

A TRIBUTE TO JORGE ZERQUERA

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Jorge Zerquera, a lifer incarcerated for forty years, ended his life on Friday night, November 17, 2023 in the Behavior Adjustment Unit (BAU) at MCI-Norfolk (MCIN). Jorge's action stunned and shocked the Norfolk prison community. Jorge was a very active member of our community - both religious and secular. Jorge was much respected, valued, and loved by his fellow prisoners. He lived the adage that he would 'give the shirt off his back" to anyone he saw in need.

Jorge Zequera arrived at MCIN in 2003. He had transferred from Florida to be closer to his family. Jorge had served four years on Florida's Death Row until the Florida Supreme Court overturned his death sentence. In its place, he received a life sentence with the possibility of a parole. After having served forty years, Jorge was due to be released in 2024. He was sixty years old.

While at MCIN, Jorge joined Project Youth whose members speak at least twice a week to area high school students and/or at-risk youth about the debilitating and destructive effects of drug and alcohol abuse, school violence, the rigors of incarceration and its effects on family members and themselves. Jorge served in Project Youth for twenty years as a moderator and assistant coordinator. By all accounts, Jorge had asignificantly positive impact on the students and his fellow Project Youth members.

In addition to his participation in Project Youth, Jorge was a lifetime professed member of the MCIN Chapter of the Third Order

of St. Dominic. Jorge was also an integral member of MCIN's Spanish Catholic community and acted as a bi-lingual translator for major Catholic events such as the annual Cursillo, confirmations and baptisms.

Jorge served as one of three Chairman of MCIN's Inmate Council having been elected by the prisoner population. As Latino Chairman, he resolved prisoner issues which required that he meet with various administrative officials up to and including the superintendent. Jorge was successful because he was trusted by prisoners and administrators to be professional representing accurately everyone's concerns.

Jorge also volunteered his time to serve on various Inmate Council committees and other groups. He was an active member of American Veterans In Prison (AVIP), Latino Cultural Awareness Committee (LCAC), the Native American Circle, and the Lifer's Group. Jorge was also employed in various capacities including as an electrician in the Industries Building and as the Video Clerk where he ordered, maintained and distributed videos in groups upon their requests.

During his twenty years at MCIN, Jorge earned his Bachelor's Degree from Boston University. He also tutored several prisoners in basic education studies up to college level courses.

The question then, given all that Jorge had accomplished and that he was looking forward to going home in 2024, why would he have taken his life? It was not because he was depressed. I and several others spoke with Jorge one and two days before he was taken to the BAU. He was upbeat, although he was concerned about the recurrent strokes he was experiencing, but he had recently been

to Milford Hospital and was waiting for the results of the tests which had been administered.

Jorge's action cries out for an explanation. The Department of Correction (DOC) must provide everyone with an accurate, candid, thorough, and believable report of the findings of whatever investigation is now ongoing. All the administration will say now, almost a week after Jorge's death, is that they can't say anything as the matter is under investigation. Given that, here are some issues which need to be addressed.

1) Was the medication Jorge was prescribed for his strokes withheld as some sort of punishment? Medication should be sacrosanct.

2) Why was Jorge's request to see a shift commander denied? Such a request once denied by a correctional officer, leaves few, if any, good options. Asking to see an official whose authority exceeds that of the correctional officer is an attempt to seek to have the situation assessed by another's eyes. On a Friday night the shift commander is the natural choice. Jorge, after being denied by the correctional officer, chose to go outside his unit to cry for help. What he received was a bevy of correctional officers descending on him, handcuffing him and walking Jorge, who offered no resistance, to the BAU.

3) Why is there no intermediate option for attempting to resolve or defuse a situation other than taking a prisoner to the BAU, a/k/a "the hole"? A member of the Lifer's Group Board of Directors has proposed to train a few prisoners as intervenors to defuse a situation before it escalates to a worst case ending. Had such an option been in place, a trained and close friend of

Jorge's may have been able to talk with him in a neutral and safe environment to try to mediate the situation. A different result may have ensued. There was a prior incident at MCIN when one prisoner was able to talk a fellow-prisoner down from the roof of one of the buildings. That was, however, not an option on the night of November 17, 2023, unfortunately for Jorge and those who mourn him.

While Jorge may have violated a rule or regulation, the consequences far outweighed the gravity of any misbehavior. There needs to be an understanding on the part of the administration of the impact of taking a lifer to the BAU as the first reaction. In Jorge's case, his parole was probably lost. He knew also that his single cell status and his job were gone as well as having his program participation severely curtailed. Had Jorge not taken his life, he would have had to spend ten to twelve years just to regain a portion of what he would have lost.

This tribute is being written on November 23, 2023 - Thanksgiving Day, the last Jorge had hope to serve in prison. I am thankful for the twenty years I spent with Jorge Zerquera. He was a dear friend, a wonderful co-worker, and very compassionate and giving. He gave so much of himself to so many. He deserved and earned a much better fate.