

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2018/08/28/voices-from-solitary-waltzing-into-hell/>

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by [Voices from Solitary](#) | August 28, 2018

The following account was written by Laura Purviance, who is currently serving a 50 to life sentence for murder at Central California Womens Facility (CCWF) in Chowchilla. In her writing, Purviance describes her experience at Lynwood Jail for women in Los Angeles. After revealing her mental health history, Purviance was placed on suicide watch in a solitary confinement cell. As Purviance predicted would happen, the isolation and conditions caused her to experience a seizure and become physically ill as well as having a mental breakdown. Purviance describes how the isolation in fact instigated, rather than mitigated, her suicidal mindset. Over the past 30 years, jails and prisons in general and solitary confinement cells in particular have become warehouses for individuals with mental health issues. Valerie Kieba

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At the end of February 2013, after turning myself in in Medford, Oregon, and accepting extradition back to California, I first went to Los Angeles Countys jail for women, Lynwood. Upon intake, I was honest about my extensive mental health history, which includes a lot of psych meds, inpatient treatment, suicidal behaviors, and suicide attempts. I was put on suicide watch, which is solitary confinement for mentally ill people. I assured them I was not currently feeling suicidal and insisted that being confined in such a way was detrimental to my mental health. I didnt know anything about how these people operated. I hadnt even had so much as a parking ticket before, and my vast experience dictated: suicide watch = 72 hours.

So there I go, cluelessly waltzing into hell, learning the hard way like I tend to

Lynwoods suicide watch, 2300 and 2400, is cold, dirty, and loud. The only clothing was a thick padded suicide gown and matching blanket. I had nothing else, no mattress, no glasses. (I have terrible eyesight, Im practically blind without my glasses) and I was alone in a 2-man cell that was kept dark. I have a history of seizures, mainly stress-induced (petite mal, I gave intake all of that history), but I figure I can tough this out for 3 days. Protocol and history, I get it.

I was kept a lot longer than 3 days.

I began showing signs of a sinus infection and started to get very sick. My pleas to see a nurse were met by the deputies with phrases such as shell be here shortly and the nurse is making rounds. I didnt know they were lying to me to shut me up, but I get that now. This continued for days.

After 5 days, I pleaded with a mental health clinician through my door that the conditions of my confinement werent healthy, that I was scared of being so sick and stressed, of having a seizure or breaking into a psychotic episode. Im clinical in my psychosis, and Im not proud of myself when I breakdown and lose it. I was introduced to a phrase I would become well acquainted with over the next 6 months: We would rather you be uncomfortable than dead.

The constant noise and stress broke me down, on top of everything else, so I figured it was my turn to be an asshole. I woke up the entire pod very early one morning by repeatedly kicking the tray slot on my cell door. Somehow this earned me the company of a deputy who suddenly said he wanted to help and would bring me a nurse if only I would stop kicking me door. I was so sick that I had lost what was left of my voice by screaming at them about my lack of trust in anything they said.

The following afternoon, I had a seizure in my cell. I vaguely recall being on a gurney at medical and being given what I found out later was a stroke test. I cried as the doctor dismissed me as manic because I had totally lost my voice at this point and could no longer speak up for myself.

This meant back to suicide watch for me. I was so dejected. I was literally rolled off the gurney onto the bare metal bunk and left alone again. Over a week now, time was getting fuzzy, and I was fluctuating between chills and fever. I kept pushing the intercom button in my cell, begging and crying barely above a squeak for help nothing came of that. I was miserably bundling up and stripping naked as the fever and chills came and went. I started slamming my head against the wall.

In a feverish state, I was enjoying the cold concrete floor, when a first watch deputy doing checks decided she didn't like me lying motionless on the ground like that. She proceeded to shout, hit the door, and use her flashlight to try and get me to move. I guess movement means you're physically alive and therefore okay, but I was far from okay and I couldn't care less about anything these people said. Their words meant nothing and talking was over, so I stayed still and ignored her.

So she came into my cell and slapped me on my face.

I don't know what it was about that, exactly, but I just lost it. She left as I looked at her and left the tray window open. I proceeded to get naked, tossed my county shoes out of the window and urinated out of the window. I ripped all of the Velcro off the suicide gown and scratched my legs bloody. I wanted a staph infection so they would amputate my legs I didn't feel I deserved legs. I painted dripping dots of blood over all the walls to remind myself what I had done. I smeared blood over my body, I paced naked in the dark, I urinated at the door hoping a deputy would slip and fall in it.

Over the next two weeks, I stayed in that same cell. It became exceedingly filthy. I was not once offered a shower. Sometimes I was fed and sometimes not. The water was turned off. I stopped eating and had few fluids, so I became very weak. I dumped my food everywhere; the room was covered in fly larva and gnats. I learned later that my attorney, Ron Hedding, had been denied to see me during this time. I didn't move during checks and deputies did not want to go into my filthy cell, so they would open the door to throw apples and cartons of juice and milk at me to try and get me to move. I didn't speak. I was verbally harassed by everyone until they realized I responded to none of it.

I got a letter one day from my significant other (he's still with me) and to see that anyone still loved and cared boggled my mind. I thought that if he could still care about me, there must be something I'm just not seeing but I knew enough to trust his judgment. I began to slowly pull it together.

I was pacing naked covered in filth when a deputy came to my door and plainly asked if I wanted a shower. I didn't trust being suddenly offered humane treatment, so I paused and said, Yes, like a question. I was firmly escorted by two female deputies to the shower after being given a clean suicide gown and handcuffed. That was probably the best shower I've ever had.

I was taken to a clean cell and tried to focus my thoughts on still being loved by people out in the world. I was interviewed by a clinician who was baffled by my polite, lucid state. I told her about my entire experience so far. I was removed from the county mental hospital transfer list, but I refused psych meds, even though my fluctuating condition scared me.

I was moved to the mental health housing, 3200, but my clinical psychosis came knocking a couple weeks later. I had made a rope in my room and I knew that evening I was either going to hang myself or ask to go back to suicide watch. I had promised my significant other I would seek help if I felt suicidal again, so I grudgingly pushed the emergency medical button and patiently waited to be taken back to hell.

They quickly transferred me to the mental health unit downtown, where I was given Benadryl and Haldol, even though I wasn't hostile. After communicating as much, I was told they also had a medical order for restraints. I took a shot in each arm while half a dozen male guards leered at me. The nurses were kind enough to spare me getting the Haldol injected into my butt cheek when I asked to at least retain some dignity in front of so many men. One of them called me a model inmate, as I grudgingly took the shots.

I proceeded to be kept in isolation with no privacy. Not only was a camera in my cell, but the entire wall for the door was thick Plexiglas. I was the closest to the deputy's desk and nurses station. The toilet and sink were directly next to the wall. At least I had a thin mat for the metal bunk. Because I wasn't allowed undergarments of any kind, I was given an adult diaper to wear during my menstrual cycle.

I remember trying to put it on the first time, and I couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous everything was. This was my life. My 25th birthday was weeks away, and this is what I had been reduced to. I kept thinking of the comedian in Watchmen saying it's all a bad joke.

Even though my previous experiences with psych meds as a child left me terrified of ever going back to them, I knew I had to accept some treatment. I began taking an anti-depressant, anti-psychotic, and mood stabilizer. I actually asked to go back to Lynwood, and eventually I did.

That was when I was told I would be kept on suicide watch indefinitely. One clinician advised me to let my attorney know of my confinement, as she felt my treatment was inhumane.

Thankfully, I was allowed good books, I had visits every weekend from my significant other along with a steady flow of letters and money to buy canteen. My good manners towards the trustees earned me a good reputation. I was frequently given extra food. I found out who had to clean up the cell I had made filthy and apologized to her. She was very kind to me about it.

The doctors saw my capacity to respond well to treatment, and knowing I had a lot of time to serve, they really went above and beyond to give me therapy. I kicked myself to be mentally, physically, and (as much as anyone could be under the circumstances) socially engaged. By September, they told me I would never be declassified to general population in the jail but they gave me the choice of either high power or mental health housing for the remainder of my time with them. I chose mental health housing.

Two years later, custody had a survey I was asked to participate in. One of the questions was about being assaulted physically in custody at the county jail. I briefly disclosed just the physical assault parts during my stay on suicide watch. I don't know if anything ever came from my repeated disclosures on my experience. I never hid it from anyone.

I'm fairly certain that had I not had the support I did while kept in those conditions, I was going to allow myself to die. My suicidal mindset absolutely was instigated by the manner of my confinement. I was killing myself slowly and didn't care that the deputies assisted me in every way.

The Voices from Solitary series publishes dispatches from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement.

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 [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 30, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 19, 2022

by [Voices from Solitary](#)

September 6, 2022

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I wonder if this is the same significant other she assisted in drugging and raping me when i was only 17

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