

# Solitary Watch

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2012/04/14/hermans-house-new-film-explores-the-injustice-of-solitary-confinement-and-the-transformative-power-of-art/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | April 14, 2012

Premiering today at the Full Frame Documentary Festival in North Carolina is [Hermans House](#), a film that follows the unlikely friendship between a New York artist and one of America's most famous inmates as they collaborate on an acclaimed art project. The inmate is Herman Wallace, one of the Angola 3, who on Tuesday will mark 40 years in solitary confinement in the Louisiana prison system.

The following is an excerpt from the film's press release:

In 1972, New Orleans native Herman Joshua Wallace (b. 1941) was serving a 25-year sentence for bank robbery when he was accused of murdering an Angola Prison guard and thrown into solitary confinement. Many believed him wrongfully convicted. Appeals were made but Herman remained in jail and to increasingly widespread outrage in solitary. Years passed with one day much like the next. Then in 2001 Herman received a perspective-shifting letter from a Jackie Sumell, a young art student, who posed the provocative question:

What kind of house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-foot cell for over 30 years dream of?

Thus began an inspired creative dialogue, unfolding over hundreds of letters and phone calls and yielding a multi-faceted collaborative project that includes the exhibition *The House That Herman Built*. The revelatory art installation featuring a full-scale wooden model of Herman's cell and detailed plans of his dream home has brought thousands of gallery visitors around the world face-to-face with the harsh realities of the American prison system.

But as *Hermans House* reveals, the exhibition is just the first step.

Their journey takes a more unpredictable turn when Herman asks Jackie to make his dream a reality. As her own finances dwindle, Jackie begins to doubt if she can meet the challenge of finding land and building a real house. Meanwhile, Herman waits to find out if the Louisiana courts will hear his latest appeal.

Along the way we meet self-confessed stick-up kid Michael Musser, who credits Herman for helping him turn his life around while in solitary; Herman's sister Vickie, a loyal and tireless supporter despite her own emotional burden; and former long-term solitary inmate and fellow Black Panther activist Robert King who, along with Herman and Albert Woodfox, was one of the so-called Angola 3 that became a cause célèbre in the 2000s.

I'm not a lawyer and I'm not rich and I'm not powerful, but I'm an artist, Jackie says. And I knew the only way I could get [Herman] out of prison was to get him to dream.

There are 2.2 million people in jail in the U.S. More than 80,000 of those are in solitary confinement. Herman Wallace has been there longer than anyone.

With compassion and meaningful artistry, *Hermans House* takes us inside the lives and imaginations of two unforgettable characters forging a friendship and building a dream in the struggle to end the cruel and unusual punishment of long-term solitary confinement.

We had an opportunity to view *Hermans House* before its release and to meet its director, Angad Singh Bhalla. The filmmakers were, of course, not permitted to shoot or record inside the prison where Herman Wallace resides. Yet his voice emerges from the depths, clear and strong, through letters and recorded phone calls. The house he imagines and Jackie Sumell builds for him is brought to life through creative use of animation. Through the moving story of their collaboration, the film makes a powerful statement about the cruelty of solitary confinement.

For more on Herman Wallace's case, see our earlier article on Mother Jones, [Southern Injustice](#).

[youtube=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gjd1smWtf7k]

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the 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*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

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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I wept so much but: i am fighting with so many others against DP, Isolation Cells, not-using DNA more strong than ever! Annamaria

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