Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Arthur "Cetewayo" Johnson photographed at Eastern State Penitentiary, the first facility in the U.S. to use solitary confinement. It is now a museum.

Arthur "Cetewayo" Johnson

Cetewayo spent 44 of his 51 years incarcerated in solitary confinement at six different state prisons in Pennsylvania. Now living in North Philadelphia, he continues to mentor incarcerated men and advocate for the rights of the incarcerated and their families through the Human Rights Coalition in Philadelphia.

Arthur "Cetewayo" Johnson spent 51 years in prison on a wrongful conviction — 44 of those years in solitary confinement. He was arrested for murder in 1970, just after turning 18. The case against him relied on a coerced statement from a 15-year-old boy interrogated by police for 21 hours and a "confession" he was manipulated into signing that he was unable to understand because of an intellectual disability and lack of education.

"The hole was brutal," he says. "We were kept in filthy cells. One pair of boxers, one t-shirt, a toothbrush with the handle cut off. You couldn't have books, newspapers — only a pen and ten sheets of paper. I was hungry every day. Starvation diets were part of the punishment."

Guards beat people without cause. Johnson tried to file legal complaints, but the courts denied them, and his letters were often destroyed. His persistence made him a target.

In 2016, the Abolitionist Law Center filed for relief, citing a psychiatrist's testimony that Johnson had experienced "social death." The Department of Corrections fought to keep him in isolation, but the judge ruled in Johnson's favor. He was moved into a step-down unit and eventually returned to general population.

The Abolitionist Law Center then began investigating his original conviction. They uncovered withheld evidence and a coerced, retracted witness statement. Working with the Philadelphia DA's office, they secured his release in 2021.

Cetewayo lives up to the nickname, which comes from a Zulu leader in recognition of his strength, and he continues to fight for vindication for those who are wrongfully imprisoned. "There's still so many innocent people inside. I want to help them come home."

"I was hungry every day. Starvation diets were part of the punishment."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Consuela Gains in front of the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Consuela Gaines

Consuela was incarcerated for 22 years at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel. She spent 26 months in solitary confinement. Today, Consuela lives in Lafayette, Louisiana, where she dreams of opening transitional homes for people returning from prison.

Consuela Gaines was just 23 when she helped her boyfriend escape from prison using a sawed-off shotgun. They were soon caught in Georgia, and Consuela was sent to the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women in St. Gabriel. There, she was placed in a death row cellblock — one of the prison's most extreme solitary confinement units. "They thought I was an escape threat," she says. Over her 22 years in prison, she spent 26 months in solitary confinement.

To access the one hour of daily outdoor time, Consuela had to be shackled and manacled, then marched through the general population compound. "The shackles would cut my skin. It was degrading," she recalls. "They kept me in handcuffs and shackles even while outside." Her yard time was carefully scheduled so no one else would be present.

"I didn't want to be treated like that, so I went five months without fresh air."

There was one other woman in Death Row #6 Cellblock with her, but they weren't allowed to speak. "I was once written up just for having her DOC number — and they used that to keep me in #6 even longer."

The isolation, silence, and humiliation of solitary still haunt Consuela. "I don't like quiet. I need to hear people. I leave the TV on. I have anxiety attacks in unfamiliar places."

"Prison taught us to suppress our feelings. If we cried, we'd be put on suicide watch."

Today, Consuela is a chapter organizer with VOTE (Voice of the Experienced). She advocates for voting, healthcare, housing, and employment rights for formerly incarcerated women.

"They kept me in handcuffs and shackles even while outside. I didn't want to be treated like that, so I went five months without fresh air."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Kiana Calloway in front of Solitary Gardens on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans. Solitary Gardens, a project led by multidisciplinary artist Jackie Sumell, is designed by prisoners serving their sentences in isolation. The gardens are created using the exact footprint of a solitary cell.

Kiana Calloway

Kiana was incarcerated at Angola prison from 1994 to 2001where he spent 16 months in Camp J, the notorious solitary confinement unit. After that, he went to Hunt Correctional Center and a number of private prisons until 2011. Of the 17 years that he served for a wrongful conviction, he was in and out of solitary confinement for a total of nine years.

Kiana Calloway was first incarcerated at age 12 in New Orleans for a schoolyard fight. "I spent ten terrifying hours in solitary confinement, locked away from the world, feeling afraid and alone. I had the shakes the entire time. That was my introduction to the carceral system."

In 1997, Kiana was falsely accused of murder and convicted by a non-unanimous jury—a practice Louisiana allowed for over a century, rooted in Jim Crow laws. He was sentenced to two life terms and sent to Angola's notorious Camp J, where he cycled in and out of solitary confinement from 1994 to 2011.

"I was often sent to the hole for petty things, like not having my shoes lined up under my bed," he recalls. But it was his 18 months in Camp J that left the deepest scars. "You spend 23 hours alone in your cell. No programs, no stimulation — just your own thoughts and the cries of men who had already gone mad. I watched people ram their heads into bars, play with their feces, throw urine."

Even now, the trauma lingers. "I struggle with anxiety, depression, and trust. I wake up in cold sweats, my body still remembering the pain of confinement. It's hard to connect with people. Sometimes I feel like I'm still in that cell."

Kiana was released in 2011 after 17 years. "Freedom is indescribable. It's lightness, it's purpose. But it's also a responsibility—to speak out for others who are still trapped, to fight for justice, and to never take a single breath of free air for granted."

"Freedom is indescribable. It's a responsibility to speak out for others who are still trapped, to fight for justice, and to never take a single breath of free air for granted."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Joyce Starr Granger photographed at Eastern State Penitentiary.

Joyce Starr Granger

Joyce came home in 2018 after serving 35 years at SCI Muncy in Pennsylvania. She endured nearly five years in isolation. Joyce is now a human rights activist, supporting women who are re-entering society, and she's studying for her bachelor's degree in mass communications.

Joyce Starr Granger was 17 when she was arrested for first-degree murder. She was tried as an adult and sent to the adult female prison. "The first stop was three days in the hole, which we call 'The Hill.' It was an outside structure in the woods, a half mile from the main prison campus. Bears would rifle through the garbage and snakes would come up through the toilet. It was diabolical."

Joyce admits to being rough in her young years. She was involved in fights which led to extended time sentenced to solitary confinement. Her longest stint in solitary was 96 consecutive days. "It's a jail inside of a jail. They got their own rules. If you got hurt, it would take a nurse at least an hour to get there. The water was tainted. I developed kidney stones. They told me I had uterine cancer, then took out my uterus."

"All of this plays in your head. The second you open your eyes you ask yourself, 'Am I going to see the end of the day?'"

Eventually, Joyce stopped fighting and started reading. She earned her GED in 1989, became active in supporting the rights of other incarcerated women, and became a certified peer specialist. "When I read the handbook, I became a prison lawyer! A lot of CO's supported me."

Joyce co-founded SWAG (Sisters With A Goal) and leads life skills workshops for incarcerated women. She co-wrote and is featured in the short PBS film, The Command Center to Bring Women Home, an imagined space run by formerly incarcerated women for those with nowhere else to turn but to each other.

"All of this plays in your head. The second you open your eyes you ask yourself, 'Am I going to see the end of the day?'"

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Donald Atilla Reese photographed at Eastern State Penitentiary.

Donald Atilla Reese

Donald was incarcerated for 46 years. He began his sentence at Holmesburg Prison and was transferred to Eastern State Penitentiary in 1969, where he was the youngest person incarcerated at the time. He spent 19 years in solitary confinement. Today, Donald does advocacy work, particularly on behalf of people sentenced to life as juveniles and those impacted by solitary confinement.

Donald Atilla Reese was born in Philadelphia in 1951. After his mother died when he was 14, he joined a gang for protection during a time of rising violence. At 16, he shot and killed a man in self-defense and was tried as an adult.

Donald spent 46 years in prison, 19 of them in solitary confinement. He was sent to solitary confinement for the first time at age 17 "for taking two slices of bread from the kitchen." His longest continuous stretch was eight years. "Throughout my incarceration, I stayed in and out of the hole," he says. "There were no Black guards. I was physically abused in solitary. I heard others being beaten. I still remember the screams."

When he was 21, another young man, Arnold Chapman, was held in the next cell over. "I'll never forget this. He only had 90 days in solitary but he lost his mind and killed himself. I still think about him. The guards said they thought he was faking it."

Inspired by civil rights movements like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, Donald participated in the 1978 Huntingdon Prison riot and engaged in hunger strikes to protest solitary conditions. "Solitary is designed to destroy the minds of men."

Released in 2015, Donald still battles the "ghosts of solitary." "I sought therapy, but I'm still a recluse. I get agitated easily." Today, he is an active member of the Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration and the Human Rights Council, and regularly attends parole meetings for juvenile lifers.

"I was physically abused in solitary. I heard others being beaten. I still remember the screams."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Darryl Hill sits at the water's edge at Lakeshore Park in New Orleans, which is on the southern shore of Lake Pontchartrain.

Darryl Hill

Darryl Hill was incarcerated for fifteen years at several prisons in Louisiana, spending over nine of those years in solitary confinement. Coming home in 2022, he is now a construction worker and studying business administration at Delgado Community College.

Darryl Hill was just twelve when he first experienced solitary confinement. After skipping school and walking home with friends, the group was stopped by New Orleans police, handcuffed, and taken to the police station. There, each child was placed alone in a 6' x 6' holding cell for hours. "It felt like it was a place for animals," Darryl recalls. The trauma stuck with him.

At thirteen, Darryl was arrested again after unknowingly getting into a stolen car. Though he didn't commit the robbery, he was charged and sent to the New Orleans Youth Study Center. He remained there for five years awaiting trial, ultimately spending nearly all of his teenage years in solitary confinement.

"You're stuck in the cell; some people commit suicide from just being in a cell," he says. "The walls start talking to you. I wouldn't trust nobody. I was all alone, having conversations with myself." Locked in his cell 23 hours a day, he had one hour for phone calls or a shower, during which he was shackled. His visits were behind glass. His parents weren't allowed contact visits for five years.

Solitary confinement didn't end there. Of his 15 years of incarceration, Darryl spent at least nine years in solitary across multiple prisons. In one, the lights were on 24 hours a day. In another, it was pitch black. "I didn't know what time of day it was. It's not human." Reflecting on the years lost, Darryl says, "Solitary confinement was the most difficult experience of my life."

"It felt like it was a place for animals. I was all alone, having conversations with myself."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Lori Waselchuk

Dana Lomax-Ayler at her home in Philadelphia, PA, where she works as an advocate and activist for incarcerated people and for those who are re-entering society.

Dana Lomax-Ayler

Dana Lomax-Ayler spent decades at SCI Muncie in Pennsylvania, twenty years of which were spent in solitary. Since getting home in 2017, she created Dana's Mobile Manna Mission that cooks meals for unhoused people who have been impacted by the carceral state, and DLA Consultants, an agency that helps people navigate re-entry.

Dana Lomax-Ayler is a wife, mother, Navy veteran, advocate, organizer, motivational speaker, and educator. When you meet Dana, you immediately feel her energy, positivity, and intelligence, and you might even think she's fearless.

Dana grew up in a loving home, but her brothers involved her in crime early on. "As a kid, I was taught how to steal. They'd pull the fire alarm and instruct me to go into classrooms and steal teachers' wallets." She spent 27 years in and out of prison.

In 2012, Dana was sent to solitary confinement for refusing to let a male guard frisk her. "The manual said searches must be by someone of the same gender. I resisted. A team of guards dragged me to the hole. I spent a year there."

She had heard many stories of male guards abusing women during searches. "I was trying to establish my own power." While in solitary, she published *Sound Off*, exposing illegal searches in Pennsylvania prisons.

Back in general population, Dana organized women to resist sexual violence, encouraging them to bathe in their cells, covering the small windows, instead of in monitored washrooms. For this, she was sent to solitary again. "I wasn't scared. My family, husband, and church supported me. They were upset because I got my sentence extended, but I stayed and I made a difference."

Because of her outspokenness, Dana spent 20 years in solitary. During that time, she launched a campaign, writing state officials to raise awareness. After visits from State Rep. Ronald Waters and U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters, changes followed: prisons hired female guards and Pennsylvania passed a law banning male guards from searching women.

Dana Lomax-Ayler at her home in Philadelphia, PA, where she works as an advocate and activist for incarcerated people and for those who are re-entering society.

"The manual said searches must be by someone of the same gender. I refused to allow a male guard to frisk me. I resisted. I fought for our rights."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Deborah Espinosa

Gail Brashear photographed in an alley in downtown Olympia, WA.

Gail Brashear

Gail was incarcerated at the age of 15 at the Washington Corrections Center for Women from 1996 until 2019. Throughout her first 15 years, she spent almost a decade in and out of isolation. Gail is now a paralegal at the Seattle Clemency Project and uses her lived experience to advocate for dignity, transparency, and redemption within our criminal justice system.

Gail Brashear spent years in and out of solitary confinement. As a juvenile "I had a life sentence," she says, "and I started doing ridiculous things to go to segregation." She describes juvenile antics — jumping on tables, faking bomb threats — not out of malice, but as a way to escape. "They didn't know what to do with me because I didn't mind going to seg.

They couldn't use it as leverage." For Gail, solitary became a place where she felt oddly free: "They couldn't take anything from me and I could just speak my mind." But the harm was real. "I started coexisting only in my head," she says. "I was dissociating… not feeling my body." She spent years in isolation, sometimes restrained, stripped naked, denied even basic hygiene. "If I was on my period, I had to prove it and wait for headquarters to approve maxi pads."

She describes being kept in dry cells, pepper sprayed, strapped down, and thrown in padded suicide rooms. "It chemically affects your brain," she says. "I had chronic amnesia. I was in a constant state of crisis."

Even so, she held on to hope. "I grew a tree from an apple seed in a paper cup. It became a symbol for me—that life could grow in these dark, concrete rooms."

Today, Gail uses her voice to advocate for others. "Solitary doesn't make anybody safer," she says of solitary. "What made me dangerous was when I lost my humanity — when nothing could phase me anymore. That's when people should be paying attention."

"I grew a tree from an apple seed in a paper cup. It became a symbol for me—that life could grow in these dark, concrete rooms."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Deborah Espinosa

Jessica Sylvia photographed at Oakland Bay in Shelton, WA, also known as ancestral land of The Squaxin Island Tribe (People of the Water).

Jessica Sylvia

Jessica was incarcerated for eight and a half years in multiple prisons across Washington State. At each prison, she was in solitary confinement for multiple six-month periods. Today, Jessica is a community organizer and activist and works for Study and Struggle, a collective that organizes for abolition through political education, mutual aid, and community building

Jessica was 26 when she went to prison. As a trans woman, she was placed in solitary confinement "for her protection" — without her consent and without an end date. She spent more than six months in a windowless cell, illuminated by buzzing fluorescent lights that never turned off. She was forbidden from speaking to or touching anyone. "Eventually, I stopped talking altogether," she said. "I forgot what it felt like to be heard."

Solitary confinement was a slow unraveling. Time lost meaning. Her sense of self began to dim. She started hallucinating footsteps and voices — anything to feel less alone. To pass time, she watched ants she lured in with syrup from her food trays — the only signs of life in a space she calls a "concrete coffin."

When she was finally released from solitary, the world outside felt too bright, too loud. Even sunlight was overwhelming. It took weeks before she could sleep through the night again, and months before she felt safe in her own body. "I had to learn how to use my voice again," she said. "It took a long time."

"I eventually found my voice again," she says. "Now I use it to make sure people know what's still happening behind those walls. Because no one deserves to disappear."

Today, Jessica is a published author, community organizer, and abolitionist. While incarcerated, she earned her associate's degree and began writing as a form of resistance. She now works with Study and Struggle, a national collective supporting incarcerated women and queer people. Her organizing centers on ending solitary confinement and all forms of torturous punishment.

"I had to learn how to use my voice again. It took a long time."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Deborah Espinosa

Eugene Youngblood photographed at his home in Tacoma, WA.

Eugene Youngblood

Sentenced as a teenager to a de facto life sentence, Youngblood spent 30 years at Walla Walla Prison in Washington, much of that time in solitary confinement. He was later granted clemency and released in 2021. Today he is the director of Community Organizing for Look2Justice. He advocates for compassion and mercy, especially for those whom society deems least deserving.

Eugene Youngblood spent nearly 30 years in prison — much of it in solitary confinement — longing for connection, dignity, and recognition. "I just wanted people to see me as a person," he says, reflecting on the struggle to hold on to his humanity.

In segregation, "everything becomes weaponized," he explains. Guards control access to water, hygiene, and even sleep. "They take your bedding, your clothing, and leave you in the cell with nothing."

At Walla Walla, where he did most of his segregation time, supplies were only distributed at midnight. "Sheet exchange is once a week — miss it, and you're stuck. Same with toothpaste or soap. So you had to be up at midnight." That rhythm flipped the daily schedule: "Ninety percent of people sleep all day and stay up all night — talking, yelling, trying to get some socialization." Breakfast is at 6 a.m. Miss it, and it's counted as a refusal. "They just walk right past you."

Movement requires full restraints. "They handcuff you behind your back, put the doggie leash on you — two guards per person. If you're acting up, they have electric shields. They'll hit you with one if they come in to extract you."

Sometimes guards would lock him in the shower and leave him there. "It's as small as that bathroom you just used. Cramped up, you know? For 30 minutes or longer."

This kind of treatment, he says, breaks a person down. "There was a time where I didn't see my own humanity."

"I wanted society to see my humanity. I just wanted people to see me as a person."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Deborah Espinosa

Marriam Oliver photographed at her home on Lake Washington, Seattle, WA.

Marriam Oliver

Convicted at the age of 14, Marriam spent the first six months of incarceration in solitary confinement. She spent a total of 22 years incarcerated at the Washington Corrections Center for Women. Today, Marriam is home and thriving. She works for the Washington Innocence Project and is a devoted mother to her daughter, Freedom.

Marriam was just 15 years old when she was sentenced to 22 years in prison. Days after arriving at prison, she was placed in solitary confinement at the Washington Correction Center for Women. Alone, frightened, and still reeling from her sentencing, Marriam didn't yet understand what isolation meant – but she understood that it would break her.

"I didn't know how to be alone. I didn't know how to cope. I didn't know how to hope."

She spent 30 days isolated in a cell. The lights never turned off. Voices echoed through the tiers. That first experience in solitary set the tone for the years to come. Over time, Marriam came to understand how easily even small infractions could land her back in "the hole." Once, it was for a splash of water. Another time, it was for shielding another woman from an assault - an act of protection twisted into "unauthorized use of force."

Each time, the isolation chipped away at her sense of safety and humanity. Even now, years later, she struggles to sleep in silence or darkness.

Now, she's speaking out to raise awareness about the torture of solitary confinement and the lasting harm it causes. She credits her resilience to a strong support network of family and loved ones who helped carry her through.

"What solitary does is deliberate. It's about power. It's about fear. And they know exactly what they're doing."

"What solitary does is deliberate. It's about power. It's about fear. And they know exactly what they're doing."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Branch-Price

John "Divine G" Whitfield photographed in Saratoga Park in Brooklyn, NY.

John "Divine G" Whitfield

Divine G was incarcerated in New York for 25 years. He spent time in solitary confinement at the Green Haven Correctional Facility. While incarcerated, he co-founded the RTA program at Sing Sing Prison. He is now an award-winning writer, filmmaker, and activist. He was executive producer and co-writer for the movie "Sing Sing," and he founded Divine G Entertainment.

John "Divine G" Whitfield, from Brooklyn, New York, spent 25 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit, including significant time in solitary confinement at Green Haven and a brief stint at Attica. He describes solitary as "the equivalent of being buried alive" — a place where time freezes and contact with the world is reduced to the sound of a meal tray sliding under the door. "If you could visualize extreme loneliness," he says, "that's solitary confinement." He likens the experience to claustrophobia: a crushing darkness and silence that wraps around you like a tomb.

When he was finally released from solitary, he says it felt like being "born alive." But the fear of going back never left him. That fear, he says, is deliberately weaponized: solitary is used not just as punishment, but as a threat — a tool of control.

Divine G challenges the myth of "due process" in prison disciplinary hearings. In theory, there are protections. In practice, he says, they are hollow. Hearings are rushed, evidence is ignored, and outcomes are often pre-determined. "There's a system in place," he says, "but it's not built for fairness. It's built to maintain power."

Today, Divine G is a powerful voice for justice and reform. He has written multiple novels and plays and was the inspiration for the central character in the acclaimed film *Sing Sing,* which tells the story of transformation and resilience inside the prison system. Since his release, he has become an advocate, using his story to push for a system rooted in dignity, not punishment.

"If you could visualize extreme loneliness, that's solitary confinement."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Branch-Price

Anisah Sabur photographed in a women's support office in Harlem, NY.

Anisah Sabur

Anisah was incarcerated for eight years at various prisons around New York. Over the course of her incarceration, she spent several months in solitary confinement. Today Anisah lives in the Bronx and is a leader in the movement to end solitary confinement.

Across multiple stints in New York State's jails and prisons, Anisah Sabur was sentenced twice to "the box" — a 6 ft x 9 ft cinderblock cell with no windows, no belongings, and almost no human contact. "They strip you of everything," she said. "It's torture."

She remembers one night when a woman set her mattress on fire. Smoke filled the unit, but the officers left them locked in their cells, forced to breathe burning plastic through the night.

Infractions for speaking up often extended people's time in solitary indefinitely. She watched women disappear —assaulted, silenced, or driven to take their own lives. "This is where all the prison sexual assaults happen," Anisah said. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Rather than let the trauma consume her, Anisah turned it into fuel. She became a fierce policy advocate for human rights and gender justice and a truth-teller, co-authoring *A Prison Within a Prison,* a groundbreaking report that centers the voices of women in solitary. She interviews survivors, builds campaigns, and organizes exhibits that bring these hidden stories to light.

Today Anisah is the National Coordinator for the Unlock the Box Campaign and she was instrumental in the fight to pass the HALT Solitary Confinement Act in New York. Her work is a lifeline for women who are still inside, and a powerful reminder that their stories matter.

"What makes me different?" she asked. "I chose to heal, to fight back, and to help others do the same."

"This is where all the prison sexual assaults happen. Out of sight, out of mind."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Branch-Price

Dolores Canales photographed in Central Park, New York City.

Dolores Canales

Dolores was incarcerated for 20 years, including time in solitary confinement at California's Pelican Bay State Prison. Drawing from her own experience as well as having a son who is incarcerated, Dolores is now an activist, organizer and Director of Community Outreach for The Bail Project. She currently lives in Los Angeles with her husband and fellow survivor and organizer, Jack Morris.

Dolores Canales is a nationally recognized advocate and movement leader whose fight against solitary confinement is deeply rooted in personal experience. She describes the system's use of isolation as "a method of warehousing people, discarding them into silence for months at a time."

In 2001, Dolores was facing a potential 25-years-to-life sentence under California's three-strikes law, while her son Johnny had already spent nearly six years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay. "When I was in the hole, it was a nine-month maximum. I knew I'd get out. For my son, it was indefinite, because he was 'validated' as a gang associate," she explains. The only evidence used to justify his placement in solitary was his name written in someone else's note. "People hear this and they don't want to believe it — that in California, someone can be put in solitary indefinitely for something so small, not even close to violent."

Dolores became a leader in the grassroots movement supporting the historic hunger strikes at Pelican Bay, organizing from the outside as families demanded an end to indefinite solitary.

She connected with Jack Morris, who was participating in the strikes from within the SHU (Special Housing Unit) at Pelican Bay. Their shared commitment to ending extreme isolation built a powerful partnership, and later, a deep love. They eventually married.

Following her release, Dolores co-founded California Families Against Solitary Confinement. She has since become a powerful force in organizing, policy, and outreach, uplifting the voices of those most impacted by incarceration. For Dolores, the fight is personal. She knows how deeply isolation fractures the human spirit, and she's dedicated her life to ensuring others are not lost in the same darkness.

"People . . . don't want to believe it — that in California someone can be put in solitary confinement indefinitely for something so small – not even close to violent."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Frank

Troy Williams photographed at Alcatraz, a former maximum-security federal prison located in the San Francisco Bay. It is now a museum.

Troy Williams

Troy Williams was incarcerated for 25 years, mostly at San Quentin Prison, where he spent over a year in solitary confinement. He now lives in Oakland, California and he is the founder of Restorative Media, using storytelling to inspire change.

From the age of 15 to 21, Troy Williams was incarcerated at the California Youth Authority, spending years in solitary confinement. "The small rectangular window was painted over," he recalls. "I couldn't look out, except for a chip the size of a quarter. That was the only place I could see the Sun."

Isolated in the Security Housing Unit (SHU), "a prison inside the prison," as he calls it, Troy was surrounded by despair. "I saw a lot of people succumb to the pressures of that environment," he says. "I started meditating because I thought I was losing my mind." To cope, he began writing a list of people he blamed for his incarceration. "My father should have stopped me… My mother should have told me she loved me more…" That list grew to 90 names.

"After 30 days I ran outta names," Troy says. "I realized one name was missing — Troy Williams. I had to look inside myself. At the end of the day, I had to live in my truth."

Through the San Quentin Prison Report, he found his voice and a passion for guiding others away from the path he once walked. But the trauma left scars. "I struggle with relationships. I'm a loner. I like being alone. I've gotten comfortable. I don't like concrete buildings. I don't like concrete at all."

He adds, "I'm comfortable being vulnerable, but I overthink. If I don't get the same energy back, I walk away." Out since 2014, he is now passionate about inspiring future youth.

"I started meditating because I thought I was losing my mind."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Frank

Rubin Lee Williams Jr. photographed at Alcatraz.

Rubin Lee Williams Jr.

Rubin Lee Williams Jr., also known as Kubwa Jitu, spent 44 years incarcerated, 33 of which were spent in solitary confinement. Today, he lives at Canticle Farm in Oakland, working with high school students to promote healing, communication, and better decision-making.

Rubin Williams, known to friends as Kubwa Jitu, spent 44 years incarcerated in the California Department of Corrections. Thirty-three of those years were spent in Security Housing Units (SHU) — isolation cells in facilities like Vacaville, Folsom, San Quentin, Corcoran, Tehachapi, and Ironwood.

"Most of my time in SHU was during the height of racial tension," he recalls. "My days were spent preparing for attacks." He lived in a constant state of hypervigilance. But even in isolation, Rubin resisted dehumanization by turning inward. "I studied dialectics, philosophy, African history, Swahili, and survival techniques. That was how I survived the loneliness and the violence."

On July 19, 2019, Rubin was released. He now lives in a community dedicated to healing and social transformation and the core values of service, spirituality, and nonviolence. Since 2020, he's worked with local high school students, sharing his story and encouraging alternatives to violence. "I talk to young people about communication and making better decisions. I try to give them the right information, what I wish I'd had when I was their age."

Rubin also works in the culinary field, sharing meals as a form of care and community. He remains committed to the work of prevention: "It's not just about getting people out of prison—it's about keeping them from ever going in."

Thirty-three years in solitary confinement could have left Rubin bitter or broken. Instead, he's chosen to lead with wisdom, compassion, and purpose.

"I studied dialectics, philosophy, African history, Swahili, and survival techniques. That was how I survived the loneliness and the violence."

Window Into Solitary

Photograph by Brian Frank

Richard "Razor" Johnson photographed at Alcatraz.

Richard "Razor" Johnson

Johnson spent 19 years in solitary confinement at Pelican Bay State Prison before he was transferred to San Quentin where he served an additional nine years. He now lives in California working on criminal justice reform, enjoying time with his family, and reclaiming the life that was once confined.

Richard Johnson's time in solitary confinement began on day one when he was escorted naked into a windowless cell at Pelican Bay State Prison in 1997. Labeled a gang member, he spent over 19 years in some form of isolation. "I remember mostly the darkness," he says. The absence of natural light in the 8-person pod still haunts him: "You never forget."

Through programs like GRIP (Guiding Rage Into Power) and Nonviolent Communication,Richard began to confront his trauma and rebuild. "These programs made us take the mask off," he says. "I learned about myself." He cried with fellow prisoners as he reckoned with the pain of separation from his family — especially his son, who was just two years old when Richard was incarcerated.

Even after his release in 2021, the impact of isolation lingers. "I can spend days in my room. You become accustomed to it. I slow down while walking to let people pass. It's part of my trauma." And still, he says, "You never really get over it."

But Richard refuses to be defined by his sentence. "I came in who I was. Imma leave who I was. Imma do me." On May 29, 2025, he released his memoir *Learning Life Lessons,* which began as a letter to his son and now speaks to "every young man walking through life with the steady voice of a father in his ear." His advice: "Never allow nobody to make you less than what you are."

Richard is a writer, speaker, and advocate for criminal justice reform. A lifelong reader and lover of Afrocentric literature and politics, he is currently working on a book of poetry.

"Never allow nobody to make you less than what you are."

Window Into Solitary

In 1829, at Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, commonly known as Cherry Hill, descendants of Pennsylvania's Quaker founders conceived the barbaric practice of isolating humans in cold concrete cells, the first experiment in a punitive practice now known as "solitary confinement." They thought that isolation might "cure" deviant behaviors by providing time to reflect, study, and pray. Cherry Hill's administrators learned almost immediately that the practice did not reform men but instead drove them crazy.

"In 1842, upon visiting Cherry Hill, Charles Dickens said, "I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers."

Yet today, solitary confinement persists as a common tactic in US prisons. It can be difficult to get an accurate sense of just how widespread this practice is, due to shortcomings in available data. The most recent prison census, released in 2021 by Bureau of Justice Statistics, found that more than 75,000 people were being held in solitary confinement—defined as being confined to the cell for 22 hours a day. (These numbers included state and federal prisons but not jails—which hold people awaiting trial or serving some short sentences—likely making the real number much higher.)

A more recent study, released in 2022 and co-authored by the Correctional Leaders Association and the Arthur Liman Center for Public Interest Law at Yale Law School, suggested that the number of people held in solitary seemed to have declined to roughly 41,000–48,000 when they collected their numbers in July 2021. But clearly, tens of thousands of incarcerated people are still regularly forced to endure the grueling experience of solitary almost 200 years after it proved to be a failed experiment. The consequences can be devastating; for example, footage from an Indiana jail recently showed that 29-year-old Joshua McLemore died of malnutrition during a schizophrenic episode after being left in solitary confinement for 20 days without mental health treatment.

After spending years of my life caged in solitary confinement, beginning at age 12, I felt the stories of those subjected to solitary had to be shared. I asked Glenn Ruga, the founder of the nonprofit Social Documentary Network and ZEKE Magazine, to take on this project to photograph 17 people across the United States who have experience with solitary confinement. While not a photographer himself, Glenn reached out to four photographers in different parts of the country—Lori Waselchuk in Philadelphia and New Orleans, Brian Branch-Price in New York, Brian Frank in San Francisco, and Deborah Espinosa in Washington state—to photograph people now in their communities after being release from prison, and talk with them about their experiences with solitary. Deborah Zalesne, co-author with me of *Ending Isolation: The Case Against Solitary Confinement,* provided invaluable writing and editing support.

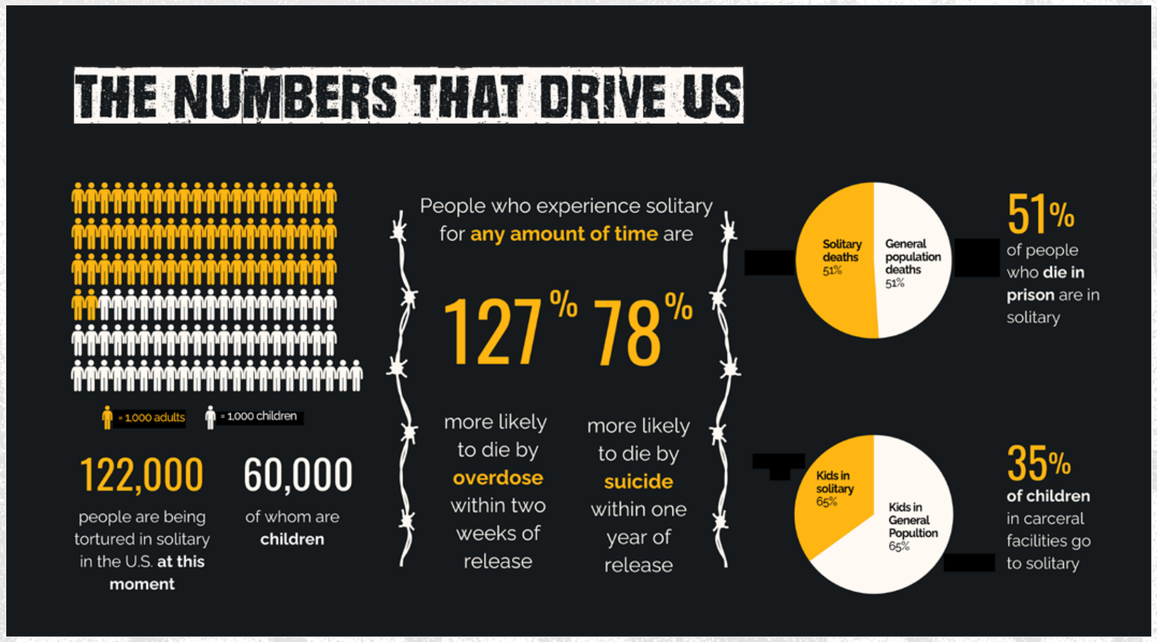
Arthur "Cetewayo" Johnson and Donald Atilla Reese photographed at Eastern State Penitentiary (now a museum) in Philadelphia. Photograph by Lori Waselchuk.

All of the participants you see here have spent portions of their lives, some short and some long-lasting, in solitary confinement, some as adolescents and others as young adults. All of them have experienced life-altering moments while trapped behind that thick steel door.

I am deeply indebted to the participants, Glenn, the photographers, Deborah, donors, and everyone else who has made this project a success.

Only through sharing our stories like these and educating the public can we work to end the practice that caused us all this harm.

– Christopher Blackwell
Executive Director, Look2Justice



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