

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2014/06/03/odyssey-pelican-bay-families-journey-californias-notorious-supermax-prison/>

Campaign and Advocacy

close

Search

close

close

by [Sarah Shourd](#) | June 3, 2014

On Memorial Day weekend, close to a hundred visitors traveled by plane, train, bus, and car to Pelican Bay State Prison. The longweekend, with the prospect of not having to rush back to work on Monday morning, meant that relatives could make the expensive, lengthy trip to the Northern-most tip of California, where a cluster of boxy-beige nondescript buildings warehouse the 1,500 men in the Security Housing Unit (SHU), in the most extreme conditions of solitary confinement in the state.

Crescent City is 736 miles from Los Angeles, where many of the men held at Pelican Bay Prison are originally from. That can easily amount to a fifteen-hour drive, the last four of which are on a dark, sinuous road flanked by ancient redwoods. For families with limited money and resources, making this trip can be akin to the obstacle-laden course navigated by Odysseus on his ten-year journey home from Troy.

At least three family members made it up this weekend that have never come before and would never have been able to make it on their own, said Dolores Canales, co-founder of the California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement (CFASC), people have health problems, the trip is too expensive some are scared to come up.

By pairing families together to share hotel rooms and carpooling through the night, CFASC has been able to winnow the cost of the trip down to one hundred and fifty dollars per person. For some of the families this literally opens up the opportunity to see their loved ones for the first time in ten years the same eternity it took Odysseus to get home.

The Intake Room

A nervous carload of mothers, wives, and a lone brother are greeted at the gate by an overly cheerful Correctional Officer (CO). He chuckles as he sorts through their IDs, SHU or Main? he asks.

SHU several people say in unison, piercing the last ten minutes of silence. That means their loved ones live in cramped, windowless cells 23 hours a day; that their only opportunity to glimpse the world outside their cells is an hour a day in a slightly larger, open-air cell; and that visits with their friends and family will be through thick glass, with no physical contact allowed.

Inside the waiting room, about 25 women and 2 men wait impatiently for the CO to call their names and make sure their clothing complies with Pelican Bay's regulations. No bras with underwire, no tight or revealing clothing, no skirts above the knee. A pregnant young woman gets sent back to her car to change her pants, deemed inappropriately tight. Others have to change their shirts if the fabric is too thin, take off earrings and leave behind letters and pictures they've brought there is a limit of ten pictures and only stud-earrings are allowed.

On the wall in the waiting room is a mounted glass case filled with sweatshirts for sale. Pelican Bay State Prison, one reads, Hard Luck Caf. Security Housing Units, reads another, Like Two Peas in a Pod.

I probably would have laughed at that years ago, says one woman, assuming all these guys deserve what they get. She says she's made the trip to Pelican Bay four times a year since her son was sent here in 1997. Now that it's my son, she adds, I know better.

This room of mostly women makes one think of the gaping holes left in communities during times of war, when traditionally it's the women who step up to fulfill the roles and responsibilities of brothers and husbands in their absence.

I'm going crazy just sitting here waiting, says one older woman, I've been sick, she continues, I can't fly. I can't drive anymore. Here I am to see my son after thirteen years.

As if on cue a frustrated young woman begins shaking the vending machine when her chips don't drop down. One-by-one, family members are asked to creep sideways through a hypersensitive metal detector, the alarm constantly going off.

When we first started coming up in 2011, said Canales, the visiting room would sometimes be empty now we worry if we're even gonna

get in. This is a good thing.

Families United

In 2011 the second major hunger strike began in Californias prisons, one of the core demands being the end of long-term solitary confinement. Canales and a few other mothers were at the center of outside support, After that hunger strike ended we realized we needed to form a group and keep organizing. After all, our husbands and kids were still in solitary.

Since then Dolores and CFASC have been at the center of it all. In 2013 another hunger strike erupted; this time 29,000 prisoners refused meals and a devoted core lasted over 60 days. CFASC was involved at every level: organizing demonstrations, sitting on the Mediation Team to negotiate the terms of ending the strike with prison officials and finding ways for families on the outside to constantly stay involved. A lot of times it was the guys inside Pelican Bay that told their family members to call us, said Canales, they urged them to get involved in the political process.

Groups of 15 are shuttled in a van to the SHU visiting room. Each person has received a number, and they make their way to the small booths where they will spend the next three hours talking to their loved ones through thick glass, their mouths pressed to a plastic phone receiver mounted to the wall beside them. Visitors are allowed access to a vending machine where they can buy soda and snacks, but they cant share them. No contact is allowed, nothing but words can be passed between them.

Most these men are validated gang members or associates which means that evidence such as a letter, an address, drawing or possession of the wrong book is enough to place them in solitary confinement for year, decades or indefinitely. Many have never committed a violent act in prison, they are deemed guilty by association and the only chance they have to get back to the mainline is to debrief, which mean giving information, often false, on other prisoners.

Every once in a while, a young woman overcome with emotion will rush towards the public bathroom, her child in tow. Others press their hands to the glass to touch their husband, brother or son on the other side. The men are pale and smiling, wearing blaring white jumpsuits tied in the front like a backward hospital gown.

Since the hunger strike, Canales said, The men inside have been allowed to order additional items from the canteen. Theyve been given shorts and bowls; a pull-up bar and access to a handball you have to remember that for decades theyve had nothing to work out with. More recently, the visits have been expanded to three hours instead of what used to be more like an hour and a half.

Though these improvements have been largely well received by prisoners and their families, Canales points out that they do nothing to end the practice of long-term solitary confinement. We definitely oppose the new legislation presented by Loni Hancock, Canales continues, referring to the recently proposed California Senate Bill 892, unless its amended. There are a few good aspects to it, but others are problematic. Ultimately, it still allows for the use of *indefinite* solitary confinement, no end in sight, thats completely unacceptable.

Leaving The Razor Wire Behind

Cars line up behind the security booth in the afternoon heat, eager to speed off and leave the razor wire and boxy-beige buildings behind, where theyre husbands, sons and fathers remain, many with no end in sight. Some will make their way to local restaurants to try and fill the nagging emptiness with warm food, while others will need to immediately start the long drive back to Los Angeles.

Visits mean everything to these guys, Canales says while sitting down to eat with a small group of CFASC members, It can often put their routines back on a positive course. You hear stories of guys that have been doing nothing but watching TV months, they dont even want to go out to yard. The guys call this checking out and it can be dangerous, the worst cases ending in suicide. After a visit some of these guys turn their lives around and start being productive again.

A small group of CFASC members stop for a walk in the redwoods. One mother in her 70s pierces the silence by telling scandalous jokes in Spanish and soon no one can stop laughing. Thats why my visits keep my son going, she exclaims, I can always make him laugh.

These women seem heartened by the simple joy of being together and the success of this weekends journey. So many of the men dont get visits, comments one woman, thinking of the hundreds of men who went without, I feel terrible for them.

Sarah Shourd is a playwright, trauma-informed investigative journalist, author, and former Stanford John S. Knight Fellow based in Oakland. A survivor of solitary confinement, her work exposes the impact of mass incarceration and explores alternatives. Her writing has been published by The Atlantic, New York Times, Mother Jones, San Francisco Chronicle, CNN, and Reuters. In 2022 she is working with The Pulitzer Center on The End of Isolation Tour: endofisolation.org or sarahshourd.com.

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

Solitary Watch encourages comments and welcomes a range of ideas, opinions, debates, and respectful disagreement. We do not allow name-calling, bullying, cursing, or personal attacks of any kind. Any embedded links should be to information relevant to the conversation. Comments that violate these guidelines will be removed, and repeat offenders will be blocked. Thank you for your cooperation.

I met my husband while he was serving time at Pelican Bay State Prison. He was serving a sentence for fraud. I tried to steer away from prisoners with a history of violence, especially those with a history of violence against women. I found my husband on: clinkpal.com I recommend doing an extensive background search on any prisoner before contacting them. That way you know what to expect.

And the whipping post or placed in stocks for a short time was so much worse?

The prisoners didn't get there by mistake. They are the worst of the worst. No sympathy here.

DT thinks this piece is one-sided??? He thinks our prisons are the Club Med of prisons of prisons? Maybe there are some low security prisons for the white population who can afford an attorney, but the majority of the people locked up in solitary are minorities and the poor. I have family who's been looked up in solitary for years. <http://www.mynameisjamie.net>. When I started that website for him I started doing a lot of research about it. It opened my eyes. I made a commitment to making people aware. I also found a website called <http://www.writeaprisoner.com>. I started reading profiles of men on death row. I received letters back from two. One man was part of the hunger strike. What I have learned about these men, their lives and how they cope is amazing. I know how important letters are and if I bring anything of value to their lives or can make part of their day worth living, then I am glad to do it. Both of them did bad things and both came from environments that made it conducive. I choose not to judge them by what they did but by who they are now. They will never get out. What is the point of continuing to make their life hell? Unless they enjoy doing that. I have already created a page at the website My Name is Jamie. Life in Prison for one man named Tarus and will create one for the other, Armando.

Well written but extremely one-sided. People don't accidentally wind up in the SHU. Our prisons are the club med of the world's prisons. I know the SHU isn't. But there are far worse prisons in the world.

I'm sorry for your pain. It's never easy having family fall. I pray for strength to continue standing next to them, encouraging them with loving, helping hands.

Nice piece. I love that you do that Delores, you are an angel. I know that sign all too well. Every other weekend rain or shine we drove up there until my back just gave out. It literally crippled me to spend all that time in the car. Even having the money to go regularly has its price to pay. I cannot barely drive anywhere and still walk at the end of the drive. Flying has gotten so outrageous. I could take a car load of people for what one round trip ticket cost. There is no reason that So CA families have to be separated by almost 800 miles. There are SHUs in Tehachapi & Corcoran. Mothers in their older years should not have to struggle on fixed incomes and with ailing health travel so far to see their sons. It breaks my heart. Grandparents that cannot bear to see their grandsons behind glass and know they will not live to touch them again. I have seen mothers pass away without ever touching their sons in decades. It is inhuman. Prison is the punishment. This isolation needs to stop and be used as temporary punishment. What makes it so cruel is there is no end. It is like beating them emotionally every day within an inch of their sanity. It takes some sadistic sick people that think this is acceptable. A normal person could not justify it. The experts admit that close family ties help prisoners, and supposedly the CDC encourages that? I don't see it. It has proved to help with violence and their rehabilitation but they send our people as far away as possible to super punish them and in turn we get punished. It cost me my health to be the best wife I could be because I was determined to be there for him as much as possible. Honestly I need it as much as him. It kills me that I only can go every 3-4 months these last two years and the 2-3 years before that it was once a month. That is really hard after seeing him every other weekend for over 10 years. Now that we get 3 hours a day makes it even harder what I would have given to have that for the last 15 years! I know why some people move up there. Unfortunately my life is here, my work, my houses, my kids and grandkids. That isn't his home, we are his home. My God continue to bless your work. You are amazing!!!

I went there for five years, almost every weekend. To see my sweetie, they should not allow this to continue. It is awful, the S.H.U. It is inhuman treatment., they do not offer any Rehabilitation AT ALL, but they sure got granted the \$\$\$\$ funds for it., the c/os in Pelican Bay, treated you like a real human, as far as the visitors go, now I go down south, and they are mean, mean mean..nasty and mean.

There can be no serious criminal justice reform until the 3 million people related to a state prisoner replace Gov. Brown and the Senators and Assembly members put into office by CCPOA. It takes some work, but it can be done. Fill your car today with people to vote for Cindy Sheehan for Gov, Sandra Fluke for Senate in the 26th district, Jack Lindblad for Senate in the 18th District, Bob Olmsted for Los Angeles County Sheriff. These are all candidates put up by ordinary people but your votes are critical to getting them in. Injustice is a result of Lethargy doing election work and 3 million people can fix that problem. Vote tonight and get others to do the same. CCPOA is working to keep you in bondage, do something about changing the situation.

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



