

Life After John

On May 6, 2011, John McClellan, a 42-year-old Philadelphia native, committed suicide while being housed in the Restrictive Housing Unit at SCI-Cresson.

On May 6, 2011 at around 11:30 p.m., the pod lights popped on. I came to the cell door looking through the crack down towards 15 Cell where John was housed. Thinking it was an ordinary medical issue, I went to sit back down. But something didn't sit right with me. John had his cell door windows covered and he didn't eat most of the day. He was too quiet. Then it hit me: John was dead.

Looking back out my cell door, the nurse was outside the door and another one inside the cell. Because it was very quiet, I could hear the medical personnel administrating CPR and using the shock pads to attempt to bring him back. Twenty minutes later, the ambulance EMs came in and administered a few cycles of CPR, pronouncing John McClellan dead on arrival.

Watching John's lifeless body being carried out inside of a maroon body bag haunts me endlessly every day. I cried when I saw him leave, dead and not alive. About two months later I was placed in that same cell he was in, reliving his experience. I could feel his presence. I was saddened by the entire situation.

I sit now at SCI-Greene with five years to go until I go home, still vividly remembering how John died. It wasn't peaceful. Officers and other inmates encouraged John to kill himself, abused him, and failed to get him medical attention (the mental health department failed to intervene). John was left to die with all his mental pain. He had no one to assist him. He died lonely. John had problems but nobody cared. Since his death, two other prisoners killed themselves at SCI-Cresson. One would think that after John's death new methods of recognizing possible suicides would be implemented. But they weren't. All help again failed.

My life has been tremendously affected by John McClellan's suicide. I watched the Department of Corrections neglect John and encourage John to kill himself, all because the officers in the RHU did not "like him". I went through the same at SCI-Cresson where officers encouraged other inmates to verbally attack me, throw feces on me and even take my family mail and urinate on it. When I needed help, I was denied all available help. The psychology department at Cresson kept particular psychologists away from me and assigned me psychologists that agreed with the abusive practices of SCI-Cresson.

Every day in solitary is another day of pain for me. Solitary confinement never change nor do the individuals who work in isolation or the inmates who occupy the cells each day. It feels like I am fighting a war with a pen as my sword.

Life after John has changed me a lot. But what about John's father and other family members who suffer? What's in it for them? John will never come back as a result of irresponsible, corrupt and abusive prison guards and inmates who sat there knowing he was in pain but encouraged him to kill himself.

I see behind the gray shirt and black pants. I see inmates as well who are just as guilty as the officers.

Rest in peace, John. Justice will be given! I will make sure it happens!

Respectfully,

Christopher Balmer

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Christopher Balmer is a 24-year-old, incarcerated at SCI-Greene. While locked in an isolation cell 23 hours a day, in solitary confinement, Christopher is a prisoner rights advocate, against solitary confinement, the death penalty, and currently advocating for homeless and leukemic children.