

THE ODYSSEY OF RAY McMINN

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How many judges, lawyers, and prison administrators donate 20 hours of service each week to a nonprofit cause, as Ray did? How many of those high moral leaders have donated \$10,000 to a humanitarian cause? And when is a person considered rehabilitated?

by Becky Johnson

Twenty-seven years ago, a crime was committed in the State of Virginia. Ray McMinn, at age 22, freshly out of the army, and following a fad that was in vogue in those days, grew his hair long. One day, in a brash moment, Ray started a horror story that marked him for life. He robbed a guy he knew of eight dollars in a crime in which no one was injured. He was arrested, and put on trial for robbery; he had used an unloaded gun. His trial lasted 15 minutes. Then the jury deliberated for eight minutes. He was sentenced to **40 years in state prison.**

As Ray put it, "It took me five years to figure out they weren't kidding." What followed were years spent living in inhumane conditions, at a time in which prisoners were not allowed visitors. Ever. Prisoners were never allowed to use the phone. Beef was not on the menu, ever. It was a life of desperation and abuse.

Ray began to lobby for the rights of prisoners to better conditions. One of the first reforms Ray and others lobbied for was to have ambulances parked within the prison walls. As Ray put it, "There were so many stabings that the men would bleed to death long before there was time for an ambulance to be called." Later, Ray and his group successfully achieved reforms allowing phone calls and visits from family and friends. As prisoners now had something to look forward to, the level of violence in the prison was reduced substantially.

After 14 years Ray was released on parole. Three times he requested to transfer his parole to California, but was refused. Six years later, at 5:04 p.m. PST on October 17, 1989, a 7.1 earthquake hit with an epicenter near Santa Cruz, California. From far away, Ray experienced the media blitz that followed the collapse of the Bay Bridge during the Oakland A's vs. San Francisco Giants World Series.

The last time he had seen his mother and sister was in Santa Cruz, his boyhood town. He'd lost touch with his family during his imprisonment, as prisoners tend to do. But he was just as concerned as anyone would be if they feared for the safety of their family.

Ray left Virginia and came to the Santa Cruz area to look for his mother and sister. It was a poor choice for him. He had no money, no job, no friends left in Santa Cruz. He drank too much alcohol, and became one of the many homeless people in Santa Cruz. He lived on the streets, played his guitar, and slept in the woods.

In 1990, Ray became a member of the Homeless Garden Project in Santa Cruz. He began as a monitor with the Interfaith Satellite Shelter Project, and worked to open up and operate the Coral Street Open Air Shelter.

The Homeless Garden Project was a program started by the Citizen's Committee for the Homeless which taught organic gardening to homeless people on city land. Ray not only turned his life around, but he went on to become an irreplaceable member of the Homeless Garden Project, working in all aspects of the expanding program. Ray loved the garden. According to his sister, Charlie Kidder, "It was when Ray spoke of his involvement with the Homeless Garden Project that his voice filled with pride and his heart with love. He had found work, friends, and real meaning in his life."

Deeply religious, Ray's top priority always was the alleviation of suffering in his fellow human beings, especially the poor, weak, discriminated against, and the homeless. I've walked the streets of Santa Cruz with Ray McMinn. He knew all the names of the panhandlers, the bums, the ladies pushing shopping carts of their belongings, the street walkers, the runaways. The poor, the down-on-their-luck, the troubled. Ray spent time with each one, an encouraging word here, the warmth of human companionship there, a referral to someone at one agency or another if needed.

Ray took Christ's teachings to the streets. Jesus associated with thieves and prostitutes. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.

Ray supported a homeless campground and opposed Santa Cruz's punitive camping ban. "I worked 225 hours of community service to pay off camping ban tickets," Ray told me. "That is excessive, to say the least."

At the Homeless Garden Project, Ray worked a 20-

hour paid shift and 20 more hours a week of volunteer work each and every week at 125 Washington Street. The only male employee among a staff of eight women, he worked mostly with the Women's Organic Flower Enterprise in which homeless women make wreaths, dried flower arrangements, authentic beeswax candles, and other crafted projects made from flowers and herbs grown in a city garden across the street. Ray was the security for these women. Now that he is gone, they are not protected. He has not been replaced.