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Bad Things Happen in the Dark

By *Kenneth E. Hartman*

Advocacy piece by Kenneth E. Hartman, who has served 32 continuous years in prison on a life without parole sentence, on Assembly Bill 1270, which will restore full media access to the prisons.

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The California Legislature should pass Assembly Bill 1270, which will restore full media access to the prisons, and Governor Brown should sign it into law. It's past time to admit that what goes on inside these publicly owned places must be subject to public scrutiny.

I've spent the last 32 years imprisoned in the darkness of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, all of it on maximum-security yards. On several occasions, I've ended up in the hole for daring to speak out against the rampant abuses of power that characterize this prison system. I'm not speaking on this from the position of a lawyer or an academic; I've lived it.

When the doors were barred to the media back in 1996, it was a part of the campaign of then-Governor Wilson to create a criminal justice system as harsh as he possibly could short of summary executions in the streets. Those were the years that saw the expansion of the prison system at an unprecedented rate. New, tilt-up institutions were plopped down from one end of the state to the other. Small towns tried to outbid each other to get their own prison.

To enforce the big crackdown inside, the Department adopted different use of force standards and recruited a different kind of guard. It wasn't long before prisoners were being gunned down for fistfighting as the incidences of brutality proliferated.

The trouble was, back then, the news media occasionally came into the prisons and asked questions of people like me. When I was interviewed in 1994 by a Los Angeles television station and predicted that the proposed three-strikes initiative would be used to lock up petty thieves and drug addicts, the powers that be were none too happy. And numerous other prisoners interviewed in other places all said the same thing. The proponents vehemently denied this would happen. Time proved who was lying.

Corruption and incompetence hide behind chaos. That's the best description of the past generation of prison policies applied on the ground, inside. Billions of scarce dollars poured into this sinkhole with none of the normal oversight that would be put on any other governmental agency, especially any other police department. It's a question of accountability.

The prison bosses will come up with a slew of reasons why the media shouldn't be allowed back in. They'll claim we'll be sending secret, coded messages out, as if we can't get on a phone and say out loud what we've got to say. They'll say our mere presence on a screen will somehow traumatize society. They'll huff and puff about safety and security, the all-purpose, meaningless mantra of prison administrators.

But underneath the bluster, it's their fear of being exposed that motivates the resistance. To build the most expensive, most expansive prison system in history required painting us as the most dangerous and uncontrollable monsters the world had ever seen. In their propaganda, we breathe fire and eat nails, and we simply must be crushed at all costs.

The prison system counted on a shroud of secrecy to keep the public in the dark, which helped to aid the passage of excessively punitive laws because in here, "be monsters."

Pass AB1270 and make it the law. Let the reporters and the cameras back in here and see how many monsters they find. The truth is drug addicts who made terrible choices fill the prisons, mostly. We regret the wrongs of our life, and we long for ways to make amends. The public has a right to see that, too.

Submitters Bio:

Kenneth E. Hartman has served 30 continuous years in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation on a life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) sentence. He is the author of "Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars," a memoir of life in prison, published by Atlas & Co. (New York, 2009), and is an award winning writer and prison reform activist. Ken was instrumental in the founding of the Honor Program at the California State Prison-Los Angeles County, and is currently leading a grassroots organizing campaign, conducted by LWOP prisoners, with the goal of abolishing the other death penalty.

[Back](#)