

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/addressing-the-overuse-of-segregation-in-u-s-prisons-and-jails/life-after-solitary-danny-murillo>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Regardless of how much time and space I put in between myself and the [Security Housing Unit](#) (SHU) in Pelican Bay State Prison, [the effects of isolation will always linger](#). My spirit resists, resiliently, the social pathologies known to [develop in prisoners who struggle to adapt to the rigors](#) of isolation. The symptoms I cannot resist seem to stem from my experience with isolation in the juvenile justice system. I cannot control what isolation has done to me, but I can learn how to cope.

I recently participated on a panel discussion at a [conference on isolation](#), along with Soros Justice Fellow [Dolores Canales](#), and the surviving members of the Angola 3, [Robert King](#) and [Albert Woodfox](#). The conference was organized by [Jules Lobel](#), the lead counsel in the landmark case, [Ashker v. Governor of California](#), that brought an end to long-term isolation in California prisons. This conference convened scholars, medical practitioners, human rights advocates, policy makers, corrections administrators, and survivors of isolation to discuss the issue of isolation from different perspectives.

Similar to my experience at UC Berkeley, this conference allowed me to connect my life experience with topics that are traditionally academic and theoretical. For instance, legal scholar [Judy Resnik](#) referred to the practice of isolation in relation to geographic location of the prison and Professor of Psychology Dr. Haney emphasized how isolation exacerbates a range of social pathologies that can lead people to isolate themselves from the outside world.

The practice of isolation in relation to geographical location reminded me of the distance between [High Desert State Prison](#) (HDSP) and my family. I was incarcerated in HDSP for six years and only received two contact visits. The distance between the prison and my family made it difficult to develop and maintain meaningful and healthy relationships. HDSP isolated me from the life-giving connections that I needed to survive.

Walking out to my first SHU yard session, I was summoned to a crack in the wall by a whispering voice. It was my first conversation with another human being in a long time. We talked through that crack frequently, and as long as possible. The very first conversation we had went like this: I get out in five years in reference to my parole date.

He asked, What are your plans when you get out?

I responded with a simple answer: Not to come back.

He asked, What are you doing now to prepare for your release?

I dont know." I said.

Fool! If you dont prepare now you bet youre going to come back! He replied. It was the first time someone told me that getting and staying out was going to take more than mere desire.

This new knowledge allowed me to create a program that involved developing critical thinking skills, as well as the implementation of a holistic program of prosperity. Learning, exercising, playing chess, listening to [Democracy Now](#) and KHSU radio, watching thought-provoking TV like [Bill Moyers Journal](#), [Independent Lens](#), and [Point of View](#), extensive reading, art & hobby crafting, and corresponding with my mother were all instrumental in helping me maintain my sanity and not get lost in the madness of isolation.

When I was released, I was excited to be home and looked forward to starting over. I quickly realized, however, the difficulty of being a second-class citizen, and the barriers that no amount of preparation could foretell, or forestall. I returned to school to complete my AA degree, which I had begun to work on in the SHU. Re-entry into higher education was also a difficult process; I carried with me the negative experiences I was exposed to when I attended public school as a child. Structural racism dictated, more so than the curriculum, my daily life in school, both as an adult and as a child. I was also not prepared for the fast pace and social interactions of college life; attending Cerritos College gave my life structure, however, and eventually I adapted sufficiently to apply to university, and gain admission to UC Berkeley. It was within this structured environment that I was able to continue to develop my critical thinking skills and build a [support group](#) who were instrumental to my success.

Some days the lingering effects of isolation are more noticeable than others. For example, having the urge to clean my apartment obsessively or becoming irritated by otherwise minor stimuli, and other more subtle but equally destructive side effects. Since early April, Ive done two interviews and a panel about my experience in isolation, highlighting the need to remind myself to be cautious, and trying to prevent becoming triggered by unsettling memories. After the conference, I decided to schedule an appointment with a therapist, which is provided by my health insurance, a resource that would have been out of reach to me in isolation.

If I learned anything at this conference it is to practice self-care and find ways to cope in the hopes that it will help me make better sense

of the impact of isolation on my overall health. [Juan Mendez](#), the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, pointed out: The fact that you're coping does not mean you're not suffering.

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