

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Sal Rodriguez](#) | August 17, 2011

In March 2010, Julie Tackett, a Seattle-based activist inspired by her religious faith, began exchanging letters with Bryan, an inmate in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay State Prison in northern California. Neither could have anticipated the astonishing direction their correspondence would take.

Bryan has been in solitary confinement in the prisons Security Housing Unit (SHU) for 16 of 21 years he has been in prison, for a crime committed when he was a teenager. Determined not to let the place crush him, Bryan learned Spanish and German while in lockdown, and has kept himself busy over the years through artwork, writing a novel, and having international pen pals. He has described his life as a quiet small Japanese garden.

Bryan's extended placement in solitary is a result of his being named 16 years ago by various anonymous inmates as a gang member. This debriefing process requires that inmates effectively snitch on other inmates and reveal gang activity in return for a release from solitary. Many inmates implicated by this process, including Bryan, were never written up for or noted to have any gang affiliation whatsoever either in or out of the prison. Yet once they are validated as gang members and placed in the SHU, they are likely to live out the rest of their sentences in solitary confinement. Every six years, a review process examines validated inmates' status. According to Bryan, in 2008 his cell was searched, and officials found a drawing and poetry done by a validated gang member; prison officials also accused Bryan of writing a card and sending it to a validated gang member, although the card was never produced. Based on these incidents, Bryan was condemned to another six years in solitary.

In Bryan's own words regarding his placement in extended solitary:

I take full personal responsibility for being a young violent prisoner who got myself thrown in the SHU. I make NO excuses nor do I try to blame others or justify my actions. But it has to be recognized that my validation as a gang member was based solely on the confidential debriefing reports of inmates who could no longer continue to suffer under these conditions of perpetual isolation in solitary confinement. There is no individual accountability under the current CDCR policies. I have now been in solitary confinement for over a decade, not based on a CDCR rules violation but rather for a false label put on myself by inmate informants broken under SHU conditions. Now in the ultimate form of group punishment I am to be housed in solitary confinement, not based on my actions but based on this gang label.

Initially, Julie and Bryan corresponded about once a month. Julie said she was unprepared for what she learned of the hellish circumstances that had been Bryan's life a decade and a half. In May 2010, Bryan first told Julie about his placement in the Secure Housing Unit:

I've been in the SHU for 15 years (solitary confinement) and as you can imagine, one either comes to know his/her self or breaks. I have my ups and downs just like everyone else but I freed my mind years ago. So I actively reach out to the world and try to stay engaged through my writing.

In the May 2010 letter, Bryan also revealed that in the 15 years of incarceration at Pelican Bay, he had only had two familial visits. His family lives in Texas, where he grew up. Upon learning this, Julie decided to visit Bryan in September of 2010. She recalled that she found Bryan to be, in person, just as he was in his letters and postcards: very intelligent, spiritual, good-humored, thoughtful, and an excellent conversationalist. Over time, the soft-spoken, reserved Bryan would become more open, and Julie would describe her in-person meetings with Bryan as very animated, often delving into esoteric topics, and very enjoyable.

In May 2011, Bryan indicated to Julie that there would be a hunger strike in the Pelican Bay SHU beginning July 1:

You know me well enough to know that I am in NO WAY suicidal, nor do I wish to harm myself in any way. But collectively we feel as though we are already dead under these conditions of extreme isolation and deprivation. I'm personally willing to go to this extreme in order to prove my desire to live. This is not life Julie. Period. We are here for one reason only, our refusals to debrief. I've had no serious

write ups in almost a decade. I have friends here who have 20-25 years in clean. Why are we here? Because were labeled as gang members? What about the other 100,000 labeled gang members on Cal. main lines?

Bryan then asked Julie to serve as his monitor during the hunger strike. Up to this point, Bryan hadnt told his family what life was really like in the SHU, instead reassuring them over the years that he was doing fine and keeping himself busy. Julie and Bryan agreed to share news of the hunger strike with his family, and a mutual understanding was established.

Julie made the decision to drive the 500 miles from to Pelican Bay, in just south of the Oregon-California. She would remain there from June 24th through the end of the hunger strike. Striking a tent in a campground a mile outside Crescent City, California, Julie embedded herself in a growing support network. Over the next several weeks, she would meet and befriend family members of hunger strikers, supporters, and even sympathetic correctional officers. She would also maintain a blog, called My Brothers Keeper, detailing her experiences and sharing excerpts from her correspondence with Bryan.

On day one of the strike, Bryan wrote:

Now its 4:05. I spent that minute asking your god, my god, whatever positive guiding force there may be to look out for you all out there and give us in here the strength to see this thing through.

On the third day of the strike, Julie and Bryan met. Julie was sure to keep Bryan informed of the growing support network outside of the prison, and he wrote:

It was great to hear that the Native Americans were out protesting for us. I sure hope you let them know that we could hear them and that we truly appreciate their support. It was good for morale to share that and the news that Folsom had participants as well. Collectively we are not as optimistic that this will end any time soon but either way we are committed.

By day six, Bryan noted a lack of medical care for hunger strikers:

Still havent seen a lick of medical care a full 6 days in. They threw that Ch. 22 Hunger Strike protocol right out the window and doctor Sayre pulled all strikers off their meds en mass. So the MTAs are real happy, no protocol on checking on we strikers and half the meds they were used to delivering are now gone.

On day seven, Bryan reported, medical care was finally made available. He had already lost 17 pounds. Bryan had signed a medical directive indicating: Do not attempt resuscitation (DNR), Comfort measures only and NO artificial nutrition by tube. He also gave Julie Power of Attorney.

On Saturday, the ninth day of the hunger strike, Julie was able to visit Bryan. Bryan had begun to experience difficulty sleeping and came off as very tired. Julie updated Bryan of the growing support on the outside. Bryan would apologize in a letter dated the July 10th for not being more on my game.

On the 11th, Bryans condition became more trying:

REALLY long day. I had zero energy and couldnt get warm all day. We were on lock down so I couldnt take a little walk to break up the day. I tried to pace my cell but it didnt make any difference. I know the guys in here are hurting. It was dead quiet all day and when we did speak I could hear it.

I have to do something with my time. I feel like Im just wallowing in the misery minute by minute. I have to find a way to pull my mind away from it. My problem is how hard it is to concentrate. Tomorrow Im pulling out a book and forcing it. The isolation is 10 times worse than the hunger.

On the 12th, Bryan found solace and inspiration in the story of Bobby Sands, the Irish republican hunger striker who died of starvation in a British prison in 1981:

I reread the chapter in Nothing But An Unfinished Song (Ch. 22) when Bobby Sands starts his hunger strike and eventually dies and it was a good wake-up call. Eleven days aint squat! I was laid up in bed for the last 3 days as if death was already upon me. I had to break that and keep moving.

Julie visited Bryan on the 16th and 17th. By the 16th, he had lost over 25 pounds. In their meeting, Julie said, Bryan wasnt himself. He was withdrawn and seemed very depressed. The usually engaged and good-humored Bryan was unfocused and quiet. Their meeting on the 17th was no different. Bryan had been nauseous and, as Julie put it, he went from being Bryan to being a hunger striker. He was, however, still very committed, and insisted that he would see the strike until the end.

The hunger strike ended on July 21st, with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation making a few token concessions, and indicating that it would review its debriefing and gang validation policies.

On July 23rd, Julie was denied a visit to Bryan. After some calling around, she found out that Bryan had been removed from his cell on the 21st due to complications from the hunger strike. Monday the 25th she was informed that Bryan was diagnosed with hypophosphatemia, a low level of phosphorous in the blood resulting in, according to Bryan, several major seizures and a series of other serious medical issues due to chemical imbalances from starvation.

Julie learned later that Bryan had been rushed to Sutter Cost Hospital in Crescent City for vital, life-saving care. His heart had been in tachycardia (dangerously high heart rate) and he had seizures. For seven hours doctors in the emergency room worked frantically to stabilize his system with numerous IV administrations.

Bryan would be transferred to the Intensive Care Unit for an additional two days. During this period he was repeatedly pressured to

debrief: [I was] asked by every new shift of COs if it was worth it and asked if I was ready to debrief yet. I expected that but not the level at which they came at me.

He would spend an additional day at Sutter Coast Hospital and then a day at the prison infirmary before being sent back to his cell. The prison infirmary is located in an area that holds psychologically troubled inmates, who were, according to Julie's recounting, screaming, yelling, kicking doors.

He looked ragged on Saturday and a bit better by Sunday so he seems to be on the mend, Julie wrote on the 2nd of August. She had returned to home in Seattle the day before.

I am so proud to be his friend. He was willing to lay down his life for the well-being of others, Julie says. I want people who read this story to walk away with an understanding of the situation in prisons across the country. During this hunger strike, ethnic groups all came together for the common good. I really hope that the CDCR follow through with good faith to bring about changes in their policies.

Bryan will be up for review regarding his placement in solitary confinement in 2014.

Reflecting on her befriending of Bryan and all that had happened, Julie posed the question: Should I continue on my well-worn path of interests or should I commit to work for positive change on behalf of thousands of men and women suffering within America's prisons? Fortunately for Bryan and the tens of thousands of inmates in solitary confinement, she has chosen the latter.

For more of the correspondence between Julie Tackett and Bryan, see Julie's blog, [My Brothers Keeper](#).



Sal Rodriguez was Solitary Watch's first and most prolific intern. Based in Los Angeles, he served as an editorial writer and columnist for the Orange County Register and the Press-Enterprise, and is now the opinion editor for the Southern California News Group.

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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wow the cells got to be very small if that tent is bigger than two cells but i am glad that they stand some how to say no me i never would do dead state hunger strike but i darn well would be one to inspire others to stay strong at least i think the work she did and the time she gave to this need is what needs to be done it is what a warrior of old did camp on the field of war waiting and standing for what they stood for it is those who are just who fight who speak out those who do not stand for injustice but for proper justice and she has the right mind set to stand up to this injustice well done for her if only more would stand with us may there be light in the darkness of justice

keep fighting the good fight you are what they need to try to live through the hell you have no person should be put in solitary for so long let alone under such conditions you live day to day in the darkest part of the plane of justice yet you find light in your work this is godly if nothing else it is your will that holds others up so long in justice yet still strong you are a strong will and i hope you never broke stand to the dark carlesnes of the senty and for these your trying to help and anyone in the hell of justice may there be light in the darkness of justice

Solution: Rewrite the gang validation process to avoid using confidential informants as sources but rather evidence based information that draws conclusive inferences that he is gang associated or member (pre sentencing report, police report, institutional behavior, correspondence, pictures, tattoos, associations, court files, self admissions, etc) second time frames for reviews once validated should be yearly with their classification review dated) third a step down program to renounce gang activity (not debrief cause that's different) and stay clean for 4 years without gang contact or activities and complete evidence based in cell self study that transitions into group activities (see AZ DOC step down) eligible for lower custody level (one level) fourth polygraph the screening fifth rewrite housing, security and classification policies to allow for reduction in custody based on institutional disciplinary, intelligence, internal and external risk scores and supervision (intense) of mail, phone calls, property searches as well as interviews regarding intelligence gathered by gang task force.. Validation should not be infinity.. There are useful management tools that will and can identify eligible prisoners for such considerations. It worked in AZ and it has worked in other states as well.

WOW. Julie you are a trooper and Bryan is a mentally and physically strong individual. Everytime I read this article it brings tears to my

eyes. These men are so brave and I will continue to fight for their rights. Thank you!! Its articles like these that make want to fight even harder and stronger.

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