

What Drives You?

Madurai, India (CNN) — Narayanan Krishnan was a bright, young, award-winning chef with a five-star hotel group, short-listed for an elite job in Switzerland. But a quick family visit home before heading to Europe changed everything.

"I saw a very old man eating his own human waste for food," Krishnan said. "It really hurt me so much. I was literally shocked for a second. After that, I started feeding that man and decided this is what I should do the rest of my lifetime."

Krishnan was visiting a temple in the south Indian city of Madurai in 2002 when he saw the man under a bridge. Haunted by the image, Krishnan quit his job within the week and returned home for good, convinced of his new destiny.

"That spark and that inspiration is a driving force still inside me as a flame — to serve all the mentally ill destitutes and people who cannot take care of themselves," Krishnan said.

This sounds like such an unusual story but it's the kind of thing that occurs every day — in India, to be sure, but in Fishtown and Manayunk, in the east side of Harrisburg and the Hill district in Pittsburgh, too. It is, of course, the story of a life-changing experience. Someone is touched to their core by a situation so compelling that he or she alters the way they look on life even when the change means making great sacrifices.

At the Prison Society we have some 300 official visitors and volunteers who at some point made a decision to spend time and money, not to mention emotional energy, to call on inmates. Their aim is to show that prisoners are cared for by people outside.

When a correctional officer gets a little too frisky and you wind up in the RHU, when a loved one passes and you are

→ unable to attend the funeral, when the court delivers what seems like another injustice, you feel figuratively like the old man in Madurai. Your thinking focuses on yourself: life has dealt you a sandwich you'd rather not eat.

That is exactly the opposite of how our visitors feel: their thinking is not about themselves but about you, a fellow traveler on the road of life. Sometimes all they can do is lend a sympathetic ear; other times they can bring your problem to the attention of people in charge. Everyone should know, however, that we have no silver bullet; we can speak on behalf of those who cannot get a hearing, but we have no power to act. We do what we can do.

At a lifers picnic at SCI Dallas recently, a veteran inmate recalled that not too long ago the ventilation in the living quarters was bad. In the heat of the summer conditions became oppressive. At the request of the prisoners, the Prison Society took this issue to the warden. When all else failed, we asked if small hand-held fans could be permitted, but we were told that would have to be approved at central office. So we took the matter to the Secretary of Corrections, who said he would approve it if all the superintendents agreed. So we did a bit of lobbying before the superintendents' meeting and eventually got approval for the hand-held fans. Dallas eventually rectified the ventilation situation with more appropriate equipment.

I HAD ALMOST FORGOTTEN ABOUT THIS INCIDENT UNTIL THE VETERAN INMATE BROUGHT IT UP AS AN EXAMPLE OF SOME OF THE THINGS THE PRISON SOCIETY DOES.

MORE RECENTLY A CONTINGENT OF LEGAL EXPERTS FROM PHILADELPHIA WANTED TO VISIT JUVENILE LIFERS TO PROVIDE COUNSEL ON FILING PCRA'S FOLLOWING THE U.S. SUPREME COURT RULING IN "MILLER v. ALABAMA". PROBLEMS AROSE WHEN THEY WERE DENIED ADMISSION AFTER TRAVELING ACROSS THE STATE. THE PRISON SOCIETY WAS CALLED AND WERE ABLE TO VOUCH FOR THE LAWYERS BY PHONE AND GET THEM ADMITTED.

THE PRISON SOCIETY DOES NOT CROW ABOUT ITS WORK. WE TRY OUR BEST TO MAKE CONDITIONS BETTER, AND WHEN WE GET DENIED WE WON'T GET DISCOURAGED. IN MANY RESPECTS WE SHARE MOTIVATION WITH THE CHEF IN INDIA. OUR THINKING IS ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF OTHERS AND HOW WE CAN BE HELPFUL.

WHAT DRIVES YOU? IS IT HOW TO GET OVER ON A CELLIE OR A VOLUNTEER? OR, HOW TO HELP YOUR FELLOW TRAVELER GET OVER THE MISERIES OF THE DAY? THE INDIAN CHEF SPEAKS OF THE FLAME INSIDE HIM THAT DRIVES HIM TO DO FOR OTHERS. GREAT PERSONAL REWARDS ACCRUE TO THOSE WHO ARE SO INSPIRED.

A GOOD LIFE, NAH, A GREAT EXISTENCE CAN BE HAD IN THE MOST DIRE OF CIRCUMSTANCES WHEN ONE PUTS THE CONCERNS OF OTHERS AHEAD OF ONE'S OWN.

This article was in the July 2013 issue of Grate Friends. [A publication of The PA Prison Society]. TO SEE MORE GO TO: WWW.PRISONSOCIETY.ORG