You can go through worse crap than you ever imagined possible and still choose to be the best version of yourself. People ask me how I'm not angry or bitter, and I ask in reply, 'Why would I want to still be in that horrible prison of hate and bitterness of my own choosing?'"

Nick Yarris now has a beautiful wife, Jesse, and a beautiful life that he's excited to live every single day.