Hang a Right

Feds finger inmate’s suicide

April 1, 1999 By Gabi Horn

Thanks to loose-lipped prison guards and a pointed suicide note, California corrections investigator and the FBI are snooping out an alleged breach in prison policy during the December 9 suicide of Michael can Straaten, 32, a Canadian citize and HIV positive inmate at Corcoran State Prison.

For two years, Van Straaten, an epileptic, requested transfer from Corcoran—a nonmedical facility and the subject of several brutality investigations—to the California Medical facility at Vacaville. Shortly after learning that his transfer had been denied, Straaten apparently hanged himself with a noose cobbled together from torn bedsheets and shoelaces. Two tips caught the FBI’s attention and kicked off a prison advocate’s campaign to expose the conditions surrounding his death.

First, the correction officers leaked info to *The Los Angeles Times*: Rather than popping open Van Straaten’s cell immediately upon discovering his dangling body, guards lagged outside for 18 minutes, videotaping the scene and checking his medical records. When they finally entered the cell, the *Times* source reported that van Straaten’s body was still warm to the touch. Investigators will determine whether his body was moving when he was discovered.

The second attention-grabber was the inmate’s final wish, expressed in a suicide note to his family: “let Judy Greenspan [of California’s HIV in Prison Focus] know that she can use my story to expose prison cruelty. In part, my death was solidarity.” Greenspan, who had advocated for Van Straaten’s transfer, is doing just that. In a full-steam media, Internet and letter-writing blitz, Greenspan is leaning on California’s attorney general to investigate Corcoran’s medical neglect of HIVers. “I am convinced that Michael would be alive today if he had been sent to an appropriate medical facility,” she said in a press release. “Corcoran is a death camp for PWAs. Michael was dumped there to die.”

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