

BENNY RIOS DONJUAN | *PICTURES AS OBJECTS*

Ordinarily, pictures are taken to capture precious memories. They become objects that are treasured because the images of the people tell us stories; we're reminded of better times, or even what could have been. Additionally, there is a long time tradition of families taking professional pictures for holidays or other special events. In general, pictures are taken around the house, on outings, get-togethers, or just randomly now that everyone has cameras on their phones. With regards to pictures, this has not always been my experience; my experience with pictures was different. For most of my life, since I was 7 years old or so, my family pictures were taken in a prison setting.

Ever since my oldest brother was incarcerated and wrongfully convicted in 1984, we have only been able to take pictures in a prison visiting room. My brother was only 18 years old when he was incarcerated and I was only 6 years old. When he was sent to I.D.O.C, we looked forward to visiting him in a setting that allowed for contact visits. When we visited him in the county jail, we were separated by a glass barrier. In I.D.O.C, we were able to hug him and eat with him; but the thing I looked forward to most was taking pictures with him. In fact, the only picture that my two brothers and I ever took together was at a prison picnic. Unfortunately, we were never able to take another picture like that outside of prison because our middle brother was murdered shortly after my brother's incarceration. He is missed.

Fast forward to 2000, my oldest brother was finally released from prison, it was a joyous occasion, but bittersweet, because I was facing my own murder case at the time. My brother and I were only able to share a year and a half of freedom as adults. Then I was convicted for my case and sent to prison to serve a 45-year sentence.

A major difference between our incarceration experiences is that we were not allowed to take pictures during the first 17 years of my incarceration. I.D.O.C had discontinued its picture program for around two decades or so. For years, many of us in I.D.O.C custody advocated for access to taking pictures with our loved ones — to no avail. Finally, they instituted another picture program — one that is closely scrutinized by internal affairs — but it's better than nothing.

I was elated to be able to take pictures with my loved ones again. However, I was also saddened by the realization that I have taken more pictures with my brother as incarcerated men rather than free men. We never had the opportunity to take many pictures on outings, randomly, or special occasions. Most of our pictures were taken in a controlled setting with only a few poses approved by I.D.O.C officials. As I look at the pictures I've taken in prison, I cherish the images of my loved ones. At the same time, I'm reminded of my bondage and oppression that comes with taking pictures by I.D.O.C staff.

Unfortunately, I'll never be able to take another picture with my brother Meme ever again. He passed away on December 8, 2023—a piece of me died that day too. Still though, I remain hopeful that one day soon, my loved ones and I will capture all of our precious memories as free people—no more restrictions!

Benny Rios DonJuan, aka DonJuan Rios #R26343, grew up in the Pilsen community and Cicero, IL. He has a MA in Christian Ministry and Restorative Arts and is completing a BA with a depth area in Conflict Transformation and Transformative Education. He has served 22 years of a 45 year sentence and is an advocate for repealing the Truth in Sentencing law and legislating the Earned Reentry parole bill into law. Above all else, Benny is a follower of Jesus Christ who promotes love, justice, mercy, liberation, and everything good.

He is a fan of romantic comedies, and he especially loves The Wedding Singer.