

US: He served nearly 44 years in solitary confinement. He was innocent of the crime.

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Albert Woodfox, 73, is an activist and the author of "Solitary," a 2019 National Book Award finalist. Known as one of the Angola Three, along with Robert King and Herman Wallace, Woodfox served nearly 44 years in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary. He was released in 2016.

You served more time in solitary confinement than any other person in the history of this country. How do you help people understand what it's like to live in a 6-by-9 cell?

My suggestion is go in your bathroom and stay in there for 23 hours. You can bring anything you want with you. You can bring a TV or whatever. Now most cells are probably roughly the same size as a bathroom. And it will give you some idea what it is to be confined, in our case in a 9-by-6 cell, in some cases smaller. Then imagine that no matter how far down the road you look in your mind, you don't see any opportunity, and to have to live with that day to day, week to week, month to month, year to year, decade to decade. It is a horrible experience.

How were you able to keep your sanity and somehow maintain hope for all those decades?

It was a combination of things that allowed me to survive 43 years and 10 months in solitary confinement. The foundation laid by my mother gave me the internal strength to endure, and I dedicated my life to the Black Panther program to better your life. So one gave me the foundation, the other gave me a purpose.

The party gave me an awakening, a sense of self-worth. Listening to what the Panther brothers were teaching was one of those moments the light goes off in your head. Like, *Hey, wait a minute, I'm not who I've been taught my entire life that I was*. They helped me to realize that I was a decent human being and could achieve things if given the opportunity. I firmly believe that in life, an event or an individual can raise your level of consciousness. And once your level of consciousness is raised, then you can no longer continue to be the person you were. So [fellow Panthers] Robert, Herman and I, we formed schools, we taught men how to read and write, we taught men history, we worked to teach ourselves the law because we knew our struggle couldn't continue to be physical, that our bodies just wouldn't survive the constant beatings and gassings that we were going through. So we had to take our struggle to another level. We figured the court would be the best place. And so we had to teach ourselves the law.

While in prison, you were convicted of the murder of a correctional officer.

Brent Miller.

Brent Miller, yes. And I understand that his wife subsequently came to your defense.

Teenie. She had been lied to for so long, herself, and so after we looked at all the evidence or lack of,

we made her aware of stuff she had no idea existed or happened. And after she read all of it, she came to the conclusion that we were innocent and that she had been lied to. And the real killers had never been brought to justice.

Why do you think the state did not follow up on the physical evidence that could have exonerated you?

Because of our activism in the prison. Because we dared to resist. Organizing the hunger strikes, organizing over clothing that was inadequate, or over working 16-hour days, seven a week, over young kids who were being forced into being sex slaves — we were organizing against all of these types of things. Robert, Herman and I, we were very influential, and they knew that. We were in solitary, and yet we were still organizing, not only in solitary, but around the prison. Through messaging and through letters and through examples of not being broken.

So when they found this officer stabbed to death, in spite of finding a bloody fingerprint on the door in his blood and a lot of other stuff that just didn't add up — every witness had a different story — they just ignored all of it.

Thinking about the impact those people had on your life, do you feel bitterness toward them?

There's a lot of anger there. But not bitterness. Anger is one of the motivating factors in what I'm doing now, continuing to be a social advocate. I've been around the country, around the world speaking on the horrors of solitary and other issues. But I never allowed myself to become bitter because, again, the example by my mom: With all the hardship she went through, she never became bitter. She instilled in me that belief that whatever situations you were given, you can make it into something better.

But how do you not become bitter? That's a really hard thing to let go, I think.

[Laughs.] I think what I went through has made me a better man, a better human being. You know, I've been asked a lot: What would I change in my life? And people are surprised when I say, "Absolutely nothing." They're like, you've been sitting in a 6-by-9 cell for 43 years and 10 months. But it gave me an opportunity to reeducate myself, an opportunity to develop qualities of endurance that I didn't even know I had. An opportunity to find something that I loved to the point that I was willing to sacrifice my life. So maybe in some abstract way that helped me — although angry — not be bitter. Bitterness is a destructive force. And I decided a long time ago that I did not want to be a destructive force in the world.

If people say, "Well, you did become a better person, you gained all this strength, so maybe prison works" — what do you say to that?

[Laughs.] Oh my goodness. The person I became was a result of me and my determination. There were no prison programs, there were no treatments from the state of Louisiana or the prison I was being housed in that contributed to me. They put me in a cell, knowing that I was innocent. For the sole purpose of breaking my spirit and breaking Robert's spirit and breaking Herman's spirit. Our cells were meant to be death chambers. We turned them into high schools, universities, debate halls, law schools — we used those cells for everything other than what they were designed to be. So everything I am, it was on my own initiative, it was on my own determination, my own strength. It didn't have nothing to do with the prison.

I'm not a religious person, but I am a very spiritual person. I believe that there has to be a reason for

the three of us to survive all of that. And I think that reason is for us to build a better humanity. To make other human beings aware of what's going on. Because public officials and bureaucrats are fond of saying "in the name of the people." And "the people" have no idea what's being done in their name. So what we're doing now, me and Robert, with the book and the speaking engagements, and traveling the world making people aware, we have brought a national and international debate on the cruelty of solitary. I take great solace in that it's making a difference. Every time that I give a speech, when I wrote my book, when I get an award, they lose; I win.

This interview has been edited and condensed. KK Ottesen's latest book is "["Activist: Portraits of Courage."](#)

KK Ottesen

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