

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/09/08/where-punishment-becomes-torture-testimony-of-dorsey-nunn-on-solitary-confinement/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | September 8, 2011

Dorsey Nunn, Executive Director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children and member of All of Us or None, has been visiting inmates in the California prison system for over 50 years in both professional and personal capacities. Nunn speaks about the experience of PJ, a friend who has been in solitary confinement for over two decades at Pelican Bay State Prison and questions the practices of long-term solitary confinement and gang validation.

A Word Document of this testimony can be downloaded here: <https://solitarywatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/dorsey-nunn-testimony.doc>

Statement of Dorsey Nunn at Hearing of California Assembly Public Safety Committee, August 23, 2011.

My name is Dorsey Nunn and I am the Executive Director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, we are a public interest law office. I am also a proud member of All of Us or None that is a project of LSPC. All of Us or None is dedicated to the full restoration of the civil and human rights of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. I have been visiting people within the California Department of Corrections for approximately 51 years, 22 years as personal visits and 29 years professionally as a paralegal.

My office had been contacted consistently since the opening of Pelican Bay where prisoners human rights were being violated. On June 28, 2011, with a hunger strike looming I decided to visit Pelican Bay for the first time. It was too hard to ignore people clearly stating that they were willing to risk their lives to change how they were being treated. I interviewed people with standard questions assessing their medical history, emergency contact information and the potential depth of the strike efforts.

There must be line if crossed where punishment becomes torture. It may not be torture to isolate human beings for a few days, a few weeks, a few months but it could be something totally different to isolate them a few years or a few decades. One of the people that I visited was PJ. I knew him when I was a fellow prisoner. When I asked PJ how long he had been in segregation he informed me that they put him Administrative Segregation in 1988. Often when I visit someone who knows me they ask me to work on their individual case. PJ didn't, we spent time talking about torture. He knew about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. He couldn't understand what would make something torture at Guantanamo Bay and not at Pelican Bay.

The first thing that struck me when PJ entered that the non-contact legal visiting area was that he lost his color; he was much lighter than I remembered him. Over the course of that day I learned about the lack of direct sunlight and where people went to exercise was referred to as the dog run. When they were in the dog run they were unable to experience what is considered the outdoors, no trees, no grass and natural sunlight having to squeeze itself over a very high wall. A blessing was to actually see the sun and the clouds. On a rainy day a blessing was not to get wet because of the lack of real weather gear to protect you against inclement weather. When I was talking to PJ I kept thinking if White people could really tell when Black people experienced a color change. Do we always appear to be tan to them?

Two people told me on that day they missed talking to Black People. I couldn't help but to imagine what it meant to be annihilated culturally and isolated to point where a person found it refreshing to talk to someone from the same race in America. One of the guys I visited complained that he only spoke to one other Black person legally in twenty years. The other times he made the attempt he was given a disciplinary report. What did this mean to their re-entry when your only contact with other human beings were acts of hostility not be touched or to only be touched suspiciously. What did it mean to communities of color to absorb large number of people who have had this experience.

The reason why I have elected to talk about this particular visit was because PJ was locked up most of this time because of association and the fact that he would not name names. If this particular visit has any real meaning to this hearing you would have to consider the following things:

Can justice be had absent an admission of wrong-doing? It is my belief that people have been tortured for multiple years.

Can a system be fair or just if it is based on the use of confidential information extracted through questionable means?

Should people have the fundamental right to confront their accusers?

Has this practice of placing people in Administrative Segregation based on flimsy information secured through the use of questionable methods, unfairly deprived people of their right to be reasonably considered for parole? PJ has been eligible for parole for 35 years. How much programming and rehabilitation time has been lost?

The last thing that I want to say is PJ my friend and I didnt mention it earlier because I didnt want to be labeled a gang member and subject my organization to the suspicion of the California Department of Correction based on association. Such a label enables the state not be held accountable for their acts of violence.

Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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may you find it that my words and thoughts lead on may there be light in the darkness of justice

The use of long term solitary confinement across the US is a national disgrace.

The use of solitary confinement across the US is a national disgrace.

I believe, as my son is also in solitary confinement in a prison, that the reason that men and women in prisons are able to be placed and left in solitary confinement for months and/or years and/or decades is because the prisons simply CAN do it! There is little oversight or pre-occupation for the rights of prisoners. Persons who have been convicted of a crime and are in jails and/or prisons are seen as less than.. and undeserving of any humanity, rights, or common decency. There is no transparency in prison life; Wardens, Captains, Lieutenants, Sergeants, officers, staff are able to do just about anything they want to our loved ones with no one to answer to except each other. It is the rare person who is strong and brave enough to speak about the truth of what goes on in prisons. The medical, psychological, emotional, physical needs of prisoners are simply not a priority in American prisons; neither is rehabilitation. Custody and punishment are IT. Even when staff are forced to take courses to learn to be sensitive to the needs of the mentally ill inmates, the type of persons who usually sign up to work in this type of environment are, in large part, those who enjoy having power & control over others weaker than they. Legislation must change, but also the mindset of the public about the men and women incarcerated. Prisons are BIG BUSINESS as well. Look what Sheriff Arpaio of Arizona who has gone into a business partnership to open a private detention center for undocumented immigrants. When a person is placed in solitary it makes it that much easier to forget about the person and label him or her as the worst or the worst, a phrase used so much now in T.V. and documentaries about the criminal justice system. So much anger, rage, resentment, hate, and rebelliousness is the only result from solitary. The person becomes unable to relate to other human beings, unable to solve problems in a logical manner, unable to truly trust or love or care anymore the person is CHANGED not for the better, but for the worse. I thought our country was about democracy, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and yes, laws and government. But we are doing our country a great disservice by treating our people, no matter what they have done or where they have come from, in this manner. IT IS WRONG!

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