

11 Feb. 2013

RE: Panel Discussion on Solitary Confinement

Reply ID: "SolitaryPanel"

Hello,

First let me offer my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to voice my thoughts and feelings. As a member of Voices From Alabama Death Row there's lots to be said.

I'm sure there will be all types of opinions, scientific and personal about the damages of being confined in a solitary environment. After discussing this with my group we offer these personal experiences and thoughts.

Although Alabama has some larger counties where jails house a higher numbers of people, most of us come from jails where the maximum count rarely exceeds 500 people. In Baldwin County on average, 200 of that number is actually Federal inmates being housed. Defendants coming in with cases such as ours and facing the Death Penalty are often placed in a solitary confinement unit, mine was in a cellblock where people with disciplinary problems were kept.

So right from the start, even under the "alleged" presumption of innocence people are being emotionally drained. A lack of contact with people who offer any positive impact. A man in the cell next to mine was on his fourth trip for fighting. He had no other thought but to be disruptive. Before long most people will at least consider that as a way of living. So by the time we got here to Death Row, most of us have issues of resentment, anger and a lack of trust. How long do you think a person with that emotional damage can keep up a relationship with family members they hardly ever get to see? For me, I'm housed roughly 300 miles from my closest family member.

Upon getting here we are again placed on a no contact regiment. A shower every other day, escorted to and from the shower in handcuffs. Locked in the shower until they decide to return. For me, I spent six and a half months in that status. Now being honest, we are given some open day room time here. We have a strong Kairos Ministry presence here. So we are allowed out as a group from time to time.

However, I feel that in itself is an even larger emotional trap. When the doors do open people are like robots. We have a group that will play dominoes for every minute they're out of the cells. Be it minutes or twelve hours straight

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Some might ask why that's a problem, those inmates are demonstrating the group activity. Performing in a social setting. In plain terms, getting along with each other. Yes, but at what cost?

That brief period of "freedom" is consumed as if there won't ever be anymore. Those inmates have lost the ability to process anything more. Before long their only goal is tomorrow's dominoes. After going back to the cells they sit at the door and cream to each other about what they should have played. The next day its discussions about yesterdays games. Can we believe they really remember what hand of dominoes they had? I say no, but in their mind they can. Because of being so consumed with it. Their solitary confinement offers nothing else.

When I first got here the Warden had an open hobby craft policy. Demonstrate you could conform to the rules like a civilized man and you were allowed to order wood working supplies, drawing and paint crafts. Most of us found a way to leave here if only in our minds. Then a new administration took over. Warden Cheryl Price and Deputy Warden Loyd Hicks. Without reason or warning they suspended the entire camps (1600 inmates) hobby craft program.

On top of that, Death Row has not been allowed outside for a recreation period in two and a half years. In July it will be three years since any of us have had a drop of sunshine on us except what comes through a window. When we ask the warden why we can't walk but the rest of the inmates on our housing unit do? They're reply, Because we say so.

Yet in our daily newsletter they post a full page on suicide and the signs to look for. People routinely kill themselves at this prison. We've also been noticed as one of the most violent in the US based on daily incidents. There are several pending lawsuits from inmates who were stabbed to officers feeling their safety was in question due to the administration.

So questions to the panel:

1. Is there anybody based in Alabama that's actually working towards changing the system? Someone we could begin to communicate with so issues could be documented and studied.
2. Has anyone proposed a set standard of treatment for people placed in this setting. I don't mean people that have been violent or have disciplinary reports I'm talking about Death Row inmates or those with medical issues.

3. Inmates housed such as us find it hard to acquire resource lists. Are there groups, schools, individuals, that offer educational materials to us for free or at a reduced cost? I ask mainly because Voices From Alabama Death Row have began making sure we have all the education we can get, even here. One of our group just completed his GED at 39 years old. He felt he had to have it as an example to his children. So we are searching for contacts.

I could write a hundred more questions and talk for pages. I recognize its a limited time and space panel. So I'll stay reserved and hope others have a chance to be heard. I thank you for just giving us the chance to speak.

I can be reached directly here at:

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Now that I'm back from court I'll be posting at my blog space weekly so look for my comments there: <http://betweenthebars.org/blogs/5406/>

I wish all of you success in this study.

Always...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Don', with a large, stylized initial 'D'.