

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | July 21, 2015

The following is a compilation of writings by Geri Erwin, who is serving 25 years to life on a second-degree murder charge. Erwin is a transgender woman involved in various facets of activism regarding sexual assault in prison, as well as just treatment of incarcerated individuals who are on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. She began her activism at 13, and she continues to advocate from New York's Southport Correctional Facility, where she has spent time in solitary confinement. Hallie Grossman

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Most everyone has the essence of a prison cell in their mind: 6 x 9, bars, bed, sink, toilet, light, locker, bikini-clad pin-up pasted on the wall

But that is like saying we all know the essence of a house 4 walls, roof, door or two, same window then we all know there are many variables in houses, what they were like when they were new, what condition they are in now, and, most critically, as the real estate people will sing in chorus: Location, location, location!

Like much in life, jails and their subcomponent cells depend upon the perception of the occupant. When one is fresh and new to prison, everything will look, sound, and feel more foreboding and scary than it really is; this is when you'll take that eternally long walk through a surreal environment. So many foreign sights and sounds, but it's all sort of a blur, anxiety expanding in your chest like a steam boiler peaked to explode at any moment. Then suddenly you're there. Just the briefest impression of the cell front bars 6 feet high 6 feet wide two feet or so slides to one side and you're inside

This is where you live now

The cells don't vary much from one to another. In the end, it is you who makes the cell different from the next, and over time you change for better, for worse, it doesn't really matter you are who you are and the prison is what it is.

I am a 48 year-old, white, male-to-female (pre-op) transgender prisoner. I'm 20 years into a 25 to life sentence.

Life as a transgender person is complicated with a capital C. Think of being, say, Anna Kendrick trapped in Bruce Willis body. I am 510, 225 pounds with broad shoulders and an overall masculine appearance. I can, and most often do, pass as a straight white male though my sisters and brothers under the LGBTQI rainbow know better, often with as little as initial eye contact

For 17 years I was blessed to continue my practical, yet patently cowardly, closeted lifestyle. Then my luck ran out. Keen predators had sniffed me out. Through anti-gay hate or morbid desire, I was targeted for attack.

I was jumped by three gang members. While I fought, I was quickly beaten to the shower floor. Cold, hard, wet, slippery kicked and incapacitated. So fast, with a kaleidoscope of images and thoughts swirling in my overwhelmed mind a core screaming alert siren blares in my brain:

I can die herenow!

Weapons do they have weapons?!

I compress into myself, anticipating icy flare of pain when a steel or sharpened Plexiglas shank rips into me. I've been cut and stabbed before I know what it feels like.

But now, no weapons not homemade, anyhow. What comes is different, worse.

The leader seizes me around waist while another grabs my shoulders. I struggle but am spent, helpless. I'm not processing what's unfolding. Even as the leader yanks down my boxers and begins raping me, I just can't believe and accept that this is actually happening, happening to me. All this through a disorientating filter of disbelief.

Yet its all too real. The taunting, the harsh manic laughter as the leader continues to thrust into me. The one immobilizing me from the front has his erect penis in my face trying to get me to perform oral sex. When I wont comply, he strikes me in the head and face more. Frustrated he settles for masturbating and ejaculating into my face, smearing his semen-coated penis between my lips, against my teeth and gums. Determined to somehow penetrate, inject some of his essence into his victim.

This crowning act of defilement prompts more laughter. I feel the last thrusts and burning, stinging surge as my rapist reaches his climax: Semen hot and alien inside me. Flash of new and different pain as he withdraws from me. They deliver a final flurry of kicks to my sides and back and melt away. Leaving me lying limp, used uplike a bag of garbage

I gather myself up, assessing injuries, but focus on cleaning the blood (mine) and semen (theirs) from my body. I wash and scrub under shower spray frantically trying to think how I can get back to my cell without COs noting Ive been in an incident. I dress and limp my way through recreation yard, trying to be inconspicuous. But an alert CO notes blood seeping fresh on my face. Snatches me up and escorts me to the facility hospital.

The evidence of rape is quickly noted. Blood and semen-stained boxers confiscated as well as painful and humiliating swabs (of rectum and throat). I am given minimal medical treatment, no X-rays. The staff takes the rest of my clothes. I am forced to leave wearing only small towel wrapped and held around waist (too short to tie). I am escorted in this manner to Involuntary Protective Custody (IPC).

I am not provided with any further or follow-up medical care. Instead I am issued tickets (misbehavior reports) for:

Given a perfunctory hearing on charges, I am sentenced to 30 days keeplock for the first charge and six months SHU for the second charge.

For the next two months, I sit in isolation with no staff interview, no further medial follow up. I am then put on transfer to Upstate CF (a dedicated SHU facility).

NYDOCCS rarely transports prisoners directly to the destination facility. One or more transit stops, with overnight to several day stays involved. At a layover stop, I am escorted by a staff member, handcuffed behind by back. I am directed into small room and sit on bench. The staff member closes the door, makes some reference to the rape incident, exposes his semi-erect penis and, standing in front of me, tells me to polish his knob.

I am absolutely shocked, but recover enough to bluff. I tell him hed better just pull the pin (personal alarm). He backs off, reziping his pants, trying to play it off as if he were just joking with me. No sane, rational person would believe these actions as a mere joke. Had I complied, that act of oral sex would just have been a bonus for a predatory staff member.

I arrive at Upstate CF exhausted, stiff and stressed out. A sexual abuse incident followed by an eight-hour bus ride with handcuffs attached to my waist, chain, shackles

As a trans woman in prison I always feel some level of threat/danger, but being held in Upstate CF SHU, I never knew if they would put another prisoner in (double cell) with me policy is policy, but Im not even registered LGBTQI, for their classification purposes (not that my identity is a secret to staff). I struggled to overcome fear of being forced to double cell with stranger, a potentially violent homophobe or my next rapist Recovering from one rape, an attempt of a staff member to coerce oral sex from me while handcuffedthe unknown is the scary thing, whether day or night.

I spend my entire time in this SHU wondering if they will toss in a cell mate at any given time forcing me to try to live/sleep with stranger, and potential next sexual predator, locked in this isolated space.

There is very little staff/prisoner interaction, and when there is you are forced to try to yell through plexiglass window, making communication difficult and negating any shred of confidentiality.

I try several times to get mental health staff to put me on call-out for interview, help with after effects of sexual assault, but with no success. I pursue follow-up medical care and STI testing, finding, to my surprise, that reports and documentation of the sexual assault incident do *not* exist. The medical report in the file states, Inmate fell, in yard, then goes on to detail injuries inconsistent with a fall and some unique to sexual assault (perhaps patient fell, and landed on erect penis.).

I am now stating, to them, an initial report of sexual assault. This spurs a Kafkaesque *Groundhog Day* sequence of fresh interviews by security staff *every* time sexual assault is mentioned. Yet each is either not documented, or inaccessible to the next interviewer. On the whole, these interviews are conducted in an insensitive and dismissive manner. One I terminated when the questioning appeared more to fill a need for titillation of the interviewer than legitimate purpose

When I was finally given interview with mental health unit staff, I was told that: I wouldnt be at this facility long enough to be worth their time/effort to open case on me

I have once again been transferred to another general population facility. It is quite challenging and disorienting re-acclimating to the normal prison routine. From 23 hours a day in a cell for 18 months to scurrying all over jail expected to keep pace with prisoner peers, most half or less than my age. There is no type of transition program or consideration given to this adjustment period. Perhaps this is an unwritten part of SHU punishment.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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I am sorry for what you have been through Geri. I hope you find peace within you.

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