

Texas prisons' top investigator leaves life of true crime stories

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The minute serial killer Kenneth McDuff walked into a Texas prison interview room complaining about a toothache, investigator John Moriarty knew he had the edge he'd been waiting for.

"I got up and went into the warden's office and got him to the head of the list to see the dentist the next morning," explained Moriarty, a stocky 53-year-old with a New York accent. McDuff soon told investigators where he had dumped the body of Austinite Colleen Reed, one of 14 people authorities believe he might have killed.

That ended one of the state's most publicized unsolved crimes. McDuff was executed in November 1998.

"With guys like him, you got no twist on them. He was on death row. He'd look at you, and you knew he was thinking, 'What's in this for me?'" Moriarty said. "That's how it works in prison."

If anyone knows how things work behind bars, it's probably Moriarty, who has spent the past 22 years investigating crimes there, 10 of them as the agency's inspector general, the top cop, and only the second IG the agency has had.

On Aug. 31, Moriarty plans to retire and go fishing. His replacement has not been named.

During his colorful career, the gruff, mustachioed investigator has busted suspects on both sides of the bars: from felons with smuggled cellphones to top prison officials involved in the VitaPro prison food contracting scandal of the 1990s.

"When I got to Texas, I knew this job was going to be different. I didn't know how different," Moriarty said of a career in which death threats were routine.

To many Texans, from white-uniformed convicts to the big shots at the state Capitol, Moriarty is the no-nonsense Sergeant Friday of Texas' prison system, a man who is both respected and feared. Walking into a prison a few years ago, he was quickly recognized by guards. "Someone's probably going to jail today," one remarked to a reporter. Same for convicts: "If he shows up, you already been got," said one.

Moriarty rolls his eyes at the story.

"You're not writing traffic tickets in there. You're dealing with major bad people every day," he said. "If you've done bad, we're coming after you. That's our job."

Indeed, the job description reads like a script for a cop reality show: Witness executions to make sure the state's procedures are followed, supervise the capture of escapees, bust lawbreakers for new crimes committed inside the gritty world of prisons.

By most accounts, he's been successful, but the key to his effectiveness is difficult to pin down.

"He has a look — his eyes tell you that he wants to help you but you've got to tell him the truth, probably 'cause he already knows it," said Jerry Peña, a retired federal undercover officer who worked with Moriarty on several federal cases inside Texas prisons. "It's a talent that a lot of officers don't have, something that makes him

effective at what he does. That New York accent is part of it."

Longtime Senate Criminal Justice Committee Chairman John Whitmire, whose legislative panel oversees Texas' sprawling prison system, said he has learned firsthand how Moriarty works. Just a few years ago, when a condemned killer on death row called Whitmire on a smuggled cellphone, he immediately alerted Moriarty.

Richard Lee Tabler and two relatives were subsequently arrested, triggering a lockdown of all state prisons for three weeks that brought about the seizure of hundreds of cellphones and other contraband — and rocketed Texas to the forefront in a national campaign to allow prisons to jam cellphone signals.

"He's a can-do guy, a no-nonsense guy," Whitmire said. "He gets to the bottom of things."

Born in New York City, the son of Irish immigrants "who were just off the boat," Moriarty grew up in the Bronx. His father worked for a chemical company; his mother was a waitress.

Long route to Texas

After graduating from a Catholic high school, he worked in construction and then took a job as a park ranger in New Jersey, writing tickets. Just over a year later, federal funding was cut and Moriarty got laid off.

"I liked law enforcement — what can I tell you?" he said. "I had never been west of Philadelphia. But Wyoming was recruiting. So I took a job out there."

Moriarty stayed with the 33-officer Evanston Police Department for eight years, working his way up from uniformed patrol officer to detective to undercover drug officer. He still bears the scar on his chest where an angry wife stabbed him one night while he was breaking up a fight between her and her husband in their trailer.

When his undercover stint was over in the late 1980s and he faced going back on the street as a patrol officer, Moriarty sent out a single application — for a job as an internal affairs investigator at the Wynne Unit in the East Texas town of Huntsville, where the prison system is headquartered.

"I got hired because I had undercover narcotics experience, and they needed someone for an undercover unit doing stings on convicts and employees," he said.

He quickly learned the ropes.

"It's a different world," Moriarty said. "You're dealing with the same criminals that are on the street, but in their world. They got nothing to lose. They'll try to work you. Everything is about manipulating the system. You have to learn how to be one step ahead of them all the time."

Back then, he said, prison internal affairs investigators were not highly regarded.

"One of our offices at one unit had a toilet in it," he said. "We were considered the bad guys who were there to screw up their world — inmates and staff."

After stints at prisons in the Palestine area, he worked on several cases with federal agencies, including the initial arrest of McDuff. He honed his skills in the rarefied world of prison crime and later served on a statewide task force formed in 1993 by then-Gov. Ann Richards to track down dangerous fugitives.

After graduating in 1996 from the FBI National Academy, a premier training ground for law enforcement, Moriarty remained a go-to person for big cases. He was named chief of operations when the prison system's new independent Office of Inspector General was established after the VitaPro contracting scandal rocked the agency. Prison officials bought \$33 million of the soy-based food additive in a no-bid contract that got several top officials fired and resulted in the federal indictment of the executive director.

Chasing bad guys

Though many of Moriarty's cases were closed years ago, he can recall details as if they were still active.

One involved Dennis Wayne Hope, an armored-car robber from the Dallas area who escaped in 1998 after cutting off the power at a Rosharon prison.

Authorities suspected he was out of state, but they didn't piece it together until he mailed a letter to a convict inside several weeks later. It was postmarked in Dallas.

"Having a great time. Wish you were here. That's what the letter basically said," Moriarty recalled. "The return address was Irk McLirk on Drop Trou (as in trousers) Boulevard. He thought he was real smart. I knew right then we were going to get him."

In short order, Moriarty and other investigators connected Hope to new robberies in Dallas and traced him through phone records to Memphis.

They found Hope's girlfriend and managed to lure him to a Memphis bar to meet her.

"Imagine how surprised he was when he rolls up in a Jaguar he bought with the (robbery) money, and he walks in, and here's two cops from Texas waiting to cuff him," Moriarty said.

Hope was returned to Texas and remains imprisoned at the maximum-security Polunsky Unit near Livingston, prison officials said.

Moriarty recalls just as vividly the case of a convict busted for selling aircraft engines through a flying magazine in a scam. "His address was Ellis 2 Towers in Huntsville," Moriarty said. "Ellis 2 is the prison."

And then there were the high-profile escapes, in which convicts used fake documents to get out or kidnapped guards with their own guns or just climbed over the fence and took off.

When Moriarty started with the Texas prison system, more than 30 convicts were listed as escapees with no trace, some dating back to the 1950s.

"We've tracked them one by one, found them dead, brought them back. Only two are still out," he said. "We think we know where they are — in Mexico. I'd like to get both of them back before I leave."

Despite his low-key, guarded personality, Moriarty has been the public face on a string of high-profile cases, the guy on the evening news explaining how a convict slipped out of — and then back into — a Sugar Land prison to go on a shopping spree or how another prisoner smuggled a cellphone onto death row to call Whitmire, the senator.

Moriarty says times have changed a lot in the prison system since he hired on, primarily in the professionalism that has replaced what was once a good ol' boy system that resembled the classic prison movie "Cool Hand Luke."

"When I started with the system, we had 28 prisons. Now we have 114. We had about 50,000 convicts, Now we have 156,000. There weren't any cellphones. We had prison gangs, but not international gangs," he said.

"It was a different world."

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