

Desperate signs hold keys to the human condition

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DURHAM -- It begins with a tap, tap, tap. The sound of a knuckle rapping on a long, thin window, made louder by its echo off a facing wall. Give the noise your attention and a flurry of hands follows. In the space of a blink, up goes an 8-by-11 sheet of white paper -and window becomes billboard.

"Sit down," says the homemade sign.

Instead, you stay standing, peering even closer into the windows that march across two sleek white walls of the Durham County Jail. From the pie-shaped courtyard in front, you are witness to the nightly ritual of the incarcerated broadcasting their messages through the only medium they have: pencil and paper.

"Nathan Eaton, 1300 Western Blvd., Raleigh 27606," reads a series of notebook sheets. On the final page, it says: "Write me."

For many prisoners, for months at a time, this plaza is their only connection to the outside world.

"AUBREY #16, 5-B," "IRAQ," "Anthony," "Michael." They announce their names, their homes, their cell numbers. Anything to catch an eye, draw it upward and keep it there for a moment longer.

Most signs are prepared ahead, to be brought out as visiting hour wraps up at 7:30 p.m. That's when the courtyard sees the most coming and going. When visiting families look up for a last wave, a final word.

But these written sound bites are not saved for loved ones. Anybody who lifts his eyes, anybody who stands in the courtyard, is game.

"They'll talk to anyone," says Christopher Benjamin, waiting to be picked up after doing 35 days in the jail himself.

"I was up in a top floor cell on the other side," he says. "There, they call out to the girls going by."

It's eerie how the signs follow your line of sight. Look to the right and four pieces of paper are instantly slapped into the window, one letter on each: "GOGO." Look to the

left and watch "Nathan Eaton" slowly push his signs across the window horizontally, as far left as they can go.

"Royce" announces his presence in the middle of the third floor with a tattered, quickly penciled sign bearing only his name. Lest an audience overlook him, he wiggles the sign side to side. As if to say: See me. I am here. Don't forget.

For those without a cell facing the courtyard, there's always the stairwell. There, a prisoner's whole body can be seen from the outside. The cell windows, by contrast, are so small they reveal only hands.

One man has brought a stack of signs to his stairwell post. He stands, leafing through it, perusing his limited vocabulary. "Talk to me," reads his first message. "Write," is his follow-up.

And you know, seeing the papers appear and disappear as if on a TV game show, feeling the urgency of the one- and two-word commands, knowing that at the root of the messages is the most basic human desire to connect - it almost makes you want to. Sit down. Talk to me. Write.