

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/04/30/voices-solitary-head-cases/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Voices from Solitary](#) | April 30, 2014

The following piece, including the introduction, was originally published in the [Colorado Independent](#), and is republished here by permission.

.....

Editors note: Yesterday, the Colorado General Assembly passed a bill to ban the use of long-term solitary confinement for prisoners with serious mental illness. The policy was initiated by former state Department of Corrections Director Tom Clements who, just as he was working to curb the states overuse of isolation and ensure that inmates have programs to acclimate them to human contact before being freed from prison was shot and killed by a mentally ill parolee who had spent years in long-term solitary confinement. Clements successor Rick Raemisch has been carrying on Clements work to limit long-term solitary for sick inmates. He has managed to move the vast majority into a treatment program. Prison officials say the multi-step program seems to be helping many prisoners. Civil rights advocates worry about those who are so mentally ill that they're unable to step up and out of isolation. They worry about those like Jack Powers.

Powers is a federal not state prisoner who was convicted of bank robbery and then transferred to the ADX supermax in Florence after he walked out the door of a lower security prisons visiting area. He spent 12 years in extreme isolation, also known as the hole, which is much like conditions endured by state prisoners at the nearby state supermax, Colorado State Penitentiary. In solitary confinement 23 hours a day, he tried to kill himself several times and amputated his fingers, earlobes, his testicle and scrotum. I feel like I am trapped within a disease, he once wrote.

Powers participation in a high profile civil rights lawsuit challenging the practice of isolating mentally ill prisoners for years without meaningful treatment or human contact resulted in a transfer last year from ADX to the federal prison systems mental health facility in Springfield, Missouri, where he had been housed and released several times before. He then was transferred to the United States Penitentiary at Tucson, where he was allowed for a time to mix with the general population. Powers wrote about the sudden exposure to people and social interactions in an essay for The Colorado Independent in November entitled [Finally Among the Living](#). I want to be the best human being I can be. But it may just be that I'm forever outside and beyond those possibilities. The intent of injury to my heart and mind is unclear as of yet, and right now I'm somewhat confused, he wrote.

Having spent so long in isolation, Powers questioned his ability to live outside it. After wearing pants without pockets for a long, long time, even having pockets is weird. I was just now standing by the door with my hands in my pockets and a guard came by and told me to take my hands out of my pockets. I complied, but then involuntarily went back to doing it as if each hand needs the tight darkness. It makes sense to me. So much sense that I wonder whether I'll be sent back to solitary for nothing more than sauntering around with my hands in my pockets.

Weeks later, an altercation with a guard landed Powers back in isolation, where he drilled a hole in his head. On March 29, he wrote the following essay about that experience, hoping it sheds light on what long-term prison isolation both state and federal can do to guys like me. Publishing it is part of The Colorado Independent's mission to personalize public policy and give voice to people who otherwise aren't heard.

There I was, lying on the concrete floor with a hole through my skull the size of a .50 caliber slug, trying to stop the profuse bleeding. Minutes before, I had successfully finished a procedure called Opening the Door by the Native American Hopis otherwise known as Trephination. It involves drilling a hole through part of the human skull where the soft spot is on a baby. This part of the human skull, however, is very thick on an adult. Because I was in solitary confinement and had makeshift tools to work with, it took me two days of drilling before I reached my brain.

The final turns of a battery-turned-drill bit seemed to crunch through a gritty patch of bone. There was a slight snap and the bit came loose inside my head. When pulled it out I saw bone stuck up on the inside of the battery, and then blood came pouring over my forehead like a waterfall and splashed into the sink like emptying a plastic bag full of it. I dropped the battery into the toilet and grabbed a wad of toilet paper and stuffed it into the hole. The blood still came on so I grabbed more and more toilet paper and held it down with both hands. The neurosurgeons later said, You came within one or two millimeters of certain death, and I thought, that is just about as close as you can get

At the time, there was an education department supervisor down the range passing out papers and talking to inmates. Because the inmates like to talk so much it took forever for him to pass my door. I was feeling somewhat dizzy but had no panic whatsoever: I have a serious head injury that is going to require immediate medical attention. Can you let someone know? He went to the gate and notified the unit lieutenant. Five minutes later a guard came to the door and asked what had happened. I repeated that I had a serious head injury and needed medical attention. Take that stuff off your head and let me see, he said. You are going to need to take my word for it, I replied, because if I take this off my brains are going to spill out on the floor.

He said, There's nothing wrong with you, and left the range.

I lay on the floor and grabbed a piece of scratch paper and pen and began to write a note to (Denver lawyer) Ed Aro: Dear Ed, I may be going to die here due to head injury and profuse bleeding. And then I stopped writing and curled up on the floor and thought about the feeling of being helpless, so helpless. I did not want to cry, however. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of my situation and the futility of trying to do anything about it. I thought about the blessing and the curse of being alive and being able to experience life as a human being. My mind sort of faded into a serene zone; my only help was from a lawyer from a law firm that somehow came to take an interest in me, and he was only one first-class stamp away.

A guard was back and trying to get me to stand up. Over an hour had passed in the shortest time. I wanted to finish the letter more than I wanted help for my head. It was important that I say things that expressed how I felt and what was going on with me at the moment and, more than anything, the appreciation for having someone to appreciate. I began to write again but it was impossible. The guard became like a watery blur; his words were hard to understand. I gained my feet, secured the bandage on the top of my head and submitted to the handcuffs. The other prisoners stood silently at their cell fronts, watching me pass with baleful eyes. The things around me were already beginning to take on a new hue. It was as if I were floating along an observer and not at all a participant. The medical technicians got me into an examination room and pulled the plug out.

The first thing they did was to call 911 for an ambulance. It was supposed to arrive within five or ten minutes and it did but because of my status as an escape risk, it was two and a half hours before they were allowed to come into the institution to get me. A S.O.R.T. (Special Operations Response Team) had to be assembled from available staff, either on- or off-duty. They finally rolled in with all their pompous attitudes and bulbous implements of torture. A remote-operated stun belt was tested in front of me and then strapped to my right leg. I was told that I would be given 50,000-volt charges that would cause me debilitating pain if I made a wrong move. Then they began with the chains: manacles on the ankles ratcheted down into the bone, a belly-chain wrapped around my waist twice and secured with a heavy padlock, handcuffs ratcheted down into the bones of my wrists and double locked, a plastic box over the handcuffs and a metal hasp to hold everything tight, and then cinching them together. Then came the straps of the stretcher themselves and the disdain of the attendants, which was disappointing.

We roared out of the prison in a cavalcade of cars and vans, radios and bulletproof vests, flashing lights and piercing sirens. It was all a faade, a joke. We took head-jarring bumps at seventy or eighty miles per hour on the highway. Regular traffic pulled off to the right and to the left like a parting of the Red Sea for Moses. They had gone operational. They were transformed from ordinary prison guards into some kind of Super-Hero Special Forces Operatives on a Special Mission. Their excitement was in the air like an electric current; they were in their element.

The pain in my head, neck, shoulders, wrists and ankles was more than extreme; it was excruciating. They yanked me out of the ambulance and wheeled me inside the trauma center where a team of healthcare professionals was waiting. They went right to work twisting and turning me like a Rubik's Cube. They cut the clothing off of my body because they could not remove the restraints. Now I was freezing cold, naked in front of a host of strangers, and wrapped in chains like a hotdog wrapped in bacon under bright lights. There were no less than eight S.O.R.T. members hovering around with great big guns like those the mutants carried in the movie *The Fight Element* with Bruce Willis. They were pissed because I had hurt myself and, thereby, made myself a persona non grata in the eyes of the administration. That was their official position but, privately, they were tickled pink (the same color of the boxers that had just been chopped off of me).

It was all just too much! I sat up and said, Hold it! I am not consenting to any further treatment. Take me back to the fucking dungeon, and I began to detach monitors, I.V. lines and identification tags. They were all somewhat shocked that I could even rise up like that, let alone talk. One of the guards said, You don't have a choice, and that is when I cut loose: Wanna bet your job on that? Unless you have a court order you had best respect my rights to refuse treatment! I was screaming on them and blood was coming out of the top of my head and a nurse was trying to get me to calm down and lie back but I would have none of it. What little leverage of psychological power I had, I had to use it and it felt great to let some of the pain loose.

An E.R. trauma surgeon came over to the left of me and literally stood by my side. I later learned that her name was Cassandra, and in the midst of all that iron-screaming negativity she had come to my assistance like an angel. She talked urgently but calmly and wanted to know what was going on. She rubbed my shoulder and arm and tried to get my wrists to a less painful position. She was a real person who was seeing me as a real person, and she was extending real care and concern. She was unafraid to confront the leader of the S.O.R.T. about the pain and discomfort the chains were causing. It was clearly overkill and she made it clear to me that she would do something about it. So, when I came back from the CAT scan, the feebs loosened the chains all the way around and it made most of us feel better. There were no real issues of security and it was absurd to begin with.

Later, after the operation, while we zipped down the highway on the way back to the prison, I thought about how brave she had been to stand up like that. I thought about how a few good people can make a difference for the better. I thought about how brutal and bizarre people can be when they have certain misconceptions. At the same time, the driver was making some kind of a snide comment to the lieutenant in the other seat about how Cassandra was a transsexual and other put-downs in the guise of jokes. I was still drugged but I spoke up and said, You think you are on top of it all. You think that outward appearances are all that matters, don't you? That doctor was one of the best human beings I've ever met and she deserves some kind of respect. They just tuned out, sullenly, silently, looking out the windows like there was something new to see out there.

John Jay Powers, federal inmate 03220-028, had no signs of mental illness when he went to prison in 1990. He is 52 and an occasional

contributor to The Colorado Independent. He is now housed at the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

Im reading this 8 years after it was written. Jack Powers has just been freed. Im 79 years old but, in his honor, and for the sake of every human being we continue to desecrate, I promise to never forget them.

ohn Jay Powers post videos every week, check him out here

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdeyr7zChECFulYD0c5ZAPw>

Your life matters

You matter.

It seems to me that the system, by design, is inhumane and irrational at every turn. One must wonder who is the sicker group: the inmates or the jailers.

This saddens me

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News