

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/04/17/to-see-or-not-to-see-capturing-herman-wallaces-41-years-in-solitary/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#) | April 17, 2013



Angad Bhalla is the director of *Hermans House*, a documentary film that examines the injustice of solitary confinement by exploring the creative journey and friendship between artist Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. Forty-one years ago today, Wallace was placed in solitary confinement following the murder of a corrections officer at Louisianas notorious Angola prison. He is believed to have spent more time in solitary than anyone in the history of the American penal system.

Bhallas previous projects include *U.A.I.L. Go Back*, which was used widely as an organizing tool to successfully pressure a multinational corporation to withdraw from a project in rural India that would have exacted a tremendous human and environmental toll on the community, and *Writings on the Wall*, a short documentary on the lives of Indian street artists. He also contributed to the editing of *Families Under Threat*, a documentary short produced for the Center For Constitutional Rights, and *Tooties Last Suit*, which was screened at the Tribeca Film Festival. He is a 2012 recipient of a Soros Justice Fellowship.

[Hermans House](#) opens theatrically in [New York City this Friday, April 19](#), and will be broadcast nationally July 8 on the [PBS series POV](#).

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Someone once told me that the key to a good documentary is access. I somehow decided to make the film *Hermans House* with no access to one of my main subjects, Herman Wallace, or to my primary location, his prison cell. Making a film about a man who has spent more than four decades in solitary confinement, I decided that this turn this lack of access into a creative opportunity.

Considering his status as one of the renowned Angola 3, I never expected to get access to film Herman in his solitary confinement cell. Herman Wallace, along with Albert Woodfox and Robert King, were Black Panther activists targeted and framed to quash their dissent. Several great documentaries on the Angola 3 were released before I finished *Hermans House*, and none of them had been permitted access to interview Herman or Albert, so when I received my refusal notice arrived, I was not surprised.

But after reading James Ridgeway's *Fortresses of Solitude*, in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, I discovered that keeping my camera out of Angolas isolation unit was far from unique. Given the pattern of keeping journalists away from solitary cells around the country, my experience only confirms a pattern of keeping our countrys torturous policies hidden from public view. What does it mean for our democratic project when filmmakers and other journalists are denied access to the solitary confinement cells that house upwards of 80,000 of our countrys residents?

The prison industrial complex has always functioned to disappear large segments of our population. Solitary confinement cells are often described as prisons within the prison, so disappearing those within them requires more than the standard practice of locating the prison in a rural hinterland away from any population center. As we are seeing, disappearing those in solitary requires full state censorship.

With *Hermans House*, I hope to use this censorship to my advantage. I felt that, if done right, not having access to Herman or his cell could only reinforce his confinement and separation from the audience. I also was telling the story of the remarkable expression his

struggle found in an unusual project proposed by artist Jackie Sumellimagining Wallaces dream homes I had a palette of other visuals to work with.

Only audiences will be able to decide whether my choices of animation and other effects convey the true horror of what spending 23 hours a day in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for years on end might feel like. But of course, to actually end this torturous practice in our prisons, using our imaginations is just the first step in a journey that will require us to stop the state from concealing solitary cells from our view.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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so Hes a murderer.. He is serving his sentence like everyone else..

Injustice of solitary confinement cannot be justified with whatever other wrongdoing. Otherwise we would remain in old imaginations, eye by eye et al. The Hole does not correct. It brutalizes responsible prison officers.

So journalists are all up in arms about the treatment of a felon, but they IGNORE the inhumane slaughter of babies who survived an abortion by a sadistic doctor. Am I the only one that cant make sense of a liberal?

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