

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | December 7, 2013

I found solitary confinement the most forbidding aspect of prison life. There is no end and no beginning; there is only one's mind, which can begin to play tricks. Was that a dream or did it really happen? One begins to question everything.

Nelson Mandela, from his 1994 autobiography *The Long Walk to Freedom*

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison. He had received a life sentence in 1964 for conspiring against the apartheid regime, and spent the first 18 of those years on Robben Island, off the coast of Cape Town. There, along with other leaders of the liberation movement, Mandela was housed in a special section of the prison and did hard labor in the island's lime quarry. He was allowed one visit a year and one letter every six months. Mandela was in and out of solitary confinement during those years, but he also managed to earn a law degree and establish himself as a leader among his jailed comrades.

Mandela's period of long-term isolation began in 1982, when he was transferred from Robben Island to Pollsmoor Prison on the mainland. By then, Mandela had become a world famous symbol of his cause. His supporters believed the move was made because he was exerting too great an influence on younger people being brought to the island prison, which had become known as Mandela University.

Mandela spent much of the next six years in solitary confinement. In 1988, after spending time in the hospital for tuberculosis, he was moved to Victor Verster Prison, where he lived under less harsh and restrictive conditions, and entered into clandestine negotiations with the government to bring an end to apartheid. In 1990, amidst international pressure, he was released from prison at the age of 71. He lived nearly 24 more years, until his death this week a model of courage and leadership not only to his people, but to political prisoners around the world.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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I write incarcerated people, and one of their complaints is the inability to take college courses and here I read Mandela received a college education while in prison. The second point I would like to make is Nelson's greatness was his ability to negotiate with his tormentors and put aside anger to work for the creation of a state based on racial equality. We in the movement can learn the important lesson as we go forward to meet with and carry on conversations with those we are unable to agree with. Meeting with the members of the Correction Officers Benevolent Association, the Captains union will be a step in finding common ground for future joint projects to completely construct a humane and sane criminal justice system.

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