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Refuse to Succumb

Justin Guyton

Yes, I've made my fair share of mistakes, some of which resulted in incarceration. When I arise each morning and look in the mirror, I don't see a saint—I see a human being. I see a man whose flaws caused him to endure hardships along the way on his journey to Ohio's Supermax Prison. Since December 23, 2015, I've been subjected to solitary confinement.

This 7' x 14' cell was designed to alter my mind and break me—if not physically, then mentally. The detrimental effects of long-term solitary confinement have been well documented. The harmful symptoms that many victims of this type of punishment develop include, but are not limited to, perceptual distortions, hallucinations, increased anxiety, nervousness, rage, depression, and suicide.

The practice of solitary confinement deprives an individual of their basic human rights. When this is paired with a prison staff of whom many have the attitude that once in solitary confinement an individual is no longer human, you get another layer of torture. That lack of compassion results in instances in which a prisoner who may be experiencing deterioration of their mental health gets repeatedly and excessively sprayed with cans of pepper spray as a result of their mental health lapse.

In this setting I've even seen the basic human right of food denied as a form of pun-

ishment. I can recall many times when prison staff have removed all but a few spoonfuls of food from a tray that was to be served in an attempt to literally starve a prisoner they despise. I've had close friends, no longer able to push through the conditions of this environment, commit suicide. I have witnessed things that are unfathomable to the average person, like multiple instances of self-mutilation and someone refusing to eat with the hope of dying just to escape their mental anguish.

As I approach more than seven years of having been subjected to these inhumane conditions, the experience has made me look deep within myself. I've witnessed things that will be forever etched within my mind. Still, I refuse to be broken. The conditions I've endured have only made me seek refuge in developing inner strength that won't allow me to succumb to the mental and physical hazards of solitary confinement.

Sadly, many aren't able to find that type of strength within themselves. This is one thing I've learned from writing and publishing a book about my experiences within the system. You never know how sharing your story will impact or change the lives of others. Moving forward, as I near my release from prison, I hope others will find the strength to overcome through writings like this one.