

Center For Constitutional Rights

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2016/08/23/i-want-share-image-solitary-confinement-hopes-you-may-know-what-i-survived>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

Today, the 23rd of the month, invoking the 23 hours per day that prisoners spend in their cells in the SHU, activists throughout California are [taking action](#) to bring attention to prison conditions. Below Ernesto Rodriguez shares his experience of indefinite solitary confinement and of his release into the general prison population, after a settlement in CCR's case [Ashker v. Governor of California](#) effectively ended longterm solitary confinement in CA prisons.

8/4/16

Dear World,

Being in solitary confinement for an indefinite SHU term at Pelican Bay felt like an eternity. The mental picture I will carry with me for the remainder of my life is like a scar in our bodies, visibly reminding us of a past hurt. Solitary confinement is much like that, the only difference is that the scar is not visible because the pain is hidden within my mind; deep within the confines of my memories. However, these memories can surface when I access such horrific experiences of my past. Like a dream, or a nightmare that stays with us forever.

Today, I want to share this vivid image of solitary confinement in hopes that you may know what I survived. What every person held in solitary confinement survives. Each unit in solitary confinement has six pods with eight cells in each pod; four on the bottom tier, and four on the top tier. The cells lack privacy. Each inmate can hear each others every sound, movement, and thoughts. I often wonder whether others around me can hear the words I write in a letter. The cells are all the same concrete that was used to build this torture chamber. The walls are disguised by white paint. They have a psychiatric asylum feel to them that can drive men mad with insanity. There is a unit that adjoins the sink and toilet; a concrete slab you can place the little you have, and yes, a concrete slab to sleep on. A prisoner can go to showers or yard, both of which are located within each pod, accessible through the opening of a metal door, controlled by the jailer at the central booth. A prisoner spends about twenty two to twenty three hours in his cell, every day of his life. The only time a prisoner comes out of his cell is to go to yard or shower. The few fortunate ones are visited by brave family and friends who muster the strength, fueled by love, to see their sons, brothers, uncles, husbands and loved ones; otherwise, he never leaves the unit. He never gets to see the sun or the moon. Even at yard one feels as if he is looking up inside of a well, forever lost, forever forgotten. One's memory fades of the colorful green on a tree; a bird flying through the sky; or a smile painted on a loved one's face. One has to gather up the courage to stare right back at the beast, and use his mind to defeat it, to conquer it. Most prisoners will spend decades, if not the rest of their lives, in solitary confinement by the corruption within these walls. An arbitrary power given to our captors by legislators to label prisoners as a threat to the security of the institution state-wide just for having a mind, becomes eternal in this solitude. When you walk into solitary confinement, often, there is never a return. A return to what often seems like a dream-life before this never ending nightmare.

This is the grim reality for most inmates housed in solitary confinement. It was my reality. I remember that when I wrote that excerpt of an essay paper I did for college, I truly believed that I would stay in solitary confinement until I paroled, more than 20 years in the future. However, inside of solitary confinement, I turned my focus towards education. Basically, I realized that I could not sit in that lifeless tomb and let myself be buried alive and rot away. So in 2010, I earned my G.E.D. and enrolled in a Bible college correspondence course, which I completed. I then enrolled in actual college at Feather River College to earn my A.A. degree. I completed programs such as: GOGI, A.A., N.A., Criminon, Love Lifted Me Recovery, Crossroad Bible Institute, College Guild, Saints Prison Ministry, Prep-Turning Point, Prep Anger Management, Finding The Way Publications, 12 Step Christian Ministry, New Jersey Bible Club, Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative, TL4Fcorp Affiliates; Defenders Recovery Program; Dismas Ministry, and Rock of Ages Ministry. Why did I become so focused towards education you might ask? Well, I knew that I'd spend the rest of my life helping at risk youth avoid learning about life the way I did, or experience what I did in solitary confinement, by being a youth counselor. This would be the only way to find redemption in my own life and mistakes. Living a life of service is the best antidepressant that would also grant me inner liberation from the torture I experienced being deprived of basic human sense.

In December of 2015, I was released from solitary confinement and sent to High Desert State Prison general population in D facility. I remember the first time I went out to the main yard, it was snowing heavily. However, I began to run around the big track. As I began to run, I began to pick up the pace. Soon enough my shirt was off and I was flying, soaring around the track with all my might and speed! I was truly flying! When I finally stopped, and as I gasped for air and tried not to pass out from the lack of oxygen in my brain (High Desert has thinner air due to the high altitude), I noticed all of the inmates looking at me as if I was a mad man. What they did not fully understand was that after years of being buried alive in a concrete casket at Pelican Bay SHU, being able to run as I did, allowed me to feel as free as I've felt in years! No wire blocking the sky, no concrete walls stopping me from running as I did! I truly felt as if I was flying!

My story did not end there, in 2016, a new law called SB 261 was passed that allows people incarcerated before the age of 23 a second chance at life. I was incarcerated at age 18, and am now 35 years of age. When I arrived at High Desert, many inmates looked up to me

because of where I came from. I used this influence not for ill purposes, but for positive ones. I became involved in mentoring younger inmates to encourage them towards education, through a program called Fair Chance Project, Walking the Yard. I also got involved writing to troubled kids through a program called Prison Letters 4 Our Struggling Youth and The Bear Within. I also became a Peer Coach with the GOGI (Getting Out by Going In) organization and started a GOGI group as a facilitator to help other inmates make positive decisions and influence their lives towards a positive direction. So when this law passed, I had already met all the requirements, and beyond, to be given a second chance at freedom outside of prison walls. I was seen by a Commissioner to parole sustainability, Kathleen Newman. Right from the start, she expressed she was very impressed with my file. And when I was done speaking, I could tell I had made a rare impression upon her. She expressed that I was a rare inspirational case and that people like me are needed in our society to do the work I will be doing; counseling at risk youth.

So to conclude this blog, next year I should be reunited with my family and doing the work I was put on this earth to do. To be of service to infinite others, in order to help them find their internal freedom and away from their inner solitude. We all have an inner light that we must nurture, in order to illuminate the world, our world with a bright light of positivity and love.

Sincerely and with much love and solidarity,

Ernesto Rodriguez

[View the discussion thread.](#)

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