

Center For Constitutional Rights

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://ccrjustice.org/home/blog/2017/01/23/running-after-solitary-forest-gump-had-nothing-me>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

The CCR blog

To mark 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 Angel Martinez, a class member in CCR's lawsuit challenging longterm solitary confinement, [Ashker v. Governor of California](#), shares his experience of being released into the general prison population after years in solitary confinement, following a settlement in the case, which effectively ended longterm solitary confinement in CA prisons.

Lucretius said, But he remains in life to whom the mind and intelligence remains. He may be a mutilated trunk dismembered all about, the spirit removed all around and separated from the limbs, yet he lives breathes the vital air.

Being in the SHU is like the constant dripping of water that wears away the hardest stone. The monotonous barrage of solitude is beyond the strength of man. The insidious torment destroys the soul without pity. The SHU does not reform, it kills.

The daily shrinking of personality is immeasurably worse than any torture of the body. While our external shape remains, attrition takes its bloodless toll on our personal identity. That which allows us to recognize ourself is annihilated. I watch daily the gradual decay of all that made me part of the world. The vile enforced idleness is a numbing violence against mind and spirit. Its slow and daily tampering with ones equanimity destroys empathy, family, and social bonds of all kinds. It leaves us in SHU with no past, no future, only a present, expanded moment circumscribed by concrete walls, locked in torment.

This was my life for over a decade in Pelican Bays SHU. Sartre said that, emotion is defined by and defining social relationships. Emotion does not exist within the solitary individual because it depends on social configurations to not just trigger it, but also to actually form it. He was right.

On January 7, 2016, I was transferred out of PBSP/SHU on my way to New Folsom. I actually got to see the sunrise. And society moving about on the freeway coming and going. It was surreal. I got to shake some mens hands after more than 13 years of no contact.

As I walked into the facility yard on that cold January night, I was greeted by a literal jail bird. He stood about 4 ft. from feet to head. On our way up the hill he wouldnt get out of the way and came towards me in a straight line with an aggressive posture, head and chest out. I didnt know what to expect. As I waited for an attack, he came two feet from me and poked his head at me. Quuuuaaackkk!!, he yelled. It stunned me. Yes, it was a Canadian goose that took over the yard. Come to find out they are territorial and very aggressive.

I was amazed to see so many geese and birds. There was an actual window in my cell. I saw the moon and stars, and an airplane. Baby geese in a line. Squirrels. And even seven deer grazing on a slope.

I got to drink **hot** coffee, **hot** food. Seasonings and ice. Even ice cream. I tasted creamer and real pizza. I got to hear music I havent heard in over 25 years. I got to use a phone and met some family members for the first time. Did I mention direct sunlight? I actually got sunburned. Wow, so much to take in.

My highlight was receiving my first contact visit with my parents and sister. What a beautiful wonderful feeling it was to hug them after so many years. In those moments I was actually living not only existing. I saw my mama on Mothers Day and pops on Fathers Day. And my lovely sister, whos been my guiding light.

Theres a dirt track that men run on. Im not a runner, never been. But just picture this: after 23 years of being in prison and never running, as soon as I hit that track my feet just dug in and I was gone, full speed. Forest Gump had nothing on me. I was free. People stopped and looked. It was fun and funny. Ha ha. Seems like the simple things bring the greatest joy. I had a job working on the yard crew and assisting men who needed help getting around in a wheelchair. Official title was adult care giver. I got to use a shovel and a water hose. A lawn mower. I cut grass. I was in college.

Sadly, on November 10, 2016, I was placed in Administrative Segregation and sent to the hold in Old Folsom, where Ive been ever since facing 48 months in SHU on a trumped up charge. Its worse than the SHU here. Smaller cells. No T.V.s, no college or education, no exercise equipment like pull-up bars, very limited property, no warm clothing, no clock, no bowl, etc.

There is no evidence to keep me in [Ad. Seg.] but due to the administration and power of [Institution Gang Investigation (IGI)] here I remain in retaliation for my own lawsuit on [Pelican Bay SHU/IGI]. And for participation in the *Ashker* class action, of which I am a member of the 8th and 14th Amendment class. Our fight is not over. Folsom has found a way, so they believe, to take away all the gains that we have achieved. Help me in trying to get our T.V.s and pull-up bars, and college classes, and rehabilitation programs that other [Administrative Segregation Units] across the state have. [Folsom Prison] says they are exempt. We are forced to sit idle here with only misery for company.

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