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Professor Larson
Literature of Witness
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Final Project: Collection of Solitary Confinement Witness Testimony

Introduction

The Cruel Injustice of Solitary Confinement

Solitary confinement has many different forms. It can be a supermax prison, designed intentionally to hold people solely in solitary confinement, or restrictive housing, also known as “disciplinary segregation, administrative segregation, protective custody, control units, security housing units (SHU), special management units (SMU), or simply ‘the hole’,”¹ which takes the form of separate isolated units within what is deemed to be a standard prison complex. It has been recognized since the mid 19th century as a dangerous practice with severe physiological and psychological effects on those confined. In 1984, the UN’s definition of torture detailed in the *Convention Against Torture* was near-identical to the inherent nature of solitary confinement, describing torture as “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person”² for reasons of interrogation and punishment, and since the *CAT*, the UN’s official policy on solitary confinement has developed to the point of labelling any stint in solitary greater than 15 days to legally qualify as torture. The Mandela Rules, named for

¹ ACLU. “Still Worse than Second Class: Solitary Confinement of Women in the United States.” *ACLU*. 2018.

² United Nations. “Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.” *United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner*. Dec. 1984

Nelson Mandela, also dictate that the confinement of a mentally or physically disabled person in solitary or supermax housing “cannot be regarded as a lawful sanction.”³

Despite this statement regarding the nature of solitary confinement, the USA has been one of the most notable proponents of flouting those guidelines in favor of solitary confinement punishments that can last anywhere from multiple weeks to years and even decades, as we see in the case of the Angola 3, three black men who were convicted for murder and kept in solitary confinement for more than 40 years as both punishment and due to their political affiliations with the Black Panthers. Solitary confinement is occasionally employed as a supposed protective tactic (removing individuals who might be targeted from the general populace), but is most often used as a disciplinary measure following any infraction deemed worthy of such a severe response. There is no strict metric in place to determine what constitutes a solid reason to throw someone in solitary- it is never an explicit part of someone’s prison sentence, and is thus left entirely up to the discretion of the guards and the administration at the incarcerated individual’s specific prison. Given that the US refuses to abide by the UN’s guidelines, with few states legally restricting stays in solitary and none limiting the number of days to the 15 day rule, this often leads to situations where people who have done little to nothing wrong find themselves in solitary solely because someone in power took a disliking to them, and then were left to rot there until the people in charge decide to let them out. “Mental illness can contribute to behavioral infractions; untreated drug addiction can also lead to placement in solitary when prisoners with addictions gain access to narcotics in prison [and]...an officer’s bad day can easily turn into solitary confinement for a prisoner for retaliatory reasons, such as a prisoner filing a grievance.”⁴

³ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. “The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.” *UNODC*.

⁴ ACLU. “Still Worse than Second Class: Solitary Confinement of Women in the United States.” *ACLU*. 2018.

Their freedom then depends on the administration deciding that they deserve to be removed from solitary custody. For many, this time only comes when their actual court-mandated sentence ends.

Although solitary confinement is often referred to in witness testimony under varying names the physical experience remains relatively constant. Most solitary confinement cells are similar six by ten foot rooms where the incarcerated are kept locked behind a steel door for 22 to 24 hours a day. These facilities are designed for long term isolation and the US has currently between 80,000-100,000 individuals being kept in solitary confinement.⁵ These individuals have severely limited contact with other individuals, are rarely allowed access to rehabilitative programming, and have little property of their own. Access to sunlight and fresh air is also scarce or nonexistent to enhance the sense of deprivation. In prisons where the incarcerated are allowed a short period of exercise it often occurs in another barren, concrete cell. The experience is designed so the incarcerated have nowhere to go, no one to speak with, and nothing to do for their entire stay.

Prolonged isolation in solitary confinement causes erosion of an individual's sense of identity with little evidence to support that the use of solitary confinement increases the safety of prisons. Widespread justification for solitary confinement's efficacy has been from proponents arguing that it increases safety by removing dangerous or vulnerable incarcerated individuals from the general population. There is little evidence to support this justification and there is evidence to the contrary, that solitary, especially long-term confinement, fosters more disruptive behavior. Instead of offering any avenue towards rehabilitation and future reintegration, solitary confinement has frequently shown to increase the chance of recidivism. The dehumanizing

⁵ Manson, Joshua. "How Many People Are in Solitary Confinement Today?" *Solitary Watch*.

isolation of solitary confinement robs the incarcerated of previous connections to family and friends, and denies them access to the rehabilitative programming that has been proven to decrease recidivism.

The “uniquely harmful effects” of solitary confinement extend beyond the loss of self and isolation and have been well-documented by individual experts and large organizations, such as the ACLU, alike. The research pertaining to the mental toll that sort of housing results in goes back decades, illustrated in both scientific studies and in personal testimonies written and verbalized by the incarcerated individuals themselves. Prisoners held in solitary confinement for a period of time exceeding 10 consecutive days have shown rapid mental, physical, and emotional deterioration, “with elevated levels of depression and anxiety, a higher propensity to suffer from hallucinations and paranoia, and a higher risk of self-harm and suicide.”⁶

The impact of solitary confinement on stable individuals is difficult enough to stomach, but its effects on those who are more fragile are even more sinister, as the same atmosphere that damages healthy minds greatly exacerbates pre-existing conditions. The ACLU reports that “in less healthy [prisoners] there is psychosis, mania or compulsive acts of self-abuse or suicide”⁷ when solitary confinement is introduced as a punishment for prison infractions, or as a method of ill-advised containment for individuals considered to be a safety risk for either themselves or other incarcerated people within their prison. This correlation grows rapidly more severe when the subjects are women, as nearly 70% of incarcerated women experience mental illness, making those placed in solitary even more likely to experience extreme mental breaks than their male counterparts.

⁶ ACLU. “Still Worse than Second Class: Solitary Confinement of Women in the United States.” *ACLU*. 2018.

⁷ ACLU. “The Dangerous Overuse of Solitary Confinement in the United States.” *ACLU*. Aug. 2014.

Feminine specific issues extend beyond mental illness into pregnancy and childbirth. The Department of Justice advises against putting pregnant or postpartum women in solitary confinement, and the use of restrictive housing on pregnant or nursing women is prohibited under the UN's Bangkok Rules, but imprisonment of this nature still occurs, and the pregnant individuals in solitary confinement suffer extreme mental health issues and find themselves unable to access proper natal care while in custody, and are often "unable to request emergency medical care"⁸ while confined.

Overall, the use of solitary confinement results in severe health issues, both mental and physical, and damages the very sense of self of the prisoners it is used against. It cuts them off from all communication with anyone with whom they can connect, and robs them of any methods of self-expression. As witness testimonies from prisoners have begun to circulate the internet more frequently, informing us about the dehumanization of solitary confinement and extreme prison punishments, they have thankfully begun to incite some small amount of change. The stigmatization of incarcerated peoples is still significant, but is slowly lessening as the incarcerated educate the general public about the abuses perpetuated through the prison system. Until recently there was little information widely available about prisons and abusive practices like solitary confinement were practically hidden from public view. With access to testimonies

⁸ Moritz, John. "New-mother limits on solitary lockups clears House panel." *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. 12 March, 2021.

like those gathered below, we are granted access to the true horrors of solitary confinement, and can use this information to champion against the use of it as a barely administrative practice.

Testimonies

Behavior Infractions:

Sarah Jo Pender - *placed in solitary confinement for 5 years after attempting to escape prison.*

My name is Sarah Jo Pender. I have been held under the wide thumb of prison administrators for five years in solitary confinement at the Indiana Women's Prison. My official punishment for escaping ended four years ago, but I am still here and there is nothing I can do to get myself out.

Generally, women in segregation are held between two weeks and six months, though multiple offenses can extend sentences to years of punishment. The isolation unit is comprised of twenty-five single cells along one hall separated from general population. My cell is 7' x 10' of painted concrete, white and chipping, with a barred, sealed window at the rear and a steel door with a small observation window at the front. A slab of concrete and thin mattress makes my bed. A stainless steel sink and toilet encrusted with years of use sits three feet from my head when I sleep.

Food is never hot and is served on plastic trays through a hatch in the door. Sometimes, it is tolerable only if I don't chew it first. Unpalatable globs of flour that was once upon a time pasta is drenched in a tomato base and served sixteen different ways mixed with mechanically separated chicken bits and soy pellets marked for animal feed. However, the bread is always edible and I can buy a jar of peanut butter if I want. What a luxury.

Here, it is cold. Artificial ventilation blows directly onto my bed so that no amount of repositioning brings relief from the chill. My bed must be made by 7 a.m. each day, so that I cannot access my full bed linens during the day when it is the coldest. The captain threatens to strip our cells of belongings, including all bedding if we are caught covering ourselves with the sheets during the day. I am wearing three pairs of socks right now, and my toes are purple and stinging cold.

I am confined to my cell 22 hours each day, and the other 2 hours am handcuffed and escorted 25 feet down the hallway to another locked room for "recreation and exercise," though the space is only twice the size of my cell. In the largest room, I can take nine steps before I must

turn around again and again. But there is a television that I can watch public broadcasting and lots of books. Books keep us sane. Since books are a main source of time management and entertainment, the prison uses them as a method of punishment. Women on disciplinary status are only allowed one non-religious book and one religious book at a time. I am allowed to possess up to five books. If we are caught with too many books during a room search, we are subject to further discipline.

Six days a week, my hands are restrained through the door hatch and an officer escorts me into a shower room. Four stalls line one wall; each stall is enclosed by three concrete walls and a steel mesh door that shuts us in and gets locked. I have fifteen minutes to shower with an army of black bugs on the walls. Black mold peppers the baseboards and thick scales of scum cling to ripped shower curtains. Then I am recuffed and escorted back to my perpetually cold cell.

As a kid, I slept with my bedroom door cracked for a sliver of the hall light to visually orient me when my bladder woke me up at night. Now, my room is constantly lit even at 2 a.m. I can push a button to dim the fluorescent bulbs, but I can never, ever sleep in darkness. However, the nights are usually quiet, except for the occasional slamming metal door, ringing phone, and piercing scream from one of the actively psychotic or suicidal women housed on the unit.

Despite knowing that isolation can drive people insane, the mental health care here is woefully inadequate. Once a month, a mental health staff comes to ask us if we are hallucinating, hearing voices, or are suicidal. More frequent meetings can be requested, but they offer no coping skills, no therapy, no advocacy. The luckiest among us are prescribed anti-depressants to numb us from the hardest parts of being alone. I am fortunate to have incredible support from my family and friends. To pass the time, I read, write, learn and plan for the future when I can be with them again. What sanity I eek out of these letters, books, phone calls and visits is enough to sustain me just a little longer. I am mentally stable now, but my mind broke down under the weight of isolation 3 1/2 years ago, and it was a long, slow, painful process of putting myself back together.

Acutely psychotic women who refuse medication are frequently locked in a cell where they bang and talk and argue with voices, scream about God and demons, and/or refuse to shower or eat for fear of being poisoned. This can go on for weeks until some invisible threshold is crossed and E-Squad officers dressed in full riot gear come in, hold her down, and a nurse injects her with an anti-psychotic medicine. This scene gets repeated every two weeks until she cooperates.

Other women who enter sane will become so depressed that they shut down or hurt themselves. I watched a woman claw chunks of flesh from her cheeks and nose and write on the window with her blood. My neighbor bashed her head against the concrete until officers dragged her to a padded cell. When she returned, the scab on her forehead was huge and shaped like the country of Brazil. Right across from my cell, a woman slit her own throat with a razor and was wheeled out on a gurney. Two others tried to asphyxiate themselves with bras and shoestrings. Now no one has shoestrings and we shuffle around in floppy tennis shoes with loose tongues.

Once, I found some embroidery floss and tied up the middle lace holes to keep myself from tripping. A guard demanded that I give her the five inch strings and then formally punished me for this violation. Another woman cut her wrists using the metal band around a pencil eraser. Now, all our pencils are stripped naked. It is always the poor prisoner porter who is forced to clean up the blood puddles and shit smears left behind when someone's mind spirals down the rabbit hole.

How is this an acceptable management tool for human beings? Short-term isolation is understandably useful for investigations, medical quarantines, emergencies, etc., but using long-term isolation to manage behavior is inhumane and hateful, especially when prison administrators do not offer a clear alternative. There is no behavioral therapy, no guidance, no education. There are no identified, achievable goals for the prisoner to earn her way out of isolation. The decisions seem arbitrary and capricious at best. There is no due process to protect our miniscule civil rights.

In the thirteen years I have been held prisoner, I have never committed an act of violence. I escaped from another prison over five years ago with the help of a prison guard. I essentially walked out of the back door. Today, that guard is at home a free man while I am still kept in this earthly purgatory. Why and for how long I do not know, because the prison administrators refuse to tell me. How's that for human rights in America?

Christopher Balmer - *an incarcerated male in the Pennsylvania prison system who focuses on the mental health effects of solitary confinement*

One of the main focuses involving the Pennsylvania prison system is solitary confinement, which will always be an issue debated amongst human rights advocates and even some mental health experts. Reality has proven itself time and time again that solitary confinement has permanent psychiatric effects, especially when used long term. People suffer constantly in isolation. But why? An illogical individual would say, "Oh, well, they should have followed the rules."

I question the Pennsylvania prison system about their use of the word "corrections" when using it in relation with a department. Is the prison system a Department of Corrections or a Department of Control? To answer this question, let us explore the use of solitary confinement within the Department of Corrections.

When a person confined commits the smallest infraction, a piece of paper is filed against the inmate called a "DC-141 - Inmate Misconduct Form". As a result he or she is sent to a place called the Restrictive Housing Unit (solitary confinement) to serve a maximum of ninety (90) days for each institutional charge filed against him. Ultimately, the inmate's fate is left up to a man called the Hearing Examiner, who naturally takes the misconduct report as more credible

than what the inmate will ever say to rebut the charges. This mandetermines how long you will stay inside the darkness of solitary confinement.

As the readers can see, solitary confinement is a place designed to house an inmate to punish him in punitive segregation- a place where he is even stripped of physical contact with family, other inmates, a phone call, and even an adequate tube of toothpaste. The name " Restrictive" is defined clearly here when housed in these units. Remember, even for the smallest infraction, for failure to stand for court or tucking in your shirt, voicing your opinion in a blunt fashion, etc., can lead to a placement in a place where you could end up coming out mentally distraught or not even make it out because the psychological pressure forced you to lose your mind.

Then you have the people who are mentally ill and are isolated in these units for years at a time, racking up dozens of years worth of misconducts. These misconducts range anywhere for attempting suicide, self mutilation, refusal to obey an order, assault, destruction of property and a lot of other infractions of institutional rules. Keep in mind, these are mental health inmates, those who are in need of treatment - the same treatment the Department of Corrections promotes to the public that they provide. Instead, like myself, they are provided more isolation time for harming themselves. (For example, I have received nearly nine hundred (900) days of I isolation time for self-mutilation. Instead of treatment, I was punished.) Correctional officers are trained to perform a job consisting of care, custody and "control". They do not provide avenues for treatment that these mentally ill inmates should receive. Instead, the mentally ill are dealt with accordingly in a manner to control them and their behaviors. Regardless whether their behaviors are associated with the symptoms of their mental illness or not, they are treated just as non-mental health prisoners.

Again, how can this be a Department of Corrections when prisons are designed to control the alleged criminal?

The final answer is, it is not a " corrective system". Prisons from the beginning of development were designed to break and control the criminal's behavior. What the Department of Corrections promotes to the public is totally false in regards to rehabilitation. They use the Restrictive Housing Unit more than they use treatment opportunities. If they cannot control you, the Department does everything to force you into compliance with the rules of the institution.

For example, if an inmate refuses to come out of his cell either because he is afraid or just does not want to come out of the cell, the Department of Corrections assembles a team of eight adult men dressed in riot gear, wielding shock shields and gas to enter the inmate' s cell, beat him and drag him out. First, they administer a dose of chemical gas inside the inmate's cell that causes the inmate's skin to burn and his lungs to collapse, forcing him to his knees. An

inmate at SCI Rockview, in April 2012, died because of this same chemical gas after the gas was shot into his cell in the attempt to force him out. He was protesting because the officers denied him his food. This is another tactic used to force an inmate into compliance: starvation.

If the inmate fails to voluntarily come out after the spray (gas) is shot into the cell, the team of eight fully grown men rush into the cell, shocking the inmate who is defenseless with a shock shield and attack him with nightsticks to remove him from the cell.

Is this correction or control? I would say control. There is no correction involved when beating an inmate senseless to get him out of his cell or shocking him like a cow to get him to move. These are methods of control. Or also known to the inmates as methods of torture. As expressed before, there are no "corrections" in the Department of "Corrections". Before the public believes a spokesperson who supports the goals and policies of the Department, regardless whether such policies or goals are wrong, look at the behaviors of the Pennsylvania prison system and ask yourself if what the Department of Corrections promotes to the public is true or false.

I have suffered six (6) long years in isolation, watching my fellow convicts kill themselves, hann themselves, get abused, medically neglected and suffer j ust as I have suffered. All in a little unit called the RestrictiveHousing Unit (isolation), a man's life can be stripped away from him. Even for the smallest infraction.

Now ask yourself. Is this a Department of Corrections or Department of Control?

I think you know the answer.

Jack Henry Abbott- *Abbot produced In the Belly of the Beast when he was 37 years old through letters he wrote while incarcerated. Abbott refers to himself as a state-raised convict and at the time of writing he had only been a free man for 9 ½ months since he was twelve years old.*

“You sit in solitary confinement stewing in nothingness, not merely your own nothingness but the nothingness of society, the others, the world. The lethargy of months that add up to year in a cell, alone, entwines itself about every “physical” activity of the body and strangles it slowly to death, the horrible decay of truly living death. You no longer do push-ups or other physical exercise in your small cell; you no longer pace the four steps back and forth across your cell. You no longer masterbate; you can call forth no vision of eroticism in any form, and your genitals, like the limbs of your body, function only to keep your body alive.” (44)

“Time descends in your cell like the lid of a coffin in which you lie and watch as it slowly closes over you. When you neither move nor think in your cell, you are awash in pure nothingness.

Solitary confinement in prison can alter the ontological makeup of a stone” (45)

“The wasteland that is your memory now comes under the absolute dictatorship of idols too terrible to envision.

They are the hard, driving winds that torture the tumbleweeds across the prairie desert of memory-- the crazy hard winds that whip up smaller chaotic columns of dust that twist a few feet in the air like little tornadoes. They are the scorching suns that wither the scrubby vegetation and torture the air that shimmers in waves of suffocating heat that rises from the dead, hard stone. They are the cold merciless nights of the desert that offer surcease only to the fanged serpents: the *punishment* unfolds.

Don't go near yourself.

Then the mirages in the wasteland. You are far from insanity; you are only living through an experience, an event. The mirages are real reflections of how far you have journeyed into that pure terrain of time. They *are* real. They bring the now out-of-place things back into the desert that was once the felicitous garden of your memory” (48)

“The real world is out of place in the hole, but the hole is nonetheless really there. It is time that no longer moves forward in human experience. You can walk, placing one foot before the other, across eternity of time. All the space you need is six or seven feet. The hole furnishes only that provision: you are living a demonstration of the theory of the infinite within the finite; the dream within the reality.

But the hole is not the stuff of dreams, of fantasies: it is all quite real. In fact, so real it haunts you.” (49)

“They finally put a name on what I have suffered in solitary: *sensory deprivation*. The first few times I served a couple of years like that, I saw only three or four drab colors. I felt only concrete and steel. When I was let out, I could not orient myself. The dull prison-blue shirts struck me, dazzled me with a beauty they never had. All colors dazzled me. A piece of wood fascinated me by its feel, its texture. The movements of things, the many prisoners walking about, and their multitudes of voice-- all going in different directions-- bewildered me. I was slow and slack-jawed and confused-- but beneath the surface I raged.” (51)

“A man is taken away from his experience of society, taken away from the experience of a living planet of living things, when he is sent to prison.

A man is taken away from other prisoners, from his experience of other people, when he is locked away in solitary confinement in the hole.

Every step of the way removes him from experience and narrows it down to only the experience of himself.

There is a *thing* called death and we have all seen it. It brings to an end a life, an individual living thing. When life ends, the living thing ceases to experience.

The *concept* of death is simple: it is when a living thing no longer entertains experience.

So when a man is taken father and farther away from experience, he is being taken to his death. (53)

Kalief Browder- *16 year old from The Bronx, who was held at the Rikers Island jail complex, without trial, for three years for allegedly stealing a backpack. During his imprisonment, Browder was in solitary confinement for two years. Two years after Browder leaves Rikers he commits suicide from the mental trauma he experienced.*

“Being home is way better than being in jail, but in my mind right now I feel like I’m still in jail, because I’m still feeling the side effects from what happened in there.”

“People tell me because I have this case against the city I’m all right. But I’m not all right. I’m messed up. I know that I might see some money from this case, but that’s not going to help me mentally. I’m mentally scarred right now. That’s how I feel. Because there are certain things that changed about me and they might not go back.”

“Before I went to jail, I didn’t know about a lot of stuff, and, now that I’m aware, I’m paranoid, I feel like I was robbed of my happiness.”

Remembering Kalief Browder

Aaron Lewis- *Lewis at 17 years old is confined to Northern Correctional Institution and would spend 10 years there, the vast majority in solitary confinement. He documents the abusive and inhumane conditions of Northern while studying litigation to fight his case.*

“That’s part of what comes from being confined. When you’re numb to emotions, your memories of emotional experiences start to fade away. You suppress them and you start being bitter and you care less about things. The more I became bitter, the more I pushed things out my mind like family, childhood, friends, and all that. I haven’t been in tune with my emotions, save for anger, in eighteen years.”

“I could feel the overly aggressive nature of the Northern environment instantly when I got there. I’m seventeen at this time, but that has no effect on the staff. Coming into Northern, everyone’s treated the same: big, small, young, old, it doesn’t matter. It was like a culture shock. When I first come into Northern, they stripped me of all my clothes—my drawers, socks, T-shirt—and put me in a jumpsuit. They chained me up with leg irons, handcuffs behind my back, and then a tether chain and padlock connecting the handcuffs to the leg irons. They marched me down the hall, like ten COs and a lieutenant. They want you to know who is running the show. They

letting you know like, go ahead, try something. When you chained up like that, and you're naked, it actually paralyzes you. You feel vulnerable in the presence of force. You feel defeated."

"The second thing that got me was how they do the recreation. You rec in kennels, like dog kennels, like a big cage. That's it. That really made me feel depressed: This is it, life in a cage. It felt like everywhere you go, you were still in a little cage. You go from your cell to the shower, and the shower is enclosed—another cell. You're not in no type of open area. You're always in some type of closet, or you're in some type of locked confinement. Even when you're out your cell for that one hour, you still feel like you're locked down. It's really no movement. All that takes a toll, especially if you constantly pay attention to it.

"You know they're trying to break you, you know they're trying to get you to act out and you really don't want to give them what they want, because it's a battle, it's a fight, it's a war. If I give them what they want, they're gonna win, but if I don't give them what they want, they're still gonna win, so how can I level this playing field? I'm gonna give them what they want until they tell me they don't want it no more. And that was what my first two years was like adapting to that new plantation called NCI Supermax. You try everything in your power to basically make them feel how you feel—defeated."

Retaliation and Punishment:

Cesar Francisco Villa - *eleven years in solitary confinement due to the fact that he is not a gang member and cannot provide information on the gang, and therefore cannot be deemed an inactive gang member.*

When we talk of the SHU and the effects the conditions have on the psyche, it's not a simple construction one can wrap his or her mind around. Understanding the treatment of Pelican Bay inmates takes some getting used to. Understanding this sickness that runs rampant in the minds of prison officials leaves knots in the pit of bellies.

Nothing can really prepare you for entering the SHU. It's a world unto itself where cold, quiet and emptiness come together seeping into your bones, then eventually the mind.

The first week I told myself: It isn't that bad, I could do this. The second week, I stood outside in my underwear shivering as I was pelted with hail and rain. By the third week, I found myself squatting in a corner of the yard, filing fingernails down over coarse concrete walls. My sense of human decency dissipating with each day. At the end of the first year, my feet and hands began to split open from the cold. I bled over my clothes, my food, between my sheets. Band-aids were not allowed, even confiscated when found.

My sense of normalcy began to wane after just 3 years of confinement. Now I was asking myself, can I do this? Not sure about anything anymore.

Though I didn't realize it at the time—looking back now—the unraveling must've begun then. My psyche had changed—I would never be the same. The ability to hold a single good thought left me, as easily as if it was a simple shift of wind sifting over tired, battered bones.

There's a definite split in personality when good turns to evil. The darkness that looms above is thick, heavy and suffocating. A snap so sharp, the echo is deafening. A sound so loud you expect to find blood leaking from your ears at the bleakest moment.

The waking is the most traumatic. From the moment your bare feet graze the rugged stone floor, your face begins to sag, knuckles tighten—flashing pale in the pitch of early morning. The slightest slip in a quiet dawn can set a SHU personality into a tailspin: If the sink water is not warm enough, the toilet flushes too loud, the drop of a soap dish, a cup ... In an instant your bare teeth, shake with rage. Your heart hammers against ribs, lodges in your throat. You are capable of killing anything at this moment. Flash attack; a beating, any violent outburst that will release rage.

This would be the time it's best to hold rigid. Take a deep breath. Try to convince yourself there's an ounce of good left in you. This is not a portrait you wish anyone to see. And then a gull screeches passing outside—another tailspin and you're checking your ears for blood.

And this is a good day.

Eleven years has passed since I entered the SHU on gang validation. This year I'll be 52-years-old. My cognitive skills over this past decade has taken an odd turn. The deterioration is discernible. When I first arrived I was attentive and if you'll excuse the expression, bright-eyed. I thought I could beat "this thing" whatever "this thing" was. I confess—I was ignorant.

Today, I could be found at my cell front. My fingers stuffed through the perforated metal door—I hang limp—a mechanism forged of heavy gauge. My head angled in a daze. My mind lost in a dense fog of nothingness. I'm withering away—I know it—and I no longer care. Hopelessness is a virus I hide under my tongue like some magic pebble, as if the shiny stone could assist in organizing thoughts; decipher warbled language from convicts without stones without tongues in a cellblock of grunts and floods of ignorance. Concentration is an abstract invention for those with half a mind if half a mind is a terrible thing to waste. And someone screams behind me, "waste not want not." But what's to waste when all you are is a virus that no one's allowed to touch.

Funny ... when I think of validation, I remember Fridays after work—cashing my paycheck—handing over a parking ticket to the bankteller, asking to be validated and I thought, how cool is this: validation for free!

Yes, this is me—the ignorant one. Today, wasting what's left of the other half.

If I were to imagine life outside of Pelican Bay, outside of the SHU—I'd have to imagine a hospital. And between me and you, I don't like hospitals. I don't like the stench of sanitized sheets, industrial strength ammonia. Gowns that open from the back. Polka dots and paper

slippers. Looney tunes in looney beds, leather straps and leather masks. Shocks and shots and broken ribs.

The truth is we're all broken in our own way. We've been undone, unwound. The inside of our plastic skulls—raked and routed. A composition of cracks and fissures where nothing will ever be the same again.

Joe Giarratano - *8 years in secure housing and supermax units, placed in solitary confinement primarily due to his activism and him fostering relationships with other inmates. His trial is considered a miscarriage of justice, but new evidence is not permitted to be submitted.*

My first long stint in SHU [secure housing unit]** came in August of 1996, when I was involuntarily transferred from Virginia to the Utah State Prison in Draper, UT. According to the UDOC spokesman, as reported in the news media, [the director of the Virginia Department of Corrections] called [the director of the Utah Department of Corrections] and stated “I have a politically hot prisoner that I want to get rid of.”

Upon arrival in Utah I refused to be photographed for a prison ID, i.e., I made funny faces and stuck my tongue out. At that point a fully geared up goon squad was brought in to escort me to a cell. I was told that I would cooperate or be broken. I was placed in a small cell, 8' x 10', at best, with low ceiling. There was no window. Bar door, and then a solid steel door that was closed to cut off any contact with others. Once locked in, with steel door closed, the overhead light was turned off. The cell became pitch black. I could not see my hand in front of my face, nor see the toilet/sink combo. I stayed like that for 10 days. Twice a day a bag meal would be tossed into the cell through a food hatch that would slam shut behind it. The mice had a field day.

Once lawyers locate where I was at they contacted the lawyers at the ACLU office in Salt Lake City. Those folks demanded to see me. Because of that I was taken out of that cell, into the light, and allowed to shower. I was then moved to the supermax unit and placed in SHU there (the building was known as Uinta 1). The cell was a bit larger: 8' x 12'. Solid slider door with small window in it. They kept the window covered with a magnetic flap (picture a large, flexible, refrigerator magnet). The cell had a concrete form bunk with very thin mattress. Stainless steel toilet/sink combo. There was a cell window, approximately 3' x 5", which let some natural light in for a few hours in the morning/afternoon. I was allowed a small amount of legal material, and religious materials, and writing material. I was allowed 2 hours of “outside” rec and 2 10-minute showers per week. The outside rec was in a small, high walled cube area with no roof. Maybe a little larger than a cell. Yelling to other prisoners was not permitted. If you did it you would lose your rec period and shower. Only human contact was with guards or counselor. If the counselor wanted to see you, the guard would shackle you, cuff you behind your back, place you on a short leash and sometimes put a hood over your head. You would be escorted to a room and chained to a wall where the counselor would speak. Then you would wait to be escorted back—could take a few minutes, could be 2 hours chained to the wall.

I went on a hunger strike that lasted about 80 days.

Eventually I was moved to the medical unit. Once placed on IV Utah demanded that Virginia retake custody of me in February of 1997. Except for about 30 days in medical unit I was in SHU for a total of 5 months.

[paragraph removed]

After leaving Utah Virginia dumped me off in Illinois, first at Joliet, and then at Stateville. At Stateville I went on another hunger strike. Again, after about 80 days, and hooked to IVs, VA was told to retake custody. My next stop was Red Onion Supermax Prison in Pound, VA (far southwest VA), where I was placed in super segregation. I arrived there in September of 1998 and was not released from there until December 2006. To this day no reason has ever been given for my placement at Red Onion. It is assumed that it was due to my having the audacity to force my way back to Virginia and for being a thorn in the [Department of Corrections'] side.

In SHU at Red Onion the days all ran together. Mental stimulation was, by design, limited. I was locked in the cell 23 hours a day. We were allowed 1 hour "outside" rec in a cage that was smaller than the cell. Eventually you would skip going out because many of the men in the SHU began arguing with each other over the vent or cell door, and to get at each other they would throw feces and urine at each other while in the cages. To avoid getting caught in the crossfires, and to avoid the stench (the cages were rarely cleaned), one would just remain in the cell. There was really no "daily life" in SHU. The days were the same. Some days it would be extremely quiet. Some days when the quiet got to be too much for some of the guys they'd pick fights on the vent, bang on doors, or bang on the sink/toilet. That was always the worst for me. That noise could go on for hours at a time. Often times guards would kick on doors, or refuse to feed someone, and that would set off some hours of noise. Sometimes guys would just snap and the goon squad would do a cell extraction. They would gas the cell, rush in with electric shield, and take the person down hard. That person would wind up strapped down to a bed.

We were only allowed a small amount of property, e.g., legal material, religious materials, writing material, and a very limited amount of personal hygiene items. Anytime you had to leave the cell you were cuffed from behind. Then had to get on your knees until you were shackled (for the first 4 years you would also have a Taser pressed to the back of your neck until you were shackled and leashed). Once you were standing you had 2 guards escort you (one with a Taser pressed to your kidney area the other holding the leash).

The days were monotonous. I, like many, slept until one could sleep no more. The few books I had I read, re-read, and read again, and again. To this I can go to any one of those books and immediately find a passage I'm looking for. For most the high point of each day was meal time. Each door had a cuff port or, bean hole, where we would get our trays. The tray was placed in a metal box contraption that the guard would place over the locking mechanism for the bean hole. The box would fit flush to the door. The plexiglass box would be opened, the tray placed in, and top closed. The guard would snap the latch for the bean hole. The prisoner would push the bean hole flap, get the tray, and the guard would lift the box which would slam the flap closed. Many of the men would trade their rec time or shower for an extra tray. The guards were quite lazy and didn't

like pulling rec or showers. Some guys would go months without rec or shower. Most all were on psychotropics or antidepressants.

The very bright cell light would come on at 5 a.m. and go off at 10 p.m. There was a “night/security light” that stayed on all night. It was bright enough that one could read or write with no eye strain anywhere in the cell. That could really get to you. We would use a towel or t-shirt to cover our eyes.

There was some natural light, though not much. The cell had a window, 3 ½’ x 5”. They covered it with an opaque film that dulled the light and blocked any view. I suffer from Vitamin D deficiency to this day, and have to take a Vit. D supplement daily, prescribed by the prison physician.

The only physical contact was with guards, when being cuffed, etc., or when you might have to be examined by the doctor. If one went to rec to stand in the cage, there wasn’t even room to pace, you could talk to the prisoner in the cage next to you.

The days really would run together and one’s perception of time could really get screwy. I found myself constantly asking guards what time it was. You were never sure if you were getting a straight answer. If you received mail you would know what day it was because the mailroom would date stamp the envelopes. But it was not unusual to lose track of days, weeks, or months.

My 8 years in SHU made me less sociable. I get extremely uncomfortable being around or in groups of people. I have experienced panic attacks in these situations. Since being released to g.p. [general population] and transferred here to WRSP [Wallens Ridge State Prison], I have probably gone to the mess hall 6 - 10 times in 5 years, I can’t tolerate the crowd, being locked in that small space with them and being that close. I survive by eating out of the prison commissary: p- butter, crackers and ramen noodles. Seriously. I generally do not initiate conversations. I do respond if someone speaks to me. I have become much more of an introvert. Depression remains a problem.

The psychiatrist at Red Onion was responsible for getting me out of SHU and transferred. Initially I was placed in a “progressive housing unit,” but not in a double cell as was the routine. I was placed on single cell status for almost a year before I transferred to WRSP general pop.

I’ve still not sorted out all the ways 8 years of SHU impacted me. In some ways I’m stronger and in others I feel screwed up.

Human beings are social creatures. We need psychological, intellectual, spiritual, environmental stimulation to function properly, to grow and develop. Without that stimulation we deteriorate. I do not care how strong one is mentally solitary confinement will adversely affect you. I have literally watched grown men deteriorate before my eyes, and go mad. There were times during my 8 year stint that I lost it and began to hallucinate and lose my grip on reality. What the public needs to realize is that eventually all of those who experience that will be released back into society, far more broken than when they went in.

The use of solitary should only be used as a last resort and, then, for only very short periods, 1 - 3 days tops. If not abolished completely. The real problem is that our prison systems are badly broken. Simply eliminating solitary will not solve the problem, but it’s a facet of the problem that needs to be addressed.

Judith Vazquez - held in solitary for three years before, during, and after her trial, without ever receiving an explanation as to why this was the case.

“My first three years (1,095 days) in solitary were pure horror. I was put in solitary in the county jail the minute I was arrested, as I waited for trial.

After I arrived at state prison, I suffered years of rape by guards. I became pregnant and was forced to abort in my cell without any medical aid. Due to the depression and desperation I felt because I had nowhere to turn to for help, I then found myself back in solitary by my own choice.

The day after my arrest, after having bail set at court, upon my return to the county jail, the guards escorted me from population into another area. I was supposed to remain in population while I awaited trial, but they placed me in an area that held just three cells. These cells were meant for females only, and next door through a glass window you could see the men’s side, which had more than ten cells. The three cells were empty; I was the only female there. I remember asking the officer why I was there; she said the judge had ordered I be placed there. I thought it was for a night or two, but it turned out to be a nightmare. I went in and never came out until three years later.

Why the judge placed me in this other area, as opposed to population, is beyond me. Many times, very late at night, some captain or lieutenant would open my door and look at me and say, “You are a pretty strong woman, Vazquez, a man would not survive all these years locked in like you have.” I would respond, “You can go back and tell whoever put me here, the judge or the prosecutor, that you can put me in a closet for all I care but you will never break me!” They would laugh and slam the door shut. Deep down inside I was afraid, but I could not allow them to see my fear.

Being in this cell for three years felt like a survival task. Much of the food served to me was raw, such as the hot dogs. I would get a lotion bottle and shampoo bottle and put one on top of the other and put one end on the edge of the sink and the other end I would use to press the hot water button so it could stay running. I would then sit there and hold one hot dog under the running hot water for a long time until the hot dog would feel a little hot so that I could eat it, although knowing it was still not fully cooked.

Some late nights I would be awakened by the men yelling, asking the officers about getting help for a very ill male inmate, but no one would come. The next day the ill inmate was being carried out in a body bag. One night I heard screams from the men about a man hanging in his cell. Officers did not show up until thirty minutes later.

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There are things that people use every day and take for granted. Things such as nature. Who would ever think that to be denied nature would be such a big deal? I had no open window. My window was about four inches wide and maybe three feet tall. My view consisted of just bricks and barbed wire. If I could see maybe a dime-sized piece of the sky, it was a lot. As time went by, I noticed a little plant growing from between the bricks. I would look at that plant every day. It was the only view of nature I had. Oh boy, did I love that plant. It was my buddy, my pal. I would watch

the breeze blow it from side to side and I would close my eyes and pretend that wind was blowing across my face. I never thought I would crave nature so badly.

As time passed, I started to resent the plant. I wanted to be the one feeling that breeze. One day I couldn't take it anymore, so I grabbed a plastic garbage bag and sealed it around the window, covering it completely. I refused to look at the plant enjoying the breeze I craved. Months went by and the cell was dark all day long.

One day, I decided I had to tear down the plastic bag. I felt I had to find a way to get air! So I began to scrape the rubber seal that held the window to the frame. I used my fingernails to scrape and scrape for days, weeks, and months. It got to the point that my fingernails began to bleed. They hurt so bad that I would cry. But I needed some air. I believe it took about six months of scraping and bleeding before I finally made a tiny little hole. Wow . . . wait. . . Sorry, I had to stop writing, my tears started to come down as I remember what I went through in that room. At times, I feel it is just past and forgotten, but I guess not.

The hole wasn't big enough so that I could feel a breeze come in, but it was big enough for me to hold my nose against it and inhale. Upon seeing this little opening, I acted savagely. I only had room to put one nostril at a time against the hole, and I would breathe in so hard. It gave me a sense of being human again. I had a secret in that room that the officers did not know about. It was my secret air supply, which was what kept me alive. I no longer felt jealous of the plant. If anything I sort of made the plant my friend again; it was all I had for company.

Thinking back about being in that cell brings tears to my eyes. Three years in a cell might not sound like so long to a civilian who has never been to jail. But I can tell you, those three years felt like a lifetime. It changes people. It turns you into someone you never thought you would be. Your life is just never the same. It's like when a soldier goes to war; there are things that will stay with that soldier forever, and he finds it hard to speak of and ends up having to live with PTSD. Well, being locked in a room for three years is just the same. It plays with your mind, with your emotions, with your life.

One day I felt I could not take it much longer. I felt the world closing in on me and without any control or knowing this was going to happen, I just busted out screaming, uncontrollably. I screamed without being able to stop. As I looked down at the floor, it seemed as though I was standing right at the edge of a cliff. The floor had somehow cracked open and for a moment or so I was not at the jail or in the cell. I was on top of the edge of some ledge where when I looked down I saw an endless pit of fire and darkness. I saw people screaming, crying, and burning.

In my eyes and thoughts I was looking at hell. I was right at the edge, and as I screamed I was trying to keep my balance. I was about to fall in and I managed to throw my balance where I fell back and landed sitting down on the floor and the pit had closed up and I was back in my cell. By then I was able to control this screaming and stopped and I was terrified and frightened from what I had just seen. I then rubbed my mouth with my hand, feeling I had drooled, and found blood on my hands. This screaming that unexpectedly burst out of me and that I was not able to control was so strong I actually bled from within.

The officers did not hear me because I could scream all I wanted and no one would hear or if they did, they ignored me. But what made this even more crazy was that at that moment when I had fallen back on my butt and sat there wiping this blood from my mouth, my door was opened by the guard and she had a priest with her! Somehow I guess the priest was at the jail that day, maybe seeing other inmates. I'm not sure, because I had never ever seen a priest there before. But the look on my face was so surprised, and he just looked at me as he saw me on the floor, and he asked me, "Are you OK?" Then he went on to tell me how he had heard about me being there and decided to come back and say hello and let me know if I needed him I could ask to see him.

I have no explanation for this. I was not sleeping and didn't dream this. I was up and pacing the floor with worries about how I was going to find help, or if I was there forever. But I never forgot what I saw. As a matter of fact, now that I have spoken on this for the first time, I may just sit down one day soon and draw this scene.

Although I overcame my claustrophobia in my jail cell, I developed another phobia—agoraphobia. When the day came for me to be transferred to the state prison, EMCF, the officers had to fight with me, and drag me out. I did not want to leave my cell. I had become used to this life of solitude. I feared being around people. I wanted to be in my cell all alone with my plant. I felt so dehumanized. Sorry . . . again I had to stop writing because my tears were coming down.

When I first arrived at the state prison in 1995 in general population, I felt like a space alien seeing our world for the first time. To see the green of grass and trees through the barbed wire and gates felt unusual. But what was really weird was to look up to the sky. It was huge, beyond huge! As I slowly spun around looking up, I can still hear myself saying, "WOW!" Other girls would look strangely at me. To see a television was even more odd. They had new shows I had never heard of, new commercials, new products in advertising. But these new visions did not last long because my eyes hurt so bad I broke down crying. To see all this light and color was too much for my eyes after spending three years in darkness.

Once you arrive to state prison, you are assigned a job. I worked steadily, but staying to myself. I worked and went right back to my cell. Then in 1998, I began to experience the sex abuse by the officers. I became pregnant and was forced to abort in my cell by the officer who abused me. I thought that day I was going to die. This abuse went on until 2001. By then I had sunk into a depression. In 2004, I became disabled and could not work anymore. With no job to go to, I had to remain in my cell all day and night. In maximum, there is very little movement. If you do not work or go to school then you must stay in your cell. I remained idle and again found myself in a form of solitary from 2004 to 2013.

In March 2013, I was classified from maximum to minimum and moved to what we call "grounds," and the transition was from night to day. When I was told I was moving to grounds, I had an anxiety attack. I was terrified! A couple of nurses were called to sit with me and calm me down. I told them, "Look. Imagine a shoe box. I am kept inside of it with the lid closed. Twenty years later, here you come and open the lid, pull me out, and tell me, 'Ok, Judy, go ahead, you are free of solitary.' AAAAAHHHHHH!!!"

These people have no idea of the damage they did to me by keeping me in this “shoe box” for so many years. They provided me with no therapy in getting one ready for such a big move—they think it’s nothing. But I must say that the “grounds” is beautiful. Lots of trees, grass, and animals, and it’s peaceful. I actually am allowed to go outside and walk. Something I had not done in more than twenty years! You should have seen me trying to walk; I looked like a nine-month-old baby taking her first steps. Still I walk funny. Mind you, for more than twenty years I basically just wore slippers and to wear shoes or sneakers feels odd to me. I feel I was actually dehumanized.

Even after months of these beautiful “grounds” I find I cannot cope or adjust. I find myself putting myself back into solitary. Sometimes, I fear I may not be able to get out of this solitary confinement “urge” I find myself having. As much as I want to go home, I fear walking out the front gates. I have sort of found myself sinking back into solitary. Not because “They” are putting me there. This time it is “Me” doing it to myself.” - Judith Vazquez, *Hell is a Very Small Place*

Chelsea Manning - *transgender, politically motivated imprisonment, confined to solitary as punishment/”protection”*

“I need help,” she wrote. “I am living through a cycle of anxiety, anger, hopelessness, loss, and depression. I cannot focus. I cannot sleep. I attempted to take my own life.” - Chelsea Manning, *Chelsea Manning Describes Bleak Life in a Men’s Prison*

Khalfani Malik Khaldun - *organizing politically in prison, placed in solitary confinement to stifle his influence*

"To Struggle in the United States is extremely dangerous. However, our very lives depend on an ongoing Conscious Movement for Liberation. The goal is development and brighter tomorrows for all people."

This interview is being conducted by The Campaign to Free Khalfani Malik Khaldun

Campaign: How long have you been in Indiana's prison plantation?

KMK: I entered the Indiana Department of Corrections in 1987, when I was a senior in high school.

Campaign: How old are you?

KMK: I was born November 30, 1969, that makes me 43 years old.

Campaign: Explain to us what your life is like on the inside?

KMK: The best way to describe it is I am in prison sanctioned to Indefinite Solitary Confinement engaged in multiple fights. One fight to regain my freedom; one fight to maintain my physical

health; one fight to be released into the General Population; and the last fight is to maintain my sanity- an all-day job.

Campaign: How has your activism made you a target for harassment or repression?

KMK: Being identified as a prison leader, political agitator, activist, or revolutionary, we get automatically singled out as threats to others, and threats to the safety and security of the prison plantations. Having been restricted from General Population for so long, my influence has been reduced to small units. The idea behind all this is to destroy our ties and relationships with comrades and new youth coming in.

Campaign: Share your position on the political nature of your murder charge involving that prison guard Phillip Curry.

KMK: On December 13, 1994, the night this guard was killed in the Indiana State Prison, he was killed on the tier above where I lived. D-Cell House was where the Prisoncrats housed the worst of the worst, their term not mine, I was at the time agitating, educating, and organizing the radical elements who would listen. So when this happened, having been a thorn in the Prisoncrats side already, they made me the responsible party that night; they were mad and wanted someone to pay. In 2001, they made me pay by finding me guilty and giving me a fresh [60] year hit.

One of the jurors who found me guilty, Juror #12, came forward after my trial; she regretted her actions and went to the judge. Instead of calling for a new trial and reversing the charge, the judge told her to go home; the judge has since retired- they manufactured evidence to obtain their conviction against me.

Campaign: Explain the corruption that exists inside Indiana's Criminal Justice System.

KMK: Like any system of corrupt politicians and abuses of power, whoever can afford to pay a greedy lawyer to represent them here may stay out of prison. These lawyers have judges and prosecutors who will give one a pass as long as they receive a nice payoff. Poor people get sent to prison to fulfill the schemes of the Prisoncrats and political regime here; more bodies mean more money- as they say Power Corrupts, but Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely. Indiana legislators have slashed prison funding for educating prisoners and providing meaningful rehabilitation programs, so that money would be solely for building new prisons. So, they are perpetuating a system that leads to more recidivism by not having a viable reentry program for prisoners prior to their release ensures a return to prison; capitalism at its best and the human exploitation of prisoners.

Campaign: Why are they continuing to house you in Solitary Confinement after nearly [2] decades?

KMK: The executive body of the Indiana Department of Corrections launched its political war against me in (1994) the night they lost one of their own. Being the only person accused, then later charged and convicted for this murder, to them (Khalfani Malik Khaldun) is Indiana's Public Enemy Number One; so they have condemned me to a prison existence in Solitary Confinement. This goes beyond my sentence of [60] years, the courts did not say serve out this term in (Administrative Segregation). The Indiana Department of Corrections wants a payback; so in retaliation they want me suffering to the point of psychological incapacitation- they want me an old grey-haired/bearded and no longer imposing potential threat. I am currently "Conduct-Clear" for [8] years, and I have completed the following programs: Substance Abuse; Stress Management; Anger Management; Commitment to Change; Prison-Life Skills; Parenting; Cage Your Rage; Rage, Recidivism, and Recovery; Prison-Life Skills #2; House of Healing; Bridging the Gap; and Inside/Outside Dads. I have been eligible for release to General Population for years now. Their justification for not releasing me is: They say I killed their officer and nobody is comfortable with signing off on my release from Solitary Confinement.

Campaign: Why is it so important to build a network support base on the outside of prison?

KMK: For the Revolutionary, Political Prisoner, Jailhouse Lawyer, Prison Activist, outside resources and support is crucial. The Prisonrats isolate (us) to control our movements, and neutralize our influence on other convicts. Having a network of loyal people, who have your best interests in mind help to keep the public informed. These supporters can be family members, friends or anyone doing prisoner support work. They can help us expose whatever ill treatment we go through when the Prisonrats know you have people that genuinely love and care about you; they're less likely to openly mess you around.

Campaign: Explain how the Indiana Department of Corrections utilizes Control Units and why?

KMK: In the early 1980s, Indiana experienced several prison riots as a result of racism and brutality by guards on militant aspiring revolutionaries and lumpen proletariat prisoners, forcing prisoners to take a stand to defend themselves; Indiana Prisonrats learned some lessons from these insurrections- and one lesson was that there was a threat to the Indiana Department of Corrections posed by politically-unified convicts. Indiana Prisonrats lobbies for funds to build [2] Solitary Confinement Units here in response to the rebellion of militancy from convicts willing to sacrifice for change. In (1991) the Indiana Supermax was build, a control unit meant to be a tool of social control of the state's most violent prisoners. In (1993) the Prisonrats built the Secured Housing Unit (S.H.U.), a unit styled after the (S.H.U.) at Pelican Bay State Prison. Both units were meant to cut the prisoners off from normal prison relations, while helping to keep the

prisoners in the General Population sorta' in check; no one wants to spend unlimited years in Administrative Segregation/Solitary Confinement. The fear of being held in these units creates snitches who will tell Prisoncrats whatever to stay in population; you may read about these units by going to (www.hrw.org)- look for Cold Storage. Amnesty International just released a [68] page report called: The Go to: (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ame51/060/2012/en>)

Campaign: How important is it to stay in touch with your loved ones?

KMK: Doing time is like having cannibals eat away at your flesh day by day. Family love and their help to assist us in maintaining are paramount. I am conscious self-educated New Afrikan (Black) man who love myself and those who love me, that connection helps to keep me determined, motivated, and hopeful in times of sadness and loss of loved ones. Since (1997), I have lost my mother, [2] brothers, and uncle, and [2] cousins. I am fighting for my life, unable to cry, mourn, or be a comfort to my family. Since (1994) my loved ones have been harassed, intimidated, threatened, and discouraged by Prisoncrats to not visit or write me at times. I have not had a "contact-visit" since 2000; we continue to persevere through it all because it is necessary.

Campaign: How do you work to maintain your health both mentally and physically?

KMK: For years I have maintained a consistent physical exercise routine and a healthy study habit of reading quality books and magazines. I don't eat pork, and that's been since 1987. I stopped eating (red meat) for [15] years; I recently started back eating it- exercise and study has kept me active and healthy for many years. One realistic fact that I want to share is no one leaves these experiences the same as they were when they came in; I am scarred by anxiety; depression; paranoia; and hypertension; as a result of being in Long Term Isolation for so many years. I have made a conscious effort to humble myself and be less reactionary in emotional situations, this way these Prisoncrats won't have any ammunition to use to justify keeping me in Solitary Confinement; as long as I am living I'm going to keep on fighting.

Campaign: How long did they keep you on the (S.C.U.) Special Confinement Unit?

KMK: Prisoncrats sent me to the (S.C.U.) Unit way in January 2003, and I spend (10) years in the windowless torture chamber. For the most part, this is one of Indiana's most racist prisons, and the staff are 98% all-white with this philosophy of southern racism. That was the worst [10] years of my [26] years in prison; altogether now I have [18] years straight in units of Solitary Confinement. They have tried to break my will to be defiant, and destroy my mental faculties; Allah has guided me out of each storm. (Allah-u-Akbar).

Campaign: In your opinion what do you think prompted the Prisoncrats to finally transfer you out in April 18, 2012?

KMK: A variety of reasons, but one in particular, is my constant pursuits in civil court. On April 4, 2012, I filed with the court a motion for an immediate/Permanent Injunctive Relief Judgement and a Memorandum of Law requesting the court to order the Indiana Department of Corrections to release me to General Population; these Prisoncrats moved me [14] days later to Pendleton Correctional Facility. This in my opinion was done to get me out of their custody so I wouldn't be a problem any longer; I had been challenging my Department-Wide Solitary Confinement Status for years. The Classification Supervisor and Superintendent also refused to release me in 2010, when I had completed a program serving as a re-entry back to population; that ACT Program is an incentive for release; they released my entire class but not me.

Campaign: What are the conditions like at Pendleton Correctional Facility?

KMK: The transfer on April 18, 2012, out of the (S.C.U.) to Pendleton did not land me in General Population, right now the General Population is run like a concentration camp with fences and cameras everywhere; the whole prison is "controlled movement" - the Prisoncrats placed me on (D.W.A.S.) Department-Wide Administrative Segregation. Inside G-Cell House, where all the potential threats and alleged trouble-makers are housed, D-Block is where (all) Disciplinary Segregation prisoners are housed, also, C-Block where I am held houses prisoners on Facility Administrative Segregation, and prisoners on (D.W.A.S.) Department-Wide Administrative Segregation is the status I am on. (D.W.A.S.) are all single-man cells, with recreation (1) hour a day and (23) hours locked in a cell, we get recreation on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, showering (only) on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, the only interaction we get is during recreation outside when we're in the (dog-run) individual cages.

Campaign: Since your arrival at Pendleton, have any officials discussed with you your possible release from that status?

KMK: The Prisoncrats are seriously playing games. The Superintendent Keith Butts, who recently retired, sent me a letter claiming he would set up a plan to consider my release from (D.W.A.S.) status, but it was all a smoke screen to get me to ease up on my demands to be treated like the rest of those prisoners who are being released; they are picking and choosing and playing prison politics with our lives. The current regime in the Commissioner's Office at the Indiana Department of Corrections, are not willing to give me a chance to prove them wrong. That is if they released me and I transitioned without incident, they will not be able to say "That's the bad guy" No more; there is no legitimate justification for my still being held captive in these units.

Campaign: How can people outside that are interested in helping you, and to join the campaign to help free you? Can you benefit from their support?

KMK: Having been in prison since 1987, I have had the unfortunate pleasure to lose family, friends, and my ties to relationships I've had with my female companions I have had to rebuild, which hasn't been easy; then establish an extended family. Right now, I need someone who is computer-savvy, who can network with organizations to encourage them to take to take on my case. I need a website on Facebook that solely covers my entire case, and we need a law firm that assists "Political Prisoners" that is activist conscious; we also need someone qualified and good with fund-raising. My success with Indiana lawyers haven't been great, they seem to be afraid to go up against the Indiana Department of Corrections and the lawyers from the Indiana Attorney General's Office. We must find a lawyer out of state that can practice in the State of Indiana. Those wanting to join this campaign to assist me in my freedom, please write me directly and we'll go from there; honestly- we need all the willing/working bodies we can get on this campaign.

Campaign: How is your Civil and Criminal fight coming along in the politics of the Indiana Court System?

KMK: ON January 11, 2013, I have a hearing on my Civil Law Suit challenging my continued confinement by the Indiana Department of Corrections. I filed several motions (Pro Se) that will be covering primarily my request for the court to order my release to General Population. My criminal (murder) case is currently at a standstill, and my initial Post-Conviction Appeal was denied, because the Public Defender's Office gave me an attorney who felt I was guilty and I should do my time; he messed my case up- I am preparing a successive Post-Conviction Relief Petition. My rights are being violated civilly and criminally, and I will never relent, not lose my self-determination to fight.

Campaign: Any final words you want to share with the pulic and the Revolutionary Community?

KMK: I can honestly say that Indiana as far as prisoners abandoning their criminal mentalities and transforming to political consciousness goes, our "think tanks", we're very aggressive in producing politically-active prisoners; but we seem to have lost our momentum somewhere. Prisoners are still studying and having individual dialogues, and I think prisoners in an attempt to avoid being captured/held for [10-20] years in Solitary Confinement, are becoming more and more less vocal and active; my having been held for the past [18] years is their prime example of where they don't want to be. To me, life is not easy, never has been, and to struggle means to reject being the victim. One who struggles is a rejuvenated fighter life-long, we are organized, prepared, and multi-talented; to struggle is to understand complexity and to pick one's own

battles. There cannot be futile progress without a real struggle, I am not broken by my adversity; but I am experiencing psychological fatigue. Aluta Continua-

Justin Erskine - *incarcerated in "the hole" for failing a drug test, discusses the horrific conditions he suffered and the process of entering solitary confinement*

I was roused out of bed by a correctional officer at about 9 AM- early for me- on a Wednesday morning.

"Pack up!" I was being transferred. I'd been on the waiting list to go to the hole for a couple of months. That's right, a waiting list. Like it's some kind of privilege or something. Waiting for the hole has its upsides, though. At least I was able to get myself prepared and let my friends and family know what was up. The wait can be stressful though - never knowing when they're coming to get you can prevent you from getting settled in or comfortable. Anyhow, I'd submitted a dirty urine and had to serve a 15 day Isolation sanction, or "hole" sentence, and even though the CO claimed he didn't know where I was being transferred, I was pretty sure that was it. He gave me some trash bags and left me to pack.

After packing just a few commissary items in a trash bag, I was interrupted by the same CO who'd returned to tell me that I was needed in Building 24, the hub building that connected the one I lived in with two others. It's where all the offices are along with some classrooms and a couple of chowhalls. I was concerned because I hadn't finished packing, but he assured me I'd be allowed to return to finish up. That may sound like a minor detail, but you always want to pack your own things - the CO's won't give it the same care, and you want things to be in order when it goes to the property room. They go through it and always seem to pilfer something or write you up for contraband - both of which I'd experienced first-hand and wanted to avoid this time around.

When I got to Building 24 I was immediately locked in a classroom and told I was waiting to speak with a J nurse. Apparently they've got to make sure you're healthy enough to do hold time. Really, it's just a formality that looks good on paper because what you tell the nurse doesn't have any bearing on how you're treated in the hole, and you're going whether you're healthy or not. I told her about the arthritis in my back - which was already in my file - and wasn't given so much as a Motrin while I was there. I don't think she even wrote it down. When she left the classroom I was given an "Inmate Statement" form to fill out. It's just a piece of paper that you're told to write whatever you want on - another looks-good-on-paper deal, I suppose. On mine I explained that I needed my legal work since I had an open case I was working on. I'd be surprised if that statement isn't in a landfill somewhere by now, but either way I never was given my paperwork.

A woman sergeant with a pleasant demeanor came to collect my statement and told me they'd be taking me to the hole in a couple of minutes. I started to protest, telling her I hadn't packed my things yet, but then realized it was frivolous. I'd been set up, bamboozled,

and all the protesting I could've done wouldn't make the slightest difference. My things were probably packed by the COs the moment I stepped off my tier to go to 24. The few items I was permitted to have in the hole - two t-shirts, two boxers, two pair of socks, a towel and washcloth, and my showershoes- had already been separated, bagged, and brought up to the building. I noticed my legal work and Bible weren't there and asked the sergeant to bring them to me. She told me she'd have my Bible brought to me (and it was) but couldn't do anything about my legal work. Then I was cuffed and shackled and driven to Building 18, the hole.

There were two things I noticed immediately when I walked onto the tier- the multitude of fencing, and how disgustingly filthy it was. To my immediate right were two fenced-in rec yards, though they could hardly be called that since they're completely empty save for a pull-up bar in one, and a broken phone in the other. There were dustballs and trash all over the floor, which appeared not to have been mopped in nearly a year. There were food fragments pushed up against the fencing with colonies of ants crawling all over them amongst the dirt and grime. And despite the smell of the COs cheap cologne in my nose, the stench of the tier was an assault on the senses. The cell-block was two-tiered with the cells sitting beyond the first rec yard, and the second in the far corner beyond the second yard. Both were covered in fencing along the sides and top. While walking to the staircase to get to my cell I noticed the downstairs cells had no furniture whatsoever. No desk, no bed, no shelf. Nothing. Just a mattress on the floor and a sink/toilet combo unit. The upper tier was just a narrow walkway with cells along one side and more fencing along the other.

Every cell had a metal flap adjacent to its door that was about a foot wide by five inches tall. This was a multi-purpose flap that opened onto a small shelf inside the cell to serve meals through, or anything that wouldn't fit under the door. It also served as a doorstep. The COs carried a crude metal pipe that fit over the flaps handle, that when in place, obstructed the door from opening more than eight inches, or so. When I got to my cell I was told to step in, still cuffed and shackled, while they put said pipe in place, then, through the eight-inch opening they removed my cuffs and shackles and slammed the door behind me. They supposed to take my bag of extra clothes and strip-search me, but they didn't. It worked out to my benefit because I still had on my watch and a pair of shorts under my pants, though the shorts didn't make it past the first strip-search.

My cell, about 7' by 14', was just as filthy as the rest of the tier. Squallid, even. There were countless dustballs and hair everywhere; piles of black dirt in the corners; and dried, crusty semen covered the walls in several places. The toilet and sink didn't appear to have been washed in eons. My mattress was heavy and felt more dense than it should have like it had taken in moisture. The air conditioning was turned all the way up and was extremely loud - to the point that it was difficult to hear anything outside of the cell - and incredibly cold. I had to keep all my clothes on all the time. I had no soap or toilet paper, or any hygiene products. I wanted to clean up a little, but didn't have anything to do so with. I had only one rag that I needed to shower with. I would've torn a blanket to use as a rag, but hadn't been given any linens yet, and wouldn't get my one sheet and blanket until later that evening. Luckily, since the COs had been negligent and forgotten to take my extra clothes, I had two pair of extra socks and decided to use one of them to get up some of the dirt and wipe the cell down so I'd at least feel comfortable sitting down. When I was finished the sock was completely black. Well just after I finished wiping the cell down, a sergeant and I went on the tier to do their hourly rounds. The sergeant noticed that I had all my extra clothes still and he gave them to him along with my shoelaces and showershoes, and put all of it outside

my cell door. I told him that I needed my legal work, linens, toiletries, and some cleaning supplies for my cell. He didn't seem in the mood to do any work that day because he basically gave me an excuse as to why he couldn't meet any of my requests. He said I couldn't clean my cell except for the days that I had rec (Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday). He claimed that he didn't have any toiletries, but that I'd receive them along with my linens on the next shift. And he said that he couldn't get my legal work for me. There was a person who was in charge of determining if inmates met the requirements to possess their legal materials while in Isolation and he said he would talk to them. I had asked what kind of hygiene and toiletries I'd be provided and was told I'd receive one small bar of state-issue soap, a state-issue toothbrush and toothpaste, and a "wrap" of toilet paper, which is about a third of a roll. However, the only thing I'd be allowed to keep in my cell was the toilet paper. The rest of it would be kept outside my cell and I'd have to ask a CO for it as needed, and give it back when I was done using it. Luckily, an inmate a few cells down heard our conversation and gave him about a half a wrap for me or I'd have been left with nothing. Still, I wasn't able to wash my hands when I was finished using the toilet. A couple of days later when I asked the same sergeant about the status of my legal work, he told me that it'd been decided that I couldn't have it because I didn't have a deadline with the courts - which I did. I'm pretty sure nobody ever looked into the issue, including the sergeant.

In order to prepare myself, I'd been almost overly inquisitive about the conditions and nature of the hole. I'd learned that three times a day - once per shift - every cell was shaken down, and every inmate strip searched. Lunch was still about an hour away and I wanted to hide my watch before the afternoon shake down. I took the band off and hid the watch in a hole in my mattress. Then I discovered that the door, which is hollow, had a couple of small holes on the bottom, facing the floor, and hid the band up inside the door. Someone else had already hidden some string and a toothbrush there, too. Had I never discovered this hiding place I could potentially have been written-up for contraband that wasn't mine. Anyway, holding on to the watch was priority; it would be an invaluable asset. This wasn't my first time in a "hole" - I'd been in two others in the two prisons I'd been in before this one- and not knowing the time can be frustrating. This was easily the worst isolation unit I'd been in, so anything to make the stay just a little more comfortable was welcome. I didn't have to wait too long before lunch was brought. It was served on styrofoam plates wrapped in saranwrap. The sides had been put in small plastic cups with lids to keep from merging with the rest of the meal. The food was always cold, and the portions inconsistent. Sometimes there was hardly any food on the tray, and other times the portions were even larger than other places in the prison. I suppose it depended on the inmates making the trays- some may have had more pity on the unfortunate. Without fail, every time our meals were served, the steel flap was opened and closed with unnecessary force. Same with the doors anytime they were opened. The flap and the door make an obnoxious metallic clang. Other places in the prison, like where I'm at now, the COs don't slam the flaps with such force; it's just another measure taken to ensure that inmates in the hole are fully degraded. Back to lunch: I had my watch, so I'd often time the meals. I'm pretty sure policy says we're allowed ten minutes, maybe 15, to eat meals, but we weren't given this much time. Most meals were between seven and eight minutes. On days we had one of the tastier meals it was usually less, a few times less than six minutes. Only when we had the most disgusting meals were we given ten minutes or more to eat.

We weren't allowed to save food of any kind, and the shake-downs were always shortly after meals to ensure we didn't try. It was hard for me not to think about how ridiculous it was - every time I was strip searched, then cuffed while officers searched my cell for some morsel of food or hidden soap I would wonder how people could bring

themselves to treat others like this. A few times I made my thoughts known, telling the officers that one day our nation would look back on this era and question how we were ever allowed to treat our citizens with such malice. Normally, if they responded at all, it was usually to the effect that they were only doing their jobs. Didn't they realize that that was the problem? Once, I got into a decent conversation with one of the COs who was searching my cell. When I spoke about how inmates were being mistreated, his sergeant chimed in saying he never saw inmates being mistreated. It became apparent to me in that moment how truly blind many of these people were to the injustices that they themselves committed.

On my second day I was able to have "rec". I already told you about the two inside cages, and the outside ones were mostly the same. There were three cages outside, but only two were used. Apparently there'd been issues in the past with inmates performing sexual acts through the fence when someone was in the middle rec yard. Only one of the cages had a pull-up bar, the other was empty. The outside yards were also quite filthy. To go to yard we were put in handcuffs which were removed once we were locked in the cages. I hadn't spoken to any inmates the first day, so took this opportunity to talk with the other guy I was on rec with. I could've talked to him through the cell vents, but the AC being so loud and cold makes it difficult to have long conversations at the vent. He was actually a former cellmate of mine. Like I mentioned, I'd already done some research, if it can be called that, about what the hole was like, but things are constantly changing, so I had a few questions for him. In the other holes I'd been in we could buy basic hygiene and stationery to write and send mail. He told me we weren't allowed anything like that here, though we were allowed to receive mail. Once we read it we had to give it back and it would be kept in a folder and given back to us when we left the hole. So, no hygiene products, save for the state-issue items I already mentioned, and no writing materials of any kind.

After 45 minutes of rec, I was cuffed and taken back on the tier to the showers. The showers all over the prison are pretty grimy, and these were no exception, though they weren't any worse than normal as far as I could tell. I was locked inside one of the few small showers, and after letting out the next rec group the COs left the tier. Showers are supposed to last 15 minutes, but we were always locked in there much longer. If you were on the first rec, you'd be left in there until the second rec was over - 45 minutes. If you had second rec, it could be even longer depending on when the officers felt like coming to take you back to your cell. It's frustrating standing around in a small, dirty shower while the officers are sitting around doing nothing. One day, right after an officer told me he had the "easiest job in the world," he refused to let me use one of the upstairs showers because he didn't feel like climbing the stairs an extra time.

When the officers came to get us from the showers, I was cuffed and taken back to my cell. It was laundry night so I told the officer to send out my towel. Normally I'd wash it by hand, but didn't have enough soap. He warned me that laundry usually returned with a brownish tint, but I had him send it out anyway. As it turned out, I shouldn't have sent it out not because it came back brown, but because it never came back at all! When I filed to be reimbursed for its cost (I'd bought the towel), I was told that the officer working that night would not verify my story and was never reimbursed. I never found out how it got lost - probably an inmate in the laundry room stole it, or the officer simply lost it. Since I'd been told I could only clean my cell on days I had rec, I made sure to request cleaning materials. I was told I'd be brought a sponge, bucket, and detergent ball, which surprised me because I'd been told by other inmates that we weren't allowed to clean our cells at all. In fact, when another inmate who'd been in the hole for some time heard this, he muttered, "I wish I'd known that." The cleaning situation is pretty flawed and follows the

pattern of how the hole is run in general. Inmates are never told what the rules are, or what they can or can't have without asking these things specifically. Access to cleaning supplies is always apparent in other buildings - there's always a mop bucket and broom in sight. Most inmates in the hole aren't even aware that they're allowed to clean, or have access to materials to do so. Anyhow, after a couple of hours and several reminders, an officer brought me only a sponge. He claimed he couldn't find a bucket or detergent ball. During my time in the hole, I requested cleaning supplies four more times - every time I had rec. Twice I was given nothing, and another time I was given only a napkin with some Comet inside. Only once was I given all the supplies necessary to adequately clean my cell. Despite this, I was often told during shake downs that my cell was the cleanest they'd seen in the hole - a testament to the fact that inmates had no clue that cleaning supplies were available. I didn't want my two weeks in the hole to be a complete waste of time. Even though I spent most of my waking hours trying to make the time pass quickly, I also made some good use of it. I collected data, so-to-speak; watching the officers behavior and the way they treated inmates. When I could, I talked to the other inmates and asked questions about how long they had to stay and what they'd done to get there. I also tried to identify some systemic flaws in the way the hole was run.

As for passing time, I tried several things. I'd originally been given a 90-day sanction, so had given some serious thought as to how I'd pass my days. The plan consisted of meditation, exercise and Bible study. On sunny days I'd planned on standing at the window for a few hours since I couldn't get outside much, and couldn't get any sun out there anyway due to the high walls. That didn't work out, though. The cell window faced east-northeast, so the sun would only shine weakly in the cell for a short time in the morning while everyone was asleep. I wondered if this was merely coincidence or by design? I did meditate, though not as often as I'd intended or wanted. I did study a decent amount of the Bible. I exercised every day which was inconvenient since I couldn't keep any soap to wash up with afterward. I tried timing my workouts according to when the COs did their rounds so I'd finish just before they came on the tier; that way I could ask for my soap and rag soon after I was done. Sometimes it worked. I figured how many back and forth laps was a mile (165, diagonal) and walked about two to five miles a day. I'd also do about a half hour of stretches in the morning and before I went to sleep. And even though I couldn't get any sun, I'd still spend a lot of time at the window watching gaggles of geese or whatever other animals were out that day - usually just birds and deer. The days still dragged by, but having a routine, however loosely structured, helped some.

Observing the behavior and conduct of the officers was heart-wrenchingly disappointing. The mistreatment was vast and disgusting. Depraved. On a large scale the things I witnessed may be considered minor, but when you consider the effects it would have on the average person if they were treated in a similar manner you begin to understand the extent of the depravity. A psychological beating can often do more damage than a physical one. The officers were largely indifferent to the needs and requests of inmates. Because we weren't allowed to keep soap or a toothbrush in our cells, we were at their mercy. Yet, when inmates tried to get their attention they often walked right by as if they heard nothing. Once, I was told by an officer that, because he wasn't technically working that tier, he wouldn't give me my soap. If an inmate ran out of soap or toothpaste before the weekly supply day, his request for more would be met with condescension instead of the requested supplies. Compassion simply did not exist. I saw an inmate who hadn't received his daily medication and was ignored for hours when he requested it. Another inmate who'd become upset when, during a shakedown, his medication was confiscated, was threatened with being put in a four-point restraint. He was emotionally distraught and the reaction of

the guards, a group of about six to eight of them, was to laugh at his misery. He never was given back his meds. I saw inmates whose mattresses were taken from them every morning at 9 am and not given back until 9 pm - always in cells with no furniture - leaving them to sit or lie on a dirty floor the entire day. One inmate's Bible was taken and never returned simply because an officer found a pack of sugar amongst its pages. There were days when the officers didn't feel like passing out the day's mail, so they would claim that there was no mail. I couldn't prove at the time that they were lying, but when I left the hole and got all my mail there were several pieces I'd never been allowed to read. Some of the mail I had been allowed to read was missing, and some of it wasn't even mine. The officers were careless, disorganized and irresponsible.

One day, during the afternoon shake-downs, I was standing at my door waiting to be shakedown. When the officers made it around to my cell, while waiting for the door to be opened, one of them, CO Shaw, stood leering at me through my cell window with the most evil stare I think I've ever been met with. He was rapidly clenching and unclenching his jaws in an unsuccessful attempt at intimidation. He looked so ridiculous that I couldn't help but laugh and shake my head. Apparently, he knew, too, how absurd he looked because his response was, "What, motherfucker! You think I look like a clown?" This wasn't the first time I'd seen him try to intimidate or bully inmates. He obviously enjoyed mistreating people and being rude. When he finished searching my cell, he moved on to my neighbor's. This particular neighbor was heavily medicated and spaced-out. He couldn't keep up his hygiene or function in any significant capacity. Shaw apparently found humor in his plight and began insulting him for how he smelled. He even tried to get me to join in, looking at me while laughing and making gestures to indicate how badly he smelled. It was appalling how cruel he was, and I was left in a state of disbelief that individuals like him could even be trusted in a position of power.

Sometimes, in a spell of apparent laziness, the overnight shift wouldn't perform their obligatory shake downs (no complaint here). But even when they did, oftentimes they would only shake-down the bottom tier. The downstairs inmates were always treated more severely than the upstairs inmates, and the disparity was senseless. It was as if some of the COs simply enjoyed mistreating them. It was obvious by their demeanors that some of the officers enjoyed the strip-search/shake-down process. A few of them would search every conceivable space and seemed to get pleasure if they found something so small as a pack of sugar or other contraband. They never stopped to consider how they may feel had they been on the receiving end of military petty tyrants such as themselves. For one downstairs inmate, the mistreatment and cruel conditions were too much. He'd suffered through having his mattress taken every day and even gone on a hunger strike. Unfortunately, it was all too much and he attempted to hang himself to escape his tormentors. The officers' reactions in the aftermath were to joke about it and compare the situation to one of another inmate's who'd successfully taken his life just days before in another isolation unit.

When I talked to the other inmates in the hole, I was shocked at how long their sanctions were. The maximum amount of time an inmate can receive in the hole is supposed to be 90 days. That kind of sanction is meant to be reserved for the most severe infractions, such as stabbings and rapes, and so forth. Yet there were guys serving 75-day sanctions for being caught with cellphones. Two of the guys I talked to were serving 70 and 75-day sanctions for phones that they were never caught with; it was only assumed that they'd had them. One of these men had been written up for Assault and Disorderly Threatening because the officer, irritated that he was unable to find this alleged phone, fabricated a story in an attempt to support those allegations. Even so, there was no evidence to support an assault, so he was found guilty of the threatening - an infraction that usually carries a short loss of privileges sanction, not holetime- and was given a 70-day hole sentence. Another inmate claimed he was given 90 days for a verbal assault on a sergeant who he'd seen spit in his food.

Another was given two 90-day sanctions for extortion. As I mentioned, my write-up for, "Substance Abuse," had originally earned me 90 days. Yet at the following classification my most serious write-up was possession of a tattoo needle - an infraction that earned me just ten days loss of privileges. Other inmates received 30 to 45 day hole sentences for possessing shanks or assaulting someone.

The striking disparity in sanction times, when compared to the alleged offenses, isn't the only systemic flaw in the disciplinary process of these conditions, though it is a major one. The individuals handing out these sanctions have never had to live in such cruel and harsh conditions. If they had, they would understand that even a couple of days is punishment enough; especially under the current conditions. When an inmate gets out of the hole, it can take weeks, or even over a month, to have his personal property returned to him, so that once he is out of the hole he's still left with nothing, making it difficult to readjust for some time. Account for the spike in the inmate's security level - which is a further penalty for write-ups and affects what he can spend at commissary - and it's almost as if you're still doing hole-time for weeks after you get out of the hole. The process one has to go through to possess their legal work while in the hole is simply ridiculous. I learned afterward that it needed to be approved by a captain before serving the hole time. But if an inmate goes immediately to the hole for any given infraction, this is impossible. And, if like me, you're aware that you're going ahead of time, it's still extremely difficult because the captains are seriously lacking in the area of correspondence. Plus, no one ever tells you that you must have it approved by a captain.

The lack of opportunity to possess basic hygiene and stationery is tantamount to cruel and unusual punishment for countless reasons. Having to rely on officers to give you your soap, instead of being allowed to keep one's cell, is a laughable policy. Or would be if it weren't so cruel. The recreation structure is flawed and doesn't allow for the option to take rec outside every time. In two weeks, and five recs, I was able to go outside just two times. Nearly every aspect of the Isolation sanction is flawed and in need of reform.

People are aware, I'm sure, that awful things happen in our prisons. Many would like to ignore it, or feel that it is what is deserved for breaking laws and institutional rules. This is what I call the, "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time," philosophy. To a degree, those people may be right- or would be if "justice" wasn't subject to the whim and emotion of hate-mongering prison guards and officials who indiscriminately, or discriminately abuse the very authority they've been given to punish such wrongs. It is foolish to attempt to teach our citizens not to hurt people and commit crime by putting them into the custody of individuals and establishments that hurt people and commit crime. Crimes against not only individuals, but humanity - and with no remorse, by people who possess no moral compass. This is not to say that all prison guards and officials operate in this manner. Not all do. During my incarceration, and hole-time, I've encountered some truly good officers who are genuinely compassionate. And they do their jobs effectively. But their efforts are overshadowed and nullified by their corrupt counterparts.

Abuse, cruel and unusual punishment, and the general mistreatment that are the current norms are not effective mediums for correcting behavior. Instead, they embitter inmates and cause resentment toward officers and the "justice" system they've been employed to enable. Through these mediums we are advocating and perpetuating negative behavior and the recidivism of our people. Admittedly, for some of our people, incarceration is a necessary measure. And, in some cases, even harsh conditions. But certainly not to the degrees that both currently take place. By locking up more of our citizens and promoting recidivism, we're sustaining the economy and creating jobs (not very well, I might add), but look at the cost. We're ruining lives, some of them innocent, and tearing apart families who must suffer by no fault of their own. But this doesn't concern our government. It is their own selfish interests

that concern them and negatively effect our country. True reform can not, and will not, be achieved until we are able to show the "lost" children of our nation that there are other options. Options not predicated on hate and fear, but on love, compassion and forgiveness.

MICHAEL “ZAHARIBU” DORROUGH - *placed in solitary confinement for decades for his alleged prison gang affiliations*

“I became a father for the first time in 1973. My second son was born in 1974. I was arrested in 1974 and incarcerated in 1975 for two counts of second-degree murder. A young lady who was very dear to me was raped. I was convicted for the murder of the person who was accused of raping her.

I was also accused of shooting a person in the Nickerson Garden projects who had threatened to bring a rival gang over to the neighborhood. I honestly had nothing to do with this shooting. There were a host of witnesses willing to testify that I was at a party on the other side of Nickerson Gardens at the time the shooting occurred. At the trial, the only witnesses who testified and connected me to the shooting were two guys (they were biological brothers) who’d been arrested for the shooting themselves and agreed to testify against me for deals. My attorney, a public defender, didn’t call any witnesses to testify on my behalf, even though they were in the courtroom during the trial. The jury convicted me of second-degree murder. During my sentencing the judge stated that the jury could have certainly found me not guilty. I was sentenced to fifteen years to life.

After that, I received a general discharge under honorable conditions from the military in 1975. My parents said my past had caught up to me. I was sent to San Quentin a month after my twenty-first birthday.

“SENT DIRECTLY BACK TO SOLITARY

It’s been said that California prisons were perhaps the most violent and brutal in the United States at that time. I certainly believe it. And San Quentin was perhaps the most violent. I remember arriving there. As I got off the bus and was being escorted to the SHU, or security housing unit—it was called “the hole” then—someone was killed. I was convinced at that moment that San Quentin was all that I had heard it was.

In 1978, while I was in San Quentin, several guys and I were engaged in a conversation about baseball. I was an avid fan at the time, particularly of the Giants. There were some officers observing the conversation from a window on the third floor.

I received a chrono a few days later stating that based on the officers’ observation, this was a Black Guerilla Family conversation taking place and that I was directing the discussion.⁵⁴ The BGF, as I understand it, is a political/military organization that believes in creating a society in which the humanity of everyone is respected, and a “chrono” is a document that explains and identifies an action or decision that was made and why. They are documents that log information used in the “validation” of a prisoner. The chrono I received also stated that I was a captain in the BGF. When I filed an appeal on this and told the reviewing appeals officer that the conversation

was about baseball, he laughed. I've always rejected the characterization of my being a prison gang member. I'm always mindful of the fact that it served as the basis for my being buried in solitary, along with others "like me.

On one occasion I received a chrono that said I admitted to being a member of the BGF and to being a captain. I never did any such thing. There is hardly any kind of defense against an alleged admission, except to say that I didn't admit to anything. I don't know, nor have I ever been told, what the alleged circumstances were: where I was, who I was talking to, or why I made this admission.

A lot of information is recycled. Informants pass on information to each other, and then multiple informants will use it when they are debriefing.⁵⁵ It is, naturally, considered reliable because multiple sources have provided it. And it is in turn used to justify placing supposed gang members in solitary.

I left San Quentin in 1976 and was transferred to DVI in Tracy.⁵⁶ I was transferred back to San Quentin in 1977. After I came back to San Quentin, as far as the CDCR was concerned, I was what they considered me to be. I stayed there until 1983, and spent almost all of my time in the SHU as a validated gang member.

"Back then, in each SHU there was what were called strip cells. This was a cell that was stripped of all property: your mattress, blankets, and sheets were taken at breakfast and given back to you at about 9 p.m., if not later. What you were provided really was up to the staff who worked in solitary. You weren't allowed to go outdoors to the yard if you were housed in a strip cell. You were fed on paper trays, and you showered a couple times a week.

I came home on May 30, 1983, Memorial Day. I thought that I was coming home to this woman that I was absolutely crazy about, but she was raped and killed three months before I got out. I was absolutely crushed when I was told that she had been killed. It was one of the few times that I remember my legs giving out from underneath me. I don't remember the details of what happened and I honestly didn't want to know. She was raped, stabbed, and killed by gang members. I should've left California. I was actually told by my parole officer that I should leave the state.

"For the first couple of weeks that I was home, I stayed with my parents in Compton. My parents helped me get a job through a friend about a week after I got there. I was working at a place called Jackson Products, in Santa Fe Springs, California.

My youngest son, Roberto, was born in 1985, and that same year I was arrested on a first-degree murder charge. I was charged with being one of three people who were armed with three different weapons in a shooting. My alleged codefendants and I were all accused of firing shots into a victim's body. My alleged codefendants and I were tried separately. There was no physical evidence: no guns, fingerprints, bloodstained clothing.

In many ways my trial on this case was much like my trial in 1974. I have statements from a number of potential witnesses who spoke to my former investigator and told him that I wasn't at the scene of the shooting when it occurred. None of these witnesses were called to testify on my behalf. There was a substantial amount of evidence that showed that I was, and am, innocent.

After deliberating for almost four full days, the jury convicted me of first-degree murder, but they found that I didn't use a weapon in the commission of the crime. This basically means that the jury didn't believe that I actually shot the victim. In spite of this, I was sentenced to life without possible parole. I was sent directly back to solitary in the SHU at Chino."

"THE FIRST EIGHT YEARS OF SOLITARY

It really is hard to define what solitary is like in words. I could probably talk forever about the experience and still not explain it. There's no way that you can be subjected to long-term isolation and not be affected by it.

When I first came to prison in 1975, solitary confinement was very different. There were four major solitary confinement units in California: San Quentin, Old Folsom, DVI Tracy, and Soledad. Every SHU had its own degree of isolation, but for the most part prisoners in solitary were allowed to go out to the outdoor yard that was built inside each unit.

The food was much better then. We were also allowed to have appliances in our cell. And in three of the SHUs we were allowed contact visits if we remained disciplinary free for a year.⁵⁹ So the degree of isolation that we were subjected to was offset by the number of programs that were available."

"Even then, it was the violence, or potential for violence, that took its toll on you psychologically. In every SHU, including the SHU in the reception center at Chino, you knew you were in an environment where you could lose your life. But San Quentin was the worst. It was overtly racist in prison, and particularly in solitary, in those years. It was very common that when cell doors opened, an Afrikan was set up to be attacked by two non-Afrikans. We had to be on guard constantly, every day. And this meant being awake, dressed, and ready for anything that might happen before breakfast.

Afrikans are guys who follow certain principles. They study and read to become critical thinkers who are connected to humanity. "Afrikan" is a term we use that has to do with shedding the influences of capitalist, racist, sexist, misogynistic America. That "k" is symbolic of the transformation into a new, critically thinking, person. The term symbolizes our struggle together and care about each other. Knowing that you were in such a violent environment, especially if you were an Afrikan, and knowing that the violence was culturally motivated, by staff, certain prisoners, and the culture of prison, it meant that you had to be hypervigilant. To live in that state of awareness every hour of every day was enough to create some serious mental health problems. There were guys who decided they could not take this, and they chose to be housed in protective custody."

"In the late 1980s in the SHU at Tehachapi—and particularly at New Folsom—there were ongoing incidents of violence.⁶⁰ New Folsom was described as a killing field because of the number of shootings that occurred there. But it was with the opening of the SHU in Corcoran in 1988 that the violence really accelerated.⁶¹

In 1988, they rounded up about thirty Afrikans and placed us in solitary pending an investigation into what was being called “BGF activity.” For the entire time that I was in solitary, I was told that the investigation was ongoing. As far as I know it’s still ongoing.

I was on the first bus to open up Corcoran SHU and was housed there from 1988 to 1990. It was as racist and as foul a place as any prison I’ve been to—as totalitarian as well. The inhumanities at Corcoran SHU took place for several years and were kept from public view.

The first eight years of solitary were the most trying. The infamous gladiator fights were being staged at Corcoran when I was there. The administration would house people on the yard together who were classified as enemies with each other. This was done knowing there would be a fight or stabbing on the yard. Prisoners would be allowed to fight, and then an officer in the gun tower would shoot the people who were fighting, sometimes with a nine-millimeter rifle, sometimes with the block gun. The block gun would shoot hard rubber projectiles and at close range could be lethal.”

“Every day, people were deliberately put into positions that would and did result in fights. Very serious fights, many of which resulted in a number of people, particularly Afrikan people, being shot and killed. I was attacked once by two non-Afrikan people, and even though it was clear that I was being attacked, somehow I was the only person who was shot with the block gun.⁶² I can remember in Corcoran SHU when you were released to the yard, you could take a deep breath and smell cordite in the air. The yard smelled like gunfire. And throughout the day, all day, you could hear gunshots being fired.”

“WHAT MADNESS FEELS LIKE

The animosities that developed at Corcoran SHU carried over to Pelican Bay SHU.⁶³ Pelican Bay opened in 1989. I was sent there in May 1990. The IGI (Institutional Gang Investigators) in particular, the so-called gang experts, had complete control over every aspect of the environment.

Pelican Bay was built in the most remote part of California. We were intentionally made to feel as though we were separated from everything. The cells were arranged in pods: seven pods in each building, and eight cells to a pod. The pods were designed in such a way that you could only see and speak to people in the other seven cells in the pod with you. For the first few years the policy was that you couldn’t pass anything to another cell, even the cell next to you. When you came out on the tier for yard or showers, you couldn’t speak to anyone, nor could you acknowledge anyone in one of the other pods. Doing so would result in your being issued a rules violation report for engaging in gang activity. If you were fortunate enough to receive a visit you were only allowed to visit for one hour, which actually meant only about forty-five minutes.

We couldn’t write to our families about the conditions because we didn’t want to worry them. It is doubtful that any mail to them would make it out of the prison anyway. The mail was routinely and intentionally held up or thrown away. No phone calls were allowed except for emergencies, and what constituted an emergency was up to the administration—the same people who were

responsible for your oppression. Part of the constant efforts to isolate us included not allowing phone calls and withholding letters.”

“There were also the same gladiator-type fights occurring at Pelican Bay. But what made Pelican Bay SHU different from every other SHU past or present was the isolation. I cannot ever remember any SHU that was comparable. Solitary at Pelican Bay really is isolation. You don’t see the sky, you see a piece of the sky. Everything was geared toward destroying the humanity of the people housed there. You watched people being driven crazy and even if you didn’t know the person, it affected you. There were guys who would get so crazy they would throw feces and urine into your cell.

After decades of being told that you’re “the worst of the worst,” you have your moments when you question your own self-worth, your sanity. You feel as though no one cares. You are, literally, all alone. It is so damaging that you can start to believe that you have nothing in common with normal people. And there is no way out. This feeling of dread engulfs you. And at that moment, you’d rather be dead than breathing in isolation.

It was after my tenth year in solitary that I became convinced that I’d be in solitary for the rest of my incarceration. There is this black hole that is all around you. The nothingness. Waking up to the same identical thing every single day. And going to sleep knowing what you’ll be waking up to. You look up, and you can see a light. It is miles away, but you can see it. You know that if you don’t make it to that light, you’re going to go crazy. You know exactly what madness feels like and what it looks like.

I’ve seen a lot in my life. Not much is worse than seeing another human being completely unravel. All of us who were housed in solitary, especially at Pelican Bay, had moments when we actually felt ourselves slipping psychologically. Some of the staff at Pelican Bay were clearly trying to intentionally contribute to driving people with mental health problems crazy. Or get them to debrief. It was really shameful. We saw it regularly, and maintaining our sanity became uppermost in our minds.

It’s said that the key to maintaining your sanity in solitary is to stay as creative as possible. And I agree, creativity has its place. But at some point, at least for me, you run out of creative space. We would, for example, constantly switch up on our exercise routines. Instead of doing, say, eight-count burpees, we would do ten count. And then the next month we would do twenty-two count. But they’re still burpees.”

“There were people in solitary who went crazy; people who tried to commit suicide, some more than once. At Pelican Bay SHU, the officers would help facilitate a person losing his mind. We were issued razors during showers, and people would try to cut their wrists while in the shower. They would be taken over to the hospital and put on suicide watch in the suicide cells, strip cells that were freezing cold. Guards would keep the person in the suicide cell for about three days, provide him with a psychiatric consultation, and then put him right back in the same cell he was

in before, give him a razor, and the suicide process would repeat itself. I've seen this go on with the same prisoner several times."

Michael Arreygue - *Michael at 17 was for 70 years to life for his crime. He has made many efforts to demonstrate his rehabilitation, but it does nothing to save him from experiences that abusive nature of the prison system.*

Any year in prison could be considered a bad year, but for me the past year has been a bad year. Although it is far from the worst because things could always be worse, for instance I probably could not be able to write these thoughts or even be around. By no means do I intend to be morbid, but as we all view the best/worst case scenario this is mine.

My bad year began in August 2014 and it came out of nowhere and knocked me out like a suckerpuncher from the blind side. As every week began I looked forward to my two days off from my assigned job in the kitchen, that fell on Thursday and Friday, were perfect days for me as were my work hours. While I was at work from 5:00 am to 11:30-12:00pm my cellmate was in the cell and when I came back from work he would be on his way out to his assigned job. It worked out perfectly we each had our own private time, which if you have ever been incarcerated you know this is a luxury. Well while I'm relaxing on my first day off out of nowhere my supervisor came to my cell door to advise me per the lieutenant and along with the majority of the kitchen crew (mainly southern Hispanics) would no longer be allowed to work in the kitchen anymore. Bear in mind that California code of regulations title 15 does not allow this without a hearing or committee action, but as us prisoners all know, many times this is how it goes. So to add insult to injury I literally got fired on my day off, come on! This was only the beginning.

The next two days seemed very odd, the correctional officers were acting different, the atmosphere was just different as well. Then they tell my cellmate, who had been my cellmate for four years, that he was transferring the following week! We both had been waiting to transfer to another level 4 prison. So here I am wondering who to move in to be my cellmate or if a new arrival will be my cellmate. All the while having a bad feeling then sure enough the prison goes on a complete lockdown.

My cellmate ends up leaving on a Tuesday about 6:30am. Two hours later my entire block is raided, searched, all property x-rayed and all that good stuff. The process took about 4-5 hours. Then everyone was placed back in our cells, besides those taken to Administrative Segregation (Ad-seg). After I was placed back into my cell I rearranged my property, make sure all is there, shower, eat, wash clothes and I finally begin to relax, lay down, and unwind. Then BAM! A correctional officer comes to the door telling me to 'cuff up, I ask for what reason and he says, "The sergeant wants to see me." Oh hell no, I know what this means but I have no idea why. I refused and told him that he could tell the sergeant to come and speak with me at the cell door. I knew they would be back, that I was going to the hole (Ad-seg). I just wanted to buy time and sure enough I am going to the hole for information given to prison officials.

While I was placed in a holding cage that is the size of a coffin standing upright in boxers and shower shoes, other individuals slowly but surely start to be placed in the cages beside me. All of us apparently were being placed in Ad-seg for the same information. This information given was untrue and given by a confidential informant so under California Law we cannot even fight it, know what the information is or even prove its falseness. You are given an opportunity to speak on your behalf, but it goes in one ear and out the other in this kangaroo court called Institutional Classification Committee (ICC). This process satisfies the due process clause but by no means is it fair. Any prisoner would agree that to them the end justifies the means, besides who cares about prisoners? We all are in prison and did something bad to be here, so tough luck, right?

This situation ended up with me and all those brought for this information to be held in Ad-seg single celled (solitary confinement) for a year. Even though we were solely waiting to be transferred, somehow our files were never seen by the officials responsible, which made no sense because in California those responsible are the Classification Staff Representatives (CSR) and they must approve all Ad-seg extensions and retentions, but our files were never seen.

So I have spent a year in solitary confinement under discipline conditions for committing no offense, but based on information given by another person who seeks to gain favorable treatment by providing information or had something against me. It is a very troubling scheme especially when California adamantly denies that it houses people in solitary confinement, although I spent a year in Ad-seg, single celled and only allowed yard 3 times a week and committed no offense. Had a correctional officer provided this information, seen it or caught me doing something I would have been given all evidence, a hearing, appealable opportunities. All in all we were given an under the table SHU term.

Now I have finally been transferred to another General Population prison but my bad year was not over yet. Upon transfer I discovered that a lot of my property was missing. It made no sense to me because on my property/inventory sheet it was all there and accounted for. Then when I get to the new prison I am placed in Ad-seg again but this time because there is no bed space available, what? I end up not receiving my property until 3 weeks later and when I do I end up losing some more of my property that came with me because it is not allowed there. Sure I could complain because these things are messed up especially when you lose things that were bought by your family. It really gets you in a state of anger, but what can you do? Make your situation worse or let it go? These things amongst others really get you thinking about getting out of here and how you should never have been here.

It seems that my bad year is over and it all started with some coward jerk who is working with the same officials who are oppressing him, using him until he no longer can provide information. While he is only hurting others and for what? A letter of recognition? Money? Not being prosecuted? While there is no way to legally fight this, I guess Cheech & Chong said it best, "Things are tough all over."

Albert Woodfox- *Woodfox served more than 40 years in solitary confinement in the notorious Angola prison of Louisiana for a crime he did not commit. To this day Woodfox fights to reform the inhumanity of solitary confinement.*

“We were locked down 23 hours a day. At first, I ignored the pressure of the cell. There was so much going on. And I never for one moment thought I’d be confined to such a small area for more than a few weeks or months at the most. Once a day, usually in the morning, all 16 of our cell doors opened at the same time and we were let out onto the tier for an hour. During that time we could shower and walk up and down the hall on the tier. Sometimes I looked out the window across from my cell. There was no outside exercise yard for CCR prisoners. There were prisoners in CCR who hadn’t been outside in years. We couldn’t make or receive phone calls. We weren’t allowed books, magazines, newspapers, or radios. There were no fans on the tier; there was no access to ice, no hot water in the sinks in our cells. There was no hot plate to heat water on the tier. Needless to say, we were not allowed educational, social, vocational, or religious programs; we weren’t allowed to do hobby crafts (leatherwork, painting, woodwork).” (Solitary 28)

“At CCR prisoners weren’t allowed to sit at a table with our visitors. We could only have noncontact visits. Each prisoner sat in a booth and there was a diamond-cut aluminum screen between him and his visitor. We were kept in full restraints throughout the visit. The first thing my mom asked me when she visited was if they hit me or if they threatened me. She was afraid they’d hurt me. I lied and said everything was all right. I didn’t want her to deal with what I was going through.” (54)

Herman and I asked them to pool their money with ours for the benefit of the tier. They agreed. Next time we were out of our cells we announced to the tier that if everyone followed the rules we had created together, then everybody would be able to buy one item out of the store each week. The tier pool would pay for it. Every week we passed a piece of paper down the tier and every man wrote what he wanted; a candy bar, shower slippers, underwear, tobacco, chips, a mirror, whatever it was. On canteen day, we’d order everything on the list and each prisoner would get his item. (111)

“After about a month in CCR I was sitting on my bunk when I started sweating, and the walls of my cell started to move toward me at the same time. My clothes tightened around my body. I took off my shirt and pants but still felt like I was being squeezed, strangled. The ceiling was pressing down on me. It was hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to see. I forced myself to stand. I took a few steps, trying not to fall. At the end of my cell I turned and walked back to the cell door. I turned and continued, pacing back and forth for several minutes, maybe an hour. Eventually I was so tired I lay on the bunk and fell asleep. After the first couple of times this

happened I started recognizing when it was coming on; my clothes tightened and I started to sweat. The atmosphere pressed down on me. Sometimes it lasted five or ten minutes, other times it lasted for hours. The only thing that helped was to pace back and forth. Usually it didn't end until I was so exhausted from walking back and forth that I could lie down. I continued having episodes like this one, which I later learned was claustrophobia, the whole time I was in prison." (114)

"Every morning in CCR I woke up with the same thought: Will this be the day? Will this be the day I lose my sanity and discipline? Will I start screaming and never stop? Will I curl up into a ball and become a baby, which was an early sign of going insane? Every day I pushed insanity away. Every day I had to find that strength. I had to find within me the will and determination not to break." (220)

"When I met with Grassian I felt vulnerable. I wasn't used to sharing my deepest feelings with anyone. But I knew the barbaric practice of solitary confinement had to stop. "The only way to survive the cell is to adjust to the painfulness of it," I told him. I couldn't answer all his questions, but I tried my best. "When you leave, you go back to your life," I said. "I go back to my six-by-nine-foot cell and have just minutes to erect all these layers, put all these defenses back." Every time I had a visit I had to break down the layers that I used to protect my sanity and my physical safety on the tier. When I went back to the cell, I had to put all those layers back. I had to shut my emotional system down. I buried my emotions, so that things that would normally touch me or move me didn't touch me or move me. And I only had approximately five to ten minutes between the visiting room and the cell to do it. "It is the most painful, agonizing thing I could imagine," I said. "But I have to do it in order to survive." (297)

"In his report Haney wrote, "All three men have relied on a belief system that has helped to keep them strong in the face of severe deprivations. They see themselves as representing something larger than themselves—as leaders who have stood up in the name of improving the prison system at Angola—and they do not want to succumb, or even give any indication that they might be weakening, out of concern for what this would mean to others who look to them for guidance, strength and example. Thus, it is especially difficult for them to admit their own vulnerability to the harsh conditions around them." (301)

Brian Nelson- *a former Chicago gang leader, Nelson was locked in solitary for 27 years in various Illinois prisons. Once free he became an advocate for the rights of men and women in prison, working for the Uptown People's Law Center.*

June 10, 2012

Dear Honorable Senators,

I come before you with the hope that my mere words can express the terrible ordeal I survived. Yet to say I survived does not adequately express the effects of the ordeal which I went through that still torture me daily. I was held at Tamms Correctional Center-Illinois' supermax prison-for 12 years, from 1998 until 2010, when I completed my sentence and went home. While I am no longer physically at Tamms, Tamms is still in my head.

In 1998 Illinois had sent me out of state, and I was housed in the minimum security unit at a prison in Las Cruces, New Mexico. My job was as the institutional tailor. Every day correctional employees dropped off uniforms and other articles of clothing to be repaired, altered, washed and pressed. When the employees dropped off these items, they also dropped off their car keys to me. After each employee's clothing was done I would walk outside the prison to their respective cars and put their clothing in the car, lock the car, then return their keys to them. Many times there were Weapons (rifles/guns) in these cars and I was trusted to complete this job unsupervised. My cell door was virtually never locked. I was able to come and go at will. Most of the time carried a pair of scissors with me. I was able to go to the chapel and prayer from 6 am until 9 pm unescorted. I was eligible for conjugal visits outside the main prison's gates in a trailer. I was classified as a trustee.

On March 28, 1998, without warning, instead of going to my tailor job, I was ordered to get dressed, placed in both leg irons and handcuffs with a waist chain. The next thing I knew, we had landed at the Greenville Airbase in Greenville, Illinois. There were approximately 75 correctional officers/state police dressed in full riot gear waiting for me as I was escorted off the plane. Further away, there were sharp shooters pointing rifles at me. I was held by a riot officer on each side, each holding one of my arms. I am an epileptic and had a seizure. The response of the riot officers holding me was to slam me, face down, on the ground in a puddle, holding me down as another riot officer put his combat boot on the back of my neck/head. These riot officers began screaming "WELCOME TO TAMMS!" I was not afforded any medical treatment. I was thrown on the bus and taken to Tamms Supermax in Southern Illinois.

I emphasize that I had not committed any disciplinary infraction in New Mexico, was never served with any disciplinary report, nor was I told why I was being transferred to Tamms. The next thing I knew, I was in Tamms Supermax-where I remained for the next 12 years.

Upon arrival at Tamms riot officers again put me face first on the concrete floor and literally cut the clothing off me. I was then left laying naked in a holding area chained up as riot officers made jokes about me having a seizure. When I requested medical attention, the riot officers informed me that if I said anything else, they would gas me. They then stationed a riot officer with a large can of tear gas directly in front of me. After approximately 30 minutes I was taken naked to another holding area where a female counselor, a female nurse and other staff

began to ask me questions about what prison I came from, my medical history and who to contact if I died at Tamms. After these people left a TV was placed in front of the holding cell and I was forced to watch a video about how Tamms supermax prison was run. I was then taken naked to H-pod placed on wing 2 in cell 6. I was issued a jumpsuit, a mattress, a sheet, a towel and a bar of soap. I was not given shoes or underwear.

I point out that prior to Tamms I had been incarcerated 16 years and throughout that period I never was treated for any mental illness, nor was I ever under the care of any mental health professionals. When I arrived at Tamms, I weighed approximately 170 pounds. Prior to my incarceration at Tamms, I never attempted to commit suicide, nor even thought about committing suicide.

The cell and wings of Tamms are all gray. The view outside my so called slit window was of a gray wall. I was in the cell alone. To attempt to talk to another prisoner I had to scream loudly. At first, I was not allowed books, T.V., radio or even a BIBLE. After several days left like this I was taken to what was called a "transfer review hearing". Present was a female DOC employee assigned to Tamms as well as an Internal Affairs lieutenant. Rather than explaining what charges had been made that sent me to Tamms, *they asked me* why I was transferred to Tamms. This shocked me that the people in charge of Tamms could not tell me why I was transferred from minimum security prison to a supermax. They confirmed that I was not a disciplinary transfer and had no pending charges against me. I was then told that I would be held at Tamms for one year and, if I behaved, I would then be returned to a regular prison. I was then placed back inside the gray box of my cell and left there.

After being at Tamms for several months, correctional officers began making referrals to the mental health department about me. I had begun losing weight, was not eating and according to the reports I have seen since, I spent my time sitting in the corner of the gray box staring at the walls, frankly, I don't remember this period at all: I have blanked it out of my mind. The psychologist at Tamms came to the cell door and after talking for a few minutes said, "From now on you will have to come out to talk with mental health staff". The psychologist's notes also stated that when asked how I was doing, tears ran down my face.

I was in that gray box 24 hours a day, six days a week. One hour per week I was allowed out of the gray box. When I left the gray box I was strip searched, chained hand and foot, then frisk searched. Two riot officers would hold my arms and escort me where ever I was going. Every day, for hours on end, I was locked away alone without any human contact staring at gray walls. I was never allowed a single phone call the entire 12 years I was at Tamms, Days went by where I didn't speak a single word. I had no outside stimuli. The librarian who was supposed to bring books around rarely did. Day after day this went on with only the hope that after one year they would transfer me back to a regular prison. I now realize that I was slipping into severe depression.

After several months, I asked to speak with a mental health care worker who I felt I could trust. When I asked if she could help me deal with the problems I was having concerning solitary confinement, she openly told me she had no idea how to help me. She stated that she knew of no course to teach mental health workers how to relate to the conditions I was forced to endure and did not know how to treat those held in solitary for prolonged periods of time. She went on to say that she was trying to learn from the men being held at Tamms so then someday she would be better able to treat others that are sent to Tamms. Nonetheless, I continued talking to the mental health worker every other week for approximately 6 months. She referred me to the psychiatrist, who prescribed medication for severe depression, anxiety disorder, and adjustment disorder. During this time, the Assistant Warden came to my cell and informed me that the policy I had been told about when I arrived (do a year and get transferred) was no longer the policy. Instead, he told me about a new "renunciation policy." Under that policy, no matter how well I behaved, I could not be transferred out of Tamms unless I agreed to make a video taped confession/statement of every crime I ever committed and a statement about everyone I knew that ever committed a crime. Further I would have to make this confession and statement without any form of immunity, and without having my lawyer present. This confession/statement would also have to include a description of all Security Threat Group (Prison gang) activity that I knew about. If I choose to make this video I still wouldn't be guaranteed a transfer. The Department of Corrections first had to decide that my video was truthful, helpful and sincere. Otherwise I would remain in Tamms until I either died or was paroled, but there was no other way to leave Tamms. IDOC knew that this placed anyone leaving Tamms life in severe danger-since everyone would know that if you left Tamms, you had to have made this video.

Despite the medication I was prescribed, I developed severe mental problems sitting in the gray box. I started pacing between 15 and 18 hours a day. This became so bad that on numerous occasions a nurse had to cut open blood blisters on the bottom of my feet caused by all the excessive pacing.

In April of 2000, I along with several other men at Tamms came together on a hunger strike to bring attention to the terrible conditions at Tamms. On May 1, 2000, approximately 169 men out of 176 at Tamms declared a Hunger Strike in solidarity or refused their meals. I and three others agreed to go as long as we could to bring awareness and change to Tamms. During the Hunger strike, our outside supporters, the Uptown People's Law Center, the Tamms Committee, and the MacArthur Justice Center, brought our plight to the United Nations Committee on Torture. The Committee in turn condemned the conditions of Tamms.

After 30 something days without eating, I was hospitalized. There were approximately 19 cells in the Tamms infirmary. Eighteen of those cells were occupied. Two men were naked and strapped to a bed because they attempted suicide. 16 men were stripped naked on suicide watch because they had either cut on themselves or hurt themselves in some other way, such as beating their head against the wall. I was the only prisoner in the infirmary that had a jumpsuit, or

blanket. The cells are intentionally keep freezing cold in the infirmary, supposedly to dissuade prisoners from self-harm. This is what passes for mental health treatment at Tamms. About 10 days later an end was called to the strike with the promise from the Associate Director that changes would take place.

I continued my downward spiral, becoming more and more depressed. In 2000, I attempted to hang myself. I made no note nor told anyone, but I was found with rope burns and bruises completely around my neck and barely able to talk. For months I had expressed to mental health staff that I couldn't handle the gray box much longer. When I was found, I was stripped naked and placed in a freezing cold cell that had blood and feces smeared all over the walls in the infirmary. The cell lights remained on 24 hours a day and the only mental health treatment" was a female mental health employee ordering me to stand up naked in front of the window so she could see me and talk to me. I refused to do this, because I was naked. It was not until a male mental health worker came would I stand up to talk.

At times while I was in Tamms I was held on a wing by myself so that I had no one to scream out to. When Tamms opened there was no separate Mental Health unit, but within a year J pod was converted into what was labeled the Special Treatment Unit. B-Pod wings 1, 2 and 6, each with ten cells, was also converted into strap down cells, and suicide watch cells. This was due to so many inmates being placed on some sort of Suicide Watch, Psych Watch, or Psych Observation. Please note that the most inmates Tamms has ever held was approximately 300, yet there are almost 60 cells set aside for severely mentally ill prisoners. The Department of Corrections has a written rule that no inmate with mental illness would be housed at Tamms. This rule was ignored beginning the day Tamms opened, and continues to be ignored today.

As the time went by and I remained in the gray box I degenerated even worse. I lost the will to live. I lost hope, even though I was scheduled to be released in a couple years. Depression overwhelmed me. Then a lawsuit was filed over the treatment of inmates with serious mental illness not being properly treated at Tamms. I was named in that suit. In reply, Tamms mental health employees began to harass me and started placing me on suicide watches for no reason. I was given the Minnesota Multi Personality Test. When the results came back, the head psychologist called me to the infirmary had me locked in a bathroom and screamed at me that I was making her look bad. She then ordered officers to strip me naked which they did, leaving me locked in the bathroom for approximately 10 hours. The psychologist then ordered that my medication be immediately stopped. As part of the case, our lawyer arranged for two doctors to come into Tamms to evaluate me Dr. Kathryn Bumns and Dr. Terry Kupers. Both doctors confirmed that I was severely depressed and the conditions at Tamms exacerbated the depression, Both found that I was actively suicidal. Even though Drs. Burns and Kupers are experts on the conditions of supermax prisons, the Tamms' psychologist refused to initiate any of the therapy they proposed. I got worse. Another serious suicide attempt followed and I lost so much weight that the Deputy Director, after seeing me in the holding cell, ordered that some sort

of treatment be started, and immediately had me weighed. I weighed 119 lbs. All the bones in my body protruded. I shuffled instead of walked. I had no appetite and I wanted to die.

Everyday I went to sleep I got down on my knees and prayed that I would die in my sleep yet God's will was not mine. When I woke up in the night I prayed harder for death. I couldn't sleep, and during this period got no more than 16 hours of sleep a *week*. I went days pacing back and forth like a zombie (a condition now recognized as a sign of severe mental illness when exhibited by animals in zoos—but apparently it's okay when people suffer this way). I looked like I was already dead and I had no will to live. Day after day all I saw was gray walls and over time my world became the gray box. I fought hard with my own mind, and I prayed. I copied the Catholic Bible word for word which took me 1 year 9 months and 2 days. I copied the Rule of St. Benedict 3 times and studied with Cistercian Monks and Priests. I watched a friend give up and kill himself at Tamms. Sadly, several minutes before he died, he told the nurse and mental health worker that he was going to commit suicide. They just didn't care and walked away. Marcus Chapman was finally released from the gray box in a black body bag on August 24, 2005.

Another dear friend was the first inmate to arrive when Tamms opened, Mr. Daniel Johnson. Danny too recently succumbed to the torture of the Gray box. In April, 2012, he went to bed at 1:00am with a plastic bag tied over his head. Approx 48 hours later he awoke in an outside hospital with a defibrillator connected to him. Danny was so mad because he thought he would finally be free of the gray box, but instead he was returned to Tamms. Then to hide what happened Danny was moved to Pontiac Correctional Center. This was so there is no negative publicity as the Illinois Governor considers closing Tamms.

But back to my own ordeal. A settlement was reached in the suit brought on behalf of mentally ill inmates. Strangely that very day I was placed back on medication that was stopped when the suit was filed. I was given treatment that was designed by Doctor Burns and within weeks I was placed on four different types of psychotropic medications. I was seen by a mental health therapist every other week to treat me according to the guidelines set by Dr. Burns. This treatment did not make me well, but it stabilized me. I was prescribed Remeron, Buspar, Prozac and Viseril. By this time I had spent a decade locked alone without human contact in a gray box. What helped me regain some hope was *Westefer v. Snyder*, a class action case challenging how we were transferred to Tamms; alleging that the conditions at Tamms are so much worse, compared to the other maximum security prisons in Illinois, that Tamms imposes an "atypical hardship." The Uptown People's Law Center (which represented the plaintiffs in *Westefer*) gave us hope in that evil place that some day we could be treated like a human being again. The United States District Court ruled in favor of the inmates in a sweeping opinion which just this month the United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld.

Tamms and the conditions I endured took all hope from me and I gave up on life. I tried to kill myself it was so bad, but the Uptown People's Law Center Executive Director Belinda

Belcher and Legal Director Alan Mills took on a fight that saved my life and many others. Ms. Belcher and Mr. Mills against all odds prevailed and helped those that everyone else abandoned. I cannot thank them enough

In 2010 I was scheduled for release on June 29. For months I requested help to prepare me for release. Remember, at this point, I had not been around other people for *twelve years*. The idea that I was about to be released to the street was terrifying. Twenty-eight days prior to my release I was transferred from Tamms to Menard Correctional Center. Upon arrival at Menard I was placed on a wing completely alone, even *more* isolated than I had been at Tamms. I was denied all personal property, and even denied a shower or shave for 28 days. Upon my release I was sent home without any medication or even a prescription. I received no therapy to help me adjust.

I spent 12 years in solitary confinement and I was never told why I was placed in solitary. I am a human being and every day I still struggle with the trauma being held in that gray box. I wake screaming at night. I can't get it out of my head some days. Solitary confinement in my opinion is worse than being beaten. That I spent twelve years in such conditions in America is appalling,

I thank you for the time you have allowed me and for looking into this matter. Thank you!
Sincerely yours,

Brian Nelson

Solitary Confinement as “Protection” of Individuals:

Chelsea Manning - *transgender, politically motivated imprisonment, confined to solitary as punishment/”protection”*

“I need help,” she wrote. “I am living through a cycle of anxiety, anger, hopelessness, loss, and depression. I cannot focus. I cannot sleep. I attempted to take my own life.” - Chelsea Manning, *Chelsea Manning Describes Bleak Life in a Men’s Prison*

Barbra Perez - *a trans woman unjustly kept in a detention center by ICE and placed in solitary confinement for “protection.”*

“We arrived in Jena, Louisiana, in the middle of a freezing night. We’d been driving for twelve or thirteen hours, and it felt like we’d reached the end of the earth. The other prisoners were sitting together in the back, but they had me singled out, chained hand and foot in a cage made of thick Plexiglas near the front of the bus, When the officer came in to check our names off his list, he

asked how many males and how many females were on the bus. The driver pointed to me and replied, “Twenty-seven and a half males,” which was followed by raucous laughter at my expense.

The detention center was called LaSalle. I’d been brought there after three terrible days at a local jail in Tennessee where my “captor” informed me that bail would be unequivocally denied and that I would remain in custody for a minimum of three months. He said if I agreed to take the order of deportation, the judge would release me immediately. When I was taken upstairs to strip, I wasn’t allowed to keep my sports bra or panties. This was the first time I’d worn men’s undergarments since I left my parents’ house in 2002. Mortified, I asked the nurse about my hormone shots. She assured me I would get them once the board approved. Then an officer came to escort me to what he lovingly called the “Sissy Pod.” It was protective custody, but as far as I could tell none of the men there even identified as gay. I was the only woman.

In my normal life no one questions my gender or sex. I never thought of myself as a boy in the first place, but now I’ve been living outwardly as a woman since my early twenties, more than fifteen years. Nothing prepared me for the experience of being exposed and imprisoned alongside other men. They all looked at me like I was the closest thing to a “real” woman they’d ever seen behind bars.

A few days later, when I arrived at LaSalle, I was taken straight to Ad Seg [Administrative Segregation]. It was loud in there, people screaming and banging on the walls of their cells. The staff’s treatment of me ranged from indifference to open hostility and disgust. Once I asked for a spoon, and the guard slammed my cell door in my face and walked off. Most of the detainees were Mexican, immigrants like me, but I didn’t know what they were in Ad Seg for. There was a guy across from me making obscene gestures—asking me to show him my breasts. Their version of keeping me safe was putting me side by side with what that facility determined to be the worst of the worst. That night I lay down and tried to sleep on the cold metal cot with only a thin sheet to protect me.

After just a few days in there I became a fragile shell of who I used to be. I was given no recreation time. A shower only every other day. The phone was attached to a hand truck, which would be wheeled to you at the guards’ leisure. In that mental state, I started doubting who I was. There was no one to talk to, no way to process what was happening to me. The anxiety and helplessness started to break me down, which is exactly what it’s designed to do.

In my regular life, I tend to isolate myself anyway because I’ve always been different. Looking like and living as a woman for so long, then being incarcerated as a man, just kind of stripped me to the core and made all my insecurities flood to the surface. Whether it’s in immigration detention or federal prison, transgender women are viewed as freaks. Men see you as an easy target, assuming you won’t fight back, so sexual harassment is constant and assault is rampant. Prison staff say there’s no other way to “safely” confine transgender women, but they’re either simply unable to understand our experience, or they don’t want to.

I had no idea what would happen to me or what lay ahead. When I was suddenly released twenty-four days later I’d lost seventeen pounds. I was handed my hormones along with my property, so they must have had them the entire time and just not wanted to give them to me. At the

time I had no idea what was happening on the outside, but I soon found out my friends, family, and the Transgender Law Center had been raising hell for me. They basically made it a royal pain in the ass for ICE to continue holding me. The fact that I'm Cuban makes me practically undeportable, I was costing them a lot of money for my expensive medication, and they knew I didn't belong there in the first place.

I later learned that I was abducted in order to fill a "bed mandate." LaSalle has to have a certain number of heads in a bed at all times in order to continue getting its funding, and nationwide ICE facilities need to have 34,000 detainees a day to fill their quota. GEO is a private corporation getting a government subsidy for running the detention center and I was another warm body to fill that bed. So, I was used. They put me through all that not because they gave a rat's ass about what I did or didn't do; I was a means to an end.

In my mind I know that they can't ever do what they did to me again, but a year later I still feel I've lost some of the security I once had. I try not to, but I find myself looking out the window of my apartment every time I hear a car slowing down. I have a letter from my attorney saying that ICE determined that "it was no longer in their interest to hold me." Even though I know the charges are dropped, I still feel uneasy.

I don't want my detention to be a defining moment for me. I don't want to feel like they won, basically. Last year I spoke at a Not One More rally in DC, standing on stage and outing myself as a trans woman in front of thousands of people. It was truly beautiful. I felt part of a cause that we all believe in, that immigrants are Americans, that we all deserve to be treated with dignity- the opposite of what I felt inside that place.

Sonya Calico - placed in solitary confinement for being transgender

"MY PARENTS WANTED TO LIVE BETTER

When I was little, I would wanna play with girls in school. I used to hate PE class, I wouldn't want to play nothing. I was always real feminine even when I was in elementary school. I'm not going to say that I got bullied because I wasn't, but people used to make fun of me because they knew I was gay.

It was just something I couldn't help. It was something I was born with. Growing up with my girl cousins, we played dolls and I was never outside playing with the boys, none of that. I always thought I was a girl. And sometimes I would cry because I'd be like, Why do I have to live this life every day, worry about people laughing at me, making fun of me, saying I'm gay and this and that. Why me? Why me?

I was born in 1985, and I have one older brother named Louis and one younger sister, Lyzette. I'm originally from the valley, from McAllen in south Texas.²⁹ It's a very small border town. McAllen is a place that nobody would want to go back to. It being a border town, the population was like 95 percent Hispanic. Even the teachers would talk to us in Spanish most of the time. I didn't learn how to speak English until I was in third grade.

I grew up seeing my parents struggle. I was born in the United States and I'm a US citizen, but both my parents are Mexican. Their names are Mercedes and Edward. They didn't get US

citizenship until I was about eighteen. When I was growing up in McAllen, they were able to find work, but always for just a little pay. Most of it was agricultural work—cabbages and fruit and stuff grew around McAllen. My parents would work in the fields for a few dollars an hour, but it was worse down in Mexico, so they didn't really mind doing it. But I remember them coming home with their fingers all busted up and things like that.”

“I have some fond memories of family, especially my mom's big family who also lived around McAllen. She has ten sisters and three brothers, and they all had a lot of kids. So I had lots of aunts and cousins. We had lots of parties, get-togethers, things like that. But my parents wanted to live better and decided to move.

First we moved to Idaho, around when I was in second grade. One of my mom's sisters, Aunt Laura, was up there, and they paid more for agricultural work up north. What we didn't know was that it would be so cold and snowy. I'm not going to lie, the year we stayed up in Idaho made me feel like an immigrant, or the child of immigrants, because of the living situation we had. We stayed in a camp. It was kind of like the projects for agricultural working people. We stayed in a tiny two-bedroom cabin in the fields surrounded by mountains with my aunt Laura's family, so six kids and four adults in a little two-bedroom. And in the winter it snowed all day, every day. My parents and siblings and I would sleep on the floor with just a space heater that was mounted in the wall. We'd have to keep the stove on just to get enough heat to stay warm.

“And then when we had school, we had to walk a mile through two or three feet of snow to get to the bus stop. In Idaho, unlike in McAllen, none of the teachers spoke Spanish. My teacher brought in a translator for me, but I could tell it was hard for her, and I felt really out of place. All the other kids in the class would look at me like, Where's this person from?”

I remember seeing my mom coming home from work and crying because that life was not what she wanted for us. She got in contact with another sister, Deralez, who lived in Dallas. Aunt Deralez was basically like, “I don't know why you're up. “there. Why are you even going through all that when you could come down here and start working with our family here?” My cousin used to own a warehouse back in the day where they made all kinds of plastic molds and stuff.

So we moved to Dallas when I was in third grade, when I was about ten years old. My parents both worked at the factory packing up molded plastics, things like makeup cases. It was much better money.

I remember Dallas being different, in a good way. We lived with my auntie Maria. Her apartment was much bigger than the place we'd had in Idaho. Three bedrooms, two bathrooms. The one thing, though, was that Auntie Maria was the one sibling that all the others had problems with. She was just a difficult person about every little thing.”

...

“My first arrest was for possession of marijuana. I was driving with a friend through Farmers Branch, which is a suburb of Dallas that’s known for racial profiling. It’s real racist there. I’m Hispanic and my friend is African American, and we got pulled over. When I asked the cops why they pulled me over, they didn’t give me a reason. But they asked to search the car. We were coming home from picking up some Chinese food and we had two little dime bags of marijuana we’d just picked up. The bags were closed, we hadn’t even smoked. My friend put them under some lo mein noodles in the food. But the cops searched so deep they even dug in the food boxes and found the weed, and I was arrested.

I had no idea what to expect. I’d never been to jail. Even though I’d just started transitioning, I was most scared about what might happen to me because I’m trans. When I got to Lew Sterrett jail, the officers at the jail asked me if I was gay.³⁰ They had a “homosexual tank,” and that’s where they put me.³¹ I was in jail for about ten or fifteen days. I was lucky to be in the homosexual tank with a girl who’d transitioned. She’d been arrested for prostitution, and she kind of took me under her wing and showed me how to be in there, what to do and what not to do. So my first time in jail wasn’t so bad, but it was still kind of scary just not knowing what to expect. In my late teens, early twenties, I continued to transition. Other than hormones, I started getting body modifications at twenty, twenty-one. When I was out at clubs I was meeting older transsexual people, and that’s where I met my godmother, Nikki Calico. She looked at me and was like, “There’s something about you that I like, and I’ve always wanted a daughter.” We were compatible—I could tell she was someone like me who just didn’t have many friends growing up. And she helped me with body modifications, how to feminize my face with fillers, that sort of thing. I took her name, Calico, in remembrance of her and in appreciation for everything she taught me and did for me. You know gay people, we consider our friends to be our family. I took her name just to continue it.

One thing about transitioning is that back in the day, if you were a transsexual and went to apply for a regular job and they knew who you were, they’d laugh at you. So there was a lot of pressure to turn to escorting. It was just something that was in the lifestyle. So I turned to that, and I was making a living at it. I’d kept in contact with the girl I’d met in jail, and she showed me how it worked.

Around that time, in 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit. Then in 2006 the apartment complex where I was staying was used as a home for a lot of people who were pushed out by Katrina. I met a man who was a victim of the hurricane. I started dating him, actually. And he was like, “You know, we could make some money because I know all the answers to the questions they ask you when you call to apply for FEMA benefits.”

He showed me how to do it, and I started “getting benefits, like \$2,500. I linked up with one of my friends and I told him about it. At first it was just supposed to be like, “We gonna get a certain amount of money,” but my friend got greedy and he kept going and going and he got caught. When he got caught he snitched on me. I was the one who showed him how to get those benefits, and I ended up going to jail for it.

The police actually arrested me at my parents' house, when I was with my mom. It was right after Thanksgiving. The officer was a woman in plainclothes who had an old photo of me and didn't know I'd transitioned by then. She told my mom that I'd given her my contact info at a bar! She said, "I've been trying to call him, but no answer," and my mom's like, Uh, that doesn't make any sense. But she called me to the door, and that's when all these other officers came in and arrested me.

"So I got arrested and I ended up bonding out and then getting five years' probation. But I kept smoking marijuana, and my tests were coming back dirty. My probation officer warned me that the next dirty test, I'd go back to jail. So I decided to run. I stayed in Dallas and just stopped reporting to my parole officer, which meant I had a warrant for my arrest. I figured they'd catch me eventually, but I ran for three years, and I really turned to escorting again then to support myself.

"I'LL BEAT THE FUCK OUT OF YOU"

I ended up finally getting picked up in Oklahoma City in a sting around the end of 2011. I was arrested for prostitution. The jail in Oklahoma City was different than county jail in Dallas. They didn't know where to put me—they didn't have anything like the homosexual tank. It took them six hours to figure out whether to put me on the male side or female side. I was brought in at 2 a.m. and they had to wait for the sergeant to come in at 8, 9 a.m. He asked, "Did you have the full surgery yet?" And to make a long story short, they eventually decided to put me in single cell, in segregation. On the men's side.

"The way the segregation cells are set up in Oklahoma City, the pods have two floors of cells and then at the ground floor is a kind of central area with tables and chairs for the eating area. I was on the top floor, behind a solid door with a little window. I could look out the window and see the other cells and the eating area, but I'd only get one hour a day that I could be out. I'd use that time to shower. Some people would go watch other people's cells through their windows and just talk to them and stuff like that. I had a lot of guys who would come to my window just "because they were so curious. They would come and say, "Show me your titties." Just all that stuff. There were a lot of guys who would come to my window and be like, "You fucking faggot bitch. If you get out the same time when I'm out, I'll beat the fuck out of you."

But at least in Oklahoma City, you could see other people through your cell window, so you weren't completely alone. You could talk to people, and they weren't all scary. I even had a cool guard. He used to come to my window. He was a younger guard. I guess he was a new employee. He used to come to my window and actually talk to me. He didn't care that I was a transsexual. Maybe he had transsexual relatives or maybe he was attracted to transsexuals. I don't know. He never came at me like that, but he was always real cool. He would make sure that every time he was on shift, he would come talk to me for thirty, forty-five minutes."

“I would read books. That’s my main thing. But I would read, and it wouldn’t stick in my head. I would just read whatever I could get and I would read just to be doing something. I would read the newspaper beginning to end, do the crosswords, and even read all the inserts. The inserts were how I would take myself out into the “world. That’s how I would keep my mind sane because I was really going crazy in there. The Bible was offered to me in there too. I didn’t have nothing but time to sit there and get into the Bible. When I would go into the Bible and read though, I was like, No, this is not me. I believe in God, but I don’t believe in the Bible. I was by myself in single cell for six weeks before the court date. I was actually able to get out of that prostitution charge because the arresting officer did things he shouldn’t have—played with my breasts, put my hand on his private parts. I told the judge I could describe his privates. He was supposed to show up in court, but with everything going on, he didn’t show, so the charges were dropped.”

“ALL YOU CAN HAVE ON IS YOUR BOXERS AND YOUR SOCKS

After my charges in Oklahoma were dropped, I still had a warrant out in Dallas. Authorities from Texas came up and put me in chains to take me back to Dallas to serve time for my fraud arrest. I was sent to Lew Sterrett to serve my time.

I was in the “homosexual tank” for the first three months. Then they had a shakedown. That’s where they come in and order everyone to take their uniforms off, to strip down to their boxers. All you can have on is your boxers and your socks.

But me having breasts and all that, I asked one of the sergeants, “Sir, can I keep my shirt on?” Because after they make you take everything off, they make you walk out of your tank and walk into the hall where the men in all the other tanks are. I’m not going to be coming out, walking out with my breasts out and all that. The sergeant told me, “Yeah, you can keep your shirt on.” When we were walking out in line out of the tank, the main sergeant was a female, an African American lady. She was waiting, inspecting everybody as we came out of the tank. When I came out, she was like, “Why do you have a shirt on?” “I said, “Ma’am, I already talked to the other sergeant. I have breasts.” She was like, “Step out of line and stand right here by the wall.” She waited until everybody got out. She said, “Come here.” She put me in a room with just her. She said, “Take your shirt off.” I was like, “Okay, but I want to still be able to keep my shirt on after you make sure that I don’t have nothing on me, right?” She said, “Let me tell you something, bitch.” She put her finger on my forehead. “If you don’t take your motherfucking shirt off . . . you’re still a man. You’re going to forever be a man. Everyone else has to pass through without a shirt, it ain’t any different for “you.” I told her I just wanted to put my shirt back on before passing the other tanks, and she said, “Take it off before I mace you.” I took off my shirt. I wasn’t trying to get maced. Then she said, “Okay. Put your shirt back on. You need to go in there, grab your shit, and get the fuck out there.”

I asked, “Ma’am, where am I going?” She said, “Don’t worry about that.” I said, “Ma’am, if you don’t tell me where I’m going, then I’m not going to do nothing because I have a right to know what the hell is going on.” She grabbed me and threw me against the wall. She said, “Bitch, I

told your faggot ass, you're going to follow my rules." Then she slammed me against the wall, and I blanked out. My first reaction was to push her back. I pushed her back, and she fell back and slid across the floor. That's when the guards came and grabbed me and threw me on the floor. Then they picked me up, made me go get my stuff, and then they put me in solitary confinement.

"RED KEPT ME SANE

They put me in solitary confinement because I pushed her, but she made it seem like it was protective custody. She felt that since I looked like a girl and I had breasts that I didn't belong in the tank. Mind you, the tank is a homosexual tank. The floor sergeant said, "It's for your protection," but she was just saying that to give a reason for putting me in lockup. When I tried to appeal it, it was denied because she said the reason was "protective custody." What about my protection the three months I've already been in there? I didn't have no issues for three months, so why should I have an issue now? That's the whole point of the homosexual tank.

They wouldn't let me come out of solitary confinement. I was in there going crazy. Solitary at Lew Sterrett was different than Oklahoma City. In Oklahoma City, at least when you looked out your window you could see other people, talk to them. But in Dallas, the view out the window in my door was nothing but a white wall. "In solitary confinement in Lew Sterrett, you have your own shower. It's your bunk bed, your shower, your little table. They bring you a tray of food to your door. So you're completely isolated from other people. The only thing that kept me sane was that every cell has a vent that the A/C comes out through. Every vent is connected to all the other cells. The inmate who was in the cell next to me, he basically had a crush on me because he had seen me being put in there. He was like, "Baby, I know what you are. I know you're transsexual, but I'll help your stay here be bet "ter, and I'm sure that you talking to me will make mine better."

All I knew was his nickname, Red. He was in solitary because he had a lot of tattoos, some with supposed gang affiliations, and so he kept getting into fistfights and stuff. He voluntarily went to solitary so he wouldn't get in fights. So he was in protective custody too.

I would move my bed, my mat by the vent, and we would talk through the vent. We would pretend that we were out in the free world. Red was like, "Okay, this is what we're going to do. Just put in your mind that we're actually out there, and this is our cell phone." He would be like, "Ring ring ring." I was like, "Hello," like I'm actually answering my phone because I started talking to myself being in there."

"Twenty-three hours or whatever, I was in there questioning even me living my life the way I'm living, like I really started doubting that. When I get out, should I try to be a man? Why do I have to go through this? Why? Why am I going through this? I didn't do nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. I know I did something illegal, but I'm already in jail. Why am I getting treated even worse? It was just that one guy. If it weren't for him, I would have gone completely crazy.

I asked for a psychiatrist. The only thing the psychiatrists did when they came and “talked to me was put me on Celexa for depression and another pill that I forget the name of. I didn’t want to be taking that medication every day because I didn’t want my body to get used to it and then when I got out, I would have to take it every day too.

I was in that solitary cell for the rest of my year at Lew Sterrett, so nine months of solitary. I kept appealing, but they wouldn’t let me out. I was talking to myself a lot. I didn’t hallucinate, but I’d have conversations with myself. I’d ask myself questions and answer them. Then I’d go back and be like, No. Red would hear me talking to myself. He’d be like, “Sonya, who are you over there talking to?” On the other side there’s another guy, but I’d never talk to the other guy. The other guy actually, his mind was gone. He thought he was a person from the Bible. Every day I would wake up, and he would say scriptures of the Bible. Yeah. He knew that I was a transsexual, so sometimes he would take it upon himself to be like, “You’re going to hell. You’re going to burn in hell.” I’d be having to deal with that every day. I thought, Oh god. That’s when Red would say, “Don’t listen. Come here. Come talk to me.”

I had a routine already. I would exercise before I would shower because by the time I got through exercising I’d be sweating, so okay, shower time. I’d hear the nurse coming through to bring people’s pills. I’d take my pills. Fifteen minutes later, I’m knocked out. I wake up at four o’clock in the morning. There’s breakfast. Get my breakfast tray. Eat my breakfast. Go back to sleep. Wake up. I’ll be in my deep sleep from four all the way until 11, 11:30. Then they’d bring lunch. Lunchtime I eat my sandwich. They called it a cold tray. Every day you’d eat bologna, bread, cheese, Jell-O, and sometimes pasta salad. That’s every day. The only time that it changes is dinner. You get a hot meal. Everything in there is made out of soybeans, so it’s fake stuff. You look at it, and you’d think, Oh, this is dog food.”

“It was loud. People would be yelling, kicking doors all the time. And I remember feeling scared when it was time to sleep, worried that anyone could open my door and come at me anytime. They could open the door and call me out for a nurse and then an inmate could be walking by and try to hurt me or something. I felt like I basically slept with one eye open and one eye closed. I read the Dallas Morning News every day from front to back. Did the crosswords. That was my only entertainment. I could also go to a gym by myself for an hour a day. I remember being let out and walking down the hall, and people would be spitting out their windows, smearing their own shit on themselves. They’d see me and it might be like, “Fucking faggot.” These people had lost their minds. I remember looking into the windows and seeing them in there, and maybe they’d have made a swing out of their sheets and were just wrapped up in them swinging. I was afraid I’d become like that. That’s what I was scared of, that eventually I would turn into that. But Red kept me sane. He’d read restaurant listings in the paper. Then he’d call me through the vent. He was like, “Baby, where are we going to go? We’re going to go check the place out. What you want to eat? Get dressed. I’m going to come pick you up at seven o’clock.” Then at seven, I’d call him—“Hey. It’s seven o’clock. Are you coming?” He’d be like, “Yeah, I’m on my way.”

“Meanwhile, the guy in the cell on the other side of him could hear us and would make fun of Red. “You’re a faggot ass nigger. You’re talking to that bitch.” Red would be like, “I don’t care what y’all say. I don’t care.” And he’d tell me, “Don’t listen to them. Just blank them out.” Then the guy who would do the whole Bible thing, he would be like, “Oh God this and God that.” We had to blank them out and just keep on with it.”

IT WAS DISCRIMINATION

“My mother came to get me out when I was released in 2012, and I went to live with her for a while. I was overwhelmed when I first got out. It took a month for me to be able to break off the thinking that people were staring at me or that they were going to attack me. Then I’d start feeling nauseated like I want to throw up. One day my godmother Nikki took me to a place called Traders Village, which is like a flea market, where they have vendors outside in the open. On Sundays it gets really super packed to a point where you can’t turn around or move.”

“I got there, and as soon as I got there I felt like something broke inside me. Nikki asked, “What’s wrong?” I was feeling really dizzy. I was like, “Mama, I don’t feel good,” and I started throwing up. She said, “What’s wrong?” I said, “Mama, you know I can’t be around a lot of people like this.” I said, “Give me your keys.” I had to go to the car and lay back in the front seat and just sit because I couldn’t be around people. It took me a long time to break off that. When I was living with my mother, I’d spend all my time in my room, just watching TV. My mom would have come up there and be like, “You need to come downstairs to eat.” I’d say, “Okay, I’ll be there.” Even then I would wait until everybody left the table. Then I would go eat by myself and hurry up and go back upstairs. I was like that for a while. And ever since I left jail I never read the newspaper now because it reminds me too much of being in there. I met Miss Nell through my best friend, Pocahontas.³² Pocahontas, she’s a transsexual advocate in Dallas. She had me come to a chat they held once a month, and Miss Nell was the guest speaker. Pocahontas had me come to the chat because I didn’t want to be around people. After I got out of prison we had been hanging out with some friends at her apartment and I couldn’t be around them. I had bad anxiety. I started throwing up because I wasn’t used to being around people yet because I had just got out.”

“Miss Nell runs the Trans Pride Initiative. After the meeting Miss Nell was there and Pocahontas said, “Miss Nell, this is my friend, Sonya, who I told you went through the whole solitary confinement. She just coming out her little shell.” Miss Nell said, “Baby, I’ve been wanting to meet you.” She said, “I got this thing going on.” Miss Nell told me she works a lot with incarcerated transgender people and their rights. That she fights for people who are in there, people who have been discriminated against in prison. They write her letters, and she fights for them. Miss Nell said, “I have this “meeting coming up with the head of the jailhouse. Do you

want to talk in front of them?" I said, "Yeah," When the meeting happened though, I actually didn't make it there, but she told them my whole story.

In jail, it seemed like they had a rule that every time someone who's transgender goes in, if they have body work, they automatically go straight to solitary. It was discrimination. People don't understand that solitary confinement really messes people's heads up. It really does. I was just lucky enough to snap out of it when I got out, but some people don't snap out of it. They stay stuck in la la land."

"Apparently the heads of the Dallas prisons didn't know really what was going on. But Miss Nell took my story to them and it played a part in getting things changed. Miss Nell is someone who gets things done. They were able to come up with a solution. Now as a transgender woman in a men's prison you have an option: you can go to the homosexual tank or go to solitary confinement. It's your choice now. You don't have to be treated like an animal.

In March 2018, we speak to Sonya to catch up.

These days I don't have no worries. I'm very happy with myself. I finished my probation, and I'm completely stress free. I don't go to sleep at night worried about going back to jail. I'm traveling a lot. It's a blessing. No matter what obstacles I went through as a transgender person I still pushed through. I'm no longer feeling doubts about my lifestyle. Because of the legal issues I was going through I felt like I failed my family. But now that the legal troubles are behind me I feel like they look at me as a different person. I'm very happy with my family, and I'm even closer with them, especially my mom. I really love Mercedes."

Tashon Burke - *a 28 year-old man suffering from mental illness while in solitary confinement for 8 years, discussing the struggles of facing mental illness in solitary confinement*

I can hear and see the other prisoners of hell, engaged in battle with their own demons. I can hear the screaming, crying, banging, clapping, laughing, and I can see prisoners being dragged out of their cells with bloody, self inflicted wounds on their bodies from cutting themselves. I see prisoners being dragged out of their cells with a brown substance, and from the disturbing smell I take it to be feces, smeared all over themselves. Their screams of pain or of reasons only they know is bedevil to my ears. I say to myself thank god they're alive, but their demons seemed to have gotten their hands on the prisoner's sanity which can eventually lead the prisoners to self destruction, unless they take it back. My sanity has been snatched away from me a few times, but I had taken it back and now I fight so hard to keep it in my grasp. I mean I never played with feces, but I have hurt myself a few times.

I am Tashon Burke, and I'm also a prisoner of hell, so I've seen the evil things that this place can do to people. I'm also not blind either to what it's trying to do to me. I fight so hard not to let myself debilitate to the point where I'd want to take my own life or leave my sanity open to be snatched away from me again. No matter how bad my demons beat me, as long as I'm still alive and sane, I'm winning.

I have a weapon, and it's an anti-depressant pill called Effexor. Effexor shields me from my demon's attacks, lets me forget about them, and allows me to escape this hell hole for a while. Eventually the Effexor wears off, and there's a certain period of time I have to wait to use it again. I do have other weapons. I have watching tv, reading books, writing, and it distracts me away from my demons and their beatings for a while, but I'm still aware of my surroundings, meaning I'm still aware I'm in hell, if that makes any sense. My Effexor has the escape button, and it allows me to escape to a peaceful place, called sleep. Even the demons from dreamland, known as nightmares, can't break through the ward of the Effexor.

I think about the prisoners this place has already devoured. I see them being dragged out of their cells, sheet line tied around their necks, their bodies left all stiff and unconscious, souls forever trapped in hell, and I tell myself that that will not be me. I have two friends from Solitary Watch who I call the Washington DC angels, and they send me words of hope, love, and encouragement, and let me know that I'm not alone, and that they're rooting for my victory.

My demons have weapons, too. Called PTSD, depression, hopelessness, desperation, tricks of the mind, and more. These weapons are very strong and I do become very exhausted fighting them off. These weapons make me remember terrible and hurtful things that I have witnessed as a kid. They also make me remember terrible and hurtful things that happened to me and people I love. They can even show me terrible and hurtful things, threatening me that it's what will happen to me and people I love in the future. They also remind me of the terrible and hurtful things I'd done to people. They make me believe that everything that happened was my fault and everything that will happen will also be my fault. These weapons all are to make me despondent to the point where I just want to die. No. As long as I'm still alive and sane, I'm winning.

My demons also have angels too, called Correctional Officers. The CO's job is oppression. It's a diabolical activity that involves terrifying mental and physical attacks on the prisoners to make your life a living, well, hell. So what is this place? Some call it the hole, the bucket, solitary confinement, the twist, etc. I got my own name for it. I call it Satan's domain.

Clarence Elkins - *wrongly imprisoned in Ohio for 6 ½ Years*

My name is Clarence Elkins, and I served six and a half years in prison for crimes I did not commit.

When I was in prison in Lucasville, Ohio, I had to take drug tests. It was difficult for me to use the restroom in front of so many people. Even though I gave them a sample and passed the test, the sergeant said that I had refused testing and put me in the "hole."

The next time, I was put in solitary because I had been having psychological problems. I was hearing people plotting to kill me. I pretty much lost my mind. I didn't get to talk to anyone—they just put me in solitary until they thought I was OK, and then they let me out and put me right back where I had been. A couple of weeks later, they put me back in solitary.

The last time, I was in solitary for three months. It turned out that the actual perpetrator of the crimes I was convicted of was serving time in the same prison, so they put me in “protective custody” because they thought I might be in danger. I did absolutely nothing wrong, but I was treated the same as everyone else in solitary. I didn’t get any assistance from the staff—they would walk right by me like they didn’t see or hear me. I felt neglected and completely invisible. I felt like I didn’t mean anything.

The noise in solitary is unbearable. Twenty-four hours a day there are inmates hollering and screaming about nothing. I thought I was going to lose my mind one night—I just started screaming too. It’s just such a lonely place. It’s the worst of the worst. Prison is bad, but solitary is really bad. No visits, no family, limited reading materials, screaming 24-7, terrible food, disgusting showers. Being locked up in a tiny cell that long is cruel and unusual.

When I finally walked out of the prison, some news reporters were out there waiting and someone raised my hand up in the air. I was actually numb. I thought, “OK. This is another day.” I didn’t think it was real. Coming out of solitary and into society, I just didn’t have any feelings when I walked out the door. You don’t know what to expect, or what to do. Six years later, I’m still learning how to cope.

Frank de Palma - *Frank De Palma served more than four decades in Nevada state prison for grand larceny, battery, second-degree murder and attempted murder. He was released in December of 2019.*

I spent 22 years and 36 days in solitary confinement. They sent me there on the Feb. 3, 1992, to separate me from some new, young gang members arriving at the prison. Then they kept me in segregation after I attempted to strangle a guard. For the last five of those years in solitary, I never once came out of my cell.

I used to go out to the exercise yard completely alone. But one day when I was out there, it was suddenly like all the air around me became a pressure force. I felt like I was between two pillars of concrete that were moving and crushing me, like I was having a heart attack. I couldn’t breathe. I started banging on the door to the yard to go back inside. I knew I needed to get out of this open area. I ran back to my cell. And within minutes, I was okay again.

It happened again when I went to the shower room. It felt like so much open space, my heart was exploding, my brain was exploding. I had the opposite of claustrophobia. I realized if it wasn’t a small, small cell, it was too much for me. I was content in there, so I didn’t leave. Then the light started bothering me, so I covered that one window. I didn’t turn on the lights unless I absolutely had to. I lived in darkness. I was happy like that. Nobody bothered me.

Eventually, just the thought of coming out of my cell for any reason would send me into a panic. Some of the guards used that to their advantage. They’d say, “We’re gonna pull you out of your cell,” just to play with me. Finally they got to a point where they were like: Just leave him there.

Sometimes I wouldn't be given a toothbrush or toothpaste, so my teeth started to rot. Some of them got abscessed, and it would hurt so bad, but I couldn't leave to go to the dentist. So I would just get the nylon out of the mattress—strong nylon string—and I'd force it up into my molars and tie it really tight. I would keep working and working and most times I would get the molar out by the root. I pulled four teeth that way.

Little by little I started divorcing myself from everyone I had known in my life before solitary. I would live in fantasies. I would create relationships with imaginary people, and I'd fall in love with them, sometimes for months. Like, I'd be in a store, knocking on melons to find a ripe one, and that's how I would meet somebody. We'd have a date, and I'd be a regular person. I imagined what kind of husband I'd be, what kind of father. Even that got to be so painful because there's nothing so miserable as unrequited love.

My memories of my real life started to fade. I began shutting everything out. I didn't feel anymore. I just went away. I literally forgot that I had a family. There was no day or night. That nothingness, emptiness, became my whole life. The chaplain told me he would come to visit me, and I wouldn't even realize he was there.

They came and got me from Ely Maximum Security Prison on Tuesday, March 11, 2014. The warden, psychologist, a couple guys from the emergency response team came up to the cell. They found out I would soon be getting out of prison, otherwise I'm sure they wouldn't have remembered me. They had to try to get me to be around people again and not hurt anybody, to be a regular person. I was basically their test case, a guy who they'd thrown away but were now picking up out of the garbage can.

When they came to my cell, I could barely speak. In my head, I knew the words I was saying, and I thought I was speaking them, but they were coming out as garbled because I hadn't talked to anyone for so long. My vocal chords were weak. I literally begged them, please don't make me come out of my shell. It took them more than seven hours to get me to come out. When I had to pack up my things, I didn't know where to begin, so I just started spinning in circles. One of the officers came in and helped roll up my property. He said, "Just keep your eyes closed, and hold onto me."

They put the belly-chains on me, and I grabbed ahold of his belt. I kept my eyes closed the whole way, because I knew that if I opened them, I'd get crushed. They put the black box handcuffs on me real tight, and my wrists swelled up. Then they put me in a van with just me and two guards up front. We drove for nearly seven hours to Northern Nevada Correctional Center, where the psychiatric unit is. I kept my eyes closed the whole time. I just focused on the pain in my wrists so I wouldn't think about anything else.

I was in the psych ward for 10 months. The first time I met the associate warden, I asked her to send me back to Ely. I didn't want to be there. I had developed a real mental illness. Being in a cell like that with nothing, all you got is your mind, and it's already warped from years of fighting to stay alive, it's not right. It's not human, it's not normal. But I had to learn to adjust.

I started by coming out of my cell for two minutes at a time, when no one else was on the tier. They had steel tables, so I'd come outside and wipe them down to keep myself busy. When I

thought it had been about two minutes, I would run back. It's like holding your breath, you can only hold it for so long. The next day they'd open the door, leave the tier, and I knew I had to do it again. I'd do it a little bit longer, count a little higher. I slowly got more comfortable. I spent more and more time around the guards and other inmates. One day, they let me tour the exercise yard while everyone else was locked up, to get a feel for it. Then they moved me to general population.

I was still afraid of people, though, because I felt so disconnected. It was like oil and water. I would be in the chow hall, and there would be a couple hundred people in there but it felt like 20,000. The noise became a cacophony of sounds that was so intense I wanted to cover my ears. I can't stand to have anybody behind me. There were times I had to stand up and eat so I could constantly turn around. The officer would say, you're sitting down or you're not eating, so I put my tray away and left.

I got out of prison on Dec. 21, 2018, after serving 42 years, 9 months and 15 days. I wear a smile on my face, but there's a war going on inside. Someone got me a hoodie, and the other night, I was standing outside the door of the halfway house, just feeling the air. I saw somebody's head behind me. It was so intense, I turned around and drove my body towards it. I fell down, because there was nobody there. It was the hood of the hoodie that had come over to the side. It looked like a head behind me.

Another time I went to Walmart, I walked in and there's a big screen TV. All of a sudden, I was on it. I saw myself. I said, "What the hell?" I started walking down the aisles. I was trying on tennis shoes, then there was another TV, and there I was. I'm looking around thinking, "What did they do, put me in a computer?" I walked to the aisle, and it looked like it stretched out for miles. I couldn't breathe. I saw a restroom sign, and I just went and locked myself in a stall for 15 minutes, yelling at myself in my head. I eventually steeled myself and left. But I was bothered by how I lost control like that. I've been in life and death situations numerous times, and it didn't bother me like this did.

Sometimes I will go into the bathroom to relax. When you go in there and turn the light off, it's completely dark. You can't see nothing. And I just ... *sigh*. I feel so calm and peaceful. Isn't that sad? That I feel at home, in blackness? Something's wrong there. And that bothers me. I feel like an alien. It's like I have so much conditioning from all those years where I didn't think, I just acted instinctively. Now I'm out here trying to re-pattern the grooves in my brain.

Even now, there's still a part of me that wants that abyss. Where there's no thought, no feeling. I just want to be gone, away from everybody and everything. And that's where I feel safe. Prison has been my whole life. Am I too damaged to ever belong? Am I gonna make it out here? It's a scary feeling.

**Solitary Confinement to "Protect" the General Population from
Individuals:**

William Blake #1 - *spent youth in juvenile jails. While in county court on a drug charge, Blake killed a sheriff's deputy and wounded another. He was twenty three, and at the time of writing his testimony he was fifty-two, serving a sentence of seventy-seven years to life. He is in his twenty-ninth year of solitary confinement. He is held in administrative rather than disciplinary segregation, meaning he is considered a permanent risk to prison safety and is in isolation indefinitely.*

“You deserve an eternity in hell,” Onondaga County Supreme Court judge Kevin Mulroy told me from his bench as I stood before him for sentencing on July 10, 1987. Apparently he had the idea that God was not the only one qualified to make such judgment calls.

Judge Mulroy wanted to “pump six bucks’ worth of electricity into [my] body,” he also said, although I suspect that it wouldn’t have taken six cents’ worth to get me good and dead. He must have wanted to reduce me and The Chair to a pile of ashes. My “friend” Governor Mario Cuomo wouldn’t allow him to do that, though, the judge went on, bemoaning New York State’s lack of a death statute due to the then-governor’s repeated vetoes of death penalty bills that had been approved by the state legislature. Governor Cuomo’s publicly expressed dudgeon over being called a friend of mine by Judge Mulroy was understandable, given the crimes that I had just been convicted of committing. I didn’t care much for him either, truth be told. He built too many new prisons in my opinion, and cut academic and vocational programs in the prisons already standing.

I know that Judge Mulroy was not nearly alone in wanting to see me executed for the crime I committed when I shot two Onondaga County sheriff’s deputies inside the Town of Dewitt courthouse during a failed escape attempt, killing one and critically wounding the other. There were many people in the Syracuse area who shared his sentiments, to be sure. I read the hateful letters to the editor printed in the local newspapers; I could even feel the anger of the people when I’d go to court, so palpable was it. Even by the standards of my own belief system, such as it was back then, I deserved to die for what I had done. I took the life of a man without just cause, committing an act so monumentally wrong that I could not have argued that it was unfair had I been required to pay with my own life.

What nobody knew or suspected back then, not even I, is that when the prison gate slammed shut behind me, on that very day I would begin suffering a punishment that I am convinced beyond all doubt is far worse than any death sentence could possibly have been. On July 10, 2012, I finished my twenty-fifth consecutive year in solitary confinement, where at the time of this writing I remain. Although it is true that I’ve never died and so don’t know exactly what the experience would entail, for the life of me I cannot fathom how dying any death could be harder or more terrible than living through all that I have been forced to endure for the past quarter century.

Prisoners call it the box. Prison authorities have euphemistically dubbed it the Special Housing Unit, or SHU (pronounced “shoe”) for short. In society it is known as solitary confinement. It is twenty-three-hour-a-day lockdown in a cell smaller than some closets I’ve seen, with one hour allotted to “recreation” consisting of placement by oneself in a concrete-enclosed yard or, in some prisons, a cage made of steel bars. There is nothing in a SHU yard but air: no TV, no balls to bounce, no games to play, no other inmates, nothing. There is also very little allowed in a SHU cell: three

sets of plain white underwear, one pair of green pants, one green short-sleeved button-up shirt, one green sweatshirt, one pair of laceless footwear that I'll call sneakers for lack of a better word, ten books or magazines total, twenty pictures of the people you love, writing supplies, a bar of soap, toothbrush and toothpaste, one deodorant stick, but no shampoo.

That's about it. No clothes of your own, only prison-made. No food from commissary or packages, only three unappetizing meals a day handed to you through a narrow slot in your cell door. No phone calls, no TV, no luxury items at all. You get a set of cheap headphones to use, and you can pick between the two or three (depending on which prison you're in) jacks in the cell wall to plug into. You can listen to a TV station in one jack, and use your imagination while trying to figure out what is going on when the music indicates drama but the dialogue doesn't suffice to tell you anything. Or you can listen to some music, but you're out of luck if you're a rock 'n' roll fan and find only rap is playing.

Your options as to what to do to occupy your time in SHU are scant, but there will be boredom aplenty. You probably think that you understand boredom, know its feel, but really you don't. What you call boredom would seem a whirlwind of activity to me, choices so many that I'd likely be befuddled in trying to pick one over all the others. You could turn on a TV and watch a movie or some other show; I haven't seen a TV since the 1980s. You could go for a walk in the neighborhood; I can't walk more than a few feet in any direction before I run into a concrete wall or steel bars. You could pick up your phone and call a friend; I don't know if I'd be able to remember how to make a collect call or even if the process is still the same, so many years it's been since I've used a telephone. Play with your dog or cat and experience their love, or watch your fish in their aquarium; the only creatures I see daily are the mice and cockroaches that infest the unit, and they're not very lovable and nothing much to look at. There is a pretty good list of options available to you, if you think about it, many things that you could do even when you believe you are so bored. You take them for granted because they are there all the time, but if it were all taken away you'd find yourself missing even the things that right now seem so small and insignificant. Even the smallest stuff can become as large as life when you have had nearly nothing for far too long.

I haven't been outside in one of the SHU yards in this prison for about four years now. I haven't seen a tree or blade of grass in all that time, and wouldn't see these things were I to go to the yard. In Elmira Correctional Facility, where I am presently imprisoned, the SHU yards are about three or four times as big as my cell. There are twelve SHU yards total, each surrounded by concrete walls, one or two of the walls lined with windows. If you look in the windows you'll see the same SHU cellblock that you live on, and maybe you'll get to see the guy who has been locked next to you for months that you've talked to every day but had never before gotten a look at. If you look up you'll find bars and a screen covering the yard, and if you're lucky maybe you can see a bit of blue sky through the mesh, otherwise it'll be hard to believe that you're even outside. If it's a good day you can walk around the SHU yard in small circles staring ahead with your mind on nothingness, like the nothing you've got in that little lacuna with you. If it's a bad day, though, maybe your mind will be filled with remembrances of all you used to have that you haven't seen now for many years; and you'll be missing it, feeling the loss, feeling it bad.

Life in the box is about an austere sameness that makes it difficult to tell one day from a thousand others. Nothing much and nothing new ever happens to tell you if it's a Monday or a Friday, March or September, 1987 or 2012. The world turns, technology advances, and things in the streets change and keep changing all the time. Not so in a solitary confinement unit, however. I've never seen a cell phone except in pictures in magazines. I've never touched a computer in my life, never been on the Internet and wouldn't know how to get there if you sat me in front of a computer, turned it on for me, and gave me directions. SHU is a timeless place, and I can honestly say that there is not a single thing I'd see looking around right now that is different from what I saw in Shawangunk Correctional Facility's box when I first arrived there from Syracuse's county jail in 1987. Indeed, there is probably nothing different in SHU now than in SHU a hundred years ago, save the headphones. Then and now there were a few books, a few prison-made clothing articles, walls and bars and human beings locked in cages. And misery.

There is always the misery. If you manage to escape it yourself for a time, there will ever be plenty around in others for you to sense; and although you'll be unable to look into their eyes and see it, you might hear it in the nighttime when tough guys cry not-so-tough tears that are forced out of them by the unrelenting stress and strain that life in SHU is an exercise in.

I've read of the studies done regarding the effects of long-term isolation in solitary confinement on inmates, seen how researchers say it can ruin a man's mind, and I've watched with my own eyes the slow descent of sane men into madness—sometimes not so slow. What I've never seen the experts write about, though, is what year after year of abject isolation can do to that immaterial part in our middle where hopes survive or die and the spirit resides. So please allow me to speak to you of what I've seen and felt during some of the harder times of my twenty-five-year SHU odyssey.

I've experienced times so difficult and felt boredom and loneliness to such a degree that it seemed to be a physical thing inside so thick it felt like it was choking me, trying to squeeze the sanity from my mind, the spirit from my soul, and the life from my body. I've seen and felt hope becoming like a foggy ephemeral thing, hard to get ahold of, even harder to keep ahold of as the years and then decades disappeared while I stayed stuck in the emptiness of the SHU world. I've seen minds slipping down the slope of sanity, descending into insanity, and I've been terrified that I would end up like the guys around me who have cracked and become nuts. It's a sad thing to watch a human being go insane before your eyes because he can't handle the pressure that the box exerts on the mind, but it is sadder still to see the spirit shaken from a soul. And it is more disastrous. Sometimes the prison guards find them hanging and blue; sometimes their necks get broken when they jump from their beds, the sheet tied around the neck that's also wrapped around the grate covering the light in the ceiling snapping taut with a pop. I've seen the spirit leaving men in SHU, and I have witnessed the results.

The box is a place like no other place on planet Earth. It's a place where men full of rage can stand at their cell gates fulminating on their neighbor or neighbors, yelling and screaming and speaking some of the filthiest words that could ever come from a human mouth, do it for hours on end, and despite it all never suffer the loss of a single tooth, never get their heads knocked clean off

their shoulders. You will never hear words more despicable or see mouth wars more insane than what occurs all the time in SHU, not anywhere else in the world, because there would be serious violence before any person could speak so much foulness for so long. In the box the heavy steel bars allow mouths to run with impunity when they could not otherwise do so, while the ambiance is one that is sorely conducive to an exceedingly hot sort of anger that seems to press the lips on to ridiculous extremes. Day and night I have been awakened by the sound of rage being loosed loudly on SHU gates, and I'd be a liar if I said that I haven't at times been one of the madmen doing the yelling.

I have lived for months where the first thing I became aware of upon waking in the morning is the malodorous funk of human feces, tinged with the acrid stench of days-old urine, where I ate my breakfast, lunch, and dinner with that same stink assaulting my senses, and where the last thought I had before falling into unconscious sleep was: "Damn, it smells like shit in here." I have felt like I was on an island surrounded by vicious sharks, flanked on both sides by mentally ill inmates who would splash their excrement all over their cells, all over the company outside their cells, and even all over themselves. I have seen days turn into weeks that seemed like they'd never end without being able to sleep more than short snatches before I was shocked out of my dreams, and thrown back into a living nightmare, by the screams of sick men who had lost all ability to control themselves, or by the banging of the cell bars and walls being done by these same madmen. I have been so tired when sleep inside was impossible that I went outside into a snowstorm to get some rest.

The wind blew hard and snowflakes swirled around and around in the small SHU yard at Shawangunk, and I had on but one cheap prison-produced coat and a single set of state clothes beneath. To escape the biting cold I dug into the seven-or eight-foot-high mountain of snow that was piled in the center of the yard, the accumulation from inmates shoveling a narrow path to walk along the perimeter. With bare hands gone numb, I dug out a small room in that pile of snow, making myself a sort of igloo. When it was done I crawled inside, rolled onto my back on the snow-covered concrete ground, and almost instantly fell asleep, my bare head pillowed in the snow. I didn't even have a hat to wear.

An hour or so later I was awakened by the guards come to take me back to the stink and insanity inside: "Blake, rec's over. . . ." I had gotten an hour's straight sleep, minus the few minutes it had taken me to dig my igloo. That was more than I had gotten in weeks without being shocked awake by the CA-RACK! of a sneaker being slapped into a Plexiglas shield covering the cell of an inmate who had thrown things nasty; or the THUD-THUD-THUD! of an inmate pounding his cell wall; or bars being banged and gates being kicked and rattled; or men screaming like they're dying and maybe wishing that they were; or to the tirade of an inmate letting loose his pent-up rage on a guard or fellow inmate, sounding every bit the lunatic that too long a time in the mind-breaking confines of the box had caused him to be.

I have been so exhausted physically, my mental strength tested to limits that can cause strong folks to snap, that I have begged God, tough guy I fancy myself, "Please, Lord, make them stop. Please let me get some peace." As the prayers went ungranted and the insanity around me persisted,

I felt my own rage rising above the exhaustion and misery—no longer now in a begging mood: “Lord, kill those motherfuckers, why don’t you!” I yelled at the Almighty, my own sanity so close to being gone that it seemed as if I were teetering along the edge of a precipice and could see down to where I’d be dropping, seeing myself shot, sanity a dead thing killed by the fall. I’d be afraid later on, terrified, when I reflected back on how close I had seemed to come to losing my mind, but at that moment all I could do was feel anger of a fiery kind: anger at the maniacs creating the noise and the stink and the madness; anger at my keepers, the real creators of this hell; anger at society for turning a blind eye to the torment and torture going on here that its tax dollars are financing; and, perhaps most of all, anger at myself for doing all that I did that never should have been done that put me into the clutches of this beastly prison system to begin with. I would be angry at the world; enraged, actually, so burning hot was what I would be feeling.

I had wet toilet paper stuffed hard into both ears, socks folded up and pressed into my ears, a pillow wrapped around the sides and back of my head covering my ears, and a blanket tied around all that to hold everything in place, lying in bed praying for sleep. But still the noise was incredible, a thunderous cacophony of insanity, sleep impossible. Inmates lost in the throes of lava-like rage firing philippics at one another for reasons even they didn’t know, threatening to kill one another’s mommas, daddies, even the children, too. Nothing is sacred in SHU. It is an environment that is so grossly abnormal, so antithetical to normal human interactions, that it twists the innards of men all around who for too long dwell there. Their minds, their morals, and their mannerisms get bent badly, ending far off center. Right becomes whatever and wrong no longer exists. Restraint becomes a burden and is unnecessary with concrete and steel separating everyone, so inmates let it go. Day after day, perhaps year after year, the anger grows, fueled by the pain caused by the conditions till rage is born and burning so hot that it too hurts.

Trying to put into words what is so unlike anything else I know or have ever experienced seems an impossible endeavor because there is nothing even remotely like it any place else to compare it to, and nothing that will do to you on the inside what so many years in SHU has done to me. All that I am able to articulate about the world of a Special Housing Unit and what it is and what it does may seem terrible to you indeed, but the reality of living in this place for a full quarter of a century is even more terrible still. You would have to live it, experience it in all its aspects with the fullness of its days and struggles added up, to really appreciate and understand just how truly terrible this plight of mine has been, and how truly ugly life in the box can be at times, even for just a single day.

I spent nine years in Shawangunk’s box, six years in Sullivan’s, six years in Great Meadow’s, and I’ve been here in Elmira’s SHU for four years now, and through all of this time I have never spent a single day in a Mental Health Unit cell because I attempted or threatened suicide, or for any other reason. I have thought about suicide in times past when the days had become exceedingly difficult to handle, but I’m still here. I’ve had some of my SHU neighbors succumb to the suicidal thoughts, though, choosing death over another day of life in the box. I have never bugged out myself, but I’ve known times that I came too close. I’ve had neighbors who came to SHU normal men, and I’ve seen them leave broken and not anything resembling normal anymore.

I've seen guys give up on their dreams and lose all hope in the box, but my own hopes and dreams are still alive and well inside me. The insidious workings of the SHU program have yet to get me stuck on that meandering path to internal destruction that I have seen so many of my neighbors end up on, and perhaps this is a miracle. So thanks be to God for the miracle; I'd rather be dead than to lose control of my mind.

Had I known in 1987 that I would spend the next quarter century in solitary confinement, I would certainly have killed myself. If I took a month to die and spent every minute of it in severe pain, it seems to me that on balance that fate would still be far easier to endure than the past twenty-five years have been. If I try to imagine what kind of death, even a slow one, would be worse than twenty-five years in the box—and I have tried to imagine it—I can come up with nothing. Set me afire, pummel and bludgeon me, cut me to bits, stab me, shoot me, do what you will in the worst of ways, but none of it could come close to making me feel things as cumulatively horrifying as what I've experienced through my years in solitary. Dying couldn't take but a short time if you or the state were to kill me; in SHU I have died a thousand internal deaths. The sum of my quarter century's worth of suffering has been that bad.

To some judges sitting on high who've never done a day in the box, maybe twenty-five years of this isn't cruel and unusual. To folks who have an insatiable appetite for vengeance against prisoners who have committed terrible crimes, perhaps it doesn't even matter how cruel or unusual my plight is or isn't. For people who cannot let go of hate and know not how to forgive, no amount of remorse would matter, no level of contrition would be quite enough, only endless retribution would be right in their eyes. Like with Judge Mulroy, only an eternity in hell would suffice. But then, given even that, the unforgiving haters would not be satisfied that hell was hot enough; they'd want the heat turned up higher. Thankfully these folks are the few; in the minds of the many, at a point, enough is enough.

No matter what the world would think about things that they cannot imagine in even their worst nightmares, I know that twenty-five years in solitary confinement is utterly and certainly cruel, more so than death by an electric chair, gas chamber, lethal injection, bullet in the head, or even immolation could possibly be. The sum of the suffering caused by any of these quick deaths would be a small thing next to the sum of the suffering that this quarter century in SHU has brought to bear on me. Solitary confinement for the length of time that I have endured it, even apart from the inhuman conditions that I have too often been made to endure it in, is torture of a terrible kind. And anyone who doesn't think so surely knows not what they are thinking.

I have served a sentence worse than death.” - William Blake, *Hell is a Very Small Place*

William Blake #2 - *another piece describing his in time spent in solitary confinement and a reflection on his time before entering into the general population*

I have been in solitary confinement in New York's prison system for thirty-four years.

Prisoners' rights advocates call it extreme isolation. Prison authorities have euphemistically dubbed it SHU (pronounced *shoe*), for Special Housing Unit. Prisoners more

aply call it the box. To folks in society these prison units are known as solitary confinement. They are rows of cages where prisoners are segregated from the general population, locked down for months, years, or even decades alone in a cell with very little personal property and few to no privileges to speak of.

In various SHUs in several different prisons, this is where I have lived since 1987. I am today fifty-seven years old, and for well over half of my life I have been isolated from people, even from other prisoners. Soon, corrections officials have told me, I am to be released to the general population of one of the state's maximum security prisons. I don't know which prison it will be, but to me that doesn't matter at all.

So I am on the cusp of returning to humanity, you might say. To my mind, it seems like I am about to become a human being once again, after more than three decades of being treated like something less, and sometimes feeling as if I actually were.

On February 10, 1987, I was taken from the county jail to a court hearing in the Town of Dewitt, just outside of Syracuse, New York. After the court proceedings had concluded, while still in the courthouse, I took the service revolver from one of the two sheriff's deputies who were escorting me and, after a brief struggle, shot both deputies. One deputy died.

On that day in Dewitt, I lived the worst moment of my life, made my greatest mistake, and committed my most terrible wrong, by far. And although I have wished it countless times, that moment will never be undone.

Five months after the shooting, on July 10, I had been tried and convicted, was sentenced to serve life, and was sent off to state prison. On that day New York's prison authorities placed me in the Special Housing Unit at Shawangunk Correctional Facility. They had quickly decided that I was a threat to the security of any prison they might put me in and so should be segregated, isolated. Somehow, I was more dangerous than the other cop killers, sundry murderers, and escape artists walking around in the general populations of New York's many maximum security prisons, so they said.

So for more than thirty years I lived in SHU, waking to the screams of madmen in the middle of the night, and smelling their shit when they decided to throw it. I got disciplinary tickets for doing things I should not have done, for doing other things that I would never regret, and for doing things I never did, when a guard decided I needed to be punished more than I already was anyway. I discovered that hopelessness and despair could mean far more than I had ever known before, and learned that loneliness could still sting deep even when a man is sleeping in a row of other men separated by only a few feet and a steel or concrete wall. I experienced a different sort of pain than anything I have felt before, the kind where the bleeding is done all on the inside, in the mind and the soul, and goes on and on through days into years. A number of times I watched as gloom settled over the unit when another SHU prisoner had ended his life with his neck in a bedsheet tied to the grate covering the light in the ceiling, rather than do

another day in the box; and I wondered if that would be my own end.

In the box you have time to think, because there is dead time aplenty. How well you manage your thoughts is all on you. I have watched as the minds of some of my neighbors regressed and were broken, as I went all in to keep my own intact. I lived in this dark space for decades, but I kept dreaming a light.

I learned meditation and mindfulness, yoga too, and practice them all religiously. With the help of God and good luck added to my own efforts, I remain sane. I kept myself out of the prison mental health units that people end up in when they have died inside and struggle to be resurrected. I grew older and grew up in this place that prison keepers built to cause prisoners pain. I lived when it would have been so easy to quit.

At last, now, the prison operators tell me that I am soon to be in population, released from this torturous place I hate. Upon getting the news initially, I had the thought fire loudly in my mind: “Yes, I made it!” The excitement inside me was strong; it felt good, very much like a prisoner being told that he’s just been granted parole and is soon to be home, free at last. But then I considered what is to come, and not for the first time. I had always believed I would one day be released from SHU, even when plenty of people were telling me I would die here. I know well what a prison population is like; this is not my first prison bid. However, I do not know what it’s like to walk into a world full of people separated by nothing after being isolated from everything and everyone for more than thirty years.

There are hundreds of men in a prison mess hall, hundreds more in a prison yard. What will it feel like to be in a crowd again? What will it feel like to walk around without my hands cuffed behind my back, to work and mingle with my fellow prisoners and prison staff? What will it be like to feel like a human being again?

The answer to these questions, of course, is I don’t know. This will be new to me, even as I do old things that I have done many times long ago.

Do I have any worries about whether or not I will be able to make it, whether I will be able to adjust? Fortunately, I am not a worrier. Fortunately, I am an optimist to my soul. I have wondered, though, if I have been damaged by SHU in some way that won’t show itself till I find myself needing to know how to act like a normal uncaged person again. In reply to that thought I said to myself: “Well, there is only one way to find out. And that is to do it.” I have fears; I am not a machine. But so far, I have never met a fear that I failed to conquer. Whatever my adjustment to population after so long in SHU may entail, I fully expect to handle it. Simple stuff or supremely difficult, I expect to make it.

More than three years ago, in December 2017, prison officials first mentioned to me the prospect of release to population. For thirty years I had received monthly review reports of my administrative segregation status, and all of them were pretty much the same, most identical to the previous one. No matter how I behaved, no matter if I expressed real remorse and regret for

past misdeeds, no matter what I may have accomplished against all odds in SHU, the reviews were invariably negative, painting me as a monster, and they were always the same in their conclusions: I was to stay in SHU in “ad seg” status.

Then, in my September 2017 review, which I received a copy of three months after it was written, the Central Office Ad Seg Review Committee wrote: “It is the recommendation of this committee that inmate Blake remain in Administrative Segregation at this time based on his past history of violence, numerous disciplinary infractions and argumentative behavior, as well as his propensity for escape. However, he may be a good candidate for release from Administrative Segregation with a proper transitional program. The committee encourages Blake to continue to exhibit appropriate behavior and work to demonstrate that he would be a good candidate for transition out of Administrative Segregation. When asked if he would be interested in a step-down, or transitional program, he responded, ‘I hope so.’”

When the review committee wrote those words, I had been four years without a ticket for any sort of misbehavior, and I had not had a violent incident in fourteen years. I have had just one escape attempt in my entire jail/prison life, and that was the courthouse incident. Somehow, this one attempt got turned into a “propensity” for escape. Also, no one had ever asked me if I was interested in going to a transitional or step-down program. If someone had, my reply would have been *Hell, yeah!* not “I hope so.”

After receiving the September 2017 review, it took a year and half before I was transferred from Great Meadow Correctional Facility’s box to the step-down program in Attica’s SHU. It was June 2019. At Attica I was taken out of my cell to a classroom for two hours a day. Leg shackles were applied and their chain was locked into a chair/desk combo where I was seated. Then the handcuffs I wore in transit were removed. Sometimes it was only a social worker or counselor and myself in the class together, with several corrections officers stationed outside the room, watching through the Plexiglas windows lining one entire wall. Other times one or two other prisoners were there with me, ad seg guys also trying to get out of the box after too many years being stuck there.

The social workers and counselors teaching the step-down class gave us lessons and practice in mindfulness, for one thing. At the time, I had been into mindfulness for exactly twenty years. So I could have written the basic book that they would read to us from. They taught lessons regarding managing anger without aggression—ART it’s called: Aggression Replacement Therapy. ART was clearly created for very young individuals with issues. I knew this before a friend of mine looked it up on Wikipedia and told me it was originally produced for juvenile delinquents. We were grilled on the evils of drug use, too, when I hadn’t smoked a joint or done any drug that wasn’t prescribed by a prison doctor in well over a decade.

For another, much younger and less educated prisoner, I imagine the step-down program could be of real value. For a old man who is a voracious reader and has spent countless hours in meditation and self reflection over a three-decade-long stay in SHU, it was useless. I learned not

a single thing of value through the Attica program that I did not already know well. Ditto for the nine months I have spent languishing in the step-down program at Mid-State Correctional Facility. Here, they teach the selfsame ART lessons, and in toto the programs curriculum is nearly identical to what a prisoner gets in the Attica program. But I went through it, participated, and sought to offer insight and edification to others in the program. On March 1, after a total of more than 20 months, I completed the step-down process.

I have done it. Now I am awaiting my transfer to a prison population in a maximum security prison unknown. I am ready to return to humanity.

Thomas Silverstein - *man held in extreme isolation with a “no human contact order” for 28 years after killing two fellow prisoners and a prison guard, allegedly in self defense*

The cell was so small that I could stand in one place and touch both walls simultaneously. The ceiling was so low that I could reach up and touch the hot light fixture.

My bed took up the length of the cell, and there was no other furniture at all...The walls were solid steel and painted all white.

I was permitted to wear underwear, but I was given no other clothing.

Shortly after I arrived, the prison staff began construction on the side pocket cell, adding more bars and other security measures to the cell while I was within it. In order not to be burned by sparks and embers while they welded more iron bars across the cell, I had to lie on my bed and cover myself with a sheet.

It is hard to describe the horror I experienced during this construction process. As they built new walls around me it felt like I was being buried alive. It was terrifying.

During my first year in the side pocket cell I was completely isolated from the outside world and had no way to occupy my time. I was not allowed to have any social visits, telephone privileges, or reading materials except a bible. I was not allowed to have a television, radio, or tape player. I could speak to no one and there was virtually nothing on which to focus my attention.

I was not only isolated, but also disoriented in the side pocket. This was exacerbated by the fact that I wasn't allowed to have a wristwatch or clock. In addition, the bright, artificial lights remained on in the cell constantly, increasing my disorientation and making it difficult to sleep. Not only were they constantly illuminated, but those lights buzzed incessantly. The buzzing noise was maddening, as there often were no other sounds at all. This may sound like a small thing, but it was my entire world.

Due to the unchanging bright artificial lights and not having a wristwatch or clock, I couldn't tell if it was day or night. Frequently, I would fall asleep and when I woke up I would not know if I had slept for five minutes or five hours, and would have no idea of what day or time of day it was.

I tried to measure the passing of days by counting food trays. Without being able to keep track of time, though, sometimes I thought the officers had left me and were never coming back. I thought they were gone for days, and I was going to starve. It's likely they were only gone for a few hours, but I had no way to know.

I was so disoriented in Atlanta that I felt like I was in an episode of the twilight zone. I now know that I was housed there for about four years, but I would have believed it was a decade if that is what I was told. It seemed eternal and endless and immeasurable...

There was no air conditioning or heating in the side pocket cells. During the summer, the heat was unbearable. I would pour water on the ground and lay naked on the floor in an attempt to cool myself...

The only time I was let out of my cell was for outdoor recreation. I was allowed one hour a week of outdoor recreation. I could not see any other inmates or any of the surrounding landscape during outdoor recreation. There was no exercise equipment and nothing to do...

My vision deteriorated in the side pocket, I think due to the constant bright lights, or possibly also because of other aspects of this harsh environment. Everything began to appear blurry and I became sensitive to light, which burned my eyes and gave me headaches.

Nearly all of the time, the officers refused to speak to me. Despite this, I heard people who I believed to be officers whispering into my vents, telling me they hated me and calling me names. To this day, I am not sure if the officers were doing this to me, or if I was starting to lose it and these were hallucinations.

In the side pocket cell, I lost some ability to distinguish what was real. I dreamt I was in prison. When I woke up, I was not sure which was reality and which was a dream.

MARYAM HENDERSON-ULOHO - *placed in solitary confinement multiple times for wearing a hijab*

"I WAS SO SCARED, I WET THE BED

You know, sometimes I say to myself, I have all the ingredients to be a failure. All the ingredients. But here I am.

I was born January 23, 1957, in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. When I was fifteen months old, my mother moved us to Fort Worth, Texas. That's where I grew up. My father passed when I was three. He was in prison for robbery and something happened with his kidneys. He got very sick. He got let out on medical release and went home to his mother's house in Pine Bluff and that's where he died. He was a serious gangster. I was told he never went anywhere without his .45. People always told me I look just like him. I don't remember him, but I remember the funeral like it was yesterday. My father was lying in a gray casket with burgundy crushed-velvet lining inside. I wanted him to get up and he wouldn't get up. We went to the cemetery and they lowered him into the ground. They threw dirt on him. I didn't want them to throw dirt on my father.

Up until the age of about sixteen I had extremely hard crying spells over my father. Being his only child, I longed for him. And my brothers and sisters weren't very nice to me at times. My mother worked all the time. So I didn't have anybody, I felt like I was just so alone.

When I was younger I didn't socialize "with people. I didn't like to be touched. I didn't even want my mother to touch me. She used to ask me at times if she could hug me, and sometimes I'd just cry. I couldn't play with other children. Intellectually I was very advanced. But I didn't know how to socialize. I had no friends. When I would go outside to play I would take a book and sit under a tree. I could read very well. I had a favorite tree, a peach tree, in front of our house. I used to climb that tree and pluck the peaches and eat them. That was pretty fun.

There were eight of us kids. Six boys and two girls. We all had different fathers. Let's see, my fourth brother and my sixth brother, they had the same father. My mother was somewhat promiscuous—my oldest sister and my second brother had the same father, but after that everybody has different fathers. My mother has a third-grade education. She cooked and cleaned people's homes to take care of us. And she had many "friends."

My sister Rosemary was very mean. She had short, thin hair. I have very long, thick, coarse hair. I was tender headed, and Rosemary would take Mama's big brush and beat me in the head with it, so I didn't like for her to comb my hair, and I didn't get my hair combed a lot. Other kids would make fun of me and call me "Little Nappy Head." I was always called names. The kids, they laughed at me because they said I was ugly, that I had rat teeth because I had a gap between my teeth.

Me and Rosemary shared the same bed. She was like seven years older than me. She used to go out and get men and bring them back in at night and she would have sex with them, in the same bed that I slept in. She would make me get down at the foot of the bed. One time Rosemary had this white man in the bed. He wanted to play with me, but my sister said, "No, don't touch her." I was so scared, I wet the bed. I started crying, but I couldn't cry aloud because I was scared. When I got up the next day my sister told Mama I wet the bed. But I couldn't tell Mama why I wet the bed 'cause if I did, I was gonna get a worse beating from my sister. So I just took the beating from my mother instead of having to take it from Rosemary."

...

"When I got married in 1973, at first I tried doing what I had been used to seeing my mom do in her relationships. But my husband, he was older, and he quickly told me, "You will not yell at me. You will not curse at me. Those are not things you will do because that is not how a wife treats her husband."

My son Augustine Jr. was born nine months later when I was seventeen. He was born May 5, 1974. After that I had three more boys—Greg in '75, David in '76, and Lucky in '78. Basically one every year.

My marriage initially felt forced but not abusive. I did not love him, but I did respect him. He was very patient with me, and he was very good with the children. He worked two jobs and went to college to make sure me and the kids were provided for. He was my husband, but really he

was my guardian. So year after year of him being patient with me, I developed a sense of love for him as a father and husband and as a man. Enough so that I moved to Nigeria with him.”

I ENDED UP IN THE HOSPITAL

I started going to Sinclair Community College, and after two years I got a degree in property management and real estate. Then I started working for the housing project, developing programs.

The first property that I bought of my own was a duplex in Dayton—three bedrooms on each side. My kids and I lived on one side and I rented the other side out. We stayed there for a few years and then I started buying other houses. In less than eight years, I’d bought dozens of properties. I had a major real estate investing business, Uloho Investment, with millions in assets. And during that time I raised my four boys and had three more kids, two boys and a girl—Adrian, Robert, and TaQuilla.

Unfortunately, I became public enemy number one with some detectives in Dayton. You see, detectives working in my neighborhood, they wanted to use some of my properties for sting operations. Some of the clients in my real estate business were “pharmaceutical dealers.” Some of them were less than honorable citizens with criminal backgrounds, drug convictions, the whole nine yards. But some wanted to turn over a new leaf and help women with children get into their own homes or help senior citizens. I felt like that was a good thing and I was in support of it. The police wanted me to help raid these guys, and I wouldn’t go along with it. So I became a problem.

In 2000, my business was raided. The police didn’t find anything because I wasn’t involved with drugs. But when they raided the office they left the building open. The property was robbed and vandalized. Everything was gone. I had a \$15,000 printer. I had computers. It caused sort of a nervous breakdown for me. I didn’t understand how the police could raid my place and then just leave the business unsecured. I started spiraling down and I ended up in the hospital. They put me on medication that had me not thinking straight. On TV I saw that Mardi Gras was coming up and I just booked a bus ticket. That was not like me. I had every intention of coming right back, but it didn’t work out that way. In February 2001, I left my youngest kids with their brothers, who were in their thirties, and I went on a vacation to Louisiana”

“When I was first arrested in 2001 and taken to Jefferson Parish Jail, it was a really scary experience for me. Now, here I am, this professional woman, never in my life have I been in a holding cell, or a holding tank, so I had no clue what to expect. One woman had lice. And these women would just steal each other’s food. I felt like I was among savages. And if you go to sleep, I mean, only God knows what’ll happen, so I couldn’t sleep.

I was held in jail for eighteen months while I was waiting for a trial. It wasn’t unusual. Some women were there five years before their trials. I was concerned about my younger kids back home, but I wasn’t too worried about them because I knew their older brothers would take care of them. And my mom was in Dayton too. One problem was, the detectives from Ohio who had

raided my business asked Jefferson Parish to deny bail and hold me. I couldn't get out on bail, so I just had to wait.

Inmates and guards would find ways to mess with me. One time the guards sent three women to fight me, and they stood on the other side of a window and watched. Another time six or seven guards kicked a mentally ill woman until I saw blood coming out of every hole in her head. They beat her unconscious, then took her to a room and strapped her down and kept her there. And these were supposedly Christian people. I was a die-hard Christian, but I actually turned to Islam partly because the guards and inmates who were Christians could be so cruel. I didn't want to be affiliated with it. So I converted there in jail. I needed peace, and I found it in Islam.

“TAKE THAT RAG OFF YOUR HEAD!”

I was convicted and sentenced in February 2003. Then a few months later, that's when I was moved from jail to prison, to St. Gabriel.⁴ The guards came and got me early in the morning and told me to pack up my stuff. They chained me into the back of a van with no windows with some other prisoners. I felt like a slave on a slave ship.

And then when we got to the prison, I think there were about eight of us prisoners, and everybody rolled out and went to the building for the new commits. A new commit is a person who's just coming into the prison. So we get there, and I have on my hijab and the officers tell me to take the rag off my head. I said, “No, I can't do that. I'm Muslim. I don't know where I am. I don't know if there's men around here, and I'm not taking my scarf off.” As Muslim women, we keep our heads covered, especially in the presence of men, because we're taught that you don't expose your beauty to strange men, you just don't do that. The guards weren't hearing any of that. They thought I was being rebellious. So, they took all the other women to process them. I had to stay in a tiny corridor locked between two doors. I stood there for about two hours while they decided what they were gonna do with me. No one knew, so they eventually put me in handcuffs and shackles, very tight, and a woman guard ordered me to go with her. She was angry, but I didn't let it click with me, I just kept smiling. Actually, my first impression was that prison was the most “beautiful place I'd ever seen in my life. They had the most beautiful plants, and trees, and flowers, and greenery, and the lawn was manicured perfectly. So I kept commenting on the flowers, and the guard was confused that someone could express joy around so much anger. She told me to just keep walking, and she put me in a cell by myself. I was in the hole.

I was the only woman in the prison who was Muslim, the only one who wore a headscarf. When I got out of solitary after those first two days, I took my scarf off to let them see I wasn't hiding anything. I didn't want confrontation. I told myself, Mary, we're gonna try to get along here, we don't want anyone thinking we're terrorists, we're gonna try to keep the peace. When I was in jail, I had a lot of trouble because of my headscarf with guards and also other inmates. I'd had to fight because of it. I didn't want to do that in prison. So for the moment I kept my scarf off.”

“But then a week later there was an incident when the prison deacon was handing out prayer books, and women were lining up for them. I got in line for a book, and when it was my turn, the deacon asked me if I was Christian or Muslim. I said I was Muslim, and he refused to give me a book. He said, “They’re only for Christians, and you can’t be both. You’ll have to choose.” ”

“So I walked down the hall, put my scarf back on, and from that day forward it was war. There was a chaplain there that I’d met when I first went in. He looked like Santa Claus, he really did. But he hated me because of my religion. He told me, “Before I allow you to infest this compound with Islam, you will do your entire time in the hole on lockdown.” He meant that. He went out of his way to try to get me locked up on many occasions.

When my family sent me my prayer rug, it went to the chaplain’s office first. It was in his possession because he was the chaplain, rightfully so. He called me and gave it to me, and then he flipped the script and told the administration that I stole it, that he didn’t give it to me, that I’d gone in his office and taken it. That was a serious infraction. But, the deacon happened to be there, and he saw everything that was going on. He stepped up to the plate and he says, “She didn’t steal that. He gave it to her. I saw him give it[...]”

I’d say, “No ma’am, I won’t. Can’t do that.” And then they’d lock me up, put me in the hole. I’d be in for ninety days at a time. Then eventually they’d let me out, but it would happen again. The longest I’d stay out was two weeks or so.

In 2004, I was in general population and I got called to see the chaplain. He was with a guard. He told me that there’d been an accident, that my son had died. I didn’t know who he was talking about, so I asked the guard. It was my first son, Augustine. He’d died in a motorcycle accident. I called my second son, Greg, and asked him to bury Augustine, since I couldn’t be there. I was devastated. Losing a child is something you can’t imagine, but not being able to be there with my family was a whole other level. I was so distraught for the first time, I asked to go to the hole, since I didn’t think I’d be able to control myself around other people. I stayed there a few days.”

AFTER A WHILE, YOU START TO LOSE HOPE

I got used to the hole. I developed a mentality of survival. Once I realized these people were trying to tear me down mentally, I strengthened my mind. Only my body was imprisoned. All of the buildings at St. Gabriel are named after zodiac signs. Like the Gemini building is for mentally challenged prisoners. The solitary cells, they’re in Leo. The cells are a little bigger than a bathroom. Maybe nine feet long and six feet wide. The walls are made of cinderblock. The door is made of metal bars. On the left side is a bed made out of steel. On that steel bed is a mattress wrapped in thick, heavy plastic. The pillow is wrapped in the same thick plastic. There’s a small window at the back, about six inches square with metal mesh on it, and a little round knob you’d turn to open it. In that same corner there’s a steel sink and a steel toilet. Beside the toilet, a step or two away, is a steel desk fixed to the wall. On the floor is a steel stool. You can reach your hand out from your stool on one side of the room and touch the gate at the front. The

fluorescent lights are always on. It was something I got used to. But not everyone could do solitude.

You had the hole. But then you had the hole inside of the hole. Even when you're in the hole, you were in a hallway with twenty other cells, so we could pass things from cell to cell through little openings, so we still had contact with each other. But there's another door at the end of the hallway with two cells that are separate that are even smaller, and they're under twenty-four-hour surveillance. A lot of the time if you get sent back there, you're back there by yourself. I could do the hole inside the hole, because my routine didn't change. But it does get to you. I hallucinated all the time in solitary. I'd see a little boy out the window. I'd think it was my first son, but I knew that couldn't be right, that he'd passed. When my mind would start to slip, I'd hear him say things: "Mommy, stay strong mommy, I'm here mommy. I'm here for you." I didn't feel so alone when I saw him. I'd start to sing, sometimes I would dance. It would make me happier.

If you want to know how I felt, put yourself there. You put yourself there and you visualize that to be you. You visualize how you enjoy hugs and being treated warm and kind. But now put yourself inside a cell or a cage where the trash and the garbage can has more regard than you as a human being, and then you tell me how you feel. I mean, even the trash gets out, but you don't.

"You don't see nobody, day after day. You get an hour on the rec yard, but if it's raining, you can't go out. You have ten minutes to take your shower and clean your room, take your trash out. Sometimes it's not enough time. Then you have to be back in your room, in your cell. If you don't make it, you get another report. If you get a report while you're already back there, you have to do an additional ninety days. Your world becomes consumed inside a six-by-nine prison cell, year after year after year. You're just in complete despair. After a while, you start to lose hope. You feel helpless. You just sit there, and you sit there, and you sit, day after day. What kind of life is that for a human being?

Women who were thrown into solitary, it affects us so horribly, mentally. A lot of them just went completely insane. You go to an animalistic level that I never witnessed before until I got to prison. One girl was eating her feces and throwing urine. She was a young girl. I saw her eat her feces then smear it all over her body and the walls and the bars. The guards restrained her and gave her Haldol and then just kept her sedated. Then they made other inmates go in and clean it up."

"A lot of women didn't make it out of the hole. I remember one young girl in the hole, she was twenty-six. I'd known her mother too, and her mother got out, and I'd kind of promised to look after her girl. This girl would come to me sometimes, like when she was sick, or when she needed wisdom. Well, she ended up in the hole within the hole, and it was affecting her. When I was able to talk to her, she told me, "Ms. Mary, I can't take the hole anymore. It feels like the walls are closing in on me." She was talking in a way that I knew she was getting to a breaking

point. So I asked a guard, “Could you let me go back there and take her cell and she can come in mine? She’s at a breaking point and I don’t think it’s going to turn out good if she’s back there by herself.” And the guard said, “You don’t tell me what to do, you don’t run nothing around here! You think you’re runnin’ shit, but you don’t tell me what to do. I’ll check on her when I’m ready to check on her.” So to spite me, she didn’t even look in on her. And the girl hanged herself. She didn’t survive. And I took that real, real hard.

I was angry. I was beyond the point of being able to respect any of the guards. I was saying things like, “Y’all murdered her, and you know you did. I told you all to go check on her and you refused out of spite.” Because of that, they put me in the tank. The tank is worse than the hole inside the hole. In the tank, they strip you buck naked. They take all your clothes, put you in a smock, take your mattress and pillow, and give you a blanket/mattress thing and a roll of toilet paper. You can’t make phone calls, can’t get mail, you don’t have communication with anybody. If they want to punish you real bad, they put you in there. And you know if you go in the tank, you might not come out alive. I went in not expecting to come out. I was in there two weeks. I kept my mind busy making flowers “out of the toilet paper. My whole cell was filled with flowers. I was able to get a magazine from the guards, and I’d leach the ink out of the magazine pages to color my flowers. There were flowers all over the head and foot of my bed, the sink, the floor. That’s how I made it through two weeks.

But that was the hardest time for me. I was losing hope of ever coming out. I was losing my will to live. I felt like I had no purpose, that my purpose for being on earth was over. I understood though that those were the kinds of thoughts I was being programmed to have, and that’s when I kind of fought back to get control of myself. But that’s what happens to the mind in isolation. I didn’t get many visits in prison because my family was so far away, but I got a visit once while I was in the hole from a Muslim sister, and I got letters while in solitary. The only reason I got out, I think, is my son Greg kept contacting the prison wanting to see me. They didn’t have an official reason for keeping me in the tank, so that forced them to let me out.”

Christopher Blackwell - *incarcerated individual at Monroe Correctional Complex who discusses the placement of sick coronavirus patients in solitary confinement for the protection of the general population*

For weeks rumors echoed throughout the Monroe Correctional Complex (MCC) as people whispered about prisoners who had tested positive for COVID-19 being transferred here from other facilities across the state. The prison where I’m incarcerated, MCC, was the first in Washington to confirm a positive case but has recently seemed to have things under control. The administration has even started to reopen the prison in little ways, allowing us to have more access to the phones and the yard. However, with new rumors, fears of another wave and another lockdown spread rapidly.

Our fears were confirmed when we received a memo from prison administration in early June stating what prisoners had already thought to be true: our prison has become a hub for

housing individuals confirmed to be positive with the virus. Sick prisoners across the state will now call MCC, and in particular our solitary confinement units, their new home.

Outbreaks have reached such high numbers in two eastern Washington prisons, Coyote Ridge Corrections Center and Airway Heights Corrections Center, that there's not enough bed space to treat the sick. Instead, sick prisoners are to be transferred to Monroe, which involves a grueling 10-hour bus ride across the state.

These transfers are not luxury bus rides even when you're healthy. You are stripped down to nothing but a bright orange jumpsuit, no underwear or socks, cuffed and shackled at the ankles and the waist for 8 to 10 hours straight. The bus is like a Greyhound but with no padding on your seat, just hard plastic, ensuring you feel every bump. The cuffs and shackles cause biting twinges of pain that never allow you forget they are there. You shift their resting place every few moments hoping to bring relief from their cold steel, but this rarely works. Using the restroom on this ride is next to impossible, you are forced to crouch down, using your tightly bound hand to wiggle the zipper in hopes of undoing your jumpsuit, all while trying to maintain your balance as the bus sways to and fro.

All I can do when I think of the past experiences I've had during transfers is have empathy for the prisoners forced to embark on such a journey while fighting off a deadly virus. I cannot imagine adding a mask on a hot summer day, while you're already experience respiratory issues, to what is already a nightmare situation.

The memo went on to assure prisoners that, "the medical and correctional staff working in [these sick units] are fully trained in [the] proper use of appropriate PPE." And that our safety and wellbeing are at the forefront of the Department's actions during this time.

This attempt at reassurance fell on deaf ears. History has and continues to show that our health and well-being as prisoners have never been a top priority for the DOC. Our prison was even recently under investigation for medical negligence, making it impossible to trust that correctional staff have adequate training for such situations. Actual medical doctors, along with other highly trained professionals, are having a hard time not contracting the virus themselves and potentially spreading it to those in their care, it's unlikely the DOC will find success where hospitals have not.

One of the biggest concerns is that correctional staff may be working in the units with sick prisoners who have recently transferred to Monroe while also working in the general population units. When the administration was confronted about this during a meeting with prisoner representatives, administrators confirmed that there was no choice but to have staff work where they are needed given the Department is so short staffed. I have no doubt the Department is short staffed; I've seen many officers work double shifts and work without days off. I also have no doubt that correctional officers themselves are not comfortable working in such conditions, you can hear grumbles about this throughout the units.

Officers are not trained medical professionals. Many correctional officers have little more than a GED, let alone a medical degree or the level of training a registered nurse would receive. The health and safety of prisoners should not be reliant on their skills and expertise during a global pandemic. In California, San Quentin State Prison is in the midst of an outbreak due to the transfer of sick prisoners from other parts of the state. It seems inevitable that we too will suffer this fate given the WA DOC are *intentionally* transferring sick prisoners.

The memo continued by encouraging prisoners to report any symptoms of COVID-19 to staff so they can be relocated into solitary confinement for treatment. The encouragements came in the form of the newly added perks of medical solitary confinement: prisoners would graciously receive the use of a TV, small radio, Game Boy, and playing cards. The advertisement to stay in this luxurious concrete box—that often triggers horrible memories for those that have spent months or years within them—came with the bonus of receiving three thirty-minute phone calls a week with our loved ones. In two different places in the memo the Department touted we would be free to move in solitary with no restraints, since one is usually handcuffed every time they leave their cell to do things like shower or use the phone. I found most of this to be nothing short of a slap to the face. Given the torturous conditions of solitary, even with the presence of a Game Boy, it is understandable that prisoners are reticent to come forward with symptoms. Most would prefer to suffer silently in the comfort of their own cells. Plus, on the off chance that you are sick but not with COVID-19, people are scared to go to solitary with the confirmed sick transfers.

The memo ended with a familiar DOC tactic: the threat of infractions, this time for not wearing a face mask or practicing social distancing, the later almost completely impossible given the layout and living conditions in this and most prisons. The possibility of receiving an infraction for a request one cannot comply with allows correctional staff to target whomever they please. Instead of protecting prisoners, these measures become nothing more than another way to overuse and abuse their power.

Frustratingly, a large portion of correctional staff fail to wear masks or practice any form of social distancing themselves. Just the other day while walking back from work a correctional officer yelled at me because my mask had slipped a little below my nose. After I pulled up my mask, I noticed the officer standing next to her had his mask around his chin completely exposing both his mouth and nose. Having more of a sense of justice than I probably should have, I shouted, “What about his mask, does the mandate to wear masks only apply to prisoners?” I was met with a cold silent stare by the officer that gave me the directive, and a smirk from the one not wearing his mask at all.

These recent memos make it clear the DOC continues to expect prisoners to live and survive in what many would deem unthinkable conditions, like the use of solitary confinement for medical quarantine and the transfer of sick and shackled prisoners across the entire state to otherwise not infected facilities. The DOC has continued to ignore the advice of medical

professionals—we still don't even have hand sanitizer. I promise you Game Boys are the least of our concerns. The time has come for the DOC to stop telling prisoners and our loved ones these feeble lies. They must show us we are a priority by letting their actions do the talking. Until then prisoners will wait for what seems to be the inevitable, our next quarantine lockdown and the possible contraction of a deadly virus.

Julie Rea - *wrongfully imprisoned for three years by the state of Illinois before her exoneration in 2006*

No blanket, underwear or pillow. The lights were on 24/7. And no bed mat either. The metal slab that was my bed was hard. Especially since my weight was down and there was nothing between my hips and it, except for the thin cotton outfit in orange.

I was in solitary so that I wouldn't do anything rash, having been brought in on a charge of murdering my own son. I was considered at-risk of depression because I had been charged, not because anybody realized that I was locked up for something I didn't do. Actually upon entering the jail I felt hopeful that the police would discover before long they had the wrong person and let me go. I was wrong. Dreadfully wrong.

The jail was a dark place where truth wasn't respected highly, and humane behavior was sparse. Guards slammed the door when passing every fifteen minutes. No peace existed while I waited for the error to be righted. But then one doesn't focus on a need for peace when it is so cold. One is chattering and curled up as tightly as one can get for warmth. Still, it added to the discomfort of the experience as a whole.

Finally, trying to lie down and assume a sleep-like position seemed the best effort I could make. Shortly, I found out it wasn't. From the audio speaker the guards had access to communicate with me in the cell. There was also a video camera. So they were able to access my person and activities for 'my safety'. Not minutes from lying down, a tape was started, one of a woman being tortured. It took me a bit to realize it was a tape and not someone in the next cell in agony at the moment.

I froze. My God what could I do? What was happening? What was this place?

Then some laughs and a remark from one guard to another, "Look at her, she's playing possum."

"She's gonna be a tough one."

"Do you think she's asleep?"

"No, she's awake alright. She's just stubborn."

In reality I was neither tough, playing possum or stubborn at that point. I was just frozen with fear. I realized that the tape wasn't faked. No one screams like that and is faking it. These were the kind of blood curdling screams that come wrenched from a body that is too exhausted to give them up, but finds them escaping anyway as it jerks and responds to whatever is being done to her. They were real. Very, very real. And if these guards were willing to play this tape and take pleasure in seeing what it did to me to hear it, well, what else were they capable of?

Did they make the tape too?

This was day one and two of my experience in solitary while in a county jail. This was before I was tried and wrongfully convicted. This was the mildest form of abuse these particular guards inflicted on me during the nights I spent in that jail.

After a few months in this county jail, I received bond until my first trial. I couldn't lay still without jerking every few seconds even when sleeping, and sleeping didn't occur without someone holding me. This is not something anyone should go through. I was innocent, but it is wrong no matter what a person may actually be guilty of.

This is a commentary on our sick criminal justice and correctional system. I survived and have healed and am continuing to heal.

I've studied and read about Philip Zimbardo's work, the growing field of wrongful conviction work, and the history our country and world has that is a dark and sad account of how human nature can fail, even the best of us.

It has left me feeling less alone. But not less violated.

I sometimes wonder who the woman on the tape was. Where she is – as well as a large number of other things that involved other people I came to know during that time period.

My earnest prayer is that the men and women who assaulted my mind, body and spirit during this time will come to know love, joy and forgiveness in goodness, rather than the pleasure of the sick and twisted activities they chose at that time.

And it is my deeper prayer that somehow writing this will place a growing desire in the hearts and minds of those who read it, that they can bring health and change to our jails and prisons and courtrooms and will do so. Ideally, that we neither bring the wrongly charged and torture them trying to get a false confession, nor mistreat any of those in our system any longer. Even if we can save only one person at a time, that is often the key to changing a whole system.

Cornelius Dupree - *was wrongfully imprisoned for 30 years by the state of Texas before DNA proved his innocence in 2011*

When I first went into prison, I was really upset and stubborn because I was imprisoned for a crime I didn't do. I was getting written up a lot for not going to work and for not doing this and that. Around 1980 or 1981, I was working in the fields picking cotton at Cofield Prison. I got into a fight with one of the other inmates. I was charged with fighting with a weapon, even though I didn't have a weapon and was sentenced to 15 days of solitary.

If you were in solitary, you were only given a full meal every third day. The first day, you would get a spoonful of rice, a spoonful of beans and a roll. It was very dehumanizing. On the third day, you get a full meal but you'd be so hungry and weak that it wasn't enough. Without food for three days, you have to be careful about how fast you eat it because you'll get sick. In the 15 days I was in there, I lost 15 pounds.

I was also very cold from lying on steel. They give you one blanket. It wasn't very long, and you had to ball up in a knot for it to cover you. It was very dirty. It was dark. You don't

know if it's day or night. You don't get recreation. They called it "the hole." There were no phone calls, there was no visitation. It was the worst thing that they had, and I'll never forget it.

Robert Dewey - *was wrongfully imprisoned for 17 years by the state of Colorado before DNA testing proved his innocence in 2012*

In 2002 or 2003, I got put in the hole because of my own medication. I was on Tylenol 3 because I had undergone back surgery, and they gave me a drug test. I told them I'm on medication, and they said that's okay we can distinguish the difference. But apparently they couldn't, because even though I gave them all my medical records, they said I tested positive for opiates and morphine.

When you're in solitary, you sit in the cell 23 hours a day for seven days a week with one hour out for yard. In that hour, you walk around in a concrete area. You really don't even get 60 minutes, because you need at least 15 minutes so you can take your shower.

Everybody likes human contact, so when you first get thrown in there and you're not used to it, you freak out a little bit. Your nerves kick in and you have to go down deep inside yourself and try to fight back against it.

For meals, they give you what they have to give you, no more and usually a lot less. You have to eat with a plastic spork. You lose weight because you don't eat as much, and then you also try to exercise to pass the time.

When you're down in the hole and you need help, you're really out of luck. The guards come by about once an hour, and they act like it's an inconvenience. Medication only comes at a certain time. For me, it was 6 a.m. and then not again until 7 p.m., regardless of what the doctor had prescribed.

Nicholas James Yarris - *former death row prisoner from the state of Pennsylvania who spent 23 years in solitary confinement before his exoneration through DNA testing in 2003*

Although I may not appear before you this day, I hope that the following efforts I make in writing can lend to all a clear understanding of what solitary confinement is to a human enduring it long term.

I am, unfortunately, a walking encyclopedic source of information about solitary confinement. Having spent an astounding 8000-plus days locked within a cell 23 hours a day, I have witnessed or understood every form of deprivation or sensory starved confinement one can know.

There are two features to solitary confinement that I wish to address here in this statement.

First, the most degrading mental breakdown to men comes from the physical confinement. In the three decades I spent watching new prisoners come to death row in Pennsylvania, I saw with little variation, the breakdown of the personality of men initially entering death row. This occurs when all structure from your previous life hits full stop and you

are left with ordered times for every facet of your care. Combined with intentional cruelty inflicted upon men in maximum-security settings, makes most men break down in their first two years. I entered death row at age 21, being the second youngest man on death row in my home state at the time in 1982.

In subsequent years, I saw death row swell in numbers from 24 in 1982, to 250 in 2004 by the time I was set free. I saw endless processions of men enter death row only to see that within two years each one either committed violence on others, self harmed or had serious mental breakdowns and required long term medications to keep them stable. Of the three men executed by Pennsylvania, two were heavily medicated psychiatric patients with long term mental health issues.

I have witnessed numerous suicide attempts and 11 successful suicides. I myself have not only attempted my own suicide at age 21, but later in my incarceration, in 2002, I asked to be executed rather than to continue being held in endless degradation.

It was only because of my asking to be executed that the DNA tests I sought for 15 years had been forced upon the state. I was not let out of solitary confinement until the day I was set free. I was exonerated by DNA in July of 2003 and was not released until January 2004. In the last months I was stripped of all death row privileges and was placed in an administrative/disciplinary housing unit where I was allowed nothing at all in my cell.

I was brought before the prison administration of Green County Prison in Pennsylvania once DNA had been used in court to remove all of my death row convictions. I was told that I posed a threat to the staff because in the years confined within solitary confinement, having my hand crushed by a guard or other things done to me made them fear me. I was told that they feared I would lash out at them because they could not accept that anyone who had been subjected to the things done to me could not want vengeance.

I guess the loudest words of damnation come from the very mouths of those who inflict the hurts they know make them the ones to be feared.

The second aspect of solitary confinement is the detriment of not having any new input. When a man is incarcerated long term his demons are not all around him, it's in every stupid mistake and every memory of pain his yesterday held.

That is what destroys anyone with decent feelings: The many stupid mistakes we made before that door shut. Every lie we told, every fight we had, every time we were embarrassed or hurt. It all bears down on you like some sick film reel of your life endlessly playing out what WAS your life. Prisoners die a thousand memories a day I was once told. I believe it is true.

Without structure we as humans break down or have our weaknesses magnified to the point of being overwhelmed. We need to have art, literacy and any form of in-cell programming we can if we care about not just erasing humans in cells. We need to understand that there are those who need to be separate from others. We have to look at the form of separation that provides security for staff and handles the burden on the state to care for the prisoner.

I think that the United States Government should seek programming and penal ideals from around the world and attempt to use as many of these as we can to better prisons for both

inmates and staff. Although it was not part of this statement in focus, we must really be aware that brutal regimens in prison break down the staff in their mental outlook. Prison guards have higher than average rates of suicide and divorce and alcohol abuse because of what they are being made to do to other humans. Solitary confinement is not a cure to violence nor a control to behavior. It is a short term part of what has to be long term strategy.

I now live in the United Kingdom. I hold a steady job and have a loving partner and we plan to marry next year. I have not wasted my time in anger for the many years I spent in solitary confinement. I also thank God for the hard work I spent studying and growing while inside.

I have been in the company of dignitaries, government officials, celebrities and powerful figures in society. I walk around society today no different than anyone else... and yet, I was on the FBI's most wanted list and came as close as 90 days away from being executed.

For all of Pennsylvania's efforts to hold me in solitary confinement because I was so dangerous was, in the end, a facade.

I make this last point not to be facetious, but to point out the reality that every prisoner at some point is going to get out, either on his feet or not. I am able to look at what was done to me and see beyond the draw of anger or pain. Not everyone is going to feel as I do, and they are going to be worse in society than they were before we subjected them to solitary confinement.

Lastly, I would like to add that in no way do I wish to take away from any respect shown to the families of those harmed by men who are placed in solitary confinement, and I also wish to acknowledge the few kind and compassionate human beings I met while in prison who rose above the setting and treated me with dignity or respect. Those are the moments I choose to hold onto from my time held within a cell.

Herman Atkins - *wrongly imprisoned by California for 11 ½ Years before being exonerated by DNA evidence*

My name is Herman Atkins, and I spent more than 11 years in prison in California for a rape and robbery that DNA testing ultimately proved I didn't commit. Being wrongly convicted and ordered to prison was a nightmare that I will never completely recover from, but the 16 months that I was forced to spend in solitary confinement was in a league all its own.

Nothing will ever compare to the way I was completely stripped of my humanity while in the "hole." I was confined for 23 hours a day in a small windowless room. A light remained on at all times, allowing the correction officers to watch my every move. I was given one hour for time in the yard and for a shower. But there were many times when, if I picked the yard first, I didn't get a shower. If I showered first, I wouldn't make it out to the yard.

In the brief time I was actually allowed out of confinement, I had to contend with constant tormenting from officers who tried to set me off so that they could prolong my sentence.

All of this happened to me, and I was proven innocent. That shouldn't matter though. When you're confined with no ability to read, to exercise, to receive basic medical attention or to develop your mind, it's just inhumane. I saw some people snap. They just lost their sanity.

As a nation, we must do better. When a government has the authority to treat people so poorly, it's impossible to hold citizens to a higher standard.

Conclusion

While reading this collection of witness testimonies, it is important to maintain respect for the individual witnesses who have come forward with their traumatic experiences as well as the countless other incarcerated individuals who are or were not able to express their experiences. This collection demonstrates that the practice of solitary confinement is dehumanizing, barbaric, and incredibly unjust. As we have organized this collection by the reasons for the witnesses' placement in solitary confinement, patterns emerge to which the reader becomes aware. One pattern demonstrates that placement in solitary confinement is often a mechanism to criminalize and punish an individual's identity. Similarly, a pattern emerges throughout the collection of using solitary confinement as a mechanism for punishing preexisting and developing mental health issues. Lastly, placement in solitary confinement as a method of retaliation demonstrates the pattern of senseless, and often unexplained, use of isolation. As the reader respectfully reads and analyzes this collection of witness testimony from solitary confinement, they will come to recognize these patterns of discrimination and senseless punishment, motivating them to take action to end this cruel and unjust system.

Criminalizing Identity

Many of the witness testimony included in this collection highlight the fact that solitary confinement is used as a mechanism for discriminatory treatment towards people of marginalized identities. These witnesses describe being placed in solitary as punishment for political organizing within prison, wearing a hijab, requiring extra medical attention, being transgender, being pregnant, or being Black.

Sonya Calico and Barbra Perez highlight how prisons often place transgender individuals in solitary confinement under the guise of protection from the general population. However, the real intent and impact is clear: placing transgender individuals in solitary confinement criminalizes their identity and frames their gender and sexuality as something that is dangerous, abnormal, and deserving of extreme social isolation and punishment. Calico describes arriving at a prison in Dallas and being placed in solitary confinement simply because a correctional officer got angry when Calico would not remove her shirt because she did not want to reveal her breasts in front of the male inmates. Calico explains that they put her in solitary confinement and “made it seem like it was protective custody...The floor sergeant said, ‘It’s for your protection,’ but she was just saying that to give a reason for putting me in lockup. When I tried to appeal it, it was denied because she said the reason was ‘protective custody.’”⁹ Solitary confinement is used as a tool to lock transgender individuals away and disguised as a practice that is in their best interest. It is clear, however, that solitary confinement is never the right option or in the best interest of anyone, and disguising it as such makes it that much harder for transgender individuals like Calico to get out. Calico explains in her essay that the correctional officers would not let her out even after she appealed several times and was “going crazy” because her cell was windowless and prohibited her from speaking to anyone else.¹⁰ Like Calico, Perez was deemed “at-risk” by correctional officers and immediately placed in solitary confinement as a way to “protect” her. “Protection” of transgender people is an obvious farce. Perez describes being placed next to men making obscene gestures towards her and asking her to show them her breasts. “Their version of keeping me safe was putting me side by side with what that facility determined to be the worst of

⁹ Calico, Sonya. *Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary*, by Taylor Pendergrass and Mateo Hoke, Haymarket Books, 2018.

¹⁰ Calico, Sonya. *Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary*, by Taylor Pendergrass and Mateo Hoke, Haymarket Books, 2018.

the worst...The anxiety and helplessness started to break me down, which is exactly what it's designed to do."¹¹

Placing transgender inmates in solitary not because of their actions, but because of their identities is discrimination plain and clear. Transgender inmates are at-risk to face more violence and sexual assault in general population; however, the solution is not to place them in solitary confinement. In fact, segregating transgender people stigmatizes them, cuts them off from educational and work opportunities, and encourages violence by the staff. Perez explains that in solitary, the staff treatment of her "ranged from indifference to open hostility and disgust."¹² In addition to being unfairly placed in solitary confinement, transgender people are often denied necessary healthcare services and medicine like hormone treatments.

Solitary confinement is also used as a discriminatory and retaliatory tactic against religious minorities, particularly Muslims. In her essay, Maryam Henderson-Uloho describes being placed in solitary confinement because she was a practicing Muslim and would not remove her hijab. Henderson-Uloho explains how the guards were not listening to why she could not remove her scarf and thought she was being defiant. In response, the guards "put me in handcuffs and shackles, very tight, and a woman guard ordered me to go with her...She told me to just keep walking, and she put me in a cell by myself. I was in the hole."¹³ When an incarcerated person looks or behaves outside of the norm, their differences are treated as things that can and must be corrected for. As such, Henderson-Uloho, along with other Muslim, transgender, and

¹¹ Perez, Barbra. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*, by Jean Casella et al., New Press, 2018.

¹² Perez, Barbra. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*, by Jean Casella et al., New Press, 2018.

¹³Henderson-Uloho, Maryam. *Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary*, by Taylor Pendergrass and Mateo Hoke, Haymarket Books, 2018.

marginalized people are subject to the whims of the prejudices of correctional officers that of whom determine their treatment inside prison.

Albert Woodfox's story is an example of how Black people, particularly Black people involved in political organizing in prison, are criminalized and sent to solitary confinement. Woodfox was wrongfully convicted of murder due to his affiliation with the Black Panthers and sentenced to life in solitary. He was released from prison 2016, but spent four decades in a 6-by-9 foot cell for 23 hours a day. Woodfox writes, "We knew that we were not locked up in a cell 23 hours a day because of what we did. We were there because of who we were."¹⁴

Women are another group of incarcerated people that are criminalized and placed in solitary confinement as a way to deprive them of pregnancy-related healthcare and a means to report sexual assault. Judith Vazquez's story is illuminating of the ways women are treated in solitary confinement. Vazquez was held in solitary before, during, and after her trial and conviction. During her first stint in solitary, she was sexually abused by an officer and became pregnant. Vazquez was forced by the officer that abused her to abort in her cell, during which she almost died. She later became disabled and was forced to stay in solitary from 2004 to 2013.¹⁵ Since there are barely any guidelines about why and how long incarcerated individuals can be sent to solitary (and if there are, they are often ignored), correctional officers can place women in solitary at random. Women often get placed in solitary as retaliation for reporting sexual assault. Once a woman is in solitary, they are in an even more vulnerable position for guards to prey on, like Vazquez. Placing women in solitary confinement works to silence them and ensure that predatory correctional officers are not held accountable.

¹⁴ WOODFOX, ALBERT. *SOLITARY*. GROVE, 2019.

¹⁵ Vazquez, Judith. *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*, by Jean Casella et al., New Press, 2018.

Criminalizing Mental Health

Solitary confinement as a means of criminalizing personhood also includes solitary confinement's criminalization of mental health. Mental health within the incarcerated population is a systemic problem and the carceral institution fails to recognize how mental health and past trauma influences an individual's actions relating to their criminal sentence. Furthermore, the prison system uses mental health to justify placing individuals in solitary confinement, either under the guise of protecting them from other incarcerated individuals or protecting the general population from them. Once placed in solitary, the mental health of these individuals is not aided but rather worsened by the extreme isolation and lack of treatment, heightening the individual's prior mental health struggles or creating new ones. Many pieces of witness testimony in this collection highlight both instances.

One notable testimony comes from Tashon Burke, an incarcerated man suffering from mental illness, spending almost 8 years of his sentence in solitary confinement. Throughout his piece, he identifies how his own preexisting mental illness suffered further damaging effects due to his isolation. Burke's testimony includes references to the physical conditions of his incarceration, but most notably his writing highlights the sights and sounds of other struggling incarcerated individuals. He describes guards dragging people out of their cells after suicide attempts and hearing the screams of fellow incarcerated individuals as they slowly lose their sanity because of the lack of human connection. He uses the metaphor of demons to personify his mental health struggles, as the PTSD, depression, and anxiety are all like individual people to him, effecting his daily life within his isolation.¹⁶ Tashon Burke's account of the impact his mental illness suffered during his time in solitary confinement highlights how solitary is not a

¹⁶ Burke, Tashon. "Voices from Solitary: Satans Domain." *Solitary Watch*

method of rehabilitation, but rather a mechanism for criminalizing individuals suffering from conditions requiring treatment unprovided by the prison-industrial complex.

Other witnesses write impactful testimonies about incarceration due to their mental health. Sarah Jo Pender elaborates on women she describes as “acutely psychotic” placed in solitary confinement for refusing to take their medication.¹⁷ Their placement in solitary is not intended to benefit these women, positively motivating them to take their medication, but rather is a mechanism of punishment forcing these women to either take their medication or suffer the traumatizing consequences of isolation. Christopher Balmer, a witness from a prison in Pennsylvania, tells the story of individuals placed in solitary confinement due to mental illness and how the prison administration extends their isolation due to what the system views as behavior infractions, more accurately described as behavior resulting from a lack of treatment.

Balmer writes;

“Then you have the people who are mentally ill and are isolated in these units for years at a time, racking up dozens of years worth of misconducts. These misconducts range anywhere for attempting suicide, self mutilation, refusal to obey an order, assault, destruction of property and a lot of other infractions of institutional rules. Keep in mind, these are mental health inmates, those who are in need of treatment - the same treatment the Department of Corrections promotes to the public that they provide. Instead, like myself, they are provided more isolation time for harming themselves. (For example, I have received nearly nine

¹⁷ Pender, Sarah Jo. “A Day in the Life.” *Solitary Watch*.

hundred (900) days of isolation time for self-mutilation. Instead of treatment, I was punished.)”¹⁸

Balmer, Pender, and Burke’s testimony highlight how the prison system uses solitary confinement as a punishment for incarcerated individuals who have diagnosable mental illness which they cannot control. Rather than providing the proper support and treatment these incarcerated people need, the system criminalizes them through mechanisms of control like solitary confinement and further uses the isolation to hide the individuals from the general population, as well as the outside public. By hiding these struggling individuals, the system no longer feels the responsibility to treat their mental health concerns, as they will no longer impact the general population or warrant concern from the outside public. However, solitary confinement of the mentally ill continues to victimize the incarcerated individual themselves.

Finally, this collection of witness testimony emphasizes the undiagnosed mental illnesses either exaggerated or developed by incarcerated people within solitary confinement. Robert Dewey describes the need for human contact and the starvation of such contact which occurs in solitary confinement.¹⁹ This starvation leads to a nervous reaction causing the body to enter into a fight or flight mindset. The question remains how long are individuals expected to fight their inner demons while in these isolated conditions? Nicholas James Yarris describes the high amount of suicide attempts and successful suicides he witnessed while in solitary confinement for twenty three years.²⁰ Pender similarly describes the impact on mental health she observed

¹⁸ Balmer, Christopher. “Department of Corrections? -Or- Department of Control?” *American Prison Writing Archive at Hamilton College*, 2014

¹⁹ Dewey, “Statement of Six People Who Were Wrongly Convicted on Their Experiences in Solitary Confinement.” Included in: Hearing Before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights. Text in: The Innocence Project. (Date: 19 June 2012)

²⁰ Yarris, “Statement of Six People Who Were Wrongly Convicted on Their Experiences in Solitary Confinement.” Included in: Hearing Before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights. Text in: The Innocence Project. (Date: 19 June 2012)

during her incarceration in solitary and the lack of support and treatment available to struggling individuals. She particularly notes, “Despite knowing that isolation can drive people insane, the mental health care here is woefully inadequate. Once a month, a mental health staff comes to ask us if we are hallucinating, hearing voices, or are suicidal. More frequent meetings can be requested, but they offer no coping skills, no therapy, no advocacy.”²¹ These and many more testimonies throughout this collection highlight the impact solitary confinement has on preexisting mental illness and developed mental illness due to isolation. Furthermore, this collection shows a pattern of the prison system using solitary confinement as a mechanism to criminalize mental health—failing to provide treatment and opting to punish individuals for diagnosable conditions beyond their control.

General Punishment

More generally, solitary confinement is often used as a means of general punishment or retaliation against an incarcerated person. Much of the witness testimony in this body demonstrates how senseless the reasoning for putting one in solitary can be.

Cesar Francisco Villa spent eleven years in solitary confinement for being falsely deemed an inactive gang member. Because he was not affiliated with the gang and he was unable to provide information about them, he was placed in solitary. Judith Vazquez was put in solitary from the moment of her arrest. She was held in solitary for three years – before, during, and after her trial, without ever receiving an explanation as to why this was the case.

Khalfani Malik Khaldun was falsely accused and wrongfully convicted of murdering a prison guard. He was incarcerated in Indiana prisons for over 30 years, 20 of those solitary confinement. Another case of false conviction, Justin Erskine was convicted of 1st degree

²¹ Pender, Sarah Jo. “A Day in the Life.” *Solitary Watch*.

murder and sentenced to natural life without parole. Michael “Zaharibu” Dorrough’s testimony also sheds light on life in solitary confinement after being falsely convicted and imprisoned. He spent more than 26 years in solitary despite there being evidence of his innocence. Michael Arreygue spent a year in solitary confinement for committing no offense, based purely on false information given by an informant. Evidently, this is a pattern among the testimonies in this collection, with incarcerated people consistently being placed in solitary confinement as a band-aid solution and punishment. Former Black Panther Albert Woodfox, too, was in solitary confinement for more than 40 years for a murder he did not commit. In a 2019 *Guardian* article, he writes, “Solitary confinement is used as a punishment for the specific purpose of breaking a prisoner” (Woodfox). These testimonies indicate just how inhumane and arbitrary solitary confinement is.

In other instances, incarcerated people are placed in solitary confinement to explicitly punish them for their actions going against the institution. Joe Giarratano was placed in solitary confinement due to his activism and his fostering of relationships with other incarcerated individuals. His trial was considered a miscarriage of justice, but new evidence had not been permitted to be submitted. As stated in his testimony, he was considered a “politically hot prisoner” the Virginia Corrections Director wanted to get rid of. Placing Giarratano in solitary confinement was not in an effort to protect him or the public, but simply a lazy method to isolate Giarratano, to restrain his political awareness and thought as much as possible. Brian Nelson spent his final 12 years in prison in solitary confinement for refusing to facilitate a prison fight. After his release, he detailed his experiences in solitary to journalists and legislative hearings. He passed away in April of 2021 after years of working to reform solitary confinement.

In this way, solitary confinement is utilized as a tool of power and punishment by the American prison system, where incarcerated individuals suffer senselessly in complete isolation.

Action Items

It is clear through these witness testimonies that solitary confinement is not a practice that should be regulated; rather, prisons and jails must discontinue its use entirely. Solitary confinement is not only dehumanizing, inhumane, and cruel, but also an internationally recognized illegal form of torture that has been shown time and time again to have disastrous effects on those who are confined. Many of the essays in this collection demonstrate that incarcerated individuals are often placed in solitary confinement as a way to silence them, stifle their voices, and break down their spirit. As such, the fact that these individuals were able to dictate their experience and the fact that these texts have made it into the world for public consumption is somewhat of a miracle. As a reader of these essays, there is a responsibility to do something about this unjust practice. Thus, reading these texts is an invitation to take actionable steps to stop the use of solitary confinement and help those who are currently in solitary. Here are some action items to take after reading this collection:

Write to someone in solitary confinement: People in solitary confinement are alone nearly 24 hours a day and cut off from the rest of society. They often do not have anyone to call or correspond with. That is why one of the most meaningful things you can do is become pen pals with someone in solitary confinement. Solitary Watch, an organization dedicated to investigating and disseminating information about solitary confinement, has a program called “Lifelines to

Solitary” that anyone above the age of 21 can participate in. To join the program, go to solitarywatch.org.²²

Contact your local and state elected officials and make demands: issues concerning state prisons and jails are often controlled by local and state officials. Writing to your local elected representatives, going to town halls, and pressuring candidates to take a stance against solitary confinement can be a very effective way to ensure solitary confinement is discontinued in the prisons and jails located in your community. Additionally, state level officials have the power to pass legislation to stop solitary confinement. In fact, in New York this past April, the nation’s strongest anti-solitary legislation was passed into the law.²³ Contacting your elected officials will help create pressure to pass legislation like this around the country.

Contact your governor and ask where they stand on solitary: governors in each state are tasked with appointing the heads of the state prison system. It is important to know where your governor stands on the issue of solitary confinement and ensure they appoint correctional department commissioners who want to discontinue the use of solitary confinement.

Donate your time and money to prisoners’ rights organizations: there are a ton of organizations working to ensure that the rights of incarcerated people in solitary confinement are being respected and that the use of solitary is halted in all areas of the country. Some of these

²² *Solitary Watch*, solitarywatch.org/about-lifelines/.

²³ Riccobene, Veronica. “Cuomo Concedes on Two Big Wins for Criminal Justice Reform.” *The Appeal Political Report*, 1 Apr. 2021, theappeal.org/politicalreport/cuomo-signs-off-on-two-big-wins-for-criminal-justice-reform/.

organizations include Solitary Watch, the ACLU, Vera Institute of Justice, the Equal Justice Initiative, and The Sentencing Project.

Share these essays with friends and family: sharing these essays is a great way to spread awareness about the issues surrounding solitary confinement and encourage other people to take action as well.

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