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Ending Mass Incarceration Conference: National Editorial Feature

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(This editorial is also available on our website)

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Title: **Get Out! Of Solitary Confinement**

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All across our nation, poor people and people of color languish in solitary confinement. Their sorrow must be brought to an end. Down south in the Bible belt, we are at the end of a heated primary race. I know all of the candidates for Sheriff in Mecklenburg County and many of their volunteers. I can endorse none. The Internal Revenue Service prohibits 501(c)3 organizations from endorsing political candidates. Even if it were permissible, it would be unwise. As a national organization, the residents of both our local jail and all of the jails in our country are our primary concern. Our conscience led us to issue a press release two days ago announcing that we will put all collaboration with our jail on hold until proper safeguards and radical change is adopted, namely a process to end solitary confinement. We invite others across the nation to follow our lead. Solitary confinement is defined as 23 hours in isolation with 1 hour to roam and stretch large muscles.

After months of phone tag, on Tuesday, January 30, 2018, a volunteer and I were graciously welcomed by the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office to tour solitary confinement at Jail North where women and youth are contained after they are *captured*. I use the term *capture* to be clear in the connotation that the slave plantation evolved into mass incarceration. Arrested individuals are treated much like *runaway slaves*. In other words, as people of color, our citizenship is still contested as is our humanity. Our bodies and families are poorly valued animal *property*. That is why video visitation and solitary confinement make sense in over 600 facilities all across this land. Animals do not need regular human contact. One would need to read the *New York Time's* Best Seller, *The New Jim Crow* or view the documentary *13th* by Ava Duvernay to grasp the appropriateness of the analogy. As we walked through Jail North for youthful captives, we were warmly greeted by white male correction officers and a warm maternal African-American Sergeant. We were informed of the benefits of solitary to jail security, the implementation of a point system to earn time outside of the cage to call family or to order from the commissary and the daily jail staff check-ins were explained as sufficient human contact. In stark contrast were the sullen despairing faces of the young black men (our sons) in those small cement block cells with metal toilets and sinks roughly the size of what we find in an airplane. They spoke of how they needed space to breath; yet solitary "makes you go crazy." One of our sons said that he had been in solitary for about 18 days. Another said he was midway through a 60 day stint. The Humane Society says 4-8 hours is too long a time in the cage, and it causes mental health problems...for a *dog*. United Nations' Special Rapporteur and Human Rights expert Juan E. Mendez says solitary is human torture and must be absolutely prohibited. It creates mental pain and suffering that is cruel and unusual punishment. As our guide smiled and said "You can tell them what you really think," that feeling began to sink in. They looked at her as if to say "Really?" Something was out of place.

Something was not right in this monstrosity of human misery where the jail staff were at ease either straight faced or smiling, nodding and agreeing with the Sergeant. The maligned former Program Director and solitary confinement whistleblower, Karen Simon, who had asked me for help to raise awareness over a year ago wanted to know what I thought about the tour. I had no way to describe what patently did not fit together. It was like a puzzle. I had all the pieces, but how do I connect them? Deception from people who are convinced by the narratives they tell themselves and others is the most difficult to process---until you call it what it is---*self deception*. For the past three months, I have felt like the character Chris in the blockbuster psychological thriller *Get Out*. Chris was in an interracial relationship. When he visited his white lover's family, his girlfriend Rose betrayed him. Implicit racial bias turned into a fight for his life. In my case, I had been working with the jail, and I was going to meet the family now at Jail North. It was an intersectional connection: the jail and the anti-incarceration expert. The family welcomed me in, and yet it was not until after I witnessed an interaction between the jail and a formerly incarcerated community activist at the Black Presbyterian Clergy forum last Sunday that I finished processing my tour and realized, the foundation needed to *GET OUT*.

Many will recall how the black help in *Get Out* had been brainwashed; actually, their brains had been substituted by the brains of white people. The grounds keeper and maid were no longer capable of assessing their role in a white racist family that held them captive. After all, the family was their meal ticket. They had become obsequious, servile, defenders of their white benefactors whose outward friendly demeanor camouflaged the AR-15 power of their racialized violence against people of color. I noticed this when I asked the Sergeant if Exodus Foundation.org could assist the jail in ending solitary, and the response was a sudden cold stare, like that of Georgina when Chris asked her to leave his phone alone. Institutional racism was not the barrier to conversation with this dedicated employee, I was entering an area of conversation for which the carceral logic mind had no response. Metaphorically speaking, last Sunday all the pieces came together, like Chris, I stood at the door, "Rose, get the keys. We have to go."

A community activist at the forum came to the microphone, "Sheriff, I spoke to ten people in jail right now, and they say that solitary exists. Are you willing to say that there is solitary confinement?" "We do not have solitary confinement, we have disciplinary detention units." Now, I am thinking. "Rose, get the keys." "I'm sorry Chris. You know I cannot do that." The gaze of the camera narrows to Chris's startled and betrayed countenance. He was bamboozled. Implicit racial bias had stalked him, and it is ready to take over his mind and convince him that a rose is not a rose: extremely limited human contact and limited physical movement is good.

Across this nation, all of us have been brainwashed to greater or lesser degrees by the dripping faucet of irreverence for poor and black bodies and families in our prison plantation nation. The Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office calls it disciplinary detention. Solitary confinement by any other name is still a disgrace to the 21st century, a degradation of a mind, the violation of a body, the assault on a soul, a cruel and unusual punishment. A rose by any other name is still a rose. My eyes did not deceive me on our tour. If any of us isolated our children in this manner, the Department of Social Services would remove our parental authority immediately. Karen Simon should have the last word here, and it should ring out from Sing Sing to Pelican Bay, "What if they were all white children and adults Madeline? Where is the black community on this? Where are the clergy?" Exodus Foundation.org had to *Get Out* of our intersectional connection with the jail until the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Office transforms its logic and gets out of brainwashing the entire county. In fact, our entire nation has been brainwashed; we have lost our minds; we are stupefied and compliant with barbaric practices. Every hamlet and village must bring pressure on local jails to end the practice of solitary confinement. The solution? Brief cooling down periods in humanely built or remodeled cells and mental health

Pods. The consequences of not getting out of solitary will continue to be deadly and costly to us all.

Postscript: This article was originally published in April, 2018. As of Jan. 2019, the newly elected Sheriff reported an end to solitary confinement in the Mecklenburg Jail.