

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/05/06/the-art-of-activism-closing-tamms-supermax/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | May 6, 2013



A new article from [Creative Time Reports](#) highlights the role played by politically engaged art in the campaign to shut down Tamms supermax prison in southern Illinois. Tamms closed its doors for good in January, but only after a protracted battle in which family members of the incarcerated, grassroots activists, and artists joined to form the group [Tamms Year Ten](#). Their goal was to End Torture in Illinois the message of the mud stencils that members painted on walls and sidewalks across Chicago.

Creative Time showcases one of the campaigns most resonant projects, Photo Requests from Solitary. As Laurie Jo Reynolds and Stephen F. Eisenman of Tamms Year Ten describe it:

Photo Requests from Solitary was one of many projects launched by Tamms Year Ten to build publicity for the campaign. The men in Tamms were invited to request a photograph of anything in the world, real or imagined. The resulting requests were touching and often surprising. They included: the sacred mosque in Mecca, comic book heroes locked in epic battle, Egyptian artifacts, Tamms Year Ten volunteers and a brown and white horse rearing in weather cold enough to see his breath. Willie Sterling III asked for a photograph of a vigil at Bald Knob Cross on top of a hill in southern Illinois to pray for his deliverance from Tamms and to be granted parole

Photographers from across the country offered to fill photo requests for men in isolation. Chicago animator Lisa Barcy, Dutch photographer Harry Bos and Baltimore filmmaker Stephanie Barber each orchestrated a version of one prisoners detailed request for a lovesick clown: A lovesick clown: holding a old fashioned feathered pen: as if writing a letter: from the waist up: in black and white. As close up as possible: as much detail as possible: & the face about 4 inches big.

Read the rest of the story of Tamms Year Tens campaign [here](#). And for more photos, see the companion piece on the [Daily Beast](#).

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

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Casella and Ridegway are such inspirations to us and everybody else who has ever worked on this issue. They are the real artists!

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