

Vegan Prisoners Support Group

December 2006

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Prisoner Letters – Joseph Harris

Getting sentenced to 3 years in prison was a bit of a shock, but I've fairly quickly settled into prison life. I'd been looking down the barrel of a custodial sentence for the 8 months since my arrest and so I'd had plenty of time to talk to the VPSG and former prisoners and to mentally prepare myself.

Everyone says it, but it's true that the fear of coming here was so much worse than the reality, even for a geeky scientist - the worst thing that's happened is having my accent compared to Hugh Grant's! In fact other prisoners have been very supportive and the doors on the wing were banging in solidarity when I unwittingly featured on the news.

After a few initial problems the VPSG helped me to get my vegan diet fully sorted out. I'm now getting a good selection of food with a weekly supply of soya milk, nuts, seeds and dried fruit...the only issue I have is that I never, ever want to see another boiled potato again!

I'm making good use of my time, toning my scrawny vegan physique in the gym, doing education classes, reading (currently 'Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee' – a true classic), teaching myself Spanish (hable un poquito de

español) and replying to all the lovely letters I've been getting. On top of this I've been lucky enough to have a few brief chats with Don Currie, who's also imprisoned here, and it's been great being able to share experiences with another vegan prisoner.

I'm due to be shipped off to another prison soon, but the VPSG as always have been fabulous and have already contacted my potential destination to inform them of my arrival.

I'd like to send a massive thank you to everyone who has written to me, it means a lot and makes this situation a lot easier to bear. Also a huge thank you to my friends, family, my amazing girlfriend and of course, the VPSG.

Please support their 'Write to Your MP' campaign to help improve prison shops, an issue of particular importance for vegan prisoners here at HMP Woodhill. *

Keep those letters coming – I try to reply to everyone ☺.

Take care, love Dr Joe x.

** Joe Harris has since been moved to HMP Lewes.*

Prisoner Letters – Garfield Marcus Gabbard

As the first vegan in this jail for several years and the only one here at present it's been frustrating sometimes, but I must say the diet is above average – I get brown rice daily, soya desserts at weekends and the meals in general are a good effort. A million thanks to the VPSG for their help and support.

I have passed a number of exams and I am now doing an Open University course in creative writing. I have progressed and become stronger for my experience and await the Home Office to decide whether to release me on parole in March 2007, if not I'll have to wait to January 2008 for freedom. I am now an enhanced prisoner and surviving better than I ever thought I would.

Whatever you are doing for the animals keep on fighting for the voiceless but try not to be a martyr. Please keep in touch with prisoners as your moral support is invaluable – post is the highlight of my day. I thank you all for your advice, help, letters, cards and moral support. Respect and hugs to you all, you make me feel very humbled. Take care and stay free.

Until all are free. Garfield.

Prisoner Letters Sarah Gisborne

Dear VPSG and Supporters

The Cookham Wood up-date from this vegan is that things are progressing. Healthcare are now starting to provide strict vegans with the VEG1 supplement after intervention from the Catering Manager and the other 'so called vegans' are having their diet looked at; meaning they take the soya milk as well as the dairy milk etc – this has now stopped.

The VPSG have also supplied me with a Vit C Supplement as I was getting flu and colds. They also can now send me nice parcels containing vegan chocolate bars and when they arrive it always feels like Christmas and yes I do pace myself with the goodies.

Even though there are quite a number of us in prison at present the support from the VPSG has continued and they are still always there when needed. All I have to do is phone them regarding an issue in prison and they try to sort it. They are such a lifeline and they should never be taken for granted.

I am still training hard in the gym and feeling very positive and strong of mind.

Your support for me has been fantastic. Please continue to support the VPSG as we need them.

Long may you and they reign.

Sarah

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Editorial

The increase in prisoners has certainly kept volunteers busy these last few months, but we are concerned with the forthcoming 'so-called' Festive Season and New Year approaching, that it could be a grim time for some vegan prisoners.

In our last newsletter we asked for your help to resolve this by writing to your MP – unfortunately there is still not even a bar of vegan chocolate, a moisturiser, hair conditioner, etc., on canteen sheets and not all prisons permit us to send in nutritional parcels. So when you next purchase your vegan goodies – please spare a thought that without your help prisoners can't do the same.

The prisoners are writing to their MP's, but they REALLY need you to write to your MP too as the Prison Service continue to drag their heels in implementing our recommendations. So if you want to help them make a difference - please sign the enclosed letter and forward it to your MP if you haven't already done so.

Thanks Jo-Ann

Prisoner Letters Jonny Ablewhite

Dear Friends

I finally have to admit defeat – the continual flow of heartfelt letters means I just can't avoid this anymore! Typing up 'collective' letters really is frowned upon, but I felt I was neglecting my letter writing responsibilities so it became unavoidable – forgive me, you beautiful creatures!! You shall be rewarded in Vegan heaven!

I've finished my Master's degree exams – yes, I may seem a little proud but I am inwardly smiling that I've managed to plough on with this course in these trying circumstances. If I pass these I can begin reading for the thesis that should conclude the Masters in Social Sciences by the end of next year – hopefully.

The simple but effective combination of both mental and physical exercise and stimulation really has assisted this prison journey so far. I have a stoical soul but the regular gym and studying I have been afforded has been indispensable in relieving any complaints.

Prisoner Letters – Josephine Mayo

Dear VPSG

Thanks again for all your hard work since I was transferred from Peterborough to Drake Hall and for also ensuring all my vegan needs were met while I was at Peterborough.

Unfortunately even though the food is fine here, I only have limited access to vegan toiletries so thanks for sending them in to me until you get it finally sorted with Prison HQ. In the meantime, your help has been invaluable.

Being in a semi open prison this place is obviously very different to Peterborough as I have more freedom.

The women are friendly here and I'm on a nice quiet house so can do my O.U Study at night without

interruptions. I have also been keeping very busy in the daytime.

Whilst I'm here I intend making full use of all the available education courses. I've also got a job in the gardens which I'm really enjoying as I love being outdoors.

Thanks to all the supporters who have been kind enough to write to me. I really appreciate it. I obviously miss my wonderful boyfriend Kerry very much, but have had some inter-prison phone calls with him which are the highlight of each month. I am told my inter-prison visit is now being processed.

Thanks again VPSG for all your help.

Jo Mayo

Prisoner Letters – Don Currie

Dear VPSG

I am well both in mind and body. I can't compete with Natasha, she's in Nirvana, but things are good here in Woodhill.

Jo-Ann and the VPSG have worked tirelessly on my behalf and I feel we are getting somewhere at last. I am now getting seeds as well as nuts and dried fruit. It seems vegans are all a bit obsessed with food, I'm looking at a long time in prison, yet all I'm concerned with is food. I wonder what the psychiatrist will make of that?

I met Joe a few times before he was transferred, we did some training together and managed to cycle 20km in 40 minutes and natter away at the

same time. Not easily done, especially as most of our conversation was about food!

I am playing chess, table tennis and going to the gym and also doing yoga and going to education five days a week.

I wish to use this opportunity to thank the VPSG and all those who support this organisation.

I would also like to thank all the people who have taken the time to write to me.

Love Don

But I won't lie; there are times when I want to crumple because I can't sit on the grass with my family or laugh in a bar with my friends – but then I see the pile of letters you send and it genuinely, poignantly, reminds me that hope is an exquisite and eternal thing. Thank you for them and for your incredible generosity. A special 'thank you' to the VPSG of course!

We have, somehow, landed in a prison that seems to be pioneering

a laissez-faire attitude to retributive punishment; not what you'd expect from Blair's post-colonial tyranny! Many aspects of this prison are inefficient and inhumane, but the regime is wholly bearable. We are only locked up from 9pm weekdays and from 6pm weekends.

The 50 or so lads I share my days with on C wing are mellow and often

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Prisoner Letters – Kerry Whitburn

Hello everyone. Hope all is well. Things are just ticking over here in Lowdham Grange. I'm still a journalist on the prison magazine, and the very first edition of Lowdham's 'SYSTEM-ATTIC' is due at the printers. Should be out for Christmas. I must say that while working on this magazine I have had the privilege of working alongside some of the more pleasant and amicable prisoners in here.

Talking of journalists, one of them recently printed a scathing article about two of us, he claimed we were bragging about Lowdham Grange being a holiday camp, and that I was bragging about receiving inter-prison visits with Jo.

Any of you who read our last letters to the VPSG (where the journalist claimed to have gained his information) will know this is not true – for a start, I mentioned that I'm *hoping* for an inter-prison visit with Jo, as I adore her and miss her terribly, but even though Jo is six months into her sentence, and I'm fourteen months in, we have NOT yet had an inter-prison visit. It's looking less likely we will receive one in the near future due to prison overcrowding and low staffing levels. Also, none of us has ever claimed Lowdham Grange is a holiday camp, what was actually said was on the lines of Lowdham being "likened to a holiday camp" but that it depends on your "experiences of a holiday camp".

What does prison mean to me? I HATE being in prison, as prison to me is not solely about the high concrete wall topped with barbed wire; and the

internal high fences topped with barbed wire too; and the bars on the windows; and the heavy, steel doors or people shouting etc. Prison to me is mainly about being AWAY from my life, love and everyone in it, away from Jo, my beautiful dog Karma, and my friends.

Unlike most of the prison population I keep my head down and get on with my time. I don't whinge, but make the best out of a dire situation. I try to fit as much as I can into my week, breaking the monotony while participating in courses I hope will benefit me after my eventual release.

As well as working on the prison magazine, I'm still enjoying the Learning Support Assistant course. I'm now about to begin unit 4, a unit based on Maths. I've just completed the Literacy unit, and after unit 4 we've got unit 5 to complete. This is based on E.S.O.L, and is the final unit of the course. Upon completion I will be qualified to work with adult learners, in prison and outside. As well as this, I do one afternoon a week in a creative writing class, where we're taught about writing stories and poems. So everything to do with my time is geared up to help me in the future. It also helps alleviate the boredom of prison, as well as the many hours of loneliness.

How do I view Lowdham Grange? As a prison where the staff treat us as HUMAN BEINGS, with a NAME, not a NUMBER. A prison that offers opportunities for those who want them: be it earning money or gaining

education. As above, I'm doing a course that could benefit me as well as others when I qualify as an L.S.A. I'm gaining experience in journalism at a level I could use, outside, by working with ethical people on ethical newspapers/magazines.

This is a prison that recognises and adapts to every prisoner's individual needs, be it race, religion or belief. When we arrived here there were virtually no vegan provisions, but now a full separate vegan menu and a Special Shop Order form to purchase vegan products, from toiletries to washing powder chocolate to nuts.

The vegan products are available for every prisoner to buy, not just vegans....spreading the word eh!

So, Lowdham Grange is NOT a holiday camp after all – it's a prison! But it's a prison that does its best to teach dignity and respect by example, whilst also offering rehabilitation opportunities. Isn't this what society wants – people leaving prison respectful, dignified and rehabilitated?

Anyway, I want to end by saying a HUGE THANK YOU to all of you who have supported me and Jo; and I apologise to ANYONE whose letter I may not have replied to. PLEASE, also, keep up your support of the VPSG – without them I would be living on salads!

MUCH LOVE AND BIG HUGS TO YOU ALL – KERRY. X

Prisoner Letters – Natasha Avery

Hi everybody

Life continues apace at Whacky Towers. There seem to be more and more mad people turning up – must be the Christmas rush. One who particularly stands out, in more ways than one, is Mrs Bimbo with huge fake breasts (three thousand pounds including flights and accommodation in Thailand as she keeps telling everyone. What a bargain eh? Bet you're all going to rush off and get yourself a pair). She keeps insisting that she knows me from somewhere and has seen me pole-dancing in a club in Birmingham (of all places – no offence Kerry).

Another new one on the spur [*new*

term for wing] is 100% doolally & keeps everyone awake all night screaming and kicking her door. She has a horrible predilection for wearing clothes that are totally see-through – a truly hideous sight – and ankle bracelets made out of dangly bits of Jeye cloth, very fetching.

I have now got a job as a gym orderly which means I clean the gym for an hour in the morning and then work out the rest of the day, which is my idea of heaven. I've lost 20 lbs (12 stone 1 to 10 stone 9) so no more Mrs Fatso. I'm getting pretty fit now and starting to cover decent distances eg cycling 15 miles, rowing 10,000 metres & running 3 miles at 7 mph. I passed all my exams & am

now a fully qualified Assistant Gym Instructor. I hope you're all suitably impressed.

I also do gym inductions for all the new people – time for more whacky behaviour as pretty much all of them are high as kites when they come in. You turn around and they have got the boxing gloves on trying to knock each other out, or are swinging bits of chain off the machinery at each other's heads.

I have been here four months now & time has flown by. My tagging eligibility date is the 25th of November, but whether I get it or not

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VPSG News – Audrey

Over the last few months we have been kept busy helping with the needs of the increased prisoners and our various campaigns. The prison shop and the lack of provision of vegan products has been a long running problem which we have spent many frustrating hours trying to resolve. We are positive that we are gaining ground, and hope that this issue will be resolved in the near future with your help – see enclosed letter to MP's.

Attendance at the Catering Conference provided a very interesting insight into the management of vegan meals in prison. We were very pleased with the response from the numerous Catering Managers who came to our table to obtain further information to help them with vegan catering. We are reliably informed by appreciative inmates that our input has significantly improved the vegan diet in most of the prisons. There was also an enthusiastic reaction to our forthcoming cookbook, which will contain menus sent in from the various establishments.

There have been several prison visits where we have met with individual test-cases and have sought to rectify any outstanding issues with the vegan diet, and are pleased to report that this has given some much needed stimulus and helped to obtain a positive outcome.

We continue to liaise closely with the Vegan Society who have been very helpful with our research, and who provide the 'VEG1' supplement which we send to our test cases at cost price. Overall, although there is more work needed still to provide our test-cases with their rightful equal opportunities, we are still very pleased that this year has been so constructive.

Audrey/VPSG Caseworker

Prisoner Letters – Natasha Avery

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is anyone's guess. Otherwise my release date is the 25th of March, so either way not long now. The support has been truly wonderful from the movement worldwide and especially from my husband Gregg who has given me the love and inspiration to do this sentence standing on my head, as have other prisoners who are doing or facing far longer than I am.

The vegan food at Bronzefield is good and almost more importantly

News - Arrests

**24-hour emergency arrest line
07984 733008**

Our current research shows the following ambient meals are suitable for vegans:

- Bunzl Vegetable Chilli
- Bunzl Pilau Rice
- Westlers Vegetable Chilli

Prisoner Letters –Jonny Ablewhite

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hilarious and, from the horse's mouth, 99.9% are here because of drugs related offences. It is clearly a pandemic problem the government has little chance of tackling. But, if drugs or drug-debts don't get in the way, they are all congenial – a consequence of their life and prison experiences. We all just want to get along and get out!

The appeal won't begin for a few months. I have little hope though. The State's judicial system is so completely entrenched in institutional and hegemonic immorality it pains me to think I will have to stand before them and be ignored again. I have thankfully managed to replace my legal team; they were so ineffectual in presenting my case I couldn't bear to let them loose on my appeal!. Please keep fingers, toes and knees crossed that it will be to some avail.

I have a great job on the prison magazine team: I proof read, spell check and edit – in keeping with my background strutting around classrooms!

they are receptive to suggestions from VPSG & from me, and actually act on them. I now get lots of veg and lots of salads too. The monthly nutritional packs from VPSG containing nuts, dried fruit, seeds, seaweed etc are wonderful & ensure a balanced diet. We prisoners nowadays are reaping the rewards of almost 13 years of commitment, perseverance & a lot of hard work by Jo-Ann & the VPSG team, & believe us we are suitably grateful! Love
Natasha x

[5th Dec – still waiting for news on tagging]

- Westlers Pilau Rice.

St Aldates and Abingdon police stations in Oxford are participating in our scheme to provide soya milk to vegans detained in custody - we need volunteers from Oxford who can purchase (cost refunded) and deliver packs of soya milk to those stations as and when necessary....please contact Karen on 07984 733008 if you can help.

I've also been asked to help teach a film studies course and I'm learning Spanish and German so I'm over the moon! I sing/howl in the prison band and we trash out rather naff versions of Pixies or Neil Young classics twice a week. We performed in front of an audience last week, with some hip-hop and R&B improvisation – it was a complete belly-aching laugh! We opened with The Velvet Underground's 'Heroin'!

And, of course, I read a lot. Of note is virtually everything by Noam Chomsky and Jacky Law's *Big Pharma* – when read with a critical eye it can give great insight into the murky world of the pharma giants.

There are 5 or 6 of us who meet weekly for a 'Philosophy' discussion on a Wednesday morning. We set this weary world to rights, rant and battle with clashing theories and opinions; it's great! We've been encouraged by recent libertarian struggles in Venezuela and Mexico. I just crave the occasional cool cider and more Vegan allies! But there is such an uplifting, heterogenic multicultural mix of people here with an eclectic jumble of stories and wisdoms – each trying to maintain rationality and some self-esteem for themselves and their families, here and abroad.

Visits are of course a redemptive blessing. So can I thank everyone for taking the time to see me, for filling my weekends with such hilarity! I thank you all dearly for writing too – from the heart of my bottom!! But I thank you most for your Veganism; for the unflinching personal dignity and compassion for animals it provides in these tyrannous times – for this gives me unfaltering strength and hope.

Yours Always For the Animals, For Their Earth.

Jonny