

THE PINK MILE

At the end of this leafy road is a maximum-security prison where some of the 51 women sentenced to death in America await their fate. Ariel Leve was given unprecedented access. Photographs by Nina Berman

The road to SCI Muncy in Pennsylvania. Top right: Rhonda Cobb, who has been a corrections officer at the prison for 21 years. 'When I put on the uniform I become Sergeant Cobb. When the uniform is off I am Rhonda'

nothing to gain from opening up. One of the most salient features of the job is anonymity. Officers make sure the inmates know as little about their personal lives as possible. They need to remain unknown. It's safer for them and for their families.

The perception of corrections officers as callous and hard-nosed is bolstered by the Hollywood myth of the sadistic guard and the constant atmosphere of repressed violence. Yet it becomes apparent that mental strength is not the only facet women officers require. Compassion, too, is very much on display. There is understanding, a recognition that the female inmates they work with have made mistakes and bad choices.

Most of the officers don't know the reasons the women they guard are in prison. They choose not to read the prisoners' files so that they can remain objective and avoid judgmental attitudes that may poison their relations with the inmates.

For them it is a good job. There is job security and health insurance. The starting wage is just over \$13.82 (£7) an hour and their mandate is to provide custody and care. But the real challenge is making sure that who they are on the inside does not define who they are on the outside.

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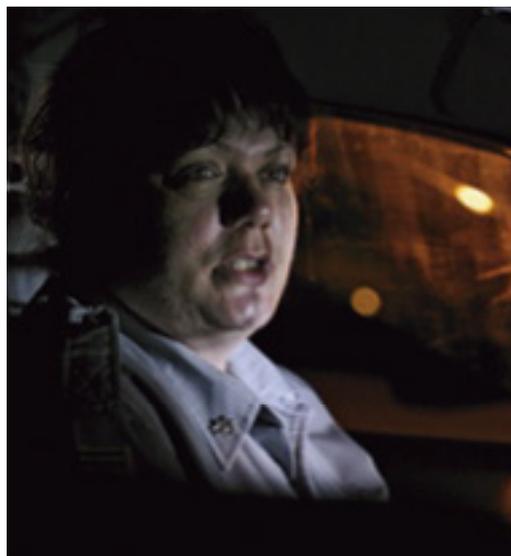
Perhaps surprisingly, Muncy's death-row inmates are not as violent as those prisoners who have something to hope for – the end of their sentences and release. They are compliant – the best behaved – because the prison is their home for life, or at least as long as the state decrees their life will be.

They live in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU), a building with four “pods” or wings. Alpha unit is for violent inmates and Bravo is a secure special-needs unit for those with mental problems and self-harmers. The fourth is YAO, for young adult offenders under the age of 21, but it is in Charlie pod where the three women who have been sentenced to death await their fate. Debra Schaefer has worked in the RHU for six months. After a year she will have a psychological evaluation. If she passes, she can work there for another year. But after two years she will be moved

life looking out that little window knowing that when they come to get me to be executed, that will be the last view outside that I ever see. But I have never seen one of them break down.” Her voice is neutral. It is not admiration, but wonderment. “They know what their future holds. I never ask them things because I have to be indifferent. I can't get emotionally or personally involved because I have a job to do.”

The death-row inmates receive mail from all over the world, which she delivers. “Sometimes I want to say stuff like, ‘Who do you know in Egypt? Who do you know in England?’ But I don't. I just look at the postcard and the stamps. I can be a better officer if I don't delve into their personal life.” She observes strict boundaries and does not allow herself to be emotionally manipulated. “I don't cross the line. I'm here to do my job, to raise my family, to have a pay cheque and insurance. There's too big a cost.”

There is no physical contact with the inmates other than when the women put their hands through an opening in the door to be cuffed when they leave their cell. They are allowed outside for “yard” for an hour once a day, first thing in the



Muncy at night. Below left: Debra Schaefer, a corrections officer who works in the Restricted Housing Unit where the death-row inmates are kept. ‘The laughter coming out of their cells is what amazes me more than anything,’ she says. ‘They make the most of every day. They’ve been here so long, those three, they’re like a family’



For those who work in a prison, there are two lives: inside and outside. Once they put the uniform on and go through the gate, they are in an alternate universe

to another unit. Two years is the limit – the stress can be intense. Her shift is eight hours. This includes walking time to and from the dining hall, leaving 20 minutes to eat. For the rest of her shift she often listens to inmates screaming that they'll kill themselves, sometimes cutting and scratching their arms, wetting the bed. From the time she enters until the time she leaves there is no lull.

It surprised her that the capital cases aren't more edgy. Charlie pod has 24 cells, most with two women in each. The women who have been sentenced to die have a cell each. They watch the other inmates come and go after their sentences are done, peering out their door every day, knowing they are never going to leave.

Schaefer has considered what this must be like. “I would not want to spend the rest of my

morning, weather permitting, if they want it.

The women on death row have Bible studies once a week. They will come out of their cell – shackled and handcuffed – and go into a private room with the priest for between an hour and two hours. Other privileges include ice cream once a week. From the commissary they are allowed to order from an approved list – shower shoes, bacon, typewriter ribbons, batteries. They are allowed \$55 worth of goods in their cell at one time.

Death-row inmates are also permitted to have a television inside their cell. There have been times when Debra will hear them laughing and ask: “What are you watching tonight?” Mostly it's reality TV. Big Brother, Survivor, and also Prison Break. “The laughter coming out of their cells is what amazes me more than anything,” she says.

“They make the best of every day. But they've been here for so long, those three, they're like a little family. They're close to each other.

“I have 41 females in my care in the RHU. Some days I go in there and I feel like I'm a foster mother. They need me for everything. If I'm at Cell 1, Cell 9 yells ‘Miss Schaefer, Miss Schaefer, I need...’ and I say, ‘Hang on a minute, I'll be right with you.’ But no, they need it right away. I don't know why it is – they're not going anywhere. I tell them, ‘I'll be there. I'll get to you.’”

When she has an inmate on a top floor yell down to her, sometimes she folds her arms across her chest like a genie, blinks her eyes and yells back: “Hey, I haven't learnt to fly yet!” There is a rapport. It is not a friendship, but there is the distinct sense that the inmates are treated like



delinquent children rather than criminals. “I’m not there to make their stay harder. I don’t treat them like a piece of shit. But if there’s one that needs a wake-up call, they know how I roll. They study me 24/7. What else do they have to do?”

Later, when talking about life with her family and children, she points out that there are many similarities with how she is at prison. “I have my rules and if you don’t like my rules... I tell them, ‘When you’re 18 – there’s the world and out you go. I will feed you, I will clothe you, and I will give you what you need to survive until you get out.’ The only difference is I show my children love.”

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It’s hard to imagine a child growing up dreaming of being a corrections officer. Rhonda Cobb did – always. As a little girl in Illinois, she and her father would drive past Marion federal prison, the maximum-security replacement for Alcatraz that houses traitors, mafiosi and serial killers. The fence stretches for miles and miles, and she would say: “One day I want to work there.”

She became a military policeman, got pregnant, left the army, moved to Muncy and called the prison every day to see if they would hire her. This is her 21st year.

“When you start out the hardest thing is learning not to let the inmates walk all over you. Not to let your buttons be pushed. When I first started, an inmate heard I was a single mother with a son, and she would yell things. I was enraged. They’re very good at finding your buttons. I got over it, but it took me a while.”

In a sweatshirt with her long blonde hair in a ponytail, Rhonda looks more like a graduate student than a 42-year-old mother with a 22-year-old son. Aside from her full-time job at the prison, she teaches kickboxing and volunteers at a hospice. “As you get into it,” she says, “you learn you can let the inmate have the last word. Because really, in the end, the guard has the last word – we walk out of the gates every day. They don’t.”

It is a warm spring afternoon and we are seated outside on her deck. There is a comforting smell

of chocolate-chip cookies baking in the oven. Rhonda’s 16-year-old daughter will be home from school soon and asked her to make them.

For the past six months Rhonda has worked as a control-centre sergeant. Before working in the prison her idea of what it would be like was largely formed by what she saw in movies.

She used to be a training sergeant instructing new officers how to interact with the inmates. Forming a relationship is against the regulations. And how does she define a relationship? “It is a working relationship, not a friendship. With a lifer or a death-row inmate, you have to watch yourself. They will act like the nicest person to you and if you are gullible they will make you believe they were placed there wrongly. They are constantly trying to manipulate.” But Rhonda has an alter ego at work. “When I put on the uniform I become Sergeant Cobb,” she says. “When the uniform is off I am Rhonda.” And what’s the difference? “I’m silly – I’m the nuttiest mom. But once I walk through the gate, the officer ➤➤➤➤➤

comes out.” She calls the inmates “ladies”.

“If I say, ‘Ladies, stand for count’, those that don’t – well, don’t ask me for anything for the rest of the day. It’s almost like being a mother. We are everything to them – mother, teacher, security provider, babysitter. We give them nourishment and tell them what they can and can’t do.”

She tells me about a woman called Francine who had been imprisoned for 20 years. She was getting ready to leave and a few days before her release she was panicking and needed a button, but didn’t know how to sew. She was frightened of how the world had changed and began crying. “I got a needle and thread and showed her how to sew on a button. She was so excited. I had a pep talk with her and I tried to quell her fears.”

It was a seminal moment for her, she says, because she knew that working in prison you’re not just a guard any more, that often it is helping without getting attached. Then there are the women who won’t get out. She has a different kind of empathy for the capital cases. “The women on death row...” She cuts herself off. The cookies need to come out of the oven.

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Some facts. There are 568 executions of women documented in the US between 1632 and 2007. The electric chair replaced the gallows, then in 1990, in Pennsylvania, lethal injection took over. Since 1976, out of 1,099 executions in the US, only 11 have been women. The latest figures show there are 51 females on death row in 18 states – 1.5% of the total death-row population. Half of these women are there for killing their husbands or boyfriends, their children, or both.

California has 15 women on death row, Texas nine. Pennsylvania has the fourth largest death-row population in the US. From 1915 to 1962 there were 350 executions in the state, only two of which were women. The last was Corrine Sykes in 1946. She was executed for stabbing to death the woman she worked for as a maid.

The three women on death row at Muncy have a fellow inmate who is absent, fighting an appeal. But there are no execution dates pending for these women and it is unlikely that they will be set any time soon. The appeals process is lengthy and complex. They will most likely die before they exhaust the process. Only the governor decides the date of execution and he is in no hurry to execute a woman.

The condemned women at Muncy are known as “the three amigos”. They are: Carolyn King, sentenced in 1994, now 42, convicted for robbery and murder of an adult white female; Michelle Tharp, sentenced in 2000, now 38, who murdered her seven-year-old daughter; and Shonda Walter, 29, sentenced in 2005 and convicted for the murder of a white male, aged 83.

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The assistant to the superintendent, Troy Edwards, was raised by his mother and admits he could have ended up in prison. When he says he did some “bad things, made some bad decisions”, it’s obvious he feels he’s been spared. At 17 he enlisted in the navy, and he believes this rescued

Troy Edwards, assistant to the superintendent, who has worked at the prison since 2005



‘IF I TOLD A MALE INMATE WHAT TO DO, HE’D GO AND DO IT. IF I TELL A WOMAN WHAT TO DO, THEY WILL ASK ME WHY’

him from a wayward life. While there he worked in the “brig”, a military prison vessel. He came to work at Muncy in 2006. He is soft-spoken and sympathetic. “These are just regular ladies who have committed bad crimes.” His gentleness seems out of context. We are walking on “campus” and he acknowledges every inmate by name. “Hi, Miss Butler, how are you today?” One inmate cheerfully calls out: “Hi, Mr Edwards! Today is my last day here. I’ll miss you!” He waves and replies: “Well I hope I don’t see you any time soon!”

Troy is married with children. Sometimes before he goes to bed at night he will sit up and remember something he forgot to do for an inmate. Like making sure they got their cancer medication. Later when I meet his wife, who does not work in corrections, she tells me he genuinely cares, and it’s striking how much this matters.

For many inmates, it is the first time someone has ever shown concern or greeted them with respect. There are over 1,300 inmates and 86% have experienced some sort of abuse prior to their incarceration. Edwards explains there are fewer gangs at Muncy because it’s all-female – it’s tough to have gangs when everyone wants to be in charge. “If I told a male inmate what to do, he’d go and do it. If I tell a woman what to do, they will ask me why.” He says it makes it hard for one woman to organise others. He says too that there is less violence because the female inmates can’t keep a secret. They talk, they don’t harbour malice, so incidents are prevented. Another difference: male inmates react physically, turning their anger

on each other. Women react emotionally and internalise it, turning the anger on themselves. They will self-harm. There is more depression and less stigma about taking medication for it.

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It’s difficult, Rhonda says, being around the women on death row. She has returned from taking the cookies out of the oven and we’ve resumed the discussion. “You know they’re not going to get out. And it makes it harder that they’re women.” This is not compassion based on an allegiance to gender. “It’s the opposite,” she explains. “Because you don’t expect it from a woman. If a woman goes and butchers somebody, it makes us all look bad. As women.”

This disappointment and frustration comes from personal experience. She doesn’t go into detail about the nature of her own abuse other than to illustrate her ability to overcome it. The result is she can relate to circumstances that would drive someone who has been mistreated to crime.

“The first thing I think of is that a good third of the inmates probably didn’t do their crime. Or they were protecting themselves. The judicial system stinks. It’s not fair. A lot of the lifers, they got life sentences back in the 1960s and ’70s – when women did not commit horrendous crimes. So they were instantly given life sentences. Nowadays, that same crime, they get five years. But when you get someone on death row, you know they did it.” She recalls being there when a death sentence was signed in 1989. It was Delores Rivers, a home health-care worker



When asked what makes her a good officer she thinks for a while before answering. “I’m fair, consistent. I’m the same every day. They like consistency. When I say something, I follow through. Whether it’s an officer or an inmate, I never leave anyone hanging.”

Rhonda met her girlfriend, Dawn, while working at Muncy. At the time Dawn was also a corrections officer. They have been together for 14 years. Dawn is now studying to be a nurse. There is something inherently forgiving about Rhonda. When I point this out she attributes it to her faith in God. “My faith tells me everyone has something to give, even the most criminal person. There has to be something decent in there.”

And what about the decision not to read the prisoners’ files? “We had a girl who had just come in – had killed her two-year-old baby. She had burnt it, starved it to death, and my son was two years old at the time. It haunted me. I was a single mom. I went home, held my baby and bawled. With that particular inmate, it was never the same. You just don’t want to know the person’s details.”

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What motivates Debra Schaefer to go to work is the desire to see her youngest daughter go to college. And to pay off her mortgage. Her husband is an avid hunter and a member of the National Rifle Association, and she would also like to go away with him on a trip.

We are sitting outside the local Starbucks. She is in uniform. She has been around prison all her life. Growing up she would visit her father who

In person, at 5ft 6in tall, with short-cropped blonde hair, she carries her authority well. You would never forget that she is in charge. But there is sweetness about her too – an eagerness to let others see inside her world, inside this mysterious job that she takes very seriously.

As captain, she is the shift commander in charge of day-to-day operations, making sure everything flows – the first line of defence.

We enter an empty room in the administration building to sit and talk. She immediately takes the chair facing out and tells me she won’t sit with her back to the door. It is a high-risk job, but she does not carry weapons or firearms. There is the ring of keys on her belt and a set of handcuffs. “Our best weapon,” she says, “is our ability to talk to them.” Despite her disciplined, competent manner, Pinard does not come from a military background. She studied criminal justice, then went to the prison training academy. It is a good career, but unlike a regular job where you bond with the people you work with, in this job, you “do your eight and the gate” and go home.

Her attitude betrays someone who is capable but not cold. She has consideration for those who are locked up, but tells me she never forgets that there’s a victim. When asked what she does when she’s not at work, she hesitates, unsure of how much to reveal. Her hands are pristine and slender and there is a tattoo of a band on her middle finger. She tells me she has a female partner, but insists all other personal details are off the record. Like the others who work

‘We are everything to the inmates – mother, teacher, security provider, babysitter. We give them nourishment and tell them what they can and can’t do’

who was convicted of the murder of an elderly woman she had been looking after. “When her death warrant got signed, she was scared. At that time – and it’s changed since then – we had constant watch. Constant watch is when an officer sits right in front of the door and literally watches that inmate 24/7.”

The irony of this – making sure they don’t kill themselves before the state can kill them – is not lost on her. She is not against the death penalty, but she’s not for it either. She would never be able to watch it carried out.

Rivers was not executed. She got a stay of appeal, a retrial and her sentence was reduced to life. Having a life sentence is less oppressive. They are not isolated. Cobb believes the women who are capital cases now will most likely get a new trial and end up with life sentences, mainly because they are women. The state doesn’t like putting women to death.

Yet despite all the emotional, psychological, physical and philosophical obstacles, she says the hardest part of her job is not the inmates, but the staff. “The officers that I don’t want to work with are those without self-esteem. If you are scared or if you’re in to make friends, you’re doomed. Some officers will come in trying to please the inmates, always trying to say the right thing.”

worked at the county jail. Later he worked at Muncy, and he retired 10 years ago. Her sister worked there for seven years and her father’s fiancée for 15. Corrections is in the family.

Physically, Schaefer is a strong woman. She can control how an inmate acts. But she can’t control how they think. She is not worried about taking a punch, but if someone has it in for her – spits on her – she can’t protect herself from that.

So where does the anger go? The ability to restrain emotions in the most dire circumstances is required, but does she ever relate to their rage?

“Have I been angry enough when I think I could have killed someone? Sure. But at that moment – in a sane sensible person – lurks the question: what’s going to happen if I do this?”

“Whereas these women... they dropped off the deep edge. Either they didn’t care or they didn’t think what the repercussions would be. I can’t answer for them. I wasn’t in their shoes. But no, I can’t sympathise. When you walk into that environment, you can’t cry for them. We have 1,200 inmates – that’s too many tears.”

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Captain Teresa Pinard has a saying: “I’m doing life on the instalment plan.” Working in prison is something few people understand – she would choose to be in jail? People just don’t get it.

with the capital cases, she talks about how they are the least volatile inmates on the pod.

A voice on her walkie-talkie interrupts us and she stands up – it is time for her to get back to the unit. She walks me to the gate and just as we are about to say goodbye, she leans in and tells me her partner’s name is Lena and that I can print that in the piece. It feels like a significant decision. Especially because Pinard seems more careful than most. Why take the risk, why cross the line? What made her change her mind? She shrugs and smiles. “My life on the outside is more important to me than my life here.”

Pinard says it is important to her that she is a role model. There are roughly 80,000 people incarcerated in Pennsylvania, and 90% of those will be released back into the community at some point. “Most likely someone in here will end up as my neighbour.” ■

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‘I’ve never felt ashamed of being an angry person. I’ve embraced it’

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