



# SOLITARY

A film by Kristi Jacobson

Running Time:  
80 minutes

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## Short Synopsis

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SOLITARY is a daring exploration of the lives of inmates and corrections officers in one of America's most notorious supermax prisons, built to hold inmates in 8x10 cells, 23-hours-a-day, for months, years and sometimes decades. With unprecedented access, the film captures a complex, unexpected and deeply moving portrait of life inside.

## Long Synopsis

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Built on an Appalachian mountaintop, Red Onion State Prison (one of over 40 supermax prisons across the US) is nearly 300 miles from any urban center, holds up to 500 prisoners in 8'x10' solitary confinement cells for 23 hours a day- isolated and is forgotten by the world. Inmates are placed in solitary confinement by prison authorities, they are not sentenced to it by a judge or jury. Most prisoners sent to solitary will eventually be released from prison. Journalists call supermax prisons "Black Sites"- mysterious places where virtually no press are admitted, and even those few that are stripped of all recording devices before being allowed on highly observed visits. In the immersive SOLITARY, filmmaker Kristi Jacobson ("A Place at the Table") managed to gain unprecedented- and unrestricted- access to Red Onion and its residents, capturing its chilling sounds and haunting atmosphere. In startlingly intimate and reflective interviews with the inmates, Jacobson discovers their violent childhoods, the dangers of prison life, and their struggles to maintain sanity in the unrelenting monotony of confinement. Interwoven with their stories are the voices of the corrections officers, who are serving a different type of time right alongside the prisoners, while they struggle to maintain their humanity. As the prison initiates a reform program to reduce the number of inmates held in solitary, the process provides an unexpected window into life on both sides of the bars. Filmed over the course of one year, SOLITARY tells the stories of people caught in the complex American penal system and raises provocative questions about punishment in America today.

## Director's Statement

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*"I feel like I've been buried alive in the ground and everybody's just basically walking over the top of me. I can hear them but they can't hear me."* — Quincy, Inmate

In the late summer of 2012, I read an article in the *New Yorker* by Dr. Atul Gawande that really hit me. "Hellhole" described in gripping detail the mental and social breakdown that occurs among human beings who are deprived of social interaction. It also revealed that tens of thousands of Americans were being held in solitary confinement inside our prison system. As I dug more deeply into the issue, the biggest shock was that no one seemed to care.

People in prison, especially those in solitary confinement, are invisible, hidden from public conscience. There are over 40 supermax prisons across the US, most built during the tough-on-crime prison boom of the late 1990s; they are known as Black Sites to the journalists who have tried to get inside. They remain unknown to most of the US population.

Many people who have worked on this issue for decades told us that getting access to a supermax would be impossible. But I couldn't see a way to tell this story without getting inside. We discovered that Virginia was in the process of implementing a new "Step-down" reform program to reduce the number of inmates held in solitary at its supermax, Red Onion State Prison, which had a reputation for being one of the toughest prisons. I wanted to learn more about how they were tackling this issue—especially since long-term solitary, or "segregation" as it is known, was so ingrained in the institution's purpose and history.

When I first spoke to the Director of the Department of Corrections, Harold Clarke, he was remarkably open, and we began a series of phone conversations—about the issue and the reforms he was implementing. We eventually discussed the importance of capturing what it's like to be in "seg," as well as the program, that led to approval to film for 3 days at the prison.

In the fall of 2013, my team and I arrived at Red Onion State Prison. Our access was not conditional, it was granted based on a mutual understanding that reform is necessary. The Warden provided our crew with an opportunity — access to the inmates, to the place, to the men and women who work there. This required trust and was at times quite challenging. Ultimately, as a filmmaker, it was an opportunity to observe, capture and tell a story that very few have ever seen.

The film gives voice to those often demonized by the mainstream media. They are easily hated and then forgotten. It's sometimes uncomfortable for the public to hear these stories, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be heard.

We spent many days shooting inside the prison over the course of a year, and each time I felt not only a deep empathy, but a responsibility to tell the stories of the people I met. This includes the inmates and the officers who bravely shared their stories with me. Their stories kept me going back, and now I hope that audiences will come with me into the world of Red Onion State Prison with an open mind and an open heart, for I believe every individual's humanity and dignity are equally important.

- Kristi Jacobson

## An Interview with Kristi Jacobson

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**Q: How did you decide to make a film about solitary confinement?**

A: I studied sociology in college—specifically criminology and juvenile justice. And working at a courthouse in Raleigh, NC opened my eyes to the complete and utter brokenness of the juvenile justice system. After that experience, I first wanted to become a lawyer, until it occurred to me that I wanted to tackle the system itself and perhaps I could make a bigger impact if I told this story. I understood from an early age the power of film. As a sociologist and documentarian, I am interested in that brokenness I observed up close - how it got so broken and how it can be fixed. And I am also interested in people, and why they do the things they do. What drives them during the best of times, what keeps them going during the worst of times? And what are the societal forces at play that contribute, and in many cases determine, our experience. And ultimately I am interested in how, in the end, we are all the same – humans striving for connection.

I've now made films about many different subjects, but this was always the film I wanted to make. After the wide release of "A Place at the Table," I felt I was in a position where I might be able to get funding for a film in this space. I was initially interested in how kids are locked up in solitary confinement – in juvies, in jails and in prisons. I can recall in detail the night I read Dr. Atul Gawande's *New Yorker* piece, "Hellhole," and learned that there are actually something like 100,000 inmates in solitary across the US – many locked in solitary for the most arbitrary reasons, and most people don't seem to know or care about it. And people locked in solitary are as forgotten as you can imagine. The existence of supermax prisons is generally unknown, and they're kept off-limits to press.

There are two quotes that I kept close throughout the process. The first is from Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy: "When the door is locked against the prisoner, we do not think about what is behind it... we have a great responsibility, as people, we should know what happens after the prisoner is taken away." I had this one, hand-written on an index card, on my wall during the making of the film.

The second is from Dostoevsky: "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." Anyone who has ever made a film knows that you don't make a film unless a subject is keeping you up at night – again and again, and this happened to me with this subject. You can't "unlearn" certain facts, stories, truths – and I found myself wanting to understand how and why in this country we widely overuse solitary confinement in our prisons. I assumed I wouldn't get inside one once I knew they existed. But then we did.

**Q: How did that happen?**

A: When we set out to make this film, many told us that filming inside of a supermax would be impossible; these prisons are known as “black sites” by the journalists covering this issue, who have worked tirelessly and doggedly for decades to expose what goes on inside. During our research we discovered that Virginia was in the process of implementing a new “Step-down” reform program to reduce the number of inmates held in solitary at its notorious supermax, Red Onion State Prison through behavioral modification and other evidence-based practices. This was especially interesting because the entire facility was built in the late 1990s, at the height of the tough-on-crime era and opened in 1998 the same year many supermax prisons opened across the country. It had a reputation for being one of the toughest prisons. I was very curious to learn more about how they were tackling this issue – especially since long-term solitary or “segregation” as its known at Red Onion was so ingrained the institution’s purpose and history.

The Step-Down program is important because until 2011 when Red Onion began to implement it, the entire prison was on 22-24 hour per day lockdown and they were seeing high levels of “incidents” and increasing staff turnover and low morale. The place was taking its toll on staff as well as inmates. Additionally, there was a recognition that releasing someone from solitary right to the streets is a public safety risk.

When I first spoke to the Director of the Department of Corrections, Harold Clarke, he was remarkably open, and we began a series of phone conversations – about the issue and the reforms he was implementing and soon that led to the importance of capturing what it's like to be in “seg,” as well as the program, that ultimately led to approval to film for three days at the prison.

Once inside the prison, the Warden provided our crew with an opportunity – access to the inmates, the place and the men and women who work there. I am grateful to everyone at Red Onion who courageously shared their stories, and particularly grateful to the Department of Corrections, who not only let me in, but allowed me the space and the freedom to find the story, as we returned to film many times over the course of one year.

**Q: How did you prepare for that first trip?**

A: I didn’t prepare myself. I just wanted to go there and be in the moment. The first time I went was by myself. I was there from 7AM until 4PM. I didn’t eat, I didn’t drink. I was just in this place. This place I’d never imagined would let me, a filmmaker, inside. It’s hard to describe what it felt like to be there. I’d never felt anything like that before.

**Q: How so?**

A: When you’re in a regular prison, even a high security prison, there are lots of people and noises; there’s a sense of life happening. It’s behind bars, yes, but it’s life – in the rec yard, the

mess hall, the gym, the library. But when you're in a segregation (or "seg") pod, it's like the life has been sucked out. There is no communal space. But there are still faces behind the windows. And voices, the yelling, the cacophony. I knew in that moment, that first trip, how vital the sound would be in capturing and telling the story of this place.

**Q: Did you have any expectations going in?**

A: I had some expectations about who I would meet in terms of the staff based on one-dimensional portrayals I've seen in fiction and non-fiction films. I learned very quickly to let go of whatever those expectations were and to be open to the stories of people locked away -- and the people on the other side of the door. It became far more interesting of a place when I looked at it that way.

After a while of filming there, I felt myself starting to change. Things that struck me as completely upsetting at the outset started seeming normal, and that was scary. As I saw how filming began to take its toll on me I gained more insight into the toll it must take on the officers who work there.

**Q: How did you choose the prisoners you ended up focusing on in the film?**

A: The Step-Down program at Red Onion allowed me to meet many inmates in a semi-group setting while they performed basic job tasks. I wasn't interviewing there, they were just doing their work and I was more or less observing. There were also some classes taking place. And sometimes, it was a matter of putting ourselves in the position to meet and talk to inmates, even if through the cell door, those held in seg, who were not participating in the program.

The last thing someone in prison wants is someone asking immediately, "What did you do to get here?" And so we made an effort to meet people and get to know them, as much as is possible inside a supermax. Some, like Randall, were dynamic storytellers. And each of the inmates so clearly craved the opportunity to have a face-to-face conversation. How we came to know them is the same as how you come to know them in the film as well. I only found out later how they got there, or what their street crimes were.

**Q: Do you feel like having the camera around affected the feeling in the prison?**

A: Our camera's presence changed the power dynamic- by giving the prisoners the opportunity to have a voice. Their desire to connect, with someone new and interested and curious - and independent, not a part of the prison administration, was palpable. The corrections officers, although at first reluctant, over time also came to realize our presence meant they, too, had a voice. The difficulty is that we couldn't tell everybody's stories - and that kept me awake at night, and still does. The stories we tell in the film are powerful and important. But there are many others - at Red Onion and across our prison system - whose



stories should be told and heard, and while that's always true when making films, it was and is especially challenging on this film.

**Q: Did the regimentation of the Red Onion daily schedule offer any advantages for filming?**

A: Yes. You know what it's like to be making most documentaries: you have one chance to get it and that's it. In prison, it's like filming on a movie set. The routine provided us an opportunity to really spend time and energy on framing and composition, on creating a visual language and shots that would bring the audience as close to being inside as possible. Our crew was small, we worked together closely. We all came to know the place and how it breathes.

**Q: By that same token, does that routine make for challenges in the edit in terms of pacing, rhythm and variety of material?**

A: We struggled with that. It was really hard to structure a film like this and finding the pacing and the rhythm played a big role. Our editor, Ben Gold, did an amazing job finding that structure, and also coming up with a wish list of shots that would help in the edit. Once we understood what our access meant, we knew we could go in and collect process pieces that would be very valuable. We spent lots of days just shooting the prison itself and how it operates. The prison sits in a really lush American setting, so we had great exterior shots to turn to as well.

**Q: It also helps that the film shows the entirety of the prison ecosystem. Was including guards, correctional officers and the warden always part of the design of the film?**

A: The warden's point of view was important from the start, because the supermax prison as an institution itself and how its run, as well as how a warden implements reforms were an intriguing part of the story from my earliest research. We felt getting the perspective of the guards and COs, and understanding the area, was really crucial from the very first visit to the prison. What was originally baked-in, that got cooked out in the editing, was the context: interviews with other people outside the ecosystem itself, like psychologists, experts, and a survivor from another prison with an incredibly powerful story. Ultimately, we felt that staying focused on this one place was the most cinematic and powerful way to tell this story.

**Q: SOLITARY is kind of the flip-side of your last film, "A Place At The Table." That film needed to be holistic, needed multiple stories as opposed to the intense focus of SOLITARY. You seem like a filmmaker with a malleable approach to your subjects.**

A: I spent my formative years working for Barbara Kopple who always encouraged me to follow my instincts, and to follow the story. I've never made a film that, in its finished form, looked the

same as the original proposal, and as Barbara likes to say - if you're not ready to go on the journey, then don't make films! In terms of style and approach, I didn't say at the outset that I wanted to make an experiential, immersive film. But once we found ourselves in that prison...all of the time spent trying to tell more of the history and larger context just seemed superfluous. When we let it go, I felt so free.

This film hits at the deep core of why I wanted to make films in the first place. It's perhaps not a comprehensive report on solitary across the U.S., but I hope it is much more than that - a powerful and moving exploration of our punitive penal criminal justice society, and what it means to be human, and a part of humankind. It's a much more evocative piece. I wanted to push myself as an artist, and this story, with its inherent challenges was an opportunity for that. I hope that audiences will be open, and will come along for the ride, and see where it takes them.

**Q: How would you encapsulate the central experience of solitary confinement for the viewer?**

A: I feel the condition itself causes irreparable harm. No one could spend a night in jail or solitary and ever understand what it's like to be there without any certainty you'll ever get out. Whether you "deserve" it or not, the harm is really difficult to repair, if not irreparable. Human beings are forever changed by it and not for the better. People talk about how juveniles, the mentally ill and pregnant women shouldn't be in solitary confinement - and they absolutely should not - but the question should be whether any one should be locked up that way at all.

## Inmates and Correctional Officers Featured in the Movie

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**Randall**, Earlysville, VA - inmate

*"All I've ever know was violence, you know? It wasn't the solution to the problem, it was just life."*



**Michael**, Los Angeles, CA - inmate

*"You've got to feel like you're relevant to somebody, you know? And if you don't feel like you're relevant to nobody in that cell, then it will make you just want to lose your damn mind. You know, just go crazy."*



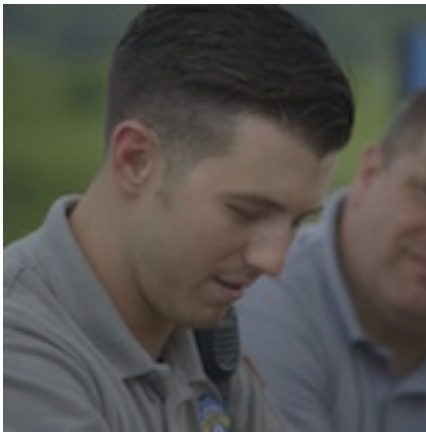
**Lars**, Hagerstown, MD - inmate

*"Segregation is tricky on the inmate. Because if the inmate is not careful, they adapt to it. And they start becoming antisocial, they become crazy, they can lose their mind. Ask yourself, can you live in a bathroom for ten years?"*



**Dennis**, Richmond, VA - inmate

*"You know, I ain't had a visit in over five years. My family is in Richmond, and it's like 500 miles round trip to drive. And we only get one hour a visit. And you can't touch each other. My family used to come up here once a year. But now, my mom is 73-years-old. The rest of the family is dying on me. I call my brother once a month and I call my mom once a month. That's the only contact I got."*



**Jordan**, Corrections Officer

*"Some days your stress level can be out the roof. And it feels like you're doing time, because you have to come back and do it the next morning. But you make what – you make the best of it."*



**Jeffery**, Prison Unit Manager

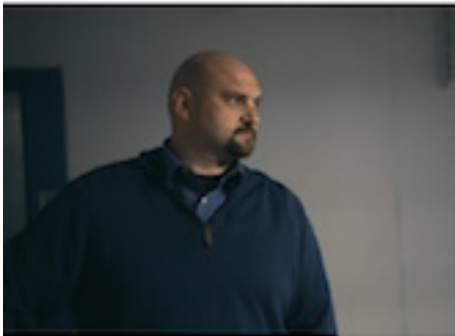
*"You look at things different. When I'm out on vacation, or around big crowds with my family, I'm always looking around. Because we are on such great alert twelve hours a day, and there is*

*the potential for violence. When you go home and it is time to relax, sometimes it is hard to let your mind relax."*



**Daniel, Corrections Officer**

*"Working in a supermax prison, it will definitely make you tougher. And some days it feels like the day's just not going to end."*



**Andy, Prison Unit Manager**

*"In this area you will see a lot of coal mines...when Red Onion Prison opened, you know, there were a lot of job opportunities. And at that time there were a lot of coal mines that were shutting down. People were being laid off, so a lot of the people that initially started at these places were people that were coming from the coal mines."*



**Randall Mathena, Warden**

*"When you're dealing with higher-level offenders, their history, a lot of times, is extreme violence. So we have to treat them as such. Bottom line, my job is to protect the public safety,*

*and protect those staff that are here to protect the offenders... So we have to consider the big picture. What is best? What is safe? What is safe for all?"*

## About Solitary Confinement

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### WHAT IS SOLITARY CONFINEMENT?

Solitary confinement is the practice of isolating people in closed cells for 22-24 hours a day, virtually free of human contact, for periods of time ranging from days to decades.<sup>1</sup>

Prisoners are sent to a solitary unit or transferred to a supermax by Prison Officials. They are not sentenced to it by a judge or jury.

Solitary confinement goes by many names, whether it occurs in a supermax prison or in a unit within a regular prison. Common names are: disciplinary segregation, administrative segregation, control units, security housing units (SHU), special management units (SMU), or simply “the hole.”<sup>2</sup>

Solitary is mainly used to punish prisoners who have violated prison rules. These rule violations can range from disciplinary violations to assault or attempted escape. It can be used by prison officials to isolate those considered too dangerous for general population. It can also be used to “protect” prisoners who are perceived as vulnerable – such as youths, the elderly or individuals who identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI).<sup>3</sup>

While some specific conditions of solitary confinement may differ among institutions, generally the prisoner spends 23 hours a day alone in a small cell with a solid steel door, a bunk, a toilet, and a sink. Conditions include:

- Little to no human contact or interaction.
- No participation in group activities, including eating with others.
- All meals provided through a slot in the cell door.
- Human contact is restricted to brief interactions with corrections officers and, for some prisoners, occasional encounters with healthcare providers or attorneys – often through the steel door.
- Severe constraints on visitation; family visits are limited, and visits are “no contact”: visiting occurs while the prisoner is in restraints and behind a partition. Many prisoners are only allowed one visit per month, if any.
- Prisoners are strip-searched first and shackled in leg irons and handcuffs when moving outside of the cell.
- Reduced or no natural light.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://solitarywatch.com/facts/faq/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop\\_solitary\\_briefing\\_paper\\_updated\\_august\\_2014.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop_solitary_briefing_paper_updated_august_2014.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop\\_solitary\\_briefing\\_paper\\_updated\\_august\\_2014.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop_solitary_briefing_paper_updated_august_2014.pdf)

- Restriction or denial of reading material, television, radios or other property.
- Exposure to frequent “cell extractions” and/or “five-point restraints” for rule violations while in segregation unit.
- Recreation occurs in isolated, small cages for one hour, several times per week.

The amount of time a prisoner spends in solitary confinement varies, but can last for days, months, years or even decades.

SOLITARY STATISTICS: The number of people held in solitary confinement in the United States has been notoriously difficult to determine. Currently, available estimates suggest between 80,000 and 100,000 incarcerated persons are held in some form of isolated confinement.<sup>4</sup>

### “BLACKSITES”– LACK OF MEDIA ACCESS

- “Supermax prisons and solitary confinement units are our domestic black sites – hidden places where human beings endure unspeakable punishments, without benefit of due process in any court of law. With few exceptions, solitary confinement cells have been kept firmly off-limits to journalists – with the approval of the federal courts, who defer to corrections officials’ purported need to maintain “safety and security.” If the First Amendment ever manages to make it past the prison gates at all, it is stopped short at the door to the isolation unit.”<sup>5</sup> From [“Fortress of Solitude” by James Ridgeway, Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 2013](#)
- “Prison officials rarely allow journalists to walk through their prisons, and even rarer is the warden who lets a reporter into his solitary-confinement unit. The voices of the men and women confined inside these prisons-within-a-prison are often the last ones that any prison administrator wants outsiders to hear ... it is virtually impossible for a reporter to gain access to a solitary-confinement unit.”<sup>6</sup> From [“James Ridgeway’s ‘Solitary Reporting’” by Jennifer Gonnerman, New Yorker, Jan 27, 2016](#)
- “In most prisons and jails, reporters who get themselves on an inmate’s list of approved visitors have to surrender pens, notebooks, tape recorders and cameras at the gate. On occasions when reporters are invited to look around inside – as they have been recently in the company of celebrity visitors like President Obama and Pope Francis – they see the facilities on their best behavior.”<sup>7</sup> From [“Let the Press In” by Bill Keller, Marshall](#)

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<sup>4</sup> <http://solitarywatch.com/facts/faq/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.cjr.org/cover\\_story/fortresses\\_of\\_solitude.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/cover_story/fortresses_of_solitude.php?page=all)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/james-ridgeways-solitary-reporting>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/10/05/let-the-press-in#.R2Eglz6Hz>



## RED ONION STATE PRISON (ROSP) - FACTS and TIMELINE

### FACTS

- Red Onion State Prison is located in Wise County, southwest Virginia. It is in the heart of coal country, hundreds of miles from Richmond.
- Solitary confinement at ROSP is known as “segregation.” Currently, it is officially referred to as “long term restrictive housing.” The position of the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) is that they do not have solitary confinement at Red Onion State Prison. VADOC currently runs a program at ROSP (and other facilities) which “gives high-risk offenders the opportunity to work their way out of restrictive housing and into the general prison population.”<sup>8</sup> It is known as the “Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program.”
- Approximately 90% of Virginia’s prisoners will, one day, be released back into society.<sup>9</sup>

### TIMELINE

- August 1998: Red Onion State Prison (ROSP) opened.
- April 1999: Human Right Watch publishes a damning report of the conditions inside Red Onion State Prison.<sup>10</sup> “At Red Onion, unfortunately, the Virginia Department of Corrections has failed to embrace basic tenets of sound correctional practice and laws protecting inmates from abusive, degrading or cruel treatment.”<sup>11</sup>
- October 2011: VADOC initiates reforms aimed at changing the culture and motivating positive developments at ROSP. As a result, the Administrative Segregation Step-Down Program is created.<sup>12</sup>
- January 2012: A front page feature on ROSP appeared in *The Washington Post*<sup>13</sup> and state legislators introduced bills in the General Assembly requiring the State to hire outside experts to recommend how to reduce the use of solitary.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3\\_DOJ.shtm](https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3_DOJ.shtm)

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginia-turns-away-from-solitary-confinement/2013/09/06/376e0502-14d7-11e3-880b-7503237cc69d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginia-turns-away-from-solitary-confinement/2013/09/06/376e0502-14d7-11e3-880b-7503237cc69d_story.html)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/redonion/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/redonion/Rospfin.htm#P59\\_713](https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/redonion/Rospfin.htm#P59_713)

<sup>12</sup> [https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3\\_DOJ.shtm](https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3_DOJ.shtm)

<sup>13</sup> Va. Prisons’ Use of Solitary Confinement is Scrutinized, *The Washington Post*, Jan. 8, 2012, p. A-1.

- March 2012: VA Department of Corrections announced it intended to make changes in the use of segregation.<sup>14</sup>
- May 2012: *The Washington Post* reports that inmates are hunger-striking at ROSP to protest, amongst other things, the conditions and practice of indefinite segregation.<sup>15</sup>
- September 2013: Legislators Patrick A. Hope (Virginia House of Delegates) and Adam P. Ebbin, (Virginia Senate) tour ROSP and write an opinion piece for *The Washington Post* praising changes in segregation practices in Virginia. "A great deal has changed in two years ... Last month, we returned to Red Onion and saw firsthand the effects of a dramatic turnaround in philosophy and treatment of prisoners in solitary confinement."<sup>16</sup>
- September 2015: [VADOC publishes media release](#) with latest segregation figures and updates on the step-down program stats. Highlights: "In the four years since the Step-Down program began, more than 350 restrictive housing offenders have participated in the program. To date, only nine offenders enrolled in the program have had a setback resulting in their return to restrictive housing."
- March 2016: VADOC publishes a media release with the latest segregation figures and updates on the step down program stats.<sup>17</sup> Among the highlights: "Since the reforms, Virginia has witnessed a 72 percent reduction in the number of men housed in long term restrictive housing. At Red Onion State Prison, measuring from 2011 through 2015, incident reports are down 65 percent, inmate grievances have fallen 71 percent and informal complaints have been reduced by 76 percent."

## SUPERMAX PRISONS TIMELINE

"The expansion of solitary confinement in the U.S. [in the late 1980s and 1990s] exploded alongside new prison construction, both driven by "tough on crime" politics. Just as "zero tolerance" policing and harsh sentencing practices flooded jails and prisons, the same philosophies inside prisons swelled the population of people in solitary – who are disproportionately young, black men. As the mentally ill were incarcerated in the absence of

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<sup>14</sup> Va. Plans to Modify Prisoner Isolation, *The Washington Post*, Mar. 31, 2012, A-1.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/virginia-inmates-embark-on-hunger-strike-to-protest-prison-conditions/2012/05/22/gIQAbLg0iU\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/virginia-inmates-embark-on-hunger-strike-to-protest-prison-conditions/2012/05/22/gIQAbLg0iU_story.html)

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginia-turns-away-from-solitary-confinement/2013/09/06/376e0502-14d7-11e3-880b-7503237cc69d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/virginia-turns-away-from-solitary-confinement/2013/09/06/376e0502-14d7-11e3-880b-7503237cc69d_story.html)

<sup>17</sup> [https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3\\_DOJ.shtm](https://vadoc.virginia.gov/news/press-releases/16mar3_DOJ.shtm)

treatment, prisons had neither the resources nor the disposition to do anything other than to put them into solitary, their own "prison-within-a-prison." "<sup>18</sup>

## TIMELINE

- 1970s into 1980s: crime, sentencing and corrections policies lead to overcrowding and lack of programming inside prisons.
- 1983: Two corrections officers were killed by inmates at Illinois' Marion State Penitentiary, the highest-security federal prison in the country, built to replace Alcatraz and intended to house the "worst of the worst." As a response to these murders the prison went into unprecedented lock down. These murders and the subsequent lock down at Marion sparked the modern use of solitary confinement in American prisons and became the template for new American supermaxes built across the country called "The Marion Model."
- 1989: California builds Pelican Bay, a new prison built solely to house inmates in isolation. By most accounts, it is the first supermax facility in the country.<sup>19</sup>
- 1990s: The building boom of supermax or control-unit prisons begins. Oregon, Mississippi, Indiana, Virginia, Ohio, Wisconsin and a dozen other states all build new, free-standing, isolation units.<sup>20</sup>
- 1994: The U.S. Bureau of Prisons builds ADX Florence, the federal government's first and only supermax facility, in Florence, Colorado.<sup>21</sup>
- 1995: A federal judge finds conditions at Pelican Bay in California "may well hover on the edge of what is humanly tolerable" (*Madrid v. Gomez*). But he rules that there is no constitutional basis for the courts to shut down the unit or to alter it substantially. He says the court must defer to the states about how best to incarcerate offenders.<sup>22</sup>
- 1999: A report by the Department of Justice finds that more than 30 states are operating a supermax-type facility with 23-hours-a-day lockdown and long-term isolation.<sup>23</sup>
- 2014: Forty-four states and the federal government have supermax units or facilities.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2015/10/13/what-can-reforming-solitary-confinement-teach-us-about-reducing-mass-incarceration#.OrN3ipPn2>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5579901>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop\\_solitary\\_briefing\\_paper\\_updated\\_august\\_2014.pdf](https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/stop_solitary_briefing_paper_updated_august_2014.pdf)

## About The Team

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**Kristi Jacobson, Director/Producer** is an award-winning filmmaker whose films capture nuanced, intimate and provocative portrayals of individuals and communities. Jacobson's 2013 film "A Place at the Table," premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and was released theatrically by Magnolia Pictures in over 35 US cities. The film, which examines the shocking paradox of hunger in the wealthiest nation on earth through the very personal stories of three American families who face food insecurity daily, won the IDA's prestigious Pare Lorentz Award and was nominated for Best Feature Documentary by the Producers Guild of America. Produced by Participant Media, the film is the cornerstone of a multi-year campaign to end hunger in the US. In 2006, Jacobson premiered her film "Toots" at the Tribeca Film Festival before its critically acclaimed theatrical run. A portrait of larger-than-life New York saloonkeeper and personality Toots Shor, "Toots" garnered several nominations and awards, including the National Board of Review's Top Documentary Award. Jacobson's directorial debut was "American Standoff," produced by two-time Oscar®-winning filmmaker Barbara Kopple. The film examines the role of unions in modern times and premiered at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival before its broadcast on HBO's award-winning "America Undercover" series.

Jacobson has appeared on "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," "Moyers and Company," MSNBC's "The Cycle" and "The Leonard Lopate Show." Her work has been featured in publications including the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, *Vanity Fair*, *Filmmaker Magazine*, *Time Magazine* and many others. Her work has been supported by grants from the Tribeca Film Institute, Sundance Institute, Chicken & Egg Pictures, and many others. A member of the Director's Guild of America and NYWIFT, Jacobson is a two-time Sundance Creative Producing Fellow and, most recently, is a 2016 recipient of the Chicken & Egg Breakthrough Award, which aims to support filmmakers to continue to be strong advocates for urgent issues.

**Julie Goldman, Producer** founded Motto Pictures in 2009. She is an Emmy Award®-winning producer and executive producer of documentary feature films. Julie is producer of "Life, Animated" and executive producer of "Weiner," both of which premiered at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. "Life, Animated" won the US Documentary Directing Award and will be released by The Orchard. "Weiner" won the US Documentary Grand Jury Prize and was acquired by IFC Films and Showtime. She is executive producer of "3 ½ Minutes, Ten Bullets" and both of which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival and were shortlisted for the 2016 Academy Award®. Julie also executive produced "The Kill Team" and "Art and Craft," both released by Oscilloscope and shortlisted for the 2015 Academy Award®. She produced three films that premiered in the U.S. Documentary Competition at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival: "Gideon's Army," "Manhunt" and the Oscar® shortlisted "God Loves Uganda," along with several other films, including "The Great Invisible," which won the SXSW Grand Jury Prize and was released by RADiUS TWC; "A Place at the Table," which was

released by Magnolia Pictures; and the Oscar® shortlisted “Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry.” Julie produced, winner of the Sundance Documentary Audience Award, shortlisted for an Academy Award® and one of 2011’s top five grossing documentaries. She consulted on the Academy Award®-winning “The Cove” and produced the Oscar® shortlisted “Sergio.”

**Katie Mitchell, Producer** is an Australian filmmaker and lawyer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her documentaries have played at festivals across Australia and abroad, including Raindance Film Festival and London International Documentary Festival. She has worked for various human rights and arts organizations including the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, and as Director of Film Programming at the Human Rights Arts and Film Festival. Katie graduated from Monash University, Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Laws with first class honors. She later completed post-graduate studies in documentary filmmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts.

**David Menschel, Executive Producer** is a criminal defense attorney and president of Vital Projects Fund, a charitable foundation that seeks to reform the criminal justice system, with a focus on issues like death penalty abolition, excessive sentencing, police and prosecutorial accountability, solitary confinement, parole, drug policy reform, and post-9/11 civil liberties. In addition, he has helped to produce Academy Award® winning and Emmy® nominated documentary films like “Citizenfour,” “The Oath,” “Detropia” and “War Don Don.” Formerly, David was an attorney at the Innocence Project in New York City and legal director of the Innocence Project of Florida, where he helped to free individuals who were wrongfully convicted. He is author of Abolition Without Deliverance: The Law of Connecticut Slavery, 1784-1848, published in the Yale Law Journal. Before attending law school, he taught American history to high school students. He received a B.A. from Princeton University (’93) and a J.D. from Yale Law School (’02). He lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Ben Gold, Editor** is a New York based editor who has worked extensively in the documentary field. He has worked on numerous episodes of “Frontline” on PBS, including the DuPont Award winning “United States of Secrets” and “Truth, War and Consequences,” and the Emmy® winner “Money, Power and Wall Street.” He also worked with director Amir Bar-Lev on the concert film “12-12-12” and is currently working on the documentary feature, “Far From The Tree,” based on the book by Andrew Solomon.

**Nelson Hume, Director of Photography** is a Director of Photography living in Brooklyn, New York. He was originally planning a career in art when the New York independent film scene exploded in the mid 80’s. Inspired, he enrolled at NYU Graduate School of Film and Television where he won the Johnson Fellowship Award. Nelson’s narrative film background overlays his work as a documentary cinematographer. He relishes the challenge of finding a cinematic language for real world stories. His work has been seen on National Geographic, Showtime, A&E Films, HBO, OWN, PBS, Bravo, Discovery Channel, Sundance Channel and ESPN. Recent credits include, “Happy Valley” by Amir Bar-Lev, “Code Black,” an emergency room documentary recently adapted as a series for CBS and “Good Bones,” a narrative feature

film directed by Tim Bohn. Nelson is deeply grateful to the correction officers and inmates in *Solitary* who so openly and bravely shared their lives and stories for the camera.

**T. Griffin, Original Music** is a composer, producer and songwriter based in Brooklyn New York. He has composed music for over 30 feature-length films and dozens of live multidisciplinary projects, with at least one represented at Sundance every year since 2009. As a player and producer he has worked with independent luminaries including Patti Smith, Vic Chesnutt, Tom Verlaine and members of Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Fugazi and The Ex. He was one of six composers selected as a fellow at the Sundance Composer's lab in 2008 and has been nominated twice for CinemaEye Honors for original music score.

## SOLITARY End Credits

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY  
**KRISTI JACOBSON**

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PRODUCERS  
**KATIE MITCHELL**  
**JULIE GOLDMAN**

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
**DAVID MENSCHER**

---

FOR HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

**SHEILA NEVINS**

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FOR HBO DOCUMENTARY FILMS

SENIOR PRODUCER  
**NANCY ABRAHAM**

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EDITOR  
**BEN GOLD**

---

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY  
**NELSON HUME**

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ORIGINAL MUSIC  
**T. GRIFFIN**

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SOUND RECORDIST  
**JOHN MATHIE**

CO-PRODUCER  
**INGMAR TROST**

FOR BLUE ICE FACT FUND  
CO-EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS  
**STEVEN SILVER**  
**NEIL TABATZNIK**  
**ROBIN SMITH**

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FOR MOTTO PICTURES

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
**CHRIS CLEMENTS**

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVE  
**CAROLYN HEPBURN**

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**MICHALE FEUSER**

FOLEY ARTIST  
**LES BLOOME**

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FOLEY MIXER  
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FOLEY ASSISTANT  
**JONATHAN FANG**

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**SHINY LITTLE STUDIOS, BROOKLYN, NY BY T. GRIFFIN**

SCORE PERFORMED BY  
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