



In prison for the election, John Dukes released into its aftermath

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TIPTON, Missouri — John Dukes missed the election.

During the campaign, he never drove by a "Trump/Pence" yard sign. He never passed a rally for Tim Kaine. He never walked into a polling station during the primaries or filled in a bubble during the general election. From the first caucus in February to Tuesday's vote, his residence received no mailers, and his phone picked up no robo-calls.

That is because, from exactly one week before the Iowa Caucus until Tuesday's general election, Dukes was in prison.

On Wednesday, he was released.

Twenty-four men and women throughout the state were set to be freed from incarceration the day after the election, according to the Missouri Department of Corrections. Twenty-four people who did not have a say in one of the most contentious elections in modern American history stepped out into its immediate aftermath on Wednesday.

Dukes, for one, was still very aware of what Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, and a host of other candidates were saying outside the barbed wire. He still had access to newspapers and TV. In short, they were saying very little about people like him.

That doesn't mean Dukes is not representative of both Missouri and the nation.

"They're not spending enough time on core issues," Dukes said about the candidates on Oct. 19, three weeks before his release. "They're too busy beatin' each other up."

Dukes sat in the visiting area of the Tipton Correctional Center, a minimum security prison that could almost pass for a junior high school: white cinder block walls, lines of blue lockers, a brightly-colored poster that read: "Only positive attitudes beyond this point." It wasn't a normal visiting day, and dozens of numbered tables around Dukes were empty. A library card hung just below his collar.

On paper, Dukes looks like an archetypal Donald Trump supporter. He's white and lives in a trailer in a red state, near the small town of Sunrise Beach, Missouri. He estimates he brought in about \$6,000 — through odd jobs and electrical work — the year before he went to prison. Throughout the campaign, countless stories were written about people who matched that description and their anger toward politicians they felt had forgotten them.

Dukes does feel forgotten. But he was far from sold on Trump, and there wasn't a hint of anger when he talked about politicians in Jefferson City or Washington, D.C.

Only a deep sense of his own powerlessness.

"We do have hopes and dreams and thoughts and prayers," he said. "And it just seems like we get shoved under the rug."

That feeling runs deeper than his inability to vote in this election. The sentence he was serving in October was for being behind in child support for two sons who are now in their 20s, and Missouri bars anybody on probation, parole or in prison from voting. However, Missouri does allow felons who have completed their sentences to vote, according to Missouri's Secretary of State.

That makes no difference to Dukes. He said he has never voted in his life, and has no plans to in the future.

"I just never felt like my vote would make a difference," he said.

Dukes is still very engaged, and his views on several issues were far more nuanced than any political ad. He admires many of the state-sponsored health-care systems in Europe, but he can't imagine that people have read enough of the Affordable Care Act regulations to have an informed opinion about them.

He said he believes the U.S. needs to be a welcoming place for foreigners, but he also feels immigrants sometimes have an easier time finding help from the government than U.S. citizens do.

Ronald Reagan was the last president Dukes said he felt was looking out for people like him, specifically because of Reagan's anti-drug policies. That's a personal topic for Dukes. Drugs ended his 13-year marriage to his wife, Carla Dukes.

"I'd seen that woman beat a lot of stuff," he said, "but she could not beat opiate addiction."

It happened May 1, 2015. While the couple did not have children, two of Carla Dukes' children from a previous relationship were in prison, and the couple had been raising two of her grandchildren. She was stressed about money. She was stressed about health. They had a fight, and John Dukes spent the night at a friend's house. He got the call around midnight.

"She overdosed and died in her daughter's bathroom in front of the grandkids," he said.

During an interview in the correctional center's visiting area, Dukes never raised his voice, and he only occasionally lifted his hand from a can of Pepsi to wave at a fly. On the table in front of him was a lined piece of paper with a list of several topics he wanted

to talk about. At the top he had written the name "Ryan Ferguson." Ferguson's murder conviction was famously vacated in 2013, and for Dukes, Ferguson represents two things about this country: a flawed criminal justice system and the reality that Ferguson was only freed after supporters spent a considerable amount of time and money.

Dukes does not see himself as innocent, and was very open about a previous drug conviction. He also feels that certain laws, such as some mandatory minimum sentences, disproportionately hurt the poor.

Yet more than anything else, Dukes feels disenfranchised by politicians who he says have little interest in people like him.

What would he would do if elected to a position of power? He gave the same answer both times the question came up: He would listen to the poor.

"They'll say, 'Oh you can write or you can call,' but unless they have a huge mob, or a gathering of people that make the news to make people pay attention, there's just not enough people that get together to do it," Dukes said.

"Maybe they hear us and they just say, 'yeah, yeah, yeah,' and then they, they're gone."

Caring for prisoners, addicts and the poor rarely drives political campaigns. Perhaps it should.

Almost 7 million adults were in prison or "under the supervision of U.S adult correctional systems" in 2014, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. That's more than the entire population of Missouri. Only nations like Russia and Cuba are imprisoning their citizens at similar rates, and the U.S. still has them beat. A statement by U.S. Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, released shortly before he announced his campaign for the presidency, is largely correct:

"Though only 5 percent of the world's population lives in the United States, it is home to 25 percent of the world's prison population."

Connected to those numbers are other sobering realities. Over 43 million people lived in poverty in 2015, according to the U.S. Census. Almost 15 percent of Missouri contributed to that number. Poverty can both cause and be caused by drug addiction, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse has charted a steady rise in the number of overdose deaths since 2001.

The combination of prison, poverty and drugs is connected to Dukes' lack of voting. He's not alone. While lines were out the door in many polling places on Tuesday, more than a third of Missourians did not vote in 2012, according to Missouri's Secretary of State. Only one third voted at all in November 2014. Those numbers are similar to the U.S. overall; nearly half of the U.S. did not vote in 2012, and less than half voted in 2014.

By those metrics, John Dukes is not an outlier. John Dukes is an American Everyman.

On Wednesday, that American Everyman became one more freed citizen that President-elect Donald Trump, Missouri Gov.-elect Eric Greitens and a host of other officials will soon be sworn to serve.

At 8:20 a.m. in the Tipton Correctional Center's main building, Dukes walked with a slight limp toward two men waiting to pick him: Darren Hilgar and Ronnie Bird. They were the first friends Dukes had seen in almost a year.

There were no hugs or handshakes; he was too eager to get outside. Dukes wore a pair of Ozark Trail tennis shoes that Hilgar had purchased for him.

"Those fit?" Hilgar said.

"Yeah," Dukes said.

His first meal as a free man was at Pioneer Restaurant in Versailles. Two eggs over medium. The three talked about dune buggies, health care, guns. Dukes learned who won the election when he woke up in prison, listening to conversations around him. But he and his friends mostly avoided the topic.

As he finished his food, he started to get nervous. He felt like a woman in the restaurant was "mean mugging" him. Maybe she knew he had just gotten out of prison. He stepped outside for a smoke. Ashes from his Marlboro Light fluttered in the sunlight.

About 20 miles away, his trailer waited. He knew he owed rent for the time he was in prison. He would need to find a way to pay it.

Then Dukes and Bird climbed into Hilgar's red pickup, and the three drove off into an uncertain future.

Supervising editor is Scott Swafford.