

Can The Prison System Be Transformed? Shaka Senghor and #Cut50 by Molly Rowan Leach

Shaka Senghor. Credit: <http://www.ecotrust.org>. All rights reserved.

Shaka Senghor spent seven out of his 19 years in prison in solitary confinement, known to other inmates as 'the hole' or 'administrative segregation' in the official language of the U.S. prison system - a term eerily designed to reduce the impact of its reality.

Convicted of the murder of a fellow drug dealer, Senghor was incarcerated in a bare six-foot by eight-foot excuse for human habitation. A concrete slab juts out of the wall, threatening impalement instead of offering sleep. The hole in the wall that's intended for bodily functions gapes back at him as if to say, I will swallow you. The lockdowns run 23 hours a day on weekdays, and 24 hours on weekends.

Human contact, if it ever happens, is administered as if an animal is being handled, replete with leashes and five-point chains. The environment is steeped at a pitch of insanity - cell blocks rife with shouts and screams and the flinging of human feces. The walls seem to speak: 'you cannot escape the incessant reminder that what you did is now who you are.'

Even after his release in 2010, Senghor, like most other former prison inmates, faced systematic discrimination as he attempted to step out of one bizarre reality into another that seemed intent on recycling his original punishment. A job and a supportive community are top priorities for those leaving prison if they are to avoid recidivism. But on employment applications, a box must be checked if the applicant has served time. In implicit and explicit ways, former prisoners are reminded of—and invisibly shackled by—their crime, long after their discharge.

Today however, Senghor is part of a new initiative in the United States that aims to transform the justice system by cutting the U.S. prison population in half by 2025. Called the "#Cut50 initiative" and launched on March 26th 2015, this effort has unusual bi-partisan support and leadership, and carries a powerful moral and political message: a culture of punishment run amuck is destroying the fabric of society; it's time to end the warehousing and exploitation of human beings.

As someone who transformed his own life and discovered a love for writing while serving those 19 years in prison, Senghor will be a powerful and respected spokesperson for

#Cut50. By sharing his story, he's already helped mothers of murder victims to forgive, inspired young men in the streets to choose a college degree over a prison number, and shifted the thinking of 'tough-on-crime' advocates from the 'lock them up and throw away the key' mentality to believing that redemption is possible. His TED talk "Why Your Worst Deeds Don't Define You" has received over one million views.

Senghor's colleagues include Van Jones and an ongoing endorsement from Newt Gingrich, about the most unlikely political partnership imaginable in the USA. Jones is an attorney and co-host of CNN's Crossfire program, as well as a former Obama Administration advisor on "green jobs" and the co-founder of organizations such as the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and Green For All. Gingrich is known for his staunch conservatism. Yet both realize the high stakes involved in the transformation of the US justice system, and the common ground that exists underneath the surface of party politics.

#Cut50 aims to reduce the incarcerated population of the US by 50 percent over the next 10 years by convening 'unlikely allies,' communicating a powerful new narrative, and elevating proven solutions such as restorative justice and youth empowerment programs that provide jobs and skills. Recent successes in both 'red' and 'blue' states prove that it is possible to reduce incarceration rates successfully while achieving better outcomes, saving money, and protecting public safety.

These programs have already demonstrated a reduction of recidivism to eight per cent, compared to national averages of 65 per cent to 70 per cent. Fania Davis and the Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth program is a good example, with a proven track record of diverting young people from detention and the likelihood of entering the 'school to prison pipeline.' Gregory Ruprecht's work in Colorado is another, showing how police officers with conventional views of justice—'lock them up and throw away the key'—can change over time as a result of direct experience of the alternatives.

In Ruprecht's case the turning point was his arrest of a group of 10 and 11-year old boys who had broken into a chemical plant. Instead of charging them with a felony, he agreed to take part in a series of "restorative justice circles" that were designed to bring the boys into direct contact with the people they had harmed, along with their parents and a trained facilitator. At the end of the process, the boys signed a legal agreement listing how they were going to set things right, ensuring accountability without having to process yet more people through the justice system and eventually into prison.

Given that the US warehouses 25 per cent of the world's prison population while comprising a mere five per cent of the world's total population, #Cut50 is long overdue. But regardless of where you live, the initiative provides a clarion call to reframe how we see ourselves and each other in the emerging landscape of justice.

In its Mission Statement, the initiative argues that there has never been a better time to mainstream the idea that prisons can be safely closed, and more effective alternatives pursued in their place. In terms of public opinion, Americans of all political stripes are questioning the failing prison system and searching for new ideas and alternatives. The moment is ripe to capture the imagination of the public with a bold vision and concrete efforts to mobilize people to hold their elected representatives accountable for seeing it through to completion.

Critics who aim to polarize the issue claim that approaches like restorative justice are 'soft on crime,' and may actually enhance the prospects of violence. A recent article published in The New York Post by Paul Sperry, for example, asserts that "liberal policies" are

making schools “less safe” by placing too much attention on offenders. The #Cut50 movement aims to dissolve such criticism by providing statistical evidence that the alternatives are working, and by moving public and political opinion beyond worn-out stereotypes about crime, punishment and retribution.

These alternatives make sense far beyond any particular party line. At heart, very few people would deny the basic needs that exist inside everyone to be understood, heard, and seen; to be given a chance to redeem; to confront the impact of our actions and be given the opportunity to re-enter the collective endeavor of society.

The choice is clear: stand by and allow the rampant school-to-prison pipeline of the US to inflict yet more needless punishment on a population that produces no improvements in its stated goals of rehabilitation and public safety - or join #Cut50's efforts to achieve a root and branch reform.

Ultimately, Senghor's message of personal and political transformation provides all of us with an opportunity to contemplate the reality of that harsh solitary cell, and to question the enormous costs of caging the human spirit.