

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2019/02/12/voices-from-solitary-six-by-ten/>

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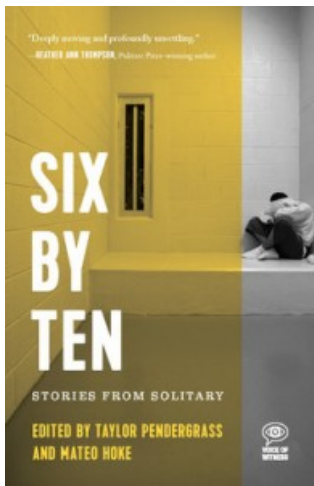
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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | February 12, 2019



The following accounts have been excerpted from [Six by Ten: Stories from Solitary](#), a recently published collection of thirteen oral history narratives from people impacted by solitary confinement. Part of the Voice of Witness series published by Haymarket Books, the volume was compiled and edited by ACLU attorney and campaign strategist Taylor Pendergrass and multimedia journalist Mateo Hoke. Six by Ten presents a range of powerful firsthand perspectives on solitary confinement through the words of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, family members, and correctional staff. The publisher has granted Solitary Watch permission to publish these excerpts here. The book cover photo, also used in the banner, is from the [Juvenile In Justice](#) series by Richard Ross. Valerie Kiebal

Mohammed Mike Ali

Mike came with his family from Fiji to the United States as a child and turned to gang life in the 1990s as protection from being bullied in school. He spent much of his teens and early twenties between juvenile hall, jail, and prison before being detained for deportation at age twenty-four. Mike experienced long stretches of isolation in a privately run immigration detention center [Eloy Detention Center in Arizona] and struggled to maintain hope with an uncertain sentence and the threat of deportation hanging over his head for over four years.

The United States maintains the worlds largest immigration detention infrastructure, with upwards of four hundred thousand people detained each year. Many of the detention facilities that house these prisoners are privately run. These facilities typically earn a fee from the federal government for each night a detainee is held. In order to minimize costs and maximize profits, facilities are often overcrowded, and medical and mental health care go lacking.

I first came on the SHU for fighting in 2003, right after I got to Eloy. I got into it with a Southern Mexican from LA. I did two months before I got out. I went in and out of SHU, but eventually they put me in SHU indefinitely because we had a riot, and they said I called the shots. They thought I set it up, but they couldnt prove it, I was like, *I didnt*. I didnt say nothing, man. It was a fight, then *bah!* The riot started, and I was just sitting back and watching.

At Eloy in the SHU, they got you alone in a cell. And you got to learn to live with this now. Youre confined in a six-by-nine cell with a solid steel door that has a metal screen in it so the guards could look inside and see what youre doing. You get three meals a day. You get yard for one hour three times a week, then a shower. Every time you move you gotta get shackled up.

In order to survive, you gotta structure yourself. Gotta get up, work out, take a shower. Pray. Eat. Stay up all night and sleep all day

because when youre up all night you pass the days quicker. A lot of people are backwards. You gotta get a couple of good books, you gotta read books, you gotta keep yourself busy. Soon as youre thinking, *Aw man. Shit, I aint got nothing to do.* Now your minds wondering, *Whats going on in the streets?* Now your minds wondering whats your wife doing. Now your minds wondering hows your kid doing, hows your mom and dad doing, right? Soon as you start thinking more, you start stressing. As soon as you start stressing more, you start tripping out more. So then you start tripping out more, now the walls are tripping on you, right? You start getting delusional. You start seeing all this shit thats not there, because your minds fucking running wild. You cant sleep cause you close your eyes, but your minds still running.

You think you see shit. I was seeing a young girl running around the hallway of the pod. It went on a couple of weeks. Id look out and see her running around at night. I asked if other people saw that. They said no. At one point I thought there was a dude in the cell next to me looking at me. I asked about him, and the guys in the other cells were like, No, nobodys in there, youre tripping.

This happened to me, but thank God I got it under control. But it happened. It happened. Being in the SHU is like being a dog tied to a pole with a ten-foot chain. Imagine leaving a dog like that for months at a time. He could eat, drink, shit, you know, take a shower and everything, but just in that space right there, ten feet. He cant go anywhere besides that ten feet, you know? Imagine what hes going through. For thirty days, two months. Eight months. Ten months. Imagine.

A lot of people died in the SHU. The medical attention was horrible. One Fijian guy I knew had high blood pressure and it wasnt treated, and he had a heart attack. People cut their wrists with razor blades. Hung themselves. There were mentally ill people who werent medicated. I saw two people straight up lose their minds in there and go crazy. They fucking just lost it, dude. If youre not strong-minded, and you dont have that strong will, youre screwed. Eventually that cell is gonna get to you, is gonna start eating you up and making you crazy.

There was a Haitian soldier, his name was Baptiste. He snapped. He was smearing shit on his windows and putting soap up his ass. I knew the dude before the SHU, and he flipped out in the SHU. He straight up lost his mind. He just lost it. That place got to him. His cell was across from mine, so I saw it firsthand. Even after I moved cells I could still smell his shit cause we were on the same pod. Each pod is ten cells, with five on each side, so everybody had to smell his shit. Even the COs. Hed be screaming for help, and they never gave it to him. Even when he got out of the SHU he wasnt the same.

Three days a week you get to leave your cell. And what I remember most was how it enrages you. Its like being a kid and you look out the window and see everybody playing and having fun, and you cant join them for some reason. You start to get angrier and angrier, and you have all this hate for everybody. If you dont know how to release it, when you finally do come out, you come out angrier than before.

Heather Chapman

Heather Chapman lives in a small two-bedroom house in Fort Lauderdale, Florida Her first child, Nikko Albanese, was arrested in 2011 for armed robbery and sentenced in 2012 to ten years in prison. Nikko began medication at age ten for a range of mental and emotional challenges, and Heather says that life in prison [at Union Correctional Institution in Florida] especially in isolation is deteriorating his mental and physical health. She says hes twice been found unresponsive in his cell, and she fears he could die before his release.

As soon as Nikko went to prison I filled out paperwork for visitation for me, Freddy, and our two girls. So I was awaiting this paperwork to come back clear they do a background check. I hadnt heard from Nikko for a month, so I ended up calling the prison and found out that Nikko was in administrative confinement. So that means something happened. I found out that he had gotten a tattoo, and because of that he was put on a disciplinary squad. Something happened on the disciplinary squad with an officer. To this day I dont know what it was, but I know Nikko.

In February 2014, he was found in the solitary confinement cell unresponsive. Nikko just shut down, stopped eating, stopped talking, stopped moving. He was just laying there waiting to die. There was an advisor at the National Alliance on Mental Illness that I would call obsessively, like a lunatic. He made a phone call to check on Nikko. And thats how I found out that Nikko was in the crisis unit and had been there for several months, and that he had been found in a catatonic state in solitary confinement. That day was horrific. I thought a catatonic state was something from the fifties. I didnt even realize that a human being could go into a catatonic state these days.

The prison doctors diagnosed him with schizophrenia. Now I know that Nikko doesnt have schizophrenia because this is something that the doctors and I were looking for when he was younger. Ive read everything there is to read on solitary confinement and what happens to the brain, how it will shut down, and how youll start hallucinating. The human brain is just not designed for this type of isolation. So it will mimic the same effects as schizophrenia, but that doesnt mean you have schizophrenia. It means that youre basically being tortured. Really, the prison doctors were seeing Nikko react to isolation. Hes not schizophrenic, but theyre medicating him like he is. And these are serious medications. Theyre not medicating him for the conditions he has, theyve misdiagnosed him and are torturing him even more with the wrong medications. Its like theyre punishing him for having symptoms of isolation.

The first time I was allowed to visit was 2015, and that was because he was found to be forty pounds underweight and near death. The first visit was horrible. Nikko had already been in solitary for two and a half years. He spent sixteen days in general population, and the rest of the time hed been in isolation. He was at Union Correctional, which is about six hours from where I live

So the guards walked me in and told me that I could buy Nikko food. All I brought was \$25, and I spent every cent of it on anything they had. They filled this box with the food and then they put it into a phone booth type of thing. I guess they opened the door to this phone booth thing, and there was an inmate standing there. They started to remove his shackles. I thought to myself for a split second, *Oh theyre putting the wrong inmate in the room. Nikko is supposed to go there. Should I say something?* And then I realized it was Nikko.

Nikko didnt know who I was. His bones were protruding. He could barely stand up. Three guards had escorted him from his cellblock to the visiting area in death row. He could barely walk. And theyre having a hard time getting the shackles off him because hes having a hard time keeping his balance. Hes blinking his eyes like the lights affecting them. He looked like a Holocaust victim. Thats all I

thought, that he looked like a Holocaust victim. It looked like rigor mortis had started to set in around his eyes, his cheekbones everything was set back. And he had that daunted look, like a beaten dog. Hes blinking and looking around. I stand up and Im waving my arms and Im saying, Nikko! Nikko its me! Its Mom. He looks and he kind of says yes, but doesnt really say anything and keeps looking around. And I realize he doesnt know who I am.

Nikko didnt know I was there. He couldnt make eye contact. He was in and out of consciousness. I kept trying to get his attention. Its a two-hour, no-contact visit so I cant touch him. Just the sound of my voice would hurt him, and asking him to look at me and give me eye contact was painful for him. I could see how painful it was. I could see that he would literally come in and out of consciousness.

So they unshackle him and hes scared. Hes very scared. And I knew that I had a very, very short time to get Nikko back. And that literally everything was depending on this visit. I cant touch him, and there is a dirty piece of glass in between us with those little holes that metal plate with holes poked in it and I needed to get Nikko to focus on me. I needed to make eye contact with him, and I needed him to remember who I was. I shouted: Nikko! Nikko! I kept calling his name to get him to look at me, trying to get his eyes to, you know, look up to eye level because he couldnt do that his head was hanging. I was talking very fast and very loud about everything his childhood, his sisters, the animals in the house. I was doing everything Im calling him names, things that I used to call him when he was younger, and Im not showing fear

Very slowly he picked up his head and then he picked up his eyes and moved them across the room until they came to me. I said, Nikko! As soon as his eyes met him, I said, Nikko! And he said, Mom? Youre here. And I said, Yes. Nikko, Im here! Im right here, Nikko. And his eyes would start falling, and I said, Nikko, keep your eyes on me. Keep your eyes on me! And he said, Mom, youre here. I said, Yes, Im here. And I just sat back, and I made him keep his eyes on me and I just smiled, and I let him kind of process the whole thing. And then he smiled.

He knew who I was. I wouldnt let him take his eyes off me, no matter what. I kept talking, and I could see that the more I spoke, and the more I kept his eyes on me you could literally see the color come back into his face, you could start to see his facial expressions. And it was like breathing life into him. They had taken the shackles off his arms so he could move his arms. I guess he must have hit the box of food with his arms because I wouldnt let him take his eyes off me. And he looked down. And of course I screamed, Nikko, look at me! Nikko! And he looked up and he said, Is this for me? and I said, Of course it is. And he had to keep his eyes on me, but hes literally shoving this food into his mouth. I was scared he was going to eat the wrappers and choke.

I was just talking, letting him know that I was there. And hes just shoving this food in his face. You know when children are really hungry and they get one of their favorite meals? Theyll sit there, bounce and swing their legs and hum, and theyre just so happy while they eat. And thats exactly what was happening with Nikko. Im there, and hes eating, and it feels good. And he says, Mom, I dont know if they told you, but I stopped eating. And I said, Yes, Nikko, they told me. Why? Why did you stop eating?

Then it was like everything stopped. Nikko stopped bouncing and humming and there was just this blanket of shame. And his head just went down and his eyes went off. And I said, No, no! Nikko! Look at me! Pick up your head and put your eyes back on me! Its okay. Then I started explaining to him what happens to human beings when they are in severe isolation, that they start to hear voices. Then I went through the basics of what happens to any human brain in this situation. And he picks his eyes up at me and you could see him feeling relief. He just sat back, looking at me, and hes drinking in every word that Im saying. And you know, I was telling him, Nikko, youre not crazy. Everything thats happening hearing voices, the hallucinations, and every single thing is normal. Because this situation that youre in is *not* normal.

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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My son is 19 now. been in shu transferred different prisons guards tried to sexually assault him in Comstock n.y he is mentally ill its scary cause these people have kids our kid age they treat ours like animals nys is harsh I cant imagine another kid going thru what ours is

We are very sorry to hear about your son. You may want to reach out to the people at NYCAIC, a group that includes many relatives of people in solitary in NY State prisons. Go to <http://www.nycaic.org> for more information.

Okay thank you they have nothing in central NY so Im gonna message them

So sad because it is so real. It is hard for people to understand what it does to the human mind to deprive them of life. I started reading SW more than 4 years ago when I started my blog at mynameisjamie.net. Jamie, still inside and still in adseg. 14 years now. I am the only one who has made the effort to keep him together. I shudder to think of how he would be doing if I had not been there, but depression is hard to keep away. I give him value to know his life has value. I am still writing my book about him Inside The Forbidden Outside. Half way through another rewrite, having to learn how to write and do this with no money. I am writing a music soundtrack for each chapter, and music videos sonniquick.net and poetry, newsletters, a mailing list. Thousands know who he is now as I work every day to give this man a second chance when he gets out. I have so much respect for the job SW has done bringing these stories to the public to read.

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