## The Fire Inside Newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners

1540 Market Street, Room 490, San Francisco, CA 94102 www.womenprisoners.org

#### To Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner: Investigate Solitary!

CCWP sent a memo to Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner in October 2013. Here is an excerpt:

e write to ask that your office initiate an investigation into women's solitary confinement conditions. The recent conversion of Valley State Prison for Women into a male facility (VSP) has led to a dramatic increase in the use of solitary confinement: Ad Seg at CCWF and the SHU at CIW. There have been several suicides in Ad Seg and the SHU in recent months, at least one from an alleged "overdose."

We believe several key factors have contributed to the increased use of solitary in the women's prisons.

- Using the category "enemy concerns" to designate women/trans prisoners to Ad Seg and the SHU. "Enemy concerns" is a documented disagreement between inmates that may have led to threats or acts of violence. The documentation may be decades old and the person may have been successfully programming in general population for years. When transferred to a new prison, they are put in segregated housing based on old documentation, even with no disciplinary issues.
- Prisoners transferred from VSPW with an "enemy concerns" tag have been placed in segregated hous-

- ing *indefinitely* due to a lack of other alternatives, lose all privileges and are kept in solitary cells for 22-24 hours per day just as women who are there for disciplinary reasons.
- The "enemy concerns" label for women in Ad Seg or SHU is similar to the "gang affiliation" label in men's prisons, increasing the average amount of time women spend in isolation units.
- Overcrowding at CCWF (currently at 173.4% of capacity) has increased tensions and conflicts, fights and assaults, resulting in more people being placed in Ad Seg/SHU.
- Deteriorating conditions in the women's prisons aggravate mental health issues resulting in increased placements in Ad Seg/SHU.



On Feb. 11, 2014 there will be a Joint Hearing of the Assembly and State Senate Public Safety Committees on solitary confinement. CCWP will speak about conditions in CA womens prisons.

#### **Solitary Confinement**

by Geraldine Quintin W65872, CIW

am a 62 year old. I have been housed in solitary confinement since November 23, 2010. I am here due to enemy concerns.

This experience of living in solitary confinement hasn't been good for me mentally. I haven't been able to call my family and I get very little mail from them. My mental health has gone down a few notches. It's so bleak in here at times that I have seriously thought about killing myself. The COs are extremely unresponsive and I have had to beg for toilet paper for hours. This is a terrible thing when you need to use the restroom.

Everything here in SHU is "Hurry up and wait!" I have seen the COs abuse certain inmates. I have been

ridiculed and it's awful for me since I suffer from depression and anxiety. Not being able to get something that I need makes me mad and upset. I have high blood pressure, so it doesn't help my physical health to get angry.

At the present time I am living on a prayer. I'm hoping I'll be back in general population before long. Thanks for listening.

Note: Geraldine wrote to CCWP in August 2013 that she had been moved out of the SHU after almost 3 years because of a turn for the worse in her mental health. She is doing better now and welcomes people to write to her at CIW, POB 8100, SCU H14, Corona, CA 92878-8100

por Misty Rojo, para el colectivo editorial del FI.

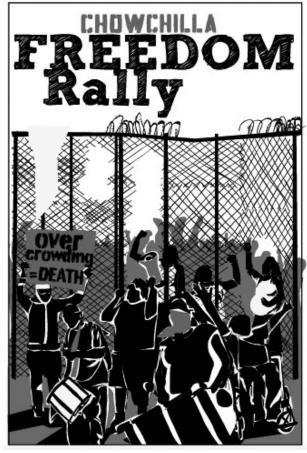
ucha gente nos ha preguntado una y otra vez en los últimos meses: Como es la experiencia de las mujeres que

se encuentran en reclusión solitaria en comparación a la experiencia de hombres que se encuentran también en reclusión solitaria? Esta es una pregunta en la que la CCWP ha reflexionado, ya que las mujeres no han sido encerradas por décadas como le ha pasado a los hombres. Mientras que la duración del tiempo es mas corto, la meta del CDCR para mujeres, hombres y gente Trans es generalmente la misma. La reclusión solitaria es utilizada para quebrantar a las personas, para recordarle que no tienen ningún poder sobre sus propias vidas y para prevenir que luchen contra su propia experiencia inhumana en prisión.

Así como los hombres, las mujeres también son puestas solas en celdas frías. Algunas celdas están infestadas de chinches y otro tipo de bichos. Las quejas son ignoradas o sim-

plemente se les cambia de celda en lugar de limpiarlas para que sean mas seguras. Las celdas son húmedas y frías en el invierno, calientes y sofocantes en el verano. Las duchas son posibles unas pocas veces a la semana, si tienes suerte. Puedes escuchar gente gritando todo el día y noche, quizá para buscar atención, quizá solo para recordar que se está viva y que es real. Sin contacto alguno. Sin amor. Sin humanidad.

Por que las mujeres son puestas en reclusión solitaria? Raramente ves que la "validación de gangas" sucede en las prisiones de mujeres. Lo vi una vez en mis diez años y era simplemente un intento para que la mujer acusara a su compañero masculino quien había sido validado y enviado a reclusión solitaria. Aunque una mujer presente buena conducta y un programa ejemplar,



Postcard from the Chowchilla Freedom rally to protest overcrowing in January 2013

si alguien le acusa de ser una "enemiga" es puesta en reclusión solitaria sin ninguna oportunidad de defenderse o poder explicar. Si te preocupa tu seguridad y te quejas adivina ¿a donde te mandan? Así es, a reclusión solitaria por "investigación pendiente", y eres tratada como la que causó el daño, sin acceso a programas u otras personas. La mujeres están siendo "protegidas" y son aisladas, supuestamente por su propio bien. Así como una mujer es abusada en una relación intima, donde el abusador le dice que la esta protegiendo de otros hombres y es aislada por su propio bien. Ésta

es la respuesta sexista del CDCR al conflicto en las prisiones de mujeres y sus efectos son devastadores.

> El Gobernador Brown y el CDCR, agravaron las condiciones de sobre-población en las prisiones de mujeres con la conversión del VSPW a ser una prisión de mujeres a una prisión de hombres. Incrementos en la reclusión solitaria "indeterminada" y el Ad Seg (segregación administrativa), tanto en la CCWF como en la CIW son productos de ese cambio. Los oficiales de prisión tienen el derecho de poner mujeres en Ad Seg indefinidamente por haber una "investigación pendiente". Muchas de las mujeres que fueron trasladadas del VSPW fueron sujetas a Ad Seg por meses, porque supuestamente tenían "preocupaciones de enemigas" entre la población del CCWF. Otras terminaron en Ad Seg por haber sido acusadas de asalto por alguien y así justificar la petición de transferencia de la acusadora al CIW. Por la extrema

sobre-población, los conflictos en el CCWF han aumentado y el Ad Seg es utilizado como una solución para el personal de la prisión. Si las mujeres tiene des-habilidades mentales que no pueden ser controladas fácilmente por medio de medicamentos, son enviadas a Ad Seg, lo cual por supuesto solo hace que su salud mental empeore. De hecho una mujer que recientemente sufrió una sobredosis en Ad Seg (otras prisioneras creen que fue un suicidio planeado) demuestra que tan desesperada se ha convertido la situación en el CCWF. ■

Traducido por Alma Muñoz

page 2 The Fire Inside

#### **Solitary Torture in Women's Prisons**

by Misty Rojo for the FI editorial collective



any people have asked us over the last number of months: how does the experience of women in solitary compare to the experience of men in solitary? This is a question that CCWP has pondered because women have not been locked in solitary for decades like many men have. While the length of time may be shorter, CDCR's goal for women, men and trans people is still very much the same. Solitary is used to break people down, to remind them they have no power over their own lives, and to keep them from fighting back against their inhuman prison experience.

Like men, women are put into single cold cells. Some cells are infested with bed bugs or some other kind of bug. Complaints are ignored or met with a cell change instead of cleaning the cells to make them safer. Cells are cold damp in winter, hot and stifling in summer. Showers are a few times a week if you're lucky. You hear people yelling all day and night maybe for attention, maybe just to remember they're alive and real. No contact. No love. No humanity.

Why are women put into solitary? Rarely do you see 'gang validation' happen in women's prisons. I saw it once in my ten years and it was simply an attempt to get the woman to tell on her male part-

ner who had been validated and sent to solitary. However, even if a woman has good conduct and rolemodel programming, if someone accuses them of being an "enemy," they are put into solitary without a chance to defend themselves or explain the circumstances. If you have a safety concern and you complain, guess where you go? Yup, to solitary "pending investigation", and you are treated as the wrongdoer with no access to programs or contact with other people. Women are being "protected" by being isolated, supposedly for their own good. Just like a woman who is abused in an intimate relationship is told by her abuser that she is being protected from other men and isolated for her own good. This is the CDCR's gendered, sexist response to conflict in the women's prisons, and the effects are devastating.

Gov. Brown and the CDCR exacerbated the overcrowded conditions in women's prisons with the conversion of VSPW from a women's to a men's prison. Increases in solitary confinement "indeterminately" and Ad Seg (administrative segregation) at both CCWF and CIW are products of that shift. Prison officials have the right to put women into Ad Seg indefinitely "pending investigation." Many women transferred from VSPW were stranded in Ad Seg for months

because they allegedly had "enemy concerns" among the CCWF population. Others ended up in Ad Seg because they were accused of assault by someone to justify the accuser's transfer request to CIW. Because of the extreme overcrowding, conflicts at CCWF have increased and Ad Seg is used as the solution by prison staff. If women have mental disabilities that cannot be easily controlled through medication, they are sent to Ad Seg, which of course only makes their mental health issues worse. The fact that one woman recently overdosed in Ad Seg (other prisoners believe this was really a planned suicide) shows how desperate the situation has become at CCWF.

We know the minute we feel handcuffs on our wrists that we are no longer in control. We know we are at the mercy of people who would rather see us cease to exist than help us rehabilitate. People who will let us die on cold cement floors before believing our cries for help are genuine. Courts who tell our children we are bad mothers and therefore they have to take them away. And to drive the point home, they isolate us for not accepting that this is the way it should be. But still we live and rise with love and light, affirming our female spirit to fight! ■

#### CCWF Supports Hunger Strike - Statement made during 2013 Hunger Strike

e, the women of CCWF, many of us who have friends and family members in the SHU, are helping support the men on Hunger Strike. We are fasting once a week on Fridays and doing a prayer walk every Friday at 7PM. We walk and pray at the same time for the men who are suffering from unfair treatment. They are already paying for the crimes they committed. The SHU is cruel and unusual punishment and we humans are entitled to have contact with other humans. The law says people can't be in solitary confinement for too long. The law is breaking its own law! We at CCWF got together and put out flyers for all the people here to stand up and join the people in the SHU and help reach their demands. This issue affects all of us.

#### **US Supreme Court Orders Governor to Comply**

n August 2nd 2013, the US Supreme Court told Gov. Jerry Brown that he could not delay the release of California prisoners any longer. In 2011, a decision written by Justice Anthony Kennedy asserted that the overcrowded conditions and poor medical care in California's prisons were unconstitutional. The panel of federal judges that issued the initial order in 2009 has denied Brown's most recent appeal this summer. They upheld the order that the state prison population be brought down to 137.5 percent of capacity by releasing almost 10,000 prisoners by December 31, 2013.

Gov. Brown continues to argue that early releases threaten public safety. He proposed a plan to again delay the end-of-year deadline to reduce the terrible prison overcrowding in exchange for a promise to spend more on rehabilitation and mental health services. If the court does not agree, the plan authorizes him to spend \$315 million next year and \$415 million the following year to house prisoners in out-of state facilities, private prisons and county jails. Gov. Brown is trying to blackmail the judges and the public by putting forward the most unacceptable proposals - relocating prisoners across the country, opening private prisons in California and making an unprecedented deal stipulating that private prisons have to hire union guards. This proposal pressures people to support the three year extension because the alternatives are so bad!

This plan was met with strong public protest around the state. "The only sustainable solution is actually reducing the number of people we lock up in state prisons," said Emily Harris of Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB). Unfortunately, the measure was approved by legislators on September 12. We are waiting to see how the judges respond.

One important question on the table is how this new plan will affect the possibilities for medical parole. The LA Times reported on August 2nd that CDCR has "developed criteria to expand medical parole, and the court-appointed agency in charge prison healthcare has selected 900 inmates for those releases." Corrections officials have stated that it would make sense for those hearings to begin at CCWF. However, it remains to be seen if Brown's new plan would stand in the way of this process.

#### Statement from Prison Birth Project, MA on 2013 Hunger Strike



s prisoners across the country prepare to strike, our hearts and thoughts are with them. As incarcerated women, we know first-hand many of the abuses the strikers face on a daily basis, as well as the retaliation for actions against the abuse. As incarcerated mothers, we are regularly set up by the system to fail while experiencing lack of access to:

healthy food; respect and autonomy; healthcare; and our children.

As we stand in solidarity with striking prisoners, we ask you to stand in solidarity with us, not just on July 8th, but every day of the year. We need folks from the outside to come inside! Being behind the wall is hard and we need support while we are here so when we get out we can be leaders. We need allies to support us in creating space and community. We need folks to listen from their heart and be by our side when we are ready to speak, to strike, and to stand out. We need allies to rally in support of policies inside and out so we can survive while we are here and thrive when we get out. Because of our experience, we are the experts on these issues and we ask that all allies, reformers, abolitionists, lawyers, legislators and our families come together around the realities— not rhetoric— and help us move mountains and break down the walls in supportive and sustainable ways physically, spiritually, politically, and personally.

For more information, visit www.theprisonbirthproject.org

page 4 The Fire Inside

#### Legal Corner What's "Legal" About Solitary Confinement?

olitary confinement is defined as "the practice of isolating inmates in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades" (from Solitary Watch). However, most prison systems in the U.S. deliberately don't use the term 'solitary confinement.' Instead they use different names such as administrative segregation (Ad Seg), security housing unit (SHU), restricted housing, protective housing or communication management. Supermax prisons, such as Pelican Bay, only have solitary confinement cells but the CDCR and Gov. Brown still deny that California practices prolonged solitary confinement.

In California, Article 7 of Title 15 covers the policies that are supposed to govern placement in Segregation Housing. Segregation orders can be issued when "an inmate's presence in an institution's general inmate population presents an immediate threat to the safety of the inmate or others, endangers institution security

or jeopardizes the integrity of an investigation of an alleged serious misconduct or criminal activity" (Title 15, 7,3335 (a)). There are few safeguards against using this broad definition to arbitrarily control prisoners. Prisoners are kept in solitary for decades for many reasons including: accusations of gang affiliation; refusal to debrief about others; because they have untreated mental illness, are gay or transgender, they report rape or abuse by prison staff, are Muslim, or they have radical political beliefs.

In 2012 there were approximately 11,730 prisoners in solitary in California. It isn't clear how many of those were women or transgender. The average term in solitary was 7.5 years. Of the 1,111 prisoners in the SHU itself, over 513 had served ten years or more and 89 had been in the SHU for at least 20 years. Hugo Pinell, who was part of the San Quentin Six case in the1970s, has been in solitary confinement for over 42 years (statistics from Mother Jones, Nov/Dec 2012).

International human rights law considers prolonged solitary confinement a form of torture. In 2011, the United Nation's chief torture investigator urged UN member nations to ban solitary confinement in prisons. The UN committee on the Rights of the Child has called for an end to the use of solitary confinement against minors. Under international law, the United States is guilty of torture and a violation of human rights when it uses prolonged solitary confinement against prisoners.

There is a long history of class action legal lawsuits challenging solitary confinement — 1980 Ruiz v Estelle, 1993 to Now Coleman v.Wilson, 1995 Madrid v. Gomez. In 2013, Ashker v. Brown has been filed on behalf of 10 prisoners in the SHU at Pelican Bay State Prison who have spent over ten years in solitary confinement. These legal cases are very important, but ultimately it will be a movement led by people inside that will rip the "sheep's clothing" off the deathly wolf of solitary.

#### SAVE THE DATE:

A Conversation with Piper Kerman, author of *Orange is the New Black*, and other formerly incarcerated people.

February 23, 2014, from 3 - 5 PM Humanist Hall, 390 27th Street, Oakland, CA For more info email: info@womenprioners.org



Piper (second from the left, top row) visits CCWP & JN, October 2013

#### Alto a las esterilizaciones del CDCR!

on los ojos del mundo puestos en las condiciones inhumanas y crueles dentro de las prisiones en California debido a la determinación de los huelguistas de hambre, más noticias estremecedoras salieron a la luz pública en julio del 2013, con revelaciones sobre las esterilizaciones ilegales practicadas en mujeres presas en California entre el 2006 y el 2010.

Miembros del Joint Legislative Audit Committee aprobaron por unanimidad una investigación del porque doctores bajo contrato con el estado, esterilizaron cerca de 150 mujeres entre el 2006 y el 2012 sin la autorización obligatoria. En respuesta a la investigación por el Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) la cual encontró que hasta 250 presas recibieron cirugía para la ligación de trompas de Falopio desde 1997, la Asambleísta Bonnie Lowenthal y la Senadora Hannah-Beth Jackson de Miembras del California Legislative Women's Caucus pidieron la auditoría.

Desde el 2008, defensores legales de Justice Now, han pedido información y responsabilidad a la oficina de Federal Receivers después de recopilar testimonios de mujeres que fueron encarceladas en el CIW y VSPW. Hay dos problemáticas que salieron a la luz. Una, es como la oficina de Federal Receivers permitió ligaciones de trompas de Falopio entre el 2006 y el 2010, a pesar de que las regulaciones prohiben la esterilización dentro de prisiones o por contratistas en California. La otra problemática, es más amplia respecto a la observación de casos desde los años 1990s, que han salido a la luz por la investigación del CIR.

Hay que ser claros-- es ilegal presionar a cualquier persona para ser esterilizada o pedir 'consentimiento' durante el parto o al nacimiento de un bebé. La ley federal reconoce que las prisiones crean un clima inhibitorio donde el consentimiento no puede ser obtenido para algo tan fundamental como el derecho a tener familia. Prisioneras y defensoras en California lucharon por, y lograron leyes y regulaciones que restringieron las ligaciones de trompas de Falopio desde 1979, amenos que "por necesidades médicas" sean aprobadas. California, y otros 30 estados en los E.U. cuentan con una historia vergonzosa de esterilizaciones forzadas a personas encerradas en prisiones, en viviendas pobres, instituciones mentales y orfanatos. La gente era un objetivo por su raza, clase y des-habilidad.

En una audiencia legislativa en agosto del 2013 que tuvo lugar en Sacramento, Misty Rojo la coordinadora del programa de CCWP, testificó sobre su propia experiencia en el VSPW. Cuestionando si las mujeres fueron objetivo para la esterilización basándose en su raza, etnicidad, edad o por la duración de su sentencia, Misty también habló de la problemática de cualquier persona que viviendo bajo condiciones de prisión, pueden tener "un consentimiento informado" sin sentirse presionada por las personas que poseen las llaves. Misty dijo: "Estamos considerando la petición para que se dé una disculpa y se reparen los daños causados a las personas quienes sufrieron tal esterilización. La esterilización niega el futuro de la gente!"

El Comité de Seguridad Pública del Senado Estatal (State Senate Public Safety Committee) ha mantenido audiencias y está haciendo un llamado a la legislación para prevenir abusos futuros de esterilizaciones. Pero como defensoras, sabemos que la legislación por si sola, no puede defender los derechos humanos. Es importante que la gente de un paso al frente y cuenten sus historias, aunque no quieran que sus nombres sean revelados.

Traducido por Alma Muñoz

#### **New Notary Law**

ustice Now's notary bill—making prison IDs an automatically valid form of ID for notaries to use to confirm an imprisoned person's identity—was signed into law! People in prison often need access to notary services that include establishing temporary custody of their children and giving authority to a trusted adult to bring their children to the prison for visits. We hope this small bill will have a huge impact on people's ability to see their children, maintain family bonds, and handle family matters in a timely and appropriate fashion.

page 6 The Fire Inside

#### **Stop CDCR Sterilizations!**

ith the eyes of the world focused on cruel and inhuman prison conditions in California due to the determination of the hunger strikers, more shocking news hit the pub-

lic in July 2013 with revelations about illegal sterilization of women in CA prisons between 2006 and 2010.

Members of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee unanimously approved an investigation into why doctors under contract with the state sterilized nearly 150 women from 2006 to 2010 without required authorizations. In response to an investigation by the Center for Inves-Reporting tigative (CIR) that found that up to 250 inmates had received tubal ligations since 1997, Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal and Sen. Hannah-Beth

Jackson of the California Legislative Women's Caucus requested the audit.

Since 2008, legal advocates at Justice Now have been asking the Federal Receivers Office for information and accountability after collecting testimony from women who were incarcerated at CIW and VSPW. There are two issues coming to light. One is about how the Federal Receivers office allowed tubal ligations between 2006 and 2010 in spite of California regula-

tions prohibiting sterilizations in prison or by their contractors. The other broader issue is about looking further back into the 1990s into cases brought to light by the CIR investigation.

STOP FORCED STERILIZATION FORZADA

Image by Rachel Romero

Let's be clear—it is illegal to pressure anyone to be sterilized or ask for 'consent' during labor or childbirth. Federal law acknowledges prisons as such a coercive environment that consent cannot be obtained for something as fundamental as the right to family. California prisoners and advocates fought for and won laws and regulations that restricted tubal ligations since 1979 unless "medical necessity" was approved. California and 30 other states in the U.S.,

have a shameful history of forced sterilizations of people locked up in prisons, poor houses, mental institutions and orphanages. People were targeted based on race, class and disability.

> At the August 2013 legislative hearing held in Sacramento, CCWP coordinator program Misty Rojo testified about her own experience in VSPW. Questioning whether women were targeted for sterilization based on race, ethnicity, age or length sentence, Misty also raised the issue of whether anyone living under prison conditions can ever have "informed consent" without feeling pressured by the people who hold the keys. Misty said, "We are considering asking for an apology and for reparations for people who underwent the Sterilization surgery. denies people their futures!"

The State Senate Public Safety Committee also held hearings and is calling for legislation to prevent future sterilization abuse. As advocates, though, we know that legislation alone cannot uphold human rights. It is very important for people to step forward and tell their stories even if they don't want their names to be used.

### ····· SURVIVING SOLITARY

#### Together we can make a difference

by Amy Preasmyer (X-29459), CCWF

In April 2013, I and another individual were falsely accused of sexual assault and placed in Administrative Segregation (Ad Seg) immediately. I faced the loss of my job, property, good living quarters, placement and status in groups and organizations. I was forced to miss my scheduled college final examinations and lost the privilege to shop, walk outside or even call home.

The federally mandated Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) protocols turned my world upside down in seconds (*Note: PREA was enacted by Congress in 2003 to prevent & report on sexual abuse in prisons*). Through PREA, I quickly learned the cruel conditions of Ad Seg. I was considered guilty until proven innocent, a constitutional right broken based on PREA protocols.

Upon entering my newly assigned chambers at 3 AM, the toilet was backed up and it smelled of urine everywhere. I had only a bedroll, a state issued muumuu and no panties. I was utterly distraught and in a mental state of disorientation. The torture and anguish administered by prison officials reveals a clear abuse of authority and misuse of power. CCWF Ad Seg conditions include: inadequate (if any) legal assistance; no phone access; no contact visits, religious services, or access to educational or rehab programs; no means to properly disinfect and sanitize cells; no efficient and proper mental health assessment, evaluation and tracking.

I was subjected to this treatment for an investigation evidenced as false. I am forced to start over when thrown back into general population. CDCR holds no accountability, doesn't right their wrong, nothing. They remain unaccountable and unmoved by the loss, humiliation and set-back I endured. They failed to offer guidance, leadership or assistance in reinstating my original program, assignment and the positive participation within my community I was once commended for. Further, the cost to arrest, charge, investigate and re-house us was absurd.

In a world of hardened minds, poverty, misunderstandings and violence, PREA was used as a tool for manipulation of the system. The woman who filed the accusation under PREA sought, and ultimately was rewarded with, a transfer to CIW. There was no disciplinary action for her false allegation or restitution for expenses incurred.

Had this woman falsely accused an officer, would that officer have been arrested and forced to relinquish rights pending results of the investigation? Would the employee suffer a wage loss? Would disciplinary action and consequences be rendered to the accuser once charges turned out to be baseless?

If we believe, we can achieve. Together we can make a difference. Support restoring lives and the need for change NOW. ■

Write to Amy Preasmyer, X-29459, CCWF 511-19-4U, P.O. Box 1508, Chowchilla CA 93610. For more information on PREA: http://nicic.gov/prea

#### Just don't give up!

by LaSonya Wells



LaSonya Wells is a survivor of the system, a recovering addict, a poet, a queer woman, and a mother. She was born in Texas but has lived in San Francisco most of her life. LaSonya got involved with CCWP and Fired Up! while incarcerated in the San Francisco county jail. Due to her sharp mind and powerful voice, LaSonya quickly became a leader during Fired Up's weekly self-empowerment groups. She was released on September 4, 2013 and immediately took to building a support network and spread-

ing her truth about the detrimental effects of the Prison Industrial Complex on her life, inspiring those around her with her journey of healing and self-love.

n the past I used to get arrested, go to jail, get involved with drugs in jail and do whatever to fit in, to survive. I'd get out and do the same thing-whatever to survive as an addict. I realized that finally it's time for me to look within myself and figure out why I keep doing the same thing.

The deputies judged me for who I used to be even though I hadn't been in jail for 7 years. Who are they to judge me? I was being put in ad seg because of my past. Going to lock up strips you of everything: of your religion--you can't go to church; you can't go to school. As soon as they feel like someone is not doing the program perfectly, they put them in ad seg and lock us away like animals. We're not animals. We're human. Do you know that being locked up 23 hours a day can drive a person crazy?

When I went to ad seg, I did a lot of self-work. I read a lot of books like Battlefield of the Mind, by Joyce Myers. I did homework on self-love and compassion.

continued on pg. 9

page 8 The Fire Inside

#### Stages of the SHU

by Anonymous

and spiritual stages. At first when you get here you're angry and disoriented. You don't want to be locked in this tiny cell and reminded of how helpless you are, how utterly out of your own control your life is. Then you come to grips with the fact that you are where you are. You start to pay more attention; you stand at your door and watch and listen. You little by little figure out who is back here with you, what rooms they are in, what they are here for. You weed through your info and try to find someone, anyone you can reach out to for maybe a bar of soap, a couple envelopes, maybe a book.

Paranoia sets in cause you've been back here for 7 dinners already and you still don't know what they are going to do with you. Finally you go before ICC and you feel humiliated and hopeless as they read your whole C-file, and look down their noses, often making snide remarks about your character and appearance while you try to look them straight in the eyes and bite back your words. Smile, nod, yes sir, yes ma'am I understand. Once you're back in your cell you kinda see it for the first time, you spend time coming to terms with your situation and now it's about trying to make this tiny brick cell livable. So you spend about 3 days scrubbing bricks and whatnot.

Once you're settled, you start to cycle again. You're angry at yourself and sometimes everyone else. You have no drive or motivation, so you sleep and lay around. But after a while sleep stops coming and you realize you have to build a routine or this place will eat

you alive. I began to look at the box from a new angle, to think of this cell as a blessing, a place to grow, to get to know myself better, to think about my goals and my future.

I slowly began to think of this cell as my safe place. And as I did, I found it harder and harder to make myself leave my space, even for a 5 minute shower. I began to have sudden panic attacks at the thought of having to step out of my "safe" place. I would get anxiety even at the thought of them opening the door so my celly could go out. The times I had to go out became a nightmare-the moment I stepped out and heard the door slide shut I would literally be convinced that the building would crumble, any second, it would crush me. God forbid I had to go outside. It felt as if the air outside was sucking the oxygen from my lungs. I would be so disgusted with myself. I never thought of myself as weak before. But here I was, losing my ability to breathe, shaking, sweating, heart pounding out of my chest. Weak...I've been through my share of shit and I never ever thought I would find myself crippled by a concrete box.

What happens next year when they take the box away? Shove me out with no skills, no means of supporting myself. I've never used a credit card, or a DVD. I've never seen a phone with a camera. Honestly, I'm scared shitless. Will I rebuild the box out there? There are so many ways to build a box to hide in. I choose to believe that I am strong enough to live without it, that somehow, when I walk through that gate I will be healed. But I don't kid myself; I know every day will be a new challenge.

#### continued from pg. 8

I got involved in Fired Up!, in an outpatient program, and different organizations that force you to take a look at yourself. I got involved in my education. I went in with 89 high school credits and left with 178.25 credits. I only need two more to graduate!

I put myself on a set schedule because otherwise I felt like I was losing my mind. I woke up with a prayer and bible study. I asked for homework from different organizations inside the jail and worked on independent study packets from school. I wrote a lot of letters and poetry. I focused on what I was feeling: one day I may be happy because I'm alive, the next day I might be upset because I'm in lock-up. You have to learn to deal with you, figure out what you're feeling. I prepared myself for a routine for the outside world. I worked on consistency and on short-term goals

I fit exercise into my schedule, too. I did 20 minutes to an hour of exercise in the morning and nighttime.

I think that exercise does something for your brain. There were days I was feeling down and I would exercise and feel better. It changes the whole view of the day. My advice for other people who make mistakes in life is when you get arrested and do time, use your time wisely. Focus on leaving as a different person. Focus on what put you there and change it. Whatever you do inside jail will follow you out and mean something, so it's not a waste. You don't have to be perfect to get your life on track, you just have to want change. And once you change, you see that the people around you are changing, as well. People shouldn't give up on themselves because of their past. Work on changing the way you think. In time you will be exactly where you want to be. I don't care what the criminal justice system says or what people might think about you, it's what you think about yourself that will help you change. Just don't give up! ■

#### Being thrown away like garbage

by Sara Rodrigues 08G1213, Albion, NY

any people who are sentenced to prisons are very young and have serious behavioral and mental health problems and this environment only makes their sickness worse. In December 2008, I tripped and fell down the rabbit hole. Instead of "Alice in Wonderland," I became Sara in Prisonland and I am still to this day trying to wake up from my nightmare. I was 16 years old entering RCOD (reception) in a maximum-security prison, Bedford Hills. My sentence was eight, years flat and 5-post release supervision. I was scared and in definite culture shock, it was all so alien and overwhelming.

Since I came to Albion, I have spent most of my time in the box and I am so tired. Having a medical condition, every time I go to the box my skin gets horrible, cracks and bleeds, and now I am so sick I feel like death. After a while I start talking to ants, crickets or any other living thing or imaginary thing I can think of so I do not totally lose what is left of my mind. My mother is convinced that they throw people like us in the box so much because they want us to go over the edge and kill ourselves. My mother documents everything that happens to me and she tries so hard to make people aware of what goes on. Right now, she is infuriated that I slipped up about a month ago and tried to hang myself and now I am back in the box for months. Mom says that we are not even allowed to treat animals that bad and keep them locked in cages for months, why is it ok to do it to humans. So yes, we get tired and in a moment of despair I can see just ending it all. I keep telling myself to hang in it won't last forever; hopefully I will listen to my own words

and stay strong.

The powers that be who send people like D [Note: Sara's cousin, Dana Roy Countryman] and myself to prison know that prisons are dangerous for people with mental, emotional, and behavioral problems; and worse than that, send children into adult prisons just because they can. They don't care. It is easier and cheaper to ship them to prisons. Too many inmates in New York State under the age of 25 are killing themselves in prisons because they are literally being thrown away like garbage by the court systems. We need good transitional programs and job training for those whose skills were not up to the training programs in prison, and good decent parole officers, who talk to people like humans, really support and help parolees to keep from going back to prison.

In closing, maybe this essay can shake some of the authorities, maybe someone somewhere will have the courage to stand up and start changing the system for the better. If you want people to pay their debts to society, come out and be better people, you cannot keep beating a dead horse with more and more punishment and shame. Many know and see how counterproductive prison can be; now we just need for someone with some common sense who has the power to take action, because most of us are really worth trying to save. Too many lives have been lost or tossed aside in the name of paying for a crime.

For full essay see: http://solitarywatch.com/category/voic-es-from-solitary/page/2/ Write to Sara: Sara Rodrigues 08G1213, Albion Corr Fac, 3595 State School Rd., Albion, NY 14411.

#### **SHU Suicide**

by Anonymous

Last night another girl hung herself. As they drug her out of her cell and down the stairs and put her on the stretcher, it occurred to me that it's become so common, so common it hurts. I woke up out of my sleep and got off my bunk, got a sip of water and looked out the window and there they were silently dragging her out, no alarm, no sense of emergency or urgency. Just your run of the mill ordinarily scheduled suicide. Nothing special going on here, just all in a days work. I laid in bed praying her spirit would fight for her life since she obviously didn't have the strength to fight for it herself. By the time breakfast rolled around her bed was already filled by a new inmate. Like rotating cattle. And it's frustrating because what one person can I be angry with? I feel like an itty bitty worm on a big ass hook. I may not like the women around me, I may not even speak to many, but I never for one tiny second, never ever do I forget that we are all in this struggle together. Each of these women is a part of me. Each one worthy of better than this.



Graphic by Rini Templeton

page 10 The Fire Inside



Former political prisoners Laura Whitehorn, Susan Rosenberg and Marilyn Buck in Marianna Prison, FL. in 1993.

#### **Surviving Solitary**

by Laura Whitehorn

FI Note: Laura Whitehorn is a former political prisoner who did 15 ½ years in prison.

only did about a year total in sol-

itary—I am floored by people having to do year after year and survive. My main recommendation for people is to create a schedule—to try to understand what time of day it is even if you have no access to daylight. Creating a structure helps to assert control over your own life and not be totally by whatever defined "routine" the prison is forcing on you: 3 times a day the door slot is open to throw some slop in, or every 3 days they let you out for a shower or exercise.

Create a project to help make a life. If you get any paper and pencil and can do any drawing or art work, that was a big survival for me. Also, it is important to be able to day dream, to remember the things that are pleasurable, especially if you don't have access to any books. One of the places I was held I couldn't have any books, so day dreaming and remembering



Graphic by Rini Templeton

good things was really important to my survival. If you have a book, at least that can help you to get away through the world of the book.

Even though there are fewer women in prison than men, you really understand that prison and jail is about control and de-humanizing. For women, the sexual abuseor threat of it- is so constant. They try to mess with you and control you in every way. For women, they

> use the vulnerability of being watched without knowing, having all your bodily functions spied on. I had to ask for toilet paper while going to the bathroom, or I had to turn in a 'used' sanitary napkin before I could get a new one. In the federal system, male guards are not allowed to stand and watch you take a shower. BUT you are subjected to pat downs from male guards, and this make you so vulnerable.

The hardest part for me was feeling that no one in the world knew—

and that the people who did, the guards, didn't care. To know that SOMEONE knows what is happening to you is crucial. This is part of what is changing now, because the hunger strike is bringing so much more attention to conditions in solitary everywhere.

#### Solidarity with striking prisoners. End long-term solitary!

#### Ad Seg at CCWF

#### August 2013

I was falsely accused by another woman of assaulting her, and just on her word I was put in Ad Seg without any warning.

First they put me in an actual cage for four hours before they sent me to my cell in Ad Seg. Once I got there, it was so nasty, dirty and disgusting I could hardly stand it. The whole place smelled like urine but especially the mattress. The



first three days I wasn't given any underwear, bra, socks, or even toilet paper, just a mumu. I asked for a book and they told me no books. No paper or phone call either. All I was given were two blankets and a sheet. I felt like I was just locked away, apart from everything and I started to freak. What kept me together was doing exercise. I walked back and forth in my cell and that started to calm me down. And the other prisoners helped me get some clothes, soap and shampoo finally. After a while the prison sent a psych to check on me and make sure I was okay. Other women who were in general population also tried to help me. I was there for a month before they reviewed the case and let me out. Once I was out it took me two and a half weeks to get my property back. The whole thing was made up, but I had to go through a horrible month in solitary without any proof before they figured that out. ■

#### **High Security Units for Women:**

#### Lexington, Marianna, Carswell

In October 1987, political prisoners Susan Rosenberg and Alejandrina Torres were brought to the High Security Unit of the federal prison in Lexington, KY. For two



years, Susan, Alejandrina and political prisoner Silvia Baraldini endured extreme sensory deprivation as part of the Bureau of Prison's (BOP) experiment in small group isolation targeting women political prisoners. The unit was finally shut down in 1988 in response to a lawsuit by the prisoners and an international campaign. But it was soon replaced by

a larger control unit in Marianna, Florida.

Today there is a women's Control Management Unit at Carswell, Texas. Its existence denied by the BOP, it houses at least three Federal women political prisoners – Marie Mason, Ana Belen Montes and Aafia Siddiqui (a Pakistani doctor). They are not only physically isolated but have severe limitations on who they can correspond and visit with.

Below is an excerpt from Susan Rosenberg's book, An American Radical - Political Prisoner in My Own Country, describing conditions in the Lexington Control Unit. "'It's got eleven surveillance cameras. There are no visible cameras in our cells, but the surveillance extends into the area of the showers... To get off our tier, we have to go through two electronic gates. We are always accompanied by an officer... We have no contact with anyone outside of the staff, yet we are subject to strip searches anytime. We are constantly patted down by men and our cells are shaken down every day. It is utter craziness! No one comes here, and no one could get us any contraband unless they were an alien with magic powers...We see no natural light, we breathe no natural air, and we eat no food that hasn't been microwaved. We see nothing but white color. Our social contact is with a television... We don't get outdoor recreation, we can't take showers except when the COs say, and they always tell us to shower when men are on duty" (p. 89). ■

page 12 The Fire Inside

#### **Hunger Strike 2013 Update**

n Sept. 5, 2013, California prisoners ended the hunger strike which began on July 8th. The 60 day strike, the longest in California history, started with 30,000 prisoners in 24 prisons across the state participating! Initiated by men in the Peli-

can Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU), the strike continued the fight for the five core demands prisoners first put forward during the 2011 hunger strike (see FI # 47 & 48). Prisoners around the state also developed their own demands specific to the inhumane conditions they were facing.

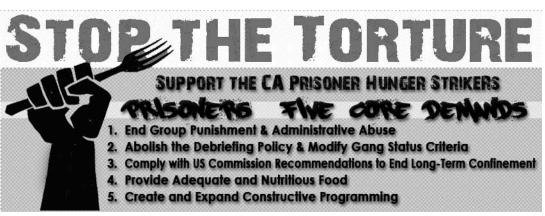
The prisoners' willingness to risk their lives to confront the torture of isola-

set a courageous example inspiring broad support on the outside. On July 13th, over 400 people from around the state rallied at Corcoran, site of one of the state's SHU's, in triple digit temperatures. This demonstration of love and support was followed by demonstrations initiated by family members at other prisons around the state, including San Quentin.

Grassroots mobilization of people across California was accompanied by sympathetic media coverage on TV and radio. Many newspapers, including the New York Times, Huffington Post, SF Chronicle and LA Times, ran articles and editorials condemning the prolonged use of solitary confinement as a form of torture. Solidarity statements came from around the world, including former prisoners in Palestine.

Despite the outpouring of support for the strikers, Gov. Brown and the CDCR refused to budge. They retaliated against the strikers by moving them to cells with even more torturous conditions, transferring them to other prisons supposedly for medical care, and getting a court order allowing CDCR to force feed the strikers if their situation became life threatening. The court order was an attempt to invalidate the Do Not Resuscitate orders that strikers had signed in advance, violating the self-determined choice of the prisoners to be on hunger strike. Fortunately none of the strikers were ever force fed.

The prisoners ended the strike following a meeting of four leaders and 14 others in the prison law library. These representatives responded to a pledge by State Senators Tom Ammiano and Loni Hancock to hold hearings and draft legislation addressing



Segment of poster by Naomi Masoko Reagan

their demands. Pelican Bay short corridor representatives issued a statement on Sept. 5, 2013:

"To be clear, our Peaceful Protest of Resistance ... to decades of systemic state sanctioned torture via the system's solitary confinement units is far from over. ..The core group of prisoners has been, and remains 100% committed to seeing this protracted struggle for real reform through to a complete victory, even if it requires us to make the ultimate sacrifice. With that said, we clarify this point by stating prisoner deaths are not the objective, we recognize such sacrifice is at times the only means to an end of fascist oppression. Our goal remains: force the powers that be to end their torture policies and practices in which serious physical and psychological harm is inflicted on tens of thousands of prisoners, as well as on our loved ones outside."

Leaders of the California Families to Abolish Solitary Confinement (CFASC) stated, "We are very proud of our family members and loved ones willing to make such a sacrifice which has gained international attention, and we are honored to be part of such a historical movement."

The hunger strikers are proceeding with a class action civil suit against the CDCR for its practice of prolonged solitary confinement. CCWP is proud to have been part of this historic fight and is committed to continue our support in the future.

#### Do you know...

by Veronica Hernandez, SF County Jail

Do you know...

that prisoner on prisoner violence has been instigated and facilitated by prison guards.

Do you know...

that prison guards are betting on who will die and who will survive. You are giving them a show, live actors and actresses paying.

Do you know...

that there are actors and actresses that are being paid instead of paying actors and actresses paying you are giving them a show, live.

Do you know... that the real enemy is not you. Do you know... that the real enemy is not me.

And if we would stop attacking each other and allow the smoke to clear, then maybe we would see that the real enemy is not you that the real enemy is not me that the real enemy is them.

Officials that deliberately instigate and facilitate prisoner on prisoner violence as a technique to control - you to control - me to keep us fighting each other instead of fighting them.

And if we would stop attacking each other and allow the smoke to clear then maybe we would see that the real enemy is not you that the real enemy is not me that the real enemy is them.

Do you know...

that prisoner on prisoner violence has been instigated and facilitated by prison guards.



thic by Rini Templeton

#### It's Your Health! Surviving solitary

t's an established fact that solitary confinement/ long term isolation is extremely harmful to a person's health—physical, mental and emotional. Class action court cases condemning the terrible impacts of solitary go back over 30 years in the United States (see p. 2 Legal Column). As recently as August 2013, Mr. Juan E. Méndez, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture called for an end to solitary confinement in response to the California prisoners' hunger strike. Mr. Méndez said solitary "often causes mental and physical suffering or humiliation, amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment... even amounts to torture".

Every study, and more importantly, every testimony from a person who has lived this experience says that the deepest impact is cause by being shut off from community, family and friends—the ISOLATION.

So the question is how to build 'community' when you are in SHU. Those who survive have found ways to break the isolation—to create some kind of community even when locked away from others and being subject to daily abuse of prison staff and horrible conditions. What are these ways to survive and break the isolation? Here are some of the things SHU survivors tell us:

- 1 Reading and writing—letting the books take you to a whole other world of ideas and experiences. Writing poetry, stories, letters or reports to express your feelings, acknowledge your reality, provide testimony exposing the torture.
- 2 Meditation and astral projection—allowing your mind and body to rest and be removed from the harsh conditions and to literally allow you to leave your cell in your mind.
- 3 Exercise- it does not just care for your body but also strengthens your mind.

What can you share from your own experience of surviving the torture of solitary? Please write to FI and help to strengthen the community of survivors of solitary. ■

#### Free Marissa Alexander Now!

arissa Alexander is an African American mother and survivor of domestic violence who fired a warning shot in the ceiling to defend herself from a life-threatening beating from her estranged husband in 2010. Although no one was hurt, Marissa was convicted of aggravated assault with a mandatory minimum enhanced sentence of twenty years under Florida law because a gun was involved. Marissa was denied a self-defense plea under Florida's "stand-your-ground" law. This is the law which was initially cited in George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin.

CCWP is part of a growing nationwide movement to free Marissa. On September 26, 2013, the 1st District Court of Appeal ruled that Marissa deserves a new trial because the trial judge did not properly instruct the jury regarding what is needed to prove self-defense. Just before Thanksgiving Marissa was released on bail- a very positive step forward! However, the prosecutor is intent on holding a second trial, scheduled to begin in March 2014. We look forward to the day when Marissa will be completely exonerated. ■

For more information contact: freemarisanow@gmail.com or justice4marissa.com

CCWP invites and encourages all women and transgender people who have been or are on the inside to send us your writing, letters, artwork, or poetry.

The next issue of Fire Inside will be #50! We think it is an important accomplishment, the longest continuously published newsletter by, for and about people in women's prisons and want to mark the anniversary. Please send us your writings, poetry and artwork and share what you think about from then (1996) -- to now (2014). What has changed in California women's prisons, what is the focus for the community now?

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#### Come work with us!

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www.womenprisoners.org
Fax: (415) 552-3150,

Email: info@womenprisoners.org

#### **CCWP Mission**

CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC, and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families and communities most impacted in building this movement.

Funded in part by Van LobenSels Rembe Rock, Women's Foundation, Left Tilt, Common Counsel, Ben & Jerry's, Solidago Peace Development Fund, People's Life Fund, Gill Foundation

# Yes, I want to support women prisoners! Please contact me to volunteer Enclosed is \$25 contribution to help send a newsletter subscription to a woman in prison Enclosed is my contribution of \$ Name: Address: Phone/email: