

REPORTER

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table. I flinched.

The killer looked at me. Occasionally, he even stared at me. For three hours, he talked to me. At times, he shouted at me.

For reasons unknown to me, I was still not shaken. There was a numbness about me that seemed to linger until hours after I was out of the prison.

I suppose the experience of meeting Berdella face to face might have been unnerving, disturbing and even revolting were it not for one thing.

The killer laughed with me.

Q. Before I forget, how old are you?

A. I'm 40.

Q. I'm 27, if you're curious.

A. Not really, you're not my type. To which you're grateful, aren't you? (laughing)

At that point, I knew this was no average demented murderer I was about to interview.

I had written Berdella asking for an interview last summer. I work in the suburbs, I wrote, and I am removed from the journalistic mainstream.

After a perfunctory reply from one

of his lawyers, I heard nothing more until early this month. That's when Berdella sent me a brief, handwritten note from the Missouri State Penitentiary.

He wrote that he was looking for a reporter who was not in the mainstream.

"I am at this time interested in beginning to tell my side of some of the events in the Kansas City area," he wrote.

The events.

Either he was not referring to the murders or he didn't want to call them that. During our conversation, he minced few words — not even the ones I might have wanted him to.

His victims were victims. His crimes were crimes.

His experiences, thoughts and feelings poured out at me in what evolved into a awkwardly personal sort of exchange.

Handcuffed behind his back, he couldn't reach the cup of water that sat in front of him. Three or four times, I held the cup to his lips.

Then, refreshed, he continued in a sometimes rambling but constantly revealing monologue that was either meticulously rehearsed or sincere —

probably a little of both.

The most important part of the interview, in my opinion, was Berdella's best effort at explaining why he committed the monstrous acts to which he has confessed.

Those words he chose carefully. He struggled with them, as if he were just discovering the truth himself.

The most startling aspect of the encounter was Berdella's sense of humor, his ability and willingness to laugh at himself.

"For a shrink, I'm a pretty good client," the killer said with a chuckle. "They got some pretty rich material here, right?"

Before the interview was over, Berdella also expressed anger, hope, even signs of remorse.

I saw real emotions from a person who might have been embarking on a new career as much as staring at life in prison without parole.

Robert Berdella has admitted to crimes that are the stuff of which nightmares are made.

But for a few hours last week, the killer showed me he is, in many ways, my *worst* nightmare — human.

— Scott Williams