

In jail, but making good moves

Chess-playing prisoners take on fellow inmates in online tournament.

By JOHN KEILMAN
Chicago Tribune

In the law library of the Cook County jail in Chicago, the chase was on. Detainee Emmanuel Garcia frantically moved his king around a virtual chessboard, losing one piece after another as his opponent closed in.

Just when it seemed all was lost, the timer hit zero, ending the game in a draw. A dozen other men dressed in tan jail scrubs applauded: The result helped the team of detainees defeat a band of Brazilian prisoners they were playing over the internet.

Garcia, though, thought he should have done better.

"I made a couple mistakes," said the 33-year-old. "I tried to give him a sacrifice and get an advantage, but he predicted it, so it didn't work. Because of that, I had to change my whole game."

So it went in the first international chess tournament for inmates, pitting Cook County against prisoners in six countries, including Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Italy and England. The matches will continue until a champion is crowned.

The players sat at tables furnished with laptop computers and small American flags, making their moves electronically as Mikhail Korenman, who teaches the jail's chess classes, coordinated with his counterparts over a balky Skype connection.

The tournament is the latest development in the jail's chess program, founded seven years ago with the help of Russian grandmaster Anatoly Karpov. About 120 detainees take classes in the game, and 15 of the best were invited to take on the world in the two-day event conducted under the auspices of FIDE, the governing body of international chess competition.

The games were played on the Chess.com platform with a 15-minute time limit. Antoine Thorne, 29, of Chicago, was playing a close match against a Brazilian opponent when his rival gave him a golden opportunity, neglecting to move his queen out of danger.

Thorne immediately saw the mistake and pounced, capturing the queen and making checkmate inevitable.

"He didn't have no way out, man," Thorne said. "It was over with from there."

Korenman said that's the kind of vision he's trying to instill in his players.

"The winner of the chess game is not the one who calculates [his own moves] better — it's the one who calculates what his opponent will do," he said. "If I can figure that out, I can win. I will be one step ahead."

He noted that a study in Brazil found that chess-playing prisoners were less likely than others to return to incarceration, an advantage, he said, that could be related to the game.

"It teaches them a different way of thinking," he said.

Thorne gets it. "They always compare chess to the game of life," he said. "If you make good decisions, it's ultimately going to lead to a good outcome. You make bad decisions, it's going to lead to bad position, and you're going to lose the game."

That said, some members of the jail's chess team are awaiting trial on charges, such as murder, that could keep them incarcerated for decades. But Sheriff Tom Dart said the game should help them, too.

"Anybody will tell you that when you keep people busy, [they're] less likely to be engaged in bad behavior," he said. "This has that effect of keeping people engaged. They now have a skill. There will be other people to play with, or they can play matches by themselves. It will keep their minds on something."

PROBLEM SOLVERS



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MAKING ROOM FOR RUMI

By GAIL ROSENBLUM • gail.rosenblum@startribune.com



Blake Elliott, 38, has worked in disability services for 10 years, but his training began earlier. In 2003, his then 16-year-old brother suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car crash and has required 24-hour care since. He's received that care in-home but Elliott knows that most people with disabilities — whether they require minor daily supervision or full-time care — aren't that lucky. So Elliott, of Minneapolis, developed a technology service, Rumi, that matches individuals who have a disability waiver with a compatible caregiver-roommate who provides a designated level of care. Elliott, vice president of operations for Rumi's parent company, Bridges MN, explains why he feels the timing is right for Rumi.

Q: You created Rumi (meetmyrumi.com) to fill a need. What was it?

A: Until about 1980, we cared for people in state institutions and state hospitals, which were very segregated and expensive. Mom or dad might have to drive to a different city to visit their child, who typically lived in that setting until he or she passed away. A massive movement began in the 1980s toward more home- and community-based settings, particularly the four-person group homes. There are now about 19,000 licensed beds in group home settings in Minnesota and they are a significant improvement over the institutionalized setting. People can live in community and the cost is reduced.

Q: I hear a "but" in your voice.

A: But vacancies for group home beds are extremely scarce, which means families must look far and wide for an opening. What we see all the time is their loved one moved to Duluth or St. Cloud or Stillwater, to a community where they've never been, with three people they don't know. With Rumi, we're trying to give people with disabilities more options. Let's blow the doors off this system and give people this radically different system. Besides, the timing is right. We're living in a sharing economy.

Q: I'm guessing safety is the No. 1 concern for the applicant and the applicant's family. This isn't just a coffee date out in the open. This person is moving in 24/7.

A: We get this all the time. We all should be worried about safety. After potential caregivers fill out their profile, two public background checks are run and then a third, following Department of Human

Services standards. There's an interview. There are five, six, seven face-to-face meetings and no names or photographs shared until there is an agreed-upon mutual connection. And our team is in place to offer continued quality assurance. It's an in-depth process.

Q: How does Rumi deal with the scarcity of housing options?

A: About 15% of the time, the caregiver has housing. Fifteen percent of the time, the person with disabilities has housing. And 70% of the time, Bridges helps them find an apartment. They split rent like traditional roommates. We've developed relationships with landlords and affordable housing advocates who are interested in what we are doing.

Q: What kind of response is your marketing getting, mostly on buses?

A: We have 750 profiles in our system; 600 are interested caregivers and 150 are people with disabilities. That ratio gives the person with a disability a lot of choice in terms of who he or she might decide to live with. From what felt like a powerless system before, they can feel a lot of power. Of that number, 225 individuals are currently in the matching process. Our first "match" — Greg and Yanni, who are featured on our website — live together in South St. Paul in a single family home. Greg goes to a day program.

Q: Why the strong interest among caregivers?

A: This is not a market-driven system. Caregivers make about \$12.50 an hour, which means about \$21,000 annually in take-home pay. No wonder the national turnover rate is more than 50%. At Rumi, we can pay up to \$43,500 a year, tax-free,

for 40-hour-a-week workers. We're trying to find those great, mission-driven people, pay them well and help them start living more full lives. An added bonus: Many tell us they hate coming home to an empty house. Now they don't have to.

Q: Tax-free?

A: Since Rumi is a service that connects two people who live in their own home on their own lease (and not in a group home or institutionalized setting), the income to the care provider is tax-free, provided several conditions are met, which are explained on our website, meetmyrumi.com. Remember to also consult your tax professional.

Q: Must caregivers work full-time?

A: No. They can work 10 or 20 hours a week. They can work a second job, have a spouse and child, or pet.

Q: How might that social network impact the person with disabilities?

A: He or she has instant social connections with a roommate's friends, family, family dog or cat. It has a positive ripple effect.

Q: What if the arrangement doesn't work out?

A: Like any roommate situation, sometimes it just doesn't work out. We ask for 60 days' notice. We have a lot of resources to help in those situations.

Q: Where does the name Rumi come from?

A: Rumi is a play on "roomie," as in "roommate" — and it's pronounced just like "roomie." Rumi is also a 13th-century poet and scholar who famously said: "What you seek is seeking you." We feel the same way about the Rumi platform.

Living, cooking, inspiring his way

"MasterChef Latino" finalist is first participant using wheelchair.

By YVONNE H. VALDEZ
Sun Sentinel

MIAMI — Through his meals, Venezuelan John Pardo touched hearts and served as inspiration for thousands of people in the second season of "MasterChef Latino." And he did everything "in his own way."

Pardo took advantage of his participation in the program broadcast by the Hispanic network Telemundo to show the world the main ingredient of his triumph in life: "Yes you can when you want."

"I wanted to show that there are no limits. The limits are set by oneself, they are in the mind," Pardo said in an interview at his Miami home. "This is how I live my life; I don't put limitations on myself. I am not a 'superhero' or anything special. But if I, who am in a wheelchair, can do it, everyone can do it."

Pardo said he is the first person in a wheelchair to participate (and become a finalist) in a reality cooking show in the United States.

A graphic designer and businessman, Pardo, 46, is about to release a documentary called, "I Did It My Way" (johnpardodidit.com), which recounts his nearly 28-day and nearly 500-mile journey on the Camino de Santiago, known in English as the Way of St. James.

The Camino de Santiago is a series of Christian pilgrimage routes of medieval origin that go to the tomb of the apostle Santiago el Mayor, located in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, Spain.

Pardo's documentary was awarded first place in the 2018 WorldFest Houston with the Gold Remy for best documentary.

"I describe the 'Way' as a metaphor for my life; in it, I leave a testimony of great experiences, friendships and teachings. It is much more than a trip or a blog. It is a documentary piece that seeks to reveal with realism and simplicity that we can develop when we set out to do something and work on it," Pardo said.

Pardo made the journey in the wheelchair he regularly uses, not a modified or electric chair, because it "is his legs." Armed only with a GoPro camera, Pardo took his August 2017 journey on the longest route, the oldest, crossing the Pyrenees from France, an experience that he says "allowed him to learn to shed material and put his ideas in order."

Another of his projects about to "get out of the oven" is his book, titled "Cook Your Way."

Pardo says he has loved to cook since he was 5 years old, inheriting that love from his mother's and grandmothers' kitchens. He teaches private cooking classes and his exquisite home, which he designed and describes as an eastern oasis, is frequently listed for rent to travelers.

Pardo is the son of an American mother and a Venezuelan father but grew up mostly in Venezuela. His life changed radically when he was 21; a gunshot in his back left him a paraplegic.

"Because of my youth and immaturity, I faced some criminals who wanted to steal my car. I bled so much that I think I died three times," he said.

The young businessman, accustomed to surfing, participating in triathlons, marathons, swimming and extreme sports, was left in a wheelchair without being able to move his left arm.

He returned to the United States for rehabilitation and has remained in the U.S. for 25 years.

"After the accident, I fell into a deep depression, but I soon got up.

My personality is like that," he said, "always a fighter."

Get in touch: Know a problem solver in your community? E-mail me at gail.rosenblum@startribune.com.