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# THE POWER OF PRISON TATION

PATRICK IRVING

Once transferred to a private out-of-state prison, my inmate population's concerns were dutifully ignored. With our resolution attempts blatantly obstructed—from insisting we pay for public records in Idaho for an understanding of the policies in Texas, to actually withholding the forms for filing a grievance—it was easy to feel that our rights were suppressed. Following months of protest and several disruptions, we couldn't even get fed with utensils that had been washed with soap.

Deciding to seek outside assistance, the first place I tried was my ACLU. They provided our DOC's policies and public record responsibilities and stressed the importance of exhausting all grievances.

Having processed several that lacked in response, I had to weigh the time and money needed to litigate an intervention, with a limited budget and no understanding of law. It made more sense to pull from my experience in network development and innovate a platform for coordinated reproach.

After gathering contacts, I reached out to the media—by press-releasing a book drive without being asked. Because it's hard to have apathy for the offender's story, I only intimated the benefit of a library with books: without visits, rec, church, or programs, books were all that we had to leave better than we came—and there were, unfortunately, not enough to go around.

These communications coincided with others, and the media soon requested interviews for coverage. Mine took place on the phone from Solitary Confinement, due to being disciplined for “creating a disruption” (a minor offense). But I avoided focusing on personal inconvenience and related the experiences affecting our group.

When the story appeared, our DOC downplayed our complaints: Politicians described a “new-prison smell,” while insinuating our concerns were the manipulation of criminals. It was damage control, and easy to counter: with documentation of avian droppings, rodent bodies, and a basic lack of sanitary implements, along with toilet paper shortages, food service issues, and the bug infestation to which we arrived. Grievances of each found a reporter. That was how I voiced my retort. (Though those documents didn't make news, they provided gatekeepers insight as to who were the fibbers).

It was while rifling through my communications from Solitary Confinement that I realized they could be used to narrate a story. So I fashioned my Inmate Concern Forms, letters, and grievances into an exhibit of our ridiculous struggles. Taking shape as a book, it read something like this:

Idaho prisons overcrowded...private prison contract...Mexican border...no toilet paper...no disciplinary due process...see how they prevent us from trying to grieve...these instructions in the Inmate Handbook are completely irrelevant to facility operations...the battle's just begun.

I asked my father to upload it on the searchable Web, and he procured a platform to showcase my materials.

Seeking out to gather more artifacts, I initiated communications to fill in the blanks. Logging as much as I could on our triplicate forms, I avoided commentating

on what people should think: Red tape has a way of speaking for itself, and people should arrive at ideas by way of their own thought.

Upon leaving Ad-Seg, I collected signatures and affidavits from the General Population, in attempt to capture our fight for the easiest fix: Wash our dishes with dish soap or give us the soap to wash them ourselves.

What should have been easy predictably was not and required a slew of information that most people didn't know (facility staff included). The most important of which, according to our facility's compliance officer, was local standards set by the Texas Commission on Jail Standards. Other states use their DOC, a Prison Oversight Committee, or a similar monitor for private prison contracts. The Texas Commission on Jail Standards (TCJS) wanted \$40 to send their Minimum Jail Standards, but my father downloaded them and mailed them for free.

With an understanding of their protocol, I sent presentations that sought an intervention. But I didn't stop with the TCJS, I wrote the local Public Health Department too. And when both failed to act, I went to the State Health Department, and the Inspector General of Health and Human Services, and complained how the other agencies wouldn't respond. And then I sent that complaint to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, with copies of all for the Department of Justice, media, and ACLUs. Closing the circle, back to the TCJS, where I presented copies of the letters I wrote everyone else—signatures, affidavits and all.

The TCJS, now knowing they had an audience, allocated more attention than the rubber stamp used prior.

As a result, we got the dish soap. And the next week they moved me to an Idaho Max. That's when my project really came to life: I've done nothing but present and send letters since!

But where costs for postage and copies add up quick, I now make copies once, upload them online, and with a minimum budget, send requests like this:

Please familiarize yourself with [description of violations] at [name and place of facility] by viewing the documents made available at [insert link to profile or site]. If you are interested in contributing to our effort or highlighting malfeasance, we encourage you to share the link with someone you know.

I write media and legislators, lawyers and advocates, friends and families and strangers too. I've continued to present for my fellows in Texas, while presenting the issues in Idaho as well. I now post newsletters and network requests, and I present my creative writing for fun. But most importantly, as a contributor to the historical record, I can ensure the retaliation I faced standing up for others won't be forgotten anytime soon.

So, here's how you can utilize a platform that's already been built: Ask someone to upload your scans to a social outlet, where they'll optimize searchability by creating a group. Naming the group properly and tagging the scans will attract a network of offender families and researchers. Use these contacts to collect and share documents. This helps establish patterns and increases the potential to litigate with success.

One might even find litigation unnecessary with this model, as official behavior changes when observed. Because when officials and their appointees don't hold each other accountable, it's likely they won't be official for long.

Let your efforts range from individual-minimal to outside-group-assist, and adjust as you go, depending on momentum. Motivation and a goal—plus letter-writing gear with a copy of your grievance—is all that's ever needed to start.

I continue refining my method from the comfy confines of Solitary Confinement, which should tell you that this can be done from anywhere. Just be sure to present with a cool, calm head, if you want to rep for your peeps in the general pop.