

Center For Constitutional Rights

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2017/03/23/release-solitary-it-was-time-machine>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

To mark the 23rd of the month, invoking the 23 hours per day that prisoners spend isolated in special housing units, activists throughout California are taking action to bring attention to prison conditions. Below, Arthur Ramirez, a class member in [Ashker v. Governor of California](#), shares his experience of being released into the general prison population after years in solitary confinement, following a settlement in the case that effectively ended long-term solitary confinement in CA prisons.

On November 8, 2013, I was finally released from Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU). Pelican Bay prison is in the city of Crescent City, California. My name is Art N. Ramirez. At present I am in Pelican Bay State Prison Restricted Custody General Population (RCGP) Pilot Program, the first of its kind in California prisons. RCGP is mainly for inmates who have not [debriefed](#), dropped out of a gang, or who have not been on the Special Needs Yard (SNY) [protective custody yards] and not active in gangs.

I was released to general population under the [Ashker v. Brown](#) historic settlement. I was in solitary confinement for a total of 33 years, and spent 24 of those years at Pelican Bay.

So the reader is aware Pelican Bay (SHU) is the new Alcatraz where supposedly the worst of the worst are placed. The history is in the *Ashker v. Brown* filings.

My name is Art N. Ramirez and this is my story after all the torture, abuse and mental deprivation while doing that time for no disciplinary infraction. And I was one of a few lucky ones that did not crack or break mentally during that period. At least 2,000 did break and debriefed.

The only way out of the SHU was to debrief, die, or parole. A [hunger strike of last resort](#) changed this correctional prison system throughout California prisons, and ultimately the courts released those in long term segregation. It all began because we asked for warm food and were told debrief and you will receive hot food, warm clothing, and be released to the mainline [general population]. The *Ashker v. Brown* settlement is the result.

What do we learn from all this? A broken promise can create bigger problems. When the fox is guarding the hen house, prisoners receive no fair or equal justice.

Some of this writing is from my article I wrote in [Prison Focus, Number 42, Spring 2014](#), which is a California prison paper. Thirty thousand inmates from California prisons participated in the hunger strikes and work stoppages; throughout the United States inmates in some form participated. All because Pelican Bay SHU inmates asked for warm clothing to protect from the cold, better hot food, an end to mental deprivation and long-term segregation.

When I'm asked how I managed so many years in SHU, I said, Same way you eat an elephant, one bite at a time.

So the reader can understand more, I thought back to my Grandpa Frank, cigar smoking with deep voice told me when I was a kid, Wild horses are wild are free, and roam the prairie go where ever they please. Once the horse is broken, his spirit is broken and is ridden, is no longer free. Never allow your spirit to be broken or you will be no good raising a family or any good to yourself! No one will know, but you! I said, Grandpa, I will always be a wild free horse.

My first experience when I was released from solitary was a one-week layover in Folsom Prison. This means rest, change buses, pick up new inmates. The facility consists of cages. It was my first experience in cages where each had a toilet, and a sink and mirror, and hair clippers.

I was let out into the yard. My first sunshine. It was hot. I got my first sun-tan in the last 24 years. I felt good, I was reenergized, like I had solar panels, or like a cocoon becoming a butterfly in slow motion. It was my first time seeing the sun in 24 years.

When the bus arrived at Corcoran State Prison, we were placed in cages outside to wait for processing. We were in exercise cages from 3:00pm to 8:00pm at night, but I didn't mind. There was hot sun and a lot of scenery. The view was like the movie *Planet of the Apes* a bunch of cages in a boomerang shape with a giant grass field as a view, with a lot of SHU units. I saw the sunset for the first time, and the moon and stars for the first time in 24 years. I saw three or four different species of birds. Believe me, it was something very different and a shock to the brain cells. It was like a time machine. In the Pelican Bay SHU, I learned to accept my conditions, get used to the cement life of living in a box, to see only TV. Here your five senses are adjusting to reality! This is paradise compared to the SHU. The sun was literally re-energizing my whole body, it was a strange feeling! Now I know how Dracula feels needing blood to stay young. Only instead of blood I need solar energy!

You see, I am now 63 years young. When I went in the sun, all my wrinkles disappeared and I looked 10 years younger, like magic.

Inside the prison grounds I saw paintings on the buildings of forests, bridges, all kinds of stuff. I saw garbage trucks, inmates walking, inmates being escorted to the law library, clinic, hospital, visitation, a bus that takes inmates to the prison grounds hospital. Its like a little city inside the walls.

Being away from all this all these years does something to your brain, your five senses and your emotions.

I was affected by mental deprivations while in the SHU all those yrs. I came out and had to decompress. All of my five senses are now normal. I can see what I look like in a real clear mirror. I can comb my hair with a comb instead of a palm brush, after all those years without these minor comforts of everyday life.

Now I have a window and can now see the moon and stars every night, the birds, the sky, the plains, sun, and a view of the green forest. Im alive now!

I received a six-hour contact visit with my girlfriend and my 2 sisters. My sister Mitsy wrote the prison warden Ducart in Pelican Bay State Prison to show her appreciation for correction guards showing them kindness and respect, and to say how human this contact visit was in comparison to the SHU window visits. How this should have been done long ago and she can see the difference in her brothers demeanor.

After 34 years she said she was finally able to hug, kiss, and touch her brother. The point here was view from a public citizen and CEO of her own business.

I must add the simple pleasure of the five senses. I ate ice cream sandwiches, various foods, drinks from food machine in visiting. My stomach blew up, filling it with various foods and drinks I hadn't had in 34 years. My visitors could not believe I ate so much. My skin color is back, my hair looks like hair now. And you know what? When I went to Corcoran and we were placed in cages that first day, they had cows nearby. And I smelled cow shit! And to me it smelled good. Because it had been 24 years in the SHU where you smell nothing. So cow shit smelled good for that reason :-)

Im now in RCGP, a mainline program hoping for elder parole under a new Federal Court agreement to release inmates 60 years old and over who have completed 25 years on their sentences. I did not debrief, Im not dead, I have not paroled. But Im not in the SHU. This was a learning experience and also a survival story. I have a lot of medical questions about long-term isolation, for example how it affects the mind and certain vitamins such as Vitamin D.

Why did so many break mentally and others didn't? These are questions you can ask yourself and wonder.

Respectfully,

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P.S. Feel free to write me and answer any questions or you can ask me anything. I will respond. I am the mac Chairmen inmate advisor in Pelican Bay State Prison R.C.G.P. Pilot Program.

[View the discussion thread.](#)

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