

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/12/18/wilbert-rideau-on-solitary-confinement-the-zenith-in-human-cruelty/>

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by [James Ridgeway and Jean Casella](#) | December 18, 2010

The American Constitution Society has run a new piece by Wilbert Rideau, describing his time in solitary confinement. As the ACSs introduction describes him, [Wilbert Rideau](#) is author of [In the Place of Justice: A Story of Punishment and Deliverance](#), a memoir that recounts his 44 years in prison, where he became a journalist and won several journalism awards, including a George Polk Award and the American Bar Associations Silver Gavel. He was freed in 2005. An excerpt from the piece follows; it can be read in full [on the ACSs blog](#).

I spent twelve years in cells that were variations of solitary confinement, as I recount in my memoir, [In the Place of Justice](#). The one in the old Calcasieu Parish jail, where I waited out the appeal of my 1961 murder conviction, was a small maximum security tier, segregated from the rest of the prisoner population. It saved my sanity that there was one other man, Ora Lee Rogers, in an adjacent cell. Our cells, like the one I later lived in on Louisianas death row, had three solid walls and a fourth made of bars, which permitted us to talk, easing somewhat the sense of being completely cut off from the world.

Still, I think I have never before or since felt the bone-cold loneliness that I felt on death row, removed from family or anything resembling a friend, and just being there, with no purpose or meaning to my life, cramped in a cage smaller than an American bathroom. The lonesomeness was only increased by the constant cacophony of men in adjacent cells hurling shouted insults, curses, and arguments not to mention the occasional urine or feces concoction. Deprivation of both physical exercise and meaningful social interaction were so severe in the early days of Louisianas death row that some men went mad while others feigned lunacy in order to get transferred to the hospital for the criminally insane, where they had freedom of movement, interaction with others, and an escape from their date with the electric chair.

Far worse than the barred cages, though, were the isolation cells I endured in local jails as I waited out appeals of 1964 and 1970 re-trials for the same crime. At one point in the Baton Rouge jail, I was held in complete solitude, surrounded by solid cinderblock walls and a steel door with a small food hatch in it that could be opened only from outside the cell. Although the Calcasieu Parish jail cell allowed me a window that looked out on the street below, and although I was permitted reading material, the social and mental deprivation was so great that every day was a struggle to maintain my sanity and stave off the inclination to drift off into daydreams. This kind of solitary confinement, where you have only your thoughts for company, is the zenith in human cruelty.

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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](#).

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by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

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September 29, 2022

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not in the places of justice that he was no he was in the Plane of Justice you do not want ever go there lol really sucks this nations terny into the plane of justice fast sick is it not that should take no thought to say yes that's sick solitary needs to be stopped i can only hope it does in time may there be light in the darkness of justice

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Solitary Watch

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