

Good morning everyone, my name is Tonja. This settlement is important for me but even more important for those who didn't get out of prison.

Today has been a long time coming.

Before working with the NYCLU, I filed this lawsuit by myself in pencil. Because when you are in solitary, you're not allowed pens. I started this lawsuit during the months I spent alone in a box.

I was not a danger. I bought another prisoner a hair dryer and sneakers. I reported an assault. I mailed the court a food sample as part of my claim about the conditions.

For that I was locked up in a cage and forgotten.

There's nothing in solitary. You can't hear a single voice other than your own when you speak out loud. You forget what it's like to be human.

I don't like hearing myself speak anymore. I can't help but remember that in that box, my voice's only purpose was to keep me sane.

It's painful for me to speak even today, but I'm here because I want no one else to suffer like this.

One of my worst days in the box someone sent me an article about solitary reform. On the same page was an article about how inhumane farms treat pigs. I thought there was more concern in that article for how pigs were treated than there is for how humans are treated. It was soul-crushing.

I'm not in solitary anymore. But I'm not the same person. I got lost in the box.

When I emerged, my partner of 23 years left because something about me wasn't quite right. I'm angry at her, at myself, at the prison system, but I get it. It's hard for me to remember who I was before solitary.

Solitary kills all that is spontaneous. It drains you of speech, thought, emotions, creativity. Before I was a professional musician and songwriter. In solitary, I drew a piano, I played it to try to keep my fingers alive but they atrophied. I know I can't rebuild the life I had.

But some days, I look forward. Little things please me, like sunlight and a morning coffee.

And today, I feel hope for the people who are still in prison. This settlement promises that we aren't just going to lock them up and forget about them.

And we aren't going to take away from people what makes us human for no reason any more.

We can look forward.

Like me, New York got lost in the box. But today, we begin to find our way out.