

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/06/11/suicide-in-solitary-a-mother-remembers-her-son/>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | June 11, 2013

Yesterday we published a [guest post](#) by the Human Rights Coalition (HRC) about the U.S. Department of Justice's scathing report on the Pennsylvania prison SCI Cresson. According to the DOJ, Cresson routinely locks prisoners with serious mental illness in their cells for roughly 23 hours per day for months, even years, at a time. At Cresson, the prolonged isolation is all the harder for many prisoners with serious mental illness to endure because it involves harsh and punitive living conditions and, often, unnecessary staff-on-prisoner uses of force.

Unsurprisingly, Cresson's practice of subjecting prisoners with serious mental illness to prolonged periods of isolation under [these] conditions has resulted in harm, including trauma, bouts of hysteria and extreme paranoia, severe depression, psychosis, serious self-injury and mutilation, and suicide.

One of the suicides was that of Brandon Palakovic, who hanged himself in his solitary confinement cell at SCI Cresson in July 2012. He was 23 years old, had a long history of mental illness, and was serving a short sentence for a burglary in which no one was hurt. [According to the Human Rights Coalition](#), After his death, an employee of SCI Cresson's medical staff told the Palakovic family that four days prior to his death Brandon had refused to take his medication. He was issued a misconduct report for refusal to obey a direct order as a consequence and sent to solitary confinement in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) as punishment.

After reading the DOJ report, Brandon Palakovic's mother, Renee Palakovic, wrote the following [statement](#), which was published by HRC:

My son was more than just a prisoner confined to a cell in a state correctional institution. I have spent nearly a year reminding myself of this fact, remembering the good times and trying to heal my broken heart. While time does not heal the wound, it does help me to learn to live with and deal with the pain that is always lingering right at the surface, ready to bring me to my knees at any moment.

So, on Friday, May 31st [2013], when I read the news articles and eventually the Justice Department report later in the weekend, the pain that I have been fighting to control and manage every minute of every day came flooding back in a real and powerful way that I was not prepared for.

Brandon was not an angel by any stretch of the imagination, but he was a human being with feelings and needs. He had ongoing mental health issues for most of his life and there were plenty of records to support that. So when he entered Cresson SCI, he was quickly seen by the psychiatrist(s) and placed on medication to regulate his behaviors. But for some reason, because he was in a prison, the need to have follow-up sessions, discuss side effects and work to determine proper dosing was left to fall by the wayside. Why? What psychiatrist does this to a patient? He was ignored. Placed in solitary for extended periods of time and treated like an animal. Taunted by guards who found amusement in toying with his mind and his emotions and given the opportunity to harm himself.

To read the Justice Department's report and find that his requests for help were ignored, his visits with the psychiatrist skipped and his treatment reduced to ongoing and never-ending confinement in a small cement cell made my heart break all over again and quite frankly, made me mad as hell.

My son was an intelligent, helpful, loving, funny, handsome and charming young man with his whole life ahead of him. Yes, he had made some serious errors in judgment and had only himself to blame for those mistakes. He needed to pay for the crimes that he had committed, but not like this. Not in a way that degraded his humanity and assaulted his self-esteem daily. Not in a way that made him believe that he had no self-worth, had nowhere to turn and would be better off dead.

My son was more than just a prisoner confined to a cell in a state correctional institution. I will keep telling myself this, because it is true. But until state correctional institutions believe it and operate based upon it, more and more sons and daughters will become victims of the callous and irresponsible treatment seen behind the walls of Cresson SCI.

For more background on the Pennsylvania prison suicide crisis, see [Matt Strouds reporting in The Nation](#) and the [Philadelphia City Paper](#).

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

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.

My deepest sympathy for your loss of your son sad I saw the picture I lost my brother John McClellan on May 7th 2011 for getting tortured in prison he was in solitary confinement for months and months I had gotten letters from the prison that they were watching my daughter they were just crazy stuff was going on its very sad that thats how they treat someone or anyone no one should be treated like this no matter what the situation is theyre all human and maybe these officers security officers should reevaluate their job and if they feel like theyre angry and upset and they feel like beating somebody maybe they should literally see a mental health Doctor I cant even put the thoughts back in my brain and my heart of how bad it was while my brother was in prison its sad and shortly after that my mother died God bless Teresa McClellan

sorry for your loss Praying for you
Otto Ball

Dear Brandons mother,

Your son was not at fault nor were you. It was the fault of the cruel prison system and their indifference to human suffering. I am praying for you.

Love.

Caroline Ramsay Merriam

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

Solitary Watch

Copyright 2022, Solitary Watch

Read about [rights and permissions](#).



Solitary Watch News