

## UNCLE STEVE

DAVID SANTANA SELL<sup>∞</sup>

*In this essay, David Santana Sell describes the importance of a close and beautiful friendship while incarcerated, the barriers inhibiting cross relationships in prison, and the ways to foster such relationships.*

I first met Steve when I entered the system, and I landed a job with him in the prison commissary. Steve is now 60-years-old. He was sentenced to 75 years to life and has already served 29 years. My first impression of Steve was of a very mature and pleasant man, and we instantly got along well. I spent the first 19 years of my sentence housed in the honor block with Steve, and he had a positive influence on me. His character alone was impressive. He wasn't involved with what a lot of prisoners occupied their time with. He didn't gamble, use drugs, he didn't even curse. He wasn't the type of man that wanted to fit in with others. He was always very generous and knowledgeable in almost every topic. He taught me how to cook certain meals; I worked with him in two different programs, and I admired the way he trained me and his work ethic. He even found me books on topics he knew I was interested in. He took an interest in me. Eventually, he was transferred to Wende Correctional facility and a year later, I was sent to Five Points. I missed him and wondered if I would ever see him again.

After spending a year in Five Points I was transferred to Wende, where Steve was. I thought about him during my very uncomfortable ride on the transportation bus. After a few hours, I arrived at my new facility. When the cuffs, shackles and waist chain came off, it almost felt like I was freed – but not completely. I sat in intake for an hour and was then escorted to my housing block. As I walked down the narrow hallway, I noticed someone very familiar from a distance! It was Steve mopping the floor. He noticed me as well; we both smiled and waved. I saw Steve again two weeks later, when I was moved to the block where he was housed. I entered the block and headed down the company to my cell. I have a habit of not looking in cells as I walk down the company, but then I heard someone say, "You finally made it". It was Steve. He was locked in 1 cell and I was in 9. Later that night, he came down to my cell to catch up and make sure I was alright. I had not received my property, but Steve made sure I was taken care of. I asked to borrow his TV for the night, and he gave me some resistance, but that was Steve being Steve. He let me borrow the TV for the night and opted to listen to his oldies.

A year later, COVID-19 struck in our facility and separated us for a few months. I tested positive and was moved. Steve was exposed and quarantined. He eventually made it back to the block but not on my company. I missed him! A year later, I was offered a job in the draft room where Steve worked. This was when our conversations became more intimate and personal, allowing our friendship to grow.

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<sup>∞</sup> The past 25 years of incarceration have inspired David Santana Sell to share his experience through writing, in an attempt to bring about awareness and create change. He writes for the millions of families and prisoners who have who been impacted by mass incarceration.

They say absence makes the heart grow fonder. Somehow, somehow we always found our way back to one another, a rare occurrence in prison, but one that I have interpreted as a divine intervention. I was convinced that we were placed in each other's lives for a greater purpose.

During this time is when I learned much more about Steve. I hadn't known his daughter had passed away and that he also had a son that was incarcerated. Steve even opened up to me about his case and that he had been a drug addict on the streets. That surprised me, because he carried himself well and looked healthy, despite having diabetes. But what saddened me most were the facts of his case. I believed everything he told me and encouraged him to work on his case and try to seek help. He replied that he couldn't write well. He was never ashamed of anything he told me. I took that to mean that Steve was proud of the man that he had become.

Showing affection is frowned upon in prison. Some may view it as a weakness, some may think it's not a trait men should display, and others are influenced by an environment that perpetuates dominance and violence. Sadly, a lot of men never experienced love from friends and family. The other day, I walked into work and hugged Steve, then I planted a kiss on his bald head. He replied, "G'ON BOY". I laughed. The next day I did the same, but this time, he didn't give me grief.

Right now, Steve is hurting, yet he has not lost the ability to show that he cares about me. Most men have lost that ability and fear displaying love in an environment that promotes aggression. The other day, as we walked back to the block from work, a fight broke out in the hallway. I was too close to the two young men fighting. Uncle Steve saw the commotion and ran towards it to make sure it wasn't me. The next day, he yelled at me for breaking formation. I never want Steve to be upset with me and I'm honored to have a friend who wants to protect me from any harm. When we walk back from work we always walk together, and next time I will not make the mistake of walking without him. I don't want Steve to be upset with me. My relationship with Steve is unique and rare to find in prison. Even in the most toxic of environments, there is always someone who stands out from the rest and makes a friendship meaningful. My bond with Steve is more than a prison friendship; he is my family, my Uncle. I will never forget him.

*If you would like to get in touch with the author, you can reach him on JPay, at David Sell, 97b2642, NYS DOCCS Inmate Services.*