

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2011/12/20/the-silent-terrifying-world-of-a-deaf-prisoner/>

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by [James Ridgeway](#) | December 20, 2011

My article The Silent Treatment appeared on the Mother Jones website a few days ago. It tells the story of Felix Garcia, a deaf man framed by his own siblings for a murder he did not commit, and given an effective life sentence. His experiences during 30 years in the Florida prison system have been horrendous, but many of them are shared by the tens of thousands of deaf and hard of hearing inmates in prisons and jails across the country. What follows are the opening paragraphs; please [click through to Mother Jones](#) to read the article in full.

This is a collect call from a correctional institution, says the robotic female voice at the other end of the line. After a moment of confusion, I realize it must be Felix Garcia, whom I visited several weeks earlier in a northern Florida prison. He is serving a life sentence for a robbery-murder for which his own brother now admits to framing him. I sent him a card for his 50th birthday. It had a picture of flowers something he probably hasn't seen in 30 years and some lame words of encouragement. Now he's calling to thank me and to plead for help.

His words seem surreal, relayed in the emotionless drone of a TTY operator: Four of his fellow deaf inmates have tried to commit suicide one somehow managed to swallow a razor blade. It sounds like he's thinking about doing the same. Please, the voice intones, will you phone my lawyers? I can't get through to them.

Felix has been deaf, for all practical purposes, since childhood. For most of his three decades behind bars, which began when he was 19, he's been housed in the general population with few special services for his disability. His experiences are the stuff of TV prison dramas: He's ignored or taunted by guards, raped and brutalized by other prisoners. Last year, he tried to hang himself.

Felix, I plead awkwardly. You are not going to kill yourself. Please, please, hold on.

I won't do it, he says finally. I have Jesus.

I repeat: Do not kill yourself.

Yes, sir. The call abruptly cuts off.

After staring at the phone for a few minutes, I call Pat Bliss, the 69-year-old paralegal who has been working on Felix's case since 1996, when the Lord told her to minister to prisoners. Pat lives in southern Virginia, almost 600 miles from Felix's Florida prison. She doesn't have a lot of money, doesn't know sign language, and isn't a lawyer. But for the last 15 years, she has crafted his defense strategies, written motions and briefs, and helped usher his case through the state and federal courts. For the past five years, Felix has called her Mom. One lawyer I talked to calls her an angel. And that's something Felix needs more than anyone I've ever met.

[Read more here.](#)

*Felix Garcia and Pat Bliss can be contacted by mail at: P.O. Box 493, Wytheville VA 24382.*

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was 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*.

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.

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What can we do now. I will go on to every link and website mentioned and see if a group of protesters is actively following Felix situation and pressuring the Florida governor or our president for change. Please email me at [ellin.hr@gmail.com](mailto:ellin.hr@gmail.com) if I can help this man or others in similar plights, I'm no attorney just a concerned human being.

Thanks

Nancy

What a travesty & inexcusable miscarriage of justice! I cannot help but feel a tremendous amount of compassion for this poor man. Locked up for all his life on a bogus charge & conviction. Was the deck ever stacked against him in that courtroom!

The governor NEEDS to release him!

Thank you for bring this to mainstream attention!

I also work on wrongful convictions of deaf individuals and deaf inmate rights issues. Am happy to share more information on similar cases if you are interested. Check out HEARD (Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf) at <http://www.behearddc.org>. The organization assists deaf inmates and corrects and prevents wrongful convictions of the deaf.

I read this the other day good work.

It seems to me Felix will need to receive a presidential pardon or a magic bag of tricks. (Only those old enough to remember Felix the Cat will understand that reference.)

In my opinion the current system is upside down where it is more afraid of losing a case than insuring justice. This is state paranoia.

Felix is a tragic case and contained in this article is evidence that shows prison is a cruel gauntlet lined with rouge guards and predatory inmates.

The inhumane acts such as this man's rape is the most difficult for me to digest. The convict code of silence on such cruelty has always eaten away at my soul.

That said there is a wider picture here.

Let me begin by sharing a story before I explain what I mean.

Yesterday I delivered a package to the nearby Federal Reserve building and was met by two armed guards one carrying an assault rifle. Now mind you I have sold and delivered many products to this same branch and overtime I have noticed the ever increasing security measures taken. In the beginning I could drive up to the building park and enter the lobby, where like any courthouse security personnel were present. I would then have to empty my pockets and show ID.

But yesterday I was ordered out of my car before driving onto the property and asked to open all four doors, trunk, and hood. Mirrors were used to inspect beneath my vehicle and then the glove box and other storage spaces were searched. I asked to hold my hands out to my sides as a wand was passed over my body stopping whenever it encountered my belt buckle or loose change. Once satisfied my I.D. was checked calls were made and only after all of this the hydraulic piston barriers were lowered and the gates arm raised and I was directed to drive over to a trailer where my package was x-rayed by another armed guard. Then I was told to leave having never reached my customer inside the building. Later the customer called to ask where her items were apparently unaware of the mission impossible I had undertaken. I took this as a reflection of just how fast the security measures have been increased.

As a rule, crime and social protest rise in periods of economic crisis.

During such times, the well-to-do become increasingly fearful and more predisposed to adopting harsh measures to safeguard their positions at the apex of the social pyramid.

As an example the economic slowdown and social protest of the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in a rapid rise in public safety spending. This spending created an explosion of the prison population. The effects of which we are still dealing with.

Given the current dismal economic conditions, combined with the growing inequality driving the anger of the OWS crowd watch for an increase in state suppression of such descent.

An alarming recent study found nearly one in three youths will be arrested by Age 23.

<http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-12-19/youth-arrests-increase/52055700/1?csp=34news>

As a father of four these odds are a warning. (Luckily all but one of my children has passed this mark without incident.)

Mothers watch over your children before they too become hopelessly entangled in the system.

Reblogged this on pastproduction.

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