



Did you know that if you choose to drink and drive and get involved in an accident in which someone is killed that you can be sentenced to serve 15 years in a Florida Correctional Institution? Or if two people die in the accident you can spend 30 years locked away? Thirty years, think about that really hard. I didn't. I never thought it could happen to me. I thought the worst that could happen is that I could get pulled over and get a DUI. If that had ever happened, I'm sure I would have thought about it a little harder, but until then, no worries.

I knew people who got DUIs in high school. It really didn't seem like that big a deal. They paid their fine, lost their license for six months and caught rides with friends until they got their hardship license for school. An accident where someone gets killed, well, that was just not going to happen. Not in a million years did I ever think it could happen to me, or that I could end up where I am today.

My name is Eric Smallridge, or I should say, it was. My new identity is Inmate P22679. I am currently serving a 22-year sentence in the Florida Department of Corrections for my role in an accident that claimed the lives of two beautiful, twenty-year-old girls, Meagan Napier and Lisa Dickson. I had been drinking. I have been incarcerated for a little over two years in which I have had plenty of time to think about the consequences of drinking and driving. Everyday I wish that I had taken DUI more seriously and heeded the advice not to drink and drive. I had a great life full of opportunity and promise, a wonderful family, lots of friends, a beautiful girlfriend and I had just received my bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems. In a split second, everything changed. It may be too late for me, but I really hope that telling you about the miserable realities of my life in a Florida prison will help you make better choices than I did.

You may have seen the television show "Oz". If not, it is (or was) a show about a maximum-security prison that is extremely violent. I think it's a bit exaggerated. Prison is more like the movie "Groundhog's Day", which is about a guy (Bill Murray) who keeps repeating the same day over and over again. Prison is very repetitive. My daily routine hasn't changed at all since I arrived: Wake up at 4:45 a.m., breakfast at 5:00 a.m., count time 6:30 a.m., report to work at 7:00 a.m., work until 10:00 a.m., return to the dorm for 10:30 a.m. count, lunch begins at 11:00 a.m. and then back to work until returning to the dorm for 3:30 p.m. count, dinner begins at 4:00 p.m. then back to the dorm, 5:30 p.m. count, 9:00 p.m. count, and finally, lights out at 10:00 p.m. Sleep is a blessed relief because at least then my mind can be in another place and time.

Now, don't get me wrong, prison can be a very violent place. After all, many people here are incarcerated for horrible, violent crimes. There are murderers, rapists, child predators, drug pushers, aggravated batterers and more. Since I've been here, people have been stabbed, others severely beaten, and on one occasion, a guy had his finger bitten off. The institution where I am is supposed to be one of the least violent. I'll leave it to you to imagine what goes on at other Florida institutions. While violence is ever-present, it isn't what makes prison life so hard to endure. One of the hardest things is thinking about all that I had taken for granted in my life, and how horribly I have messed up not only my life, but also the lives of so many others.

If I were to talk about all the things I took for granted as a free man, I'd be writing for a very long time. But the list of really important things begins with my freedom itself. When I was a free man I never even thought about what freedom meant to me. Now I think about it all the time. I have no freedom of choice. I am told what to wear, what to eat, when to eat and how fast to eat. The menu is repeated week after week and you eat what they give you or you don't eat. I cannot choose to use the bathroom by myself or take a shower by myself. I live in a dorm with 69 other "roommates" that I did

not choose and most of whom I wouldn't ever have wanted to associate with. Our bunk beds are barely 24" apart and there is no way to isolate myself from them or their constant noise. If I have a headache or am not feeling well, the best I can do is pull my bed covers over my head. There is no privacy in prison; the guards must be able to see me at all times no matter where I go. At this institution, as well as many others in Florida, all inmate movement is controlled. There are actually red lines painted on the sidewalks and we must walk inside the red lines at all times.

Another thing I took for granted while free was the ability to pick up a phone and call my family and friends whenever I felt like it. Phone access is very limited in prison. It literally takes months to get a phone number approved so I can call it, and I am only allowed to have 10 approved numbers on my calling list. There are only two telephones for all 70 men crammed in each dorm to use, and they are only turned on a few hours each evening. When I do get to make a phone call, the calls are limited to 15 minutes and I have to call collect knowing that the person I am calling will be charged anywhere from \$8 to \$20 (depending on their service provider). No one can ever call me, not even in times of family emergencies, such as when my grandmother passed away very unexpectedly this summer.

Visiting with family and friends had always been a huge part of my life that I had taken for granted. It is especially difficult during the holidays and other special occasions like marriages and reunions. I never realized how very precious all those moments were and how much they meant to me, or how much it meant to my family and friends that I be there with them. Now that isn't an option for any of us.

In prison, no one can just "come for a visit." The only way I can visit with anyone is if they go through a long and frustrating application process. Only 15 people can be on my approved visitation list at one time, and only five of them can come to see me on a given day. Those that are approved to visit have to drive about 100 miles each way and if five people are already there, they get turned away. Visitation conditions are far from ideal and privacy is nonexistent. We are allowed one hug as they enter and one when they leave. On a busy weekend, there may be upwards of 180 people visiting and everyone sits across from each other at these long common tables where sometimes everyone is trying to talk over each other just to be heard. The worst part is that I never imagined that my friends and family would have to be thoroughly frisked and I would have to be strip searched before and after every visit.

If you've seen movies where inmates have televisions or computers, forget it. There is one small television that gets 3 or 4 local channels for 70 inmates. It is placed in a small area with the only two tables we have for writing or playing cards. Life in a dorm is loud and crowded.

Hopefully I've already convinced you that prison is a miserable place that you never want to experience for yourself. So far, I have told you about the frustration and the boredom, the violence that erupts occasionally, the constant noise of so many inconsiderate inmates and the unnerving startle when the guards suddenly shout at someone for good reason or just because they can. I've told you about some of the things I used to take for granted when I had my freedom, but I still haven't told you about the very worst part of being in prison: Just being here. Every fence topped in circles of razor wire, every closed door, every wrinkled blue uniform, every barred window is a constant reminder of the wasted years ahead of me and the many innocent people's lives that have been adversely affected because of the accident I so ignorantly thought could never happen.

The two people I think about the most are the two that died in the accident I didn't think could ever happen. Meagan Napier and Lisa Dickson were only twenty years old. They had their whole lives ahead of them. I think about them all the time and it hurts. Everyday I ask God why I wasn't the one to die instead of them. If only I could trade places with them so they could realize the great lives they should have had, but I can't and they can't and I will live with that reality every single day of the rest of my life. I think about Meagan and Lisa's families and friends a lot, too. I agonize over what I could possibly do to ease their grief and return their loved ones to them. But I cannot do that either and it is more painful than any amount of physical torture that could be inflicted upon me.

If you have a drink, enjoy yourself but remember that driving simply is not an option. Don't risk it, not even once, because it only takes a split second to go from a great future to Inmate P22679. Please don't ever hesitate to designate a driver or to call a cab. Otherwise you may be riding in a police car or, God forbid, a hearse.

Writing this has not been easy for me. It is really hard to talk about my existence as Inmate P22679, the feelings of worthlessness, the fear that I will no longer be capable of contributing to society when I am finally released from prison in 2022, the feeling that I have failed myself and my family, and the sorrow I feel for the loss of two beautiful human beings – Meagan and Lisa. I'm writing this for them, their families and mine. It never seemed possible that my life could turn out this way. I bet you don't think yours could either. Think again. I am living proof that it CAN happen to you!