

Shane's story

Shane Staggs grew up in Clearwater, Calif., what he describes as "a small dead-end town" in the northern part of the state. He has never met his biological father, and growing up, he rarely saw his mother. She was battling a heroin addiction.

As a kid, he lived under his stepfather's roof, and he was the only multi-racial person in the household – a fact his cousins made sure he was constantly aware of.

Staggs became so accustomed to domestic violence and abuse from his stepfather, he said, that eventually it was the mental anguish that affected him more than the physical pain he endured.

When he was 9, he began stealing his stepdad's weed so he could share it with his friends. He said he got higher from the feeling of finally being accepted than from the THC. But that changed as he got older.

He moved to Eugene as a teenager and began to sell drugs to college students. By age 17, he said, he was pushing large quantities of cocaine, pills and MDMA. He drank and popped pills. Pills graduated to heroin.

"I was smart. I just had zero guidance," he said. "My priorities were all wrong."

It was around this time he began to reconnect with his mother. The two would bond over methadone and OxyContin. He said these were some of his happiest memories.

In his early 20s, he moved to Washougal, Wash., where he shared a four-bedroom home with a friend and his then-girlfriend. He said he had a "legit" painting business and was staying out of trouble, although he was still

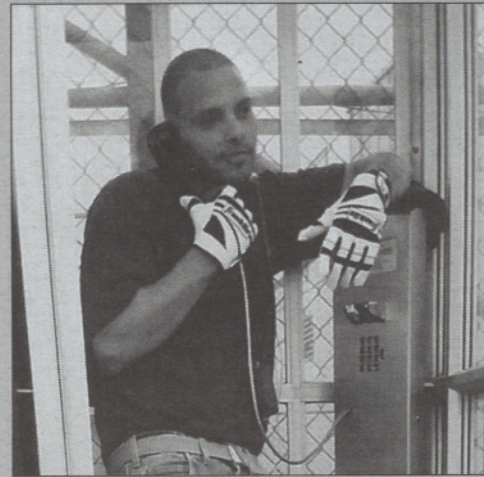


PHOTO COURTESY OF SHANE STAGGS



Shane Staggs earned a number of certificates for his achievements while in state prison.

using drugs.

Then his mother died of a heroin overdose. In quick succession, Staggs lost everything.

When he got back from his mother's funeral in Colorado, there was an eviction notice on his front door. He headed back to Eugene, where he began selling drugs, forging checks and committing other crimes. During that time, his girlfriend gave birth to his son. As soon as he cut the umbilical cord at the hospital, the state took the boy because the mother had drugs in her system.

Shortly thereafter, his girlfriend was sent to prison. Already spiraling out of control, he felt he had nothing else to lose at that point.

Staggs went on a five-day crime spree, kicking down doors and robbing people. The spree escalated to kidnapping when he and his accomplice forced two University of Oregon students and another woman, on separate occasions, to drive around town and make ATM withdrawals.

"I finally got caught," Staggs said. "I can honestly say I am thankful for that."

As Staggs began to detox on the floor of the Lane County jail, he was looking at an indictment for 14 counts of Measure 11 crimes, which carry mandatory minimum sentences. He was soon handed a 17 1/2-year sentence, which he began to serve in 2010.

During Staggs' incarceration, he's been sent to solitary confinement three times – once for four months after a fight, and twice, nearly a year each time, for drugs. Two of those times, he was found guilty based on information gleaned from confidential informants. He maintains his innocence.

Staggs wrote about his experience in solitary confinement for Street Roots while he was sitting in the Disciplinary Segregation Unit at Oregon State Penitentiary in March.

(Editor's note: This letter has been edited for clarity. The underlines are Staggs'.)

A Solitary Mind

By Shane Staggs

This is a lonely place. As I wander in this state of seclusion, anxiety follows. Panic meets depression, simultaneously, colliding with many other mental and emotional deprivations I need most at this time in order to feel human.

In solitary confinement, the un-requested sounds of keys and muffled radio correspondence have become indicators of time. They mark the nameless hours by which no clock tracks; according to our overseer the warden, inmates deserve no sense of the passing of time.

I shall be content with that only because all else is silent in the sensory deprivations forced upon me by my arrival to the Oregon State Penitentiary's Segregation Unit.

My one-man cell: A bathroom with bars and a bed is where I spend 23 hours and 20 minutes a day by myself. Forty minutes to shower and shave before I must return to my box. Lost in deep thoughts and confused over how I've ended up residing in such a place, I'm in my head a lot. Still a strong mind is the only reason I am able to avoid suicidal

contemplation.

I look for answers to my many questions but have yet to find them, I am left to guess, or assume. ... Today one of my questions is why I've just read in the Statesman Journal that an ex teacher got sentenced to 180 days in county jail for molesting a child for close to a decade; my mind is left to pray that not only does that man meet with karma for his actions beyond the half year sentence his judge imposed on him, but also that the young man he abused recovers in a way that allows him to enjoy life without fear of seclusion himself.

My next question is why? Why am I serving a full year (365) days in solitary confinement for an unjustified allegation in prison?

I am in constant awe of the Oregon Department of Corrections. This "organization" has no organization. I cannot be convinced otherwise.

Furthermore, is it necessary that every night I am forced to try and fall asleep to the off-beat drumming produced by a mentally unstable schizophrenic?

This cruel and unusual punishment on the other inmates and I is inhumane; worse is that the mentally vulnerable are subject to the

same inhumane conditions, tipping that precarious balance that is their instability, while at the same time invading my own sanity, putting me at risk of potentially becoming what I see, what I hear even as this is being wrote and read – an "unstable mind" diagnosed by forces beyond his control.

How does being in his cage away from others help me? How does it aid in rehabilitation? Does it make sense to remove me from general population when I am not threat to others?

The judge in my case has already done the ultimate punishment. If I cannot be involved in a program, or a club, or many other pro-social activities due to non-punitive segregation, how can I succeed? If the testimony of a desperate inmate with a drug problem is all administration needs to put me in a box for a year at a time, despite my achievements in self-help classes, gainful employment and mentorship, you may as well label me a "target." I do. A target not only to the "desperate," but also to the pathological failure who is most envious of my success.

Is it fair to force me to cut ties from my life, to remove a son from his father's reach? Is it healthy to force my shoulder, away leaving no

familiar surface for my wife to cry on? Depriving me of life and liberty?

I would like to know why ODOC thinks this kind of treatment is necessary in the slightest fashion.

I feel it is very important to have communication from loved ones while in prison; it is evident that such connections aid in fostering healthy relationships and therefore reduce the risk of recidivism upon a prisoner's transition into society.

This form of "non-punitive" solitude does the exact opposite; indeed, it presents the alternative: Immersion into the deviant lifestyle to which a previous offender is most accustomed.

To be alone is a scary feeling. In a place like this, trusting is hard, and knowing who to trust is even harder.

I chose the former, it is easier to trust no one. Cold, dingy, dark ... I feel what I witness. As I get minimal sleep tonight, I'll prepare for tomorrow.

If I can overanalyze just enough to make logical exceptions for my conspiring thoughts ... It just might be a good day.

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Now imagine that you are confined to a hotel bathroom for any period of time. It's not a condition that supports human life."

Even though he's six hours away from family and friends, Staggs and his fiancée are relieved that it appears he will remain in Eastern Oregon. They figure the farther away from the lieutenant he is, the better.

Another inmate's story bears striking similarity to Staggs. Like Staggs, Rafael Mora-Contreras was a model inmate before he began to have problems with the lieutenant.

He was president of the Latino Club at Oregon State Penitentiary for nine years, and staying out of trouble was a requirement for that position. He created his own niche at the prison, photographing inmate weddings and fundraisers and advocating for Hispanic inmates.

When there was a large-scale investigation into drugs, Mora-Contreras was placed into solitary confinement for more than two months. Documents indicate there were reports that he was involved in bringing drugs into the prison, but Mora-Contreras indicated in a letter to an attorney that he believed prison staff was targeting him because he advocates for the rights of Hispanic inmates.

"If you go into a disciplinary segregation unit," Mora-Contreras told Street Roots, "most of the population there is of minority – blacks, Hispanics."

The Vera Institute of Justice study found black and Hispanic inmates were overrepresented in segregated populations. While black inmates make up 10 percent of the total prison population, they made up 17 percent of the IMU population. And while Hispanic inmates represent 13 percent of prisoners, they account for 18 percent of both IMU and administrative segregation populations.

In addition, black and Hispanic inmates often received longer segregation sanctions per incident than white inmates.

Another inmate, Jose Maciel, was placed in solitary confinement for two weeks following a fight. He has since been released from prison, but he wrote a notarized statement on Mora-Contreras' behalf.

Maciel said that before he was moved out of solitary, the lieutenant pulled him into his office and told him that if he would submit testimony saying Mora-Contreras had been an enabler of the fight, he would give him soda and popcorn tickets along with other privileges, and he said he would make Maciel's disciplinary report disappear.

He said that because it wasn't true, he refused.

"Refusing to blame Rafael for the fight, (the lieutenant) became upset, called me degrading and racist names, and insulted me. He took me back to my cell, in the hole. He took away my blanket, pillow and toilet paper for 5 days and on August 24 sent me to Snake River Correctional (Institution)," he wrote.

Ultimately, Mora-Contreras was cleared of all charges but was also transferred to Snake River, far away from his family. In July, after months of advocacy from his friends and family, he was transferred back to Salem and is now at Oregon State Correctional Institution.

Due process?

A review of disciplinary hearing audio recordings involving another inmate, Jaime

Ramirez, showed just how little defense an inmate has when facing charges.

In May 2016, after guards found Suboxone, commonly used to treat opioid addiction, in Ramirez's socks, he had a disciplinary hearing in which he pleaded guilty.

"It's a shameful thing, having a drug addiction, obviously, but it's something that I won't deny," he said at the hearing.

He was sentenced to two months in solitary confinement, two weeks' loss of privileges and a \$100 fine.

He took issue with the fine. "I don't have a Social Security number or IT number," Ramirez said. "Therefore when I work, I don't qualify for an industries job, for one, and any other job that I get, I am not allowed to make anywhere above \$49, so that's my max, and my income is really low."

Undocumented immigrants housed in Oregon's prisons cannot obtain employment with the higher-paying Oregon Corrections Enterprises operations without a tax identification (IT) number, which can be difficult to obtain while in prison.

"You have a current balance of \$321," Hearings Officer Jeremy Nofziger said.

"I've saved that. That's taken me years to save," he said.

The fine was not dropped. Three months later, Ramirez had another hearing, this time for his involvement in a large-scale fight. It began Aug. 5 and lasted three days, involving 200 inmates. Many inmates were swiftly investigated for their involvement.

After reviewing the evidence, the charges against Ramirez were all dismissed. The video evidence appeared to match Ramirez's version of events.

But then in October, he was tried again for the same altercation based on a new memo added by the lieutenant. He now said Ramirez had confessed to him shortly after the fight.

Ramirez questioned why this evidence wasn't mentioned at the first hearing when the lieutenant was present.

"Not for one second did I say to him that I fought. That is untrue," he pleaded. "If you think about it, during the first hearing, my case was investigated for 30 days. How come just now (the lieutenant) decides to come up with a memo saying this? It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, and it's really, really unnerving to tell you the truth. I've been incarcerated 13 years. I have never had this kind of experience before, and far as the system goes, I mean it's never done me wrong."

Ramirez received three months in solitary confinement, with the cost of restitution to be determined at a later date.

Another inmate, Arturo Mora, told Pendleton-based private investigator Carlos Vega that he spent six months in IMU after he refused to tell the lieutenant where he got the drugs found in his possession. He was charged with disobedience, uprising and disturbance as a result, he said.

"I've only been in one fight since I was locked up, and that was 20 years ago," Mora said. "Been here since 1984. I am a 55-year-old man."

He went on to say that the lieutenant has verbally threatened him and is known to regularly abuse his power. "(The lieutenant) has always accused you of things with no facts."

He said he tried to complain about the lieutenant by writing to the DOC's inspector

general who is charged with investigating staff misconduct, he said.

But it was the lieutenant who answered the complaint.

Inmate Roderick Griggs also told Vega that the lieutenant had threatened him.

"If you don't cooperate with them," Griggs said, "especially (the lieutenant), they will threaten you and let you know that things can happen to you. Never physically, but they have threatened me verbally."

Griggs was transferred in September from the prison in Salem to Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Umatilla – 230 miles away. He told Vega he believed it was retaliation for not cooperating with the lieutenant's investigations.

"Now I'm so far away, I can't even see my son now," he said.

Snake River inmate Frederick Myles said he spent two years and six months in Snake River's IMU.

"The funny part about it is all they have to do is listen to us and try to help us," he told Vega. "You go to them for help, and they send you to segregation."

He said investigators sometimes give confidential informants items they've collected during shakedowns.

He said that with the lieutenant, "it's his way or the highway, basically. You've got one of two options: You can do what he say or you can just get ready to get put under investigation and shipped to other institutions. ... They can do whatever they want to you. You're at the mercy of them."

In a letter to Street Roots, another inmate, Arturo Ruiz, stated that he's been in prison since 1984 "and I never met an officer like (the lieutenant)."

He said that after he was caught with drugs, the lieutenant told him that he could cooperate and his disciplinary report would disappear, or if he refused, then he would use everything in his power to make sure that Ruiz stayed locked up in IMU.

During an interview, Prins, the inspector general, refused to disclose whether the lieutenant is under any internal investigation for misconduct.

Of 17 official grievances inmates filed against the lieutenant over the past four years, 10 were denied outright, mainly because inmates failed to correctly follow the complicated set of rules for filling out such complaints.

In cases where a grievance against the lieutenant had been accepted, the subsequent investigation appeared to consist of little more than asking the lieutenant for his version of events and taking him at his word.

Prins also declined to comment on whether bribery and threats are appropriate tools for gathering information from informants, stating that he was unprepared to answer those questions.

Prins' office is responsible for investigating the misconduct of inspectors, including the lieutenant.

According to a spokesperson for the corrections department, the lieutenant was unavailable for an interview.

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FREDERICK MYLES,
INMATE AT SNAKE RIVER
CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION