



# Carlos Rosado Earns Bachelor's Degree, Plants Garden All While Serving Time

Rosado Was Released Monday After 12 Years Behind Bars

By EMILY FRIEDMAN

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There isn't much about Carlos Rosado that wouldn't surprise you.

Up until five days before he was scheduled to receive a Bachelor of Arts degree Saturday from the prestigious Bard College, Rosado was known primarily as inmate No. 98B0620 at New York's Woodbourne Correctional Facility. He was released Monday after serving more than 12 years for armed robbery.

"I'm excited, I'm ready," Rosado said a few days before his release.

To those who know the 35-year-old husband and father of four, from the guards at the medium security prison to his fellow inmates, Rosado isn't your typical prisoner. Indeed, he might better be described as an inmate with one of the greenest thumbs in the history of the New York State Department of Correctional Services.

Rosado is credited with developing a garden in one of the few green spaces inside the otherwise cement-heavy prison. In the two years since the garden's inception, it has provided some of the only access the prison's 800 inmates have to fresh vegetables and fruit.

Rosado and the other 30 inmates he recruited for the garden are all students of the Bard Prison Initiative, a privately-funded program that offers inmates at five New York State prisons the opportunity to work toward a college degree from the New York college in Annandale-on-Hudson. It's one of only a handful of programs nationwide that allow inmates to pursue higher education while incarcerated.

The Bard program, which is the brainchild of alumnus Max Kenner, is competitive, accepting only 15 new students at each facility every other year.

But while other students in the program -- about 27 of whom who will graduate with a degree in June -- are studying more traditional subjects such as accounting and English literature, Rosado used the garden as a supplement to his senior thesis, which looks at the

history of prison food and bears a title, "Prison Food and Penal Practice in the Post-Rehabilitated World," that many graduate students would find daunting.

"The National food supply is contaminated and imbalanced," he said one day last week while touring the garden, which has beginning to sprout for the season. "We wanted the garden to supplement the kitchen here."

Rosado has been working on his degree, a BA in social studies, for six years.

## **Woodbourne Treats Inmates Like "Humans," Deputy Says**

One of the garden's biggest cheerleaders, as well as the Bard program, is Woodbourne's Deputy Superintendent Jean King.

The facility often receives letters from prisoners across the state begging to be transferred to Woodbourne because of the educational opportunities, King said. While Woodbourne, a medium-security prison, is often a stop for convicts after they spend time at maximum-security prisons, space is limited, as with any such facility.

"Corrections has changed a lot, we're much more focused on re-entry [into society] than we used to be," she said. Throughout Woodbourne, inmates call out to King, whom they refer to fondly by her nickname, "Dep. King." And it's clear she has a good relationship with the prison population.

"They're human beings first, we treat them the way we'd want our husbands or sons treated," King said. "The big complaint from inmates is the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables, but the storage space and spoilage is an issue for us." Inmates pile into a mess hall three times a day for meals, the majority of which are pre-frozen and processed. One inmate complained that "just an hour after eating, I'm hungry again," noting that the meals are short on nutritional value.

Instead asking for contraband, one gardener said, he's more likely to be hassled for "a piece of broccoli" than anything else.

Rosado's garden is certainly an improvement to the lackluster prison menu, to which even King agreed.

And the garden itself is nothing to scoff at, with cucumbers, kale, garlic and a variety of different lettuce already thriving across the 16 raised beds.

"At first, the idea of an actual garden here was the most insane thing I'd ever heard," Rosado said. "But [the garden] was a way to take my education and put it into practice."

## **A Garden in Prison Means a Garden Without Tools**

There are elements of running a garden that aren't easy at a prison. For one, restrictions on what tools they are permitted to have leave them with nothing more than a beaten-up ruler and a rice spoon from the mess hall.

"There are limitations placed on us because we are in prison," Rosado said. "No metal spades, no weed whacker, no shovel. So we needed to create a sort of "no-tools required" garden."

And because of the prison's strict rules about dirty uniforms and the wardens' frowning on them "tracking mud through the cellblock," Rosado said he designed the garden beds based on the advice he read in noted gardener Mel Bartholomew's book "Square Foot Gardening."

"We did raised beds so we'd minimize the time we'd have to spend planting and watering, and I always said I wanted a garden that made it possible to wear a tuxedo here and not get dirty," Rosado said. "It's all reachable, three feet on one side and two on the other."

Daniel Marquez, an inmate who works in the garden, demonstrated how he uses a spare rag to keep himself clean while he works, using dental floss to map out the square-foot beds and a stapler to secure the lines.

"We've got to be very innovative," he said.

But whether inmates, some of whom are serving life sentences, should be planting and caring for a garden is up for debate among victim advocacy groups.

Will Marling, the executive director for the National Organization for Victim Assistance, said some victims might have a hard time grappling with the idea of the individual who killed a family member being allowed so many privileges.

"Some victims are so horrifically hurt they don't think it's just for these people to have any pleasant experiences for the rest of their lives," Marling said. "But others do believe there is time in prison for self-improvement to fill the time."

## **Inmates Say Education Behind Bars Saved Their Lives**

Many inmates said that by working in the garden, they've learned skills that they believe could have kept them out of trouble to begin with.

"A lot of people who I associated with on the street didn't have [the knowledge of how to sustain themselves] and so they relied on other people to feed them," said Darrel Isaac, 40, who has been locked up for nearly 14 years.

Several charges of robbery and weapon possession mean Isaac won't be considered for early release until 2012.

"Maybe if I had that information, I would not have been in prison or done the things I have done back then," he said. "This garden gave me a sense of empowerment."

Inmate Javier Flores, 31, said that he's thankful for the garden because it helped him to learn that "you don't have to commit a crime and take someone's property in order to feed your family."

Flores has been incarcerated for 10 years stemming from robbery and weapon possession charges. He hopes to be released next year.

"[Now I know] I have a responsibility toward the environment and my community and my family," said Flores, adding that he writes to his 10-year-old daughter about the garden. "Before, on the street, I never thought about any of that."

For Rosado, who spent several years at other prisons such as the notoriously tough Attica Correctional Facility prior to coming to Woodbourne, the garden served to support what he'd already learned through hours of sitting in his cell and thinking.

"I already had an understanding that resorting to any type of activity that would [lead to punishment] is not an option for me anymore," said Rosado, who has a job interview set up with a recycling company in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

"The garden is a culmination of that understanding; it's a byproduct of my understanding that crime is not an option.

"It's the cherry on top of the cake."

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