

## **OSP Field Trip, September 2020 aka The Great Labor Day Campout**

On Tuesday September 8 at 5:30am I woke and cleaned my cell, wrapped in the dramatic red orange of the sun through the smoke. I walked Oregon State Correctional Institution's (OSCI) central corridor to work. Passing under the enormous ceiling fans that pull air directly from the air of the sky above our roof unfiltered, I peered into entrances of other units looking for the familiar faces of my Native brothers. Since March I have been separated from most of them. Half of our prison's population has been segregated from the other half. I was eager to signal to new brothers whom I'd heard arrived and were shaking things up, to let them know that I saw and welcomed them. I couldn't identify any new Indians because like you, I'm conditioned to look for brown skin and black braided hair. Most mornings, as I scan down the unit, my gaze ends at the far side of each tier, capped by fans as large as the ones in the corridor. At OSCI, only staff work areas have any form of air conditioning. In the summer, the hot air is sucked in from above and whips through inmate housing, sweltering and dry. Our cells are like greenhouses if the fans are turned off. For months, there is no escape from the daytime heat exhaustion or sleeplessness it produces. On that morning, there was a faint haze from smoke forcing its way into every part of the prison.

Once on the phones at work, I answered several calls for vehicles and license reinstatement requirements. My final call was with a California State Police officer relocating to Oregon, needing to transfer titles and registrations for two cars. After I completed providing him a checklist for his first vehicle, security officers entered the call center and roared that we get off the phones and return to our housing units. I explained it to my client, guessing that we were having a fire drill, and transferred my customer to a line for our headquarters' call center, wondering as he thanked me repeatedly for my help, if he knew where I was. Would it change anything if he did? I am endlessly struck by the ignorance of the public and especially law enforcement officers about the realities of prison. Police on the streets, deputies in jails, judges in courtrooms, and corrections officers in prisons are all disjointed bones of the same limb. Compartmentalized and distanced to allow indifference. Divorced from seeing the traumatic results of their actions.

My friend was sent to live with his father after he began to act out in the way preteen boys with identity issues do. His father was a veteran who had other younger children with another woman. My friend was excited to meet his father and to be loved by him. After a short time, his father began to rape him regularly. Soon my friend's father began to share him to be raped by other men. One man took him into a private room and told him he was safe and there was nothing to be afraid of. For years later, to my friend, those words were the worst of the crime. My friend recognized his younger siblings were being groomed by every adult in their world. At 15 my friend approached his sleeping father's bed, and with a rifle, shot his father in the head. My friend was a minor and therefore could not be housed with adult men in jail. He was kept in solitary confinement for ten months, visited only every sixty days by social workers. He remembers fondly, on one of his five visits, a male social worker played a game of chess through the bars of his cell. The courts determined my friend should be sentenced for murder as an adult. At sixteen he was sent to prison with grown men. December 2020 will mark the fortieth year this child rape victim has been incarcerated and denied the parole he is eligible to receive. This is

who is in prison in America when you vote without insisting up accountability of the multijointed system, when you vote for stricter laws and this is the extent of your involvement. It's fortunate that the police officers who arrested him, deputies who jailed him and judge who sentenced him are shielded from the reality of his life they created. In view of my friend, they would be forced to abandon their hero narratives and face their own stark immorality. This is a system engineered to scapegoat and do violence to victims.

As I returned to my housing unit, I saw the smoke had become so thick I could hardly see the length of the main corridor, with visible ash propelled down onto me. Once in my cell, an announcement came from the PA. *"This is an emergency. OSCI will be evacuated. This is not a drill."* We were piled into transport busses and driven to Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP). As we pulled in, I could see inmates from Mill Creek and Santiam prisons. The populations of four prisons evacuated into a single facility. As we deboarded and were directed onto OSP's recreation yard, it took nearly ten hours to move the nine hundred inmates from OSCI to OSP. I was on the recreation yard until after midnight. I felt a sense of magic being outside after dark, free to roam the yard and mingle in groups larger than four persons for the first time in nearly six years. It was like a music festival without art or women. I met the new Native brothers and we bonded quickly. Around midnight we were taken by groups into the chow hall to be fed for the first time since breakfast. As I entered my throat choked from the pepper spray hanging in the air. This foreshadowed nearly every trip to the chow hall over the next six days. As I sat to eat, a fight broke out in the center of chow. Officers scrambled to break it up. Pepper spray was deployed and commands of *"Stop fighting!"* bounced off the walls. While attention was on the altercation, another group began to scuffle along the walls. OSCI is home to many gang drop outs. I have no problem with the choice to leave a gang; it's a sign of intelligence. However, most members leave out of fear or cowardice, not maturity. Housed in a facility where they are not cloaked in fear, they become emboldened bullies once more, grouping together again, posturing like active gang members. Under this evacuation, they were on the menu for the active gang members housed at OSP. These once-loud, brash paper tigers crumpled every time chow was called. At least the Hispanic Southsider dropouts were mostly brave enough to face the firing squad and fight back. Housed in "the barn", the White ex-gang population, many of whom claimed to be still active gang members when at OSCI, drafted a petition to have their meals delivered to them from fear of fighting in the chow hall. The pages of signatures were longer than the petition itself, and so their food was delivered. It came with bloody band aids, broken glass, rocks and dirt in the food. Their coffee came brewed with piss. Every time I went to chow, I saw these men who were predators to the meek at OSCI become quiet and wide eyed. I sensed my own institutionalization as I felt excitement spark and grow at the promise of violence. In the past few years, a cadre of Surenos from California have come into Oregon prisons and unseated the resident gangsters from Oregon who have been deemed too weak or inactive.

After eating, we began to group into sets of twenty to be housed inside the prison. Fourteen of us Natives, two Whites and eight Southside dropouts comprised our group as we were led into A Block, Unit 3. We were housed in the TV room of the most exclusive Honor Unit in the prison, and maybe the state. It was unlike anything I've seen in six years in prison. There were exercise bikes, a rowing machine, a pull up bar, kettle bells, an inversion table, five big screen TVs and showers, all on the unit. All items were in excellent repair. OSP is famous for its open group showers as the sole means of bathing. I would get to avoid this unpleasant rite of passage. As the

days passed, our Southsider roommates would be attacked at chow or elect to go into protective custody, giving us even more space in the TV room. OPSs Native brothers, Asians and Lifers sent us care packages with coffee and hygiene, and we all shared it to the last drop. No one was left out of the treasures spirited to us. It even spilled over to our Non-Native neighbors. Our elder and mental health afflicted brothers were cared for and felt cared about for the first time in years. White people isolate, marginalize and ignore the old and mentally “nonconforming”. Prison is White, and has done this to our men. I remembered what I was taught, that healing happens in community and harm in isolation. To our people, banishment was as bad as death. To my mind, OSP is an institution of paradoxes. Inmates can untuck their shirts and wear their shorts outside of their housing units. There are fundraisers and Feeds every week, and inmates get to see where the money goes in the form of workout equipment or entertainment devices, and the inmates actually get to use them. Gang politics are present, but there is also a clearer sense of respect and compassion. Even our OSCI officers were affected to a degree when one brought up a gifted bag of soap, toothpaste and deodorant. This act, called “sharing” is one of the many prosocial behaviors criminalized in prisons. Passing anything to another inmate that is bought from canteen will result in a cell-in or a charge of extortion, resulting in time in the Hole. I was also reinvigorated by seeing the access to outside resources OSP’s Native Club had. The things I know are good and healthy that my work has always sought to do and been denied by DOC, *can* be done in a correctional setting without incident. It takes staff members being willing to work in order for us to receive services. It is their willingness to work that is our only obstacle.

Meal times were inconsistent. The first full day at OSP, we did not get breakfast until almost 3pm. Then, at 10pm, we received two meals in separate paper bags representing both lunch and dinner. The second day we ate breakfast at 6:30am, and did not eat again until 8pm (lunch), followed by dinner at 11pm. This was due to all of the fighting in the chow hall. My only fears while at OSP came from worrying about friends and family affected by the fires, and my being housed in Oregon state’s number one Covid19 hotspot facility. I have been using my mask whenever I leave my cell or work cubicle at OSCI. I hate my mask, but it is a minor inconvenience. Through work, I have spoken with many people whose lives have been wrecked by Covid, personally impacted by having the illness, or by loving someone who has it. I can only honor their tears and deaths by taking this virus seriously in my own actions. Today I overheard an officer telling a staff member that there are two newly suspected Covid cases, inmates who have been isolated in the Hole. The DOC denies that this is how suspected cases are handled. It creates a reason for anyone to deny feeling ill at all, Covid or no.

I loved my time at OSP. My resolve and that of my fellow Board members to recommit ourselves to OSCI’s Native Club and to our Native community is renewed. We are America’s underclass, thrown away and ignored, put directly in the path of violence and disease, and further criminalized for it. If we do not have each other, we have no one.