

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/02/18/voices-from-solitary-disciplined-into-madness-and-death/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | February 18, 2013

The following essay comes from Sara Rodrigues, formerly imprisoned at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison for women in Westchester, New York, and now further upstate at Albion. When Sara was sent to prison at the age of 16, she found her friend D there as well. Both Sara and D had life-long struggles with mental health, and while in prison, spent long periods of time in solitary confinement (both Keppel, which is lockdown in one's own cell, and SHU, which is the Special Housing Unit).

Sara writes about the difficulty D faced when she was finally released and put on parole, with no transitional assistance to move from prison to the free world. She ultimately ended up back in prison and committed suicide, shortly after giving birth to a baby girl. Sara Rodrigues wrote this piece in the hope of spreading awareness of her situation and the experience of many people around her. She writes, Too many inmates in New York State under the age of 25 are killing themselves in prisons because they are literally being thrown away like garbage by the court systems. (Thanks to Jennifer Parish of the Urban Justice Center for forwarding this essay to Solitary Watch.) Rachel M. Cohen

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This essay is dedicated to D and all those who have given their minds and/or lives trying to pay their debt to society and to those who will forever be haunted and scarred from our justice system. Once self-worth and hope dies within our souls, what is left behind is a shell of life that can see no future, no redemption and no chance for a normal life. It is then that our minds realize how truly unwanted we are and how on a daily basis we are reminded that society has no use for us. Day by day life becomes very dark, some lose their minds, some will never be the same, and some just give in and take their own lives.

Many people who are sentenced to prisons are very young and have serious behavioral and mental health problems and this environment only makes their sickness worse. This is D's story and how somehow out of the tragedy of her passing has made me resolve to open people's eyes to the greater damage that happens to everyone by throwing the very young, mentally and emotionally ill into cages to rot under the pretense that more punishment, isolation, and deprivation will make people change for the better. This story has nothing to do with not doing your time, but doing your time in a healthy corrective facility, not the factories of misery that most of our prisons are today. D's death had such an impact on me that she inspired me to keep fighting for my sanity, to try to never give up, and to get the word out whether people care to hear the truth or not.

In December 2008, I tripped and fell down the rabbit hole. Instead of Alice in Wonderland, I became Sara in Prisonland and I am still to do this day trying to wake up from my nightmare. I was 16 years old entering RCOD (reception) in a maximum-security prison, Bedford Hills. My sentence was eight years flat and 5-post release supervision, I was scared and in definite culture shock, it was all so alien and overwhelming. Later I learned D was there, to me D was my cousin, my best friend, and a sister all rolled into one. We could talk about anything, she helped me so much to get used to this crazy way to survive my new life. We also argued a lot as young teenage girls often do, now in hindsight I regret ever getting angry and wish I had been a better friend.

Some months later, she was paroled and went home but it did not take long and here she was again. Being so young when she went into prison, the outside world was just too overwhelming for her. This and coupled with the fact that there are no transitional programs for people leaving prisons in the area we live in, which is Jefferson County, this leaves all parolees pretty much on their own. Get out of prison, go report to parole, go to Credo (drug and alcohol counseling), go to mental health, get a job, pay your rent, don't drive till we say you can, pay parole, pay credo, be home at curfew. You give up because it is all so stressful, can't get a decent job because you are just out of prison and no one wants to hire you, zero job programs or training programs for parolees. One can't even go to VESID (vocational training) until 6 months after you get out of prison and by then it is usually too late.

People need these services as soon as they come home and because of all this lack of support, every parolee is set up for failure. So she just gave in to all the temptation around her and started partying and having a good time, and even though her mother begged parole to try to live in a drug and alcohol program instead of sending her back to prison, they didn't care and did what they do best. That is to not keep people out of prison but to make sure they end up back in. Do the math, almost zero services and supports for parolees in this country why is this and who lets this happen?

By this time she came back to Bedford Hills, she was pregnant. Ds time in the prison system was not easy, she was an outsider even in prison, she had a extensive disciplinary record which was making her mental health issues worse, and she had a long history of suicidal behavior, she had been hospitalized before incarceration and during. Making matters worse, she was always in KeeplockorSHU and this did nothing to help her problems. In coming back to prison, it was so much harder to deal with than the time before and at that point, I believe she thought nothing would ever change, she was in a cycle she could not get out of and I think she was just getting soul tired.

D was a fun girl who could have done great things in life. She had a good support system; she was creative, beautiful, funny, and smart. She could do hair and nails like a professional, no matter what her issues were she had many good attributes. Even though she did not have a lot, she would give you the shirt off her back if you needed it. This girl was not a nothing; she was a living, breathing, strong willed human despite all of her troubles. To many others and me she was a much better human than many who claim to be A-one citizens.

January 22, 2010 D gave birth to a beautiful healthy baby girl. She got to spend some time with her until arrangements were made for her mom and step dad to come pick the baby up. At this time D seemed to be doing better and holding her own, then within a few months she went on the draft to Albion Correctional Facility. This was the beginning of the end, she hated being at that prison, she was scared of that place because she was always in trouble and spent almost all of her time in shu. It was not long before she had deteriorated so bad she was sent to Marcy Psychiatric, she spent some time there and was shipped back to Bedford. Two days later on June 17th 2010, D was dead; she was found hanging in her cell while she was in keep lock because of three tickets she received while still at Albion. It was two weeks before her 23rd birthday.

Some thought she did it on accident because she didnt want to go back to Albion and some thought she just had enough but it didnt matter she was gone and me, I lost my mind, I was alone, grief stricken and sick. This was just too much for my mind to grasp. I became angry with her, God, and everyone around me. Every night I had horrible nightmares, I would wake up screaming and crying hoping this was just another nightmare, but it was real. Something went wrong, she should have never been sent back to Bedford Hills because she was just not stable enough. The fact that she was so desperate speaks volumes about how bleak she thought her situation was. Her family was devastated, as was my family; our worlds were in upheaval and pain.

In many ways, I can totally relate to the feeling of wanting to just give up. Since I came to Albion, I have spent most of my time in the box and I am so tired already. Having a medical condition, every time I go to the box my skin gets horrible, my skin cracks and bleeds, rick now I am so sick, I feel like death. After awhile I start talking to ants, crickets or any other living thing or imaginary thing I can think of so I do not totally lose what is left of my mind. My mother is convinced that they throw people like us in the box so much because they want us to go over the edge and kill ourselves. My mother documents everything that happens to me and she tries so hard to make people aware of what goes on. Right now, she is infuriated that I slipped up about a month ago and tried to hang myself and now I am back in the box for months. Mom says that we are not even allowed to treat animals that bad and keep them locked in cages for months, why is it ok to do it to humans. So yes, we do get tired and in a moment of disparity, I can see just ending it all. I keep telling myself to hang in it wont last forever hopefully I will listen to my own words and stay strong.

Although she died in prison, I believe the brunt of responsibility for her death lies in the hands of the people who put her in there. Prisons are not equipped or have the time or training to be able to deal with people with mental and behavioral problems. They have been taught that if they just keep disciplining with tickets, Keeplock and SHU, eventually they will stop acting out. This is far from the truth and that is why I believe that everybody I know with mental health or behavioral issues that goes to Albion ends with way worse issues. They are strictly about punishment whether you are guilty of your tickets or not. To them you are just a trouble maker who must love being locked all the time. They arent educated to the bigger picture that people like D and myself have always had problems even as small children. If we understood why we are the way we are, and could be normal I know our lives would not have been hard. There are many good decent officers here at Albion, who are fair, try to understand and treat us with dignity and to all of them I say thank you and dont ever stop having heart, but there are others who well, the only way I can explain how I feel towards them is to refer you to Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban the dementors, the COs of Azkaban prison who dont have a good happy positive thought about anyone, they take all good feelings and thoughts away, drain them of life, and take pleasure in watching you fail.

The powers that be, who send people like D and myself to prison full well know that prisons are dangerous for people with mental, emotional, and behavioral problems and worse than that, send children into adult prisons just because they can. They dont care to help them get the help they need, it is easier and cheaper to ship them to prisons. Too many inmates in New York State under the age of 25 are killing themselves in prisons because they are literally being thrown away like garbage by the court systems. We need good transitional programs and job training for those whose skills were not up to the training programs in prison and good decent parole officers who talk to people like humans, really support, and help parolees to keep from going back to prison. All these things if they were in place may have saved Ds life. D needed a decent long term residential treatment and rehab program, that was equipped to deal with her mental health issues, not to be thrown away into prison as if she was disposable.

Although Ds death was the most horrible time of my life, it was a learning experience and surprisingly she inspired me to try to be the best person I can be and I do try, and that is not an easy thing in here. I learned not to depend on anyone but God and myself. Since her death, I have realized how making fun of someone, teasing, embarrassing or humiliating someone does hurt. We sometimes do not realize how mean comments can hurt another. I have learned to try to never judge anyone because you never know the circumstances of what they have had to endure that may have made them become the way they are. A big thing I have learned is that with just a little common kindness, it may save a life, and just showing human concern and being there for someone makes a difference and may have a positive impact on them.

In writing this essay, I felt that maybe others that have been in similar situations could possibly relate and may reach out to help someone who needs to be lifted. In choosing this topic I felt the way to get the message to all inmates about the importance of sticking together and helping other inmates instead of being mean to each other. I hope this reaches at least a few hearts and helps them understand the impact we all have on each others lives. This situation is real and it happens all the time inside and outside of prison. Try to remember you are not alone and try to never give up on life no matter how bad you feel like enough is enough. D left behind a family that loved her very much and misses her everyday. More than anything I learned life is so precious, we take each other for granted never understanding that one moment someone can be there and the next day they can be gone from our lives forever. This had to be part of my healing

process too; I had to tell her story so she did not die in vain. It is so ironic that my most notable surprising experience was with another inmate who taught me more than she could have ever imagined. Unbelievably I feel her with me sometimes holding me up when I feel like I just cannot do it anymore. No matter how bad people make you feel about yourself, no matter what they call you or how bad they try to degrade you, remember you are not unworthy, that everyone has issues especially the ones who want you to fail because that is the only way they have to feel good about themselves.

In closing, maybe this essay may shake some of the authorities, maybe someone somewhere will have the courage to stand up and start changing the system for the better. If you want people to pay their debts to society, come out and be better people, you cannot keep beating a dead horse with more and more punishment and shame. As we are all aware, many know and see how counterproductive prison can be; now we just need for someone with some common sense who has the power to take action because most of us are really worth trying to save. Too many lives have been lost or tossed aside in the name of paying for your crime.

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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if there is no help on the outside after release, make your own organization, that will take these young people released under their wing and help them find a place in society for them. Nobody on the outside knows what you've been put through except those who've been there. Let them help, they will do the best job, I'm sure.

I once layed in a cell beside this girl and she told me stories about countymen and how she felt responsible for her death I tried to give her hope encouragement and inspiration there are a lot of intelligent and talented women locked up in these cells who need support I spent 10 months in Shu and solitary confinement and life outside of prison has been difficult we need a voice it time we are heard and supported not broken down and made to feel segregated

Sarah I hear you. Do you remember me? Facebook me or email me
Love
Karen

Dear Loved-one,

Reading your story shows how life in prison parallels with the story of Alice in Wonderland. I have written a book titled: The Angel with Burnt Wings, by Scarlett Jensen, my pen name. The book will be published in July 2013 by Authorhouse.co.uk. Alice in this story follows a man called Vice into the black hole of crime and punishment. Shackled dreams and painful pasts we thought, but Alice experience pure rebirth. Her greatest struggle became her greatest victory while she passed the road from black hell to green paradise. Please read the story. It will mean a lot to you.

Scarlett Jensen

hello everyone, I am Saras mom and I have to say thank you for your kind comments to my daughter. Her experience in Shu has been a long dark road for both of us. I do not think she will ever get over what happened to D. We know we are not alone and we will keep fighting to let people know what goes on, secretly they get away with torture, hiding behind their jobs to totally abuse, dehumanize, and destroy humans who are hanging on to life by a thread. Many of the people in shu are not the worst of the worst as they call them but young people with emotional problems and that is what happened to D. After awhile her poor soul just got tired and she was left with the feeling she would never fit in this world, she was told this by many of the people in the justice system. She and many others are just thrown away to prisons to be thrown into these torture chambers with the worst of the officers watching over them. I have met many good cos and officers but I have seen the result of the worst. My daughter denied showers, denied proper medical attention, denied and given a ticket for bringing her bible to a bible study visit with a woman who is part of a prison ministry. (very recent) My eyes have seen the breakdown of another human being my own daughter. I have witnessed her bruised and swollen, smelling of body oder, sad and angry, scared, her skin looking as horrible as I have ever seen it. Just recently another girl in shu asked for sanitary napkins and for four hours two cos harassed and ignored her, finally she opened the little window and threw the bloody sheets out, only then did they give her sanitary napkins because now the cameras could see what she was fussing about. These are disgusting men who should be fired and charged with a crime. It is up to us families for the ones who have families to step up and say enough is enough, we will not tolerate this

anymore. For those who are scared that they will take more out on your loved ones I ask you aren't they already being tortured and abused and people have shut up about it because they are scared. Well D. is the result of people keeping their mouths shut. We have an obligation to all the inmates to stop these barbaric tactics as they do no one any good. How can they make inmates follow any rules when they most surely don't follow rules then when they get turned in for it they and their buddies go after the inmates even more. Now I ask who is the real criminal.

Heart breaking words, and important. Thank you, Sara, for describing the cruel reality you and many other young (and older) people are facing in the dungeons. Michelle Alexander (author of *The New Jim Crow*) recently gave a talk and said we need to keep building inside and outside a movement to confront the madness of mass incarceration fueled by the bogus war on drugs. Keep writing, and know you can make a difference; do it for D, do it for your sisters and brothers who cannot express themselves, and do it for yourself. You are not defined by the labels and images that others would impose on you; you are defined by your own heart and spirit!

Sara You Hang In There, Don't Ever Give Up* God Bless You & Keep You Safe. Riley

Thank you for hanging in there, so we could read this! You are a good writer! You are not alone. Good luck and yes this country is wrong to do this to its own. Think of Sly Stones Stand lyrics! There's a midget standing tall..and a giant beside him about to fall.

Sara, your writing blows me away. I'm fighting for you. Please stay strong, and I mean that. You are amazing!

I love you Sara! I cried as well while I was reading this. Hang in there sweetie! Your Mom has really tried to fight for you. She really loves you so much and so do we! What a beautiful dedication to your friend!

Sara ur wonderful and a good young woman who also has a lot to give please hang in there sweet heart..ty for talking about my precious Dana. In ur essay .Oh i could feel her she would be so proud of you as i am. You put it all so well and changes must be made solitary is ridiculous at the rate ny has been going for yrs i remember for tickets she had almost a tr in solitary or keep lock and she did like it she figured well cant get more tickets.although she didnt mean to die but be sent back to psych. For fear of a lower grade prison i mean not a max by that and that to is awful one should not be in fear to go from a max to a med / min.AND SHAME TO THE JUDGES AND PAROLE sending long time psych patients with ptsd and odd n add to prisons CHANGES MUST BE MADE GOD SEJD ME A GOOD LAWYER AND I WILL MYSELF 3154861117

I think solitary confinement need to be done away with all together. If the judge, jury, lawyer or the DA cant handle it long term then, it should never be done to any other human being. And trust and believe, every ill treatment under the sun is still in the view of the one that makes the last judgement along with the last vengeance for what ever they do to anyone inside or out side of prison. I must say to you Sara, stay strong and always treat people kind but never for get their is always hope when you keep your mind and heart on the right force. That force is stronger and able to carry through ever worldly problem on the face of the earth. Forget about human help and look to our heavenly father and his son.

Judges and prosecutors are the empty heads that do not consider nor do they care what happens to the person after sentencing. If they were socially consious they would be helping to mold a system that helps the individual that is in need of help. Instead metting out punishment gives these egoist a sense of power. They have acquired a taste for vindictiveness and their appetites are increasing. They have become, over the last thirty years a serious danger to our culture and society. We have given them the right by allowing our politicians / legislators to write laws that allow no flexiblity neither do our laws require there be citizen commissions that review judicial behavior. In other words there is no accountability. What happens when one isnt held accountable. The culture turns barbaric.

You did a wonderful job on this piece. It made me cry to think of her feeling so alone & unwanted. God bless You Riley92354

STATES LIKE MAINE HAVE MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR SOLITARY CONFINEMENT AND THEIR SOLITARY CONFINEMENT IS DOWN 70 PERCENT. NEW YOEK CITY HAS NO MINIMUM STANDARDS AND 84 PERCENT OF THOSE SENT TO SOLITARY ARE THERE FOR NON VIOLENT CAUSES. IF SOLITARY WAS USED ONLY IN THE MOST VIOLENT CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN INMATES AND GUARDS AND USED FOR SHORTER PERIODS OF TIME WITH CONSTANT REVIEWS TO MAKE SURE INMATE NOT DETERIOATING MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY THAT WOULD BE AN IMPROVEMENT OVER CURRENT STANDARDS. THE PUBLIC UNDER THE CURRENT SYSTEM IS LESS SAFE AND SECURE BECAUSE 95 PERCENT OF ALL INMATES ARE EVENTUALLY RELEASED BACK TO THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS. THE CRIMINAL INJUSTICE SYSTEM IS A FAILURE WITH SIXTY SIX PERCENT RETURNING TO JAIL AFTER FIVE YEARS FROM RELEASE. THE BOARD OF CORRECTIONS , THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND COBA THE CORRECTIONS OFFICERS BENEVOLENT ASSOCIATION MUSTR WORK TOGETHER FOR A SANE SYSTEM WHERE IMPRISONED PEOPLE ARE TREATED WITH REHABILITTATION IN MIND AND NOT PUNISHMENT AND REVENGE FOR CRIMES COMMITTED. VICTIMS OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR MUST SPEAK OUT FOR HUMANE TREATMENT OF PRISONERS. HUMILIATING PRISONERS AND TREATING THEM AS NON HUMANS WILL NOT RESTORE THE SELF ESTEEM TAKEN FROM VICTIMS OF CRIME. REHABBILITATION OF INMATES WILL ALLOW INMATES NEVER TO RETURN TO A LIFE OF CRIME BUT TO BE PRODUCTIVE HUMAN BEINGS WITH JOBS , FAMILIES AND SUPPORT FROM THEIR COMMUNITIES. CORRECTION OFFICERS WOILL GAIN THE RESPECT OF THE PUBLIC WHEN THEY SHOW COMPASSION TOWARDS INMATES AND USES FORCE ONLY TO QUELL AND INCIDENT INSTEAD OF RUNNING RIUKERS WITH A CULTURE OF BRUTE FORCE.

I read your story and my heart goes to you. Thank you for sharing your heart. Peace to you and your family for standing beside her. The whole country is cutting back on everything, so it is up to us on the outside of prisons to make the world know that we are not going to put up with this.

Thanks for sharing Sara. You are lifting me up. Peace and power.

Excellent piece she sounds more sane and humane than those with the keys.

Stay strong!

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