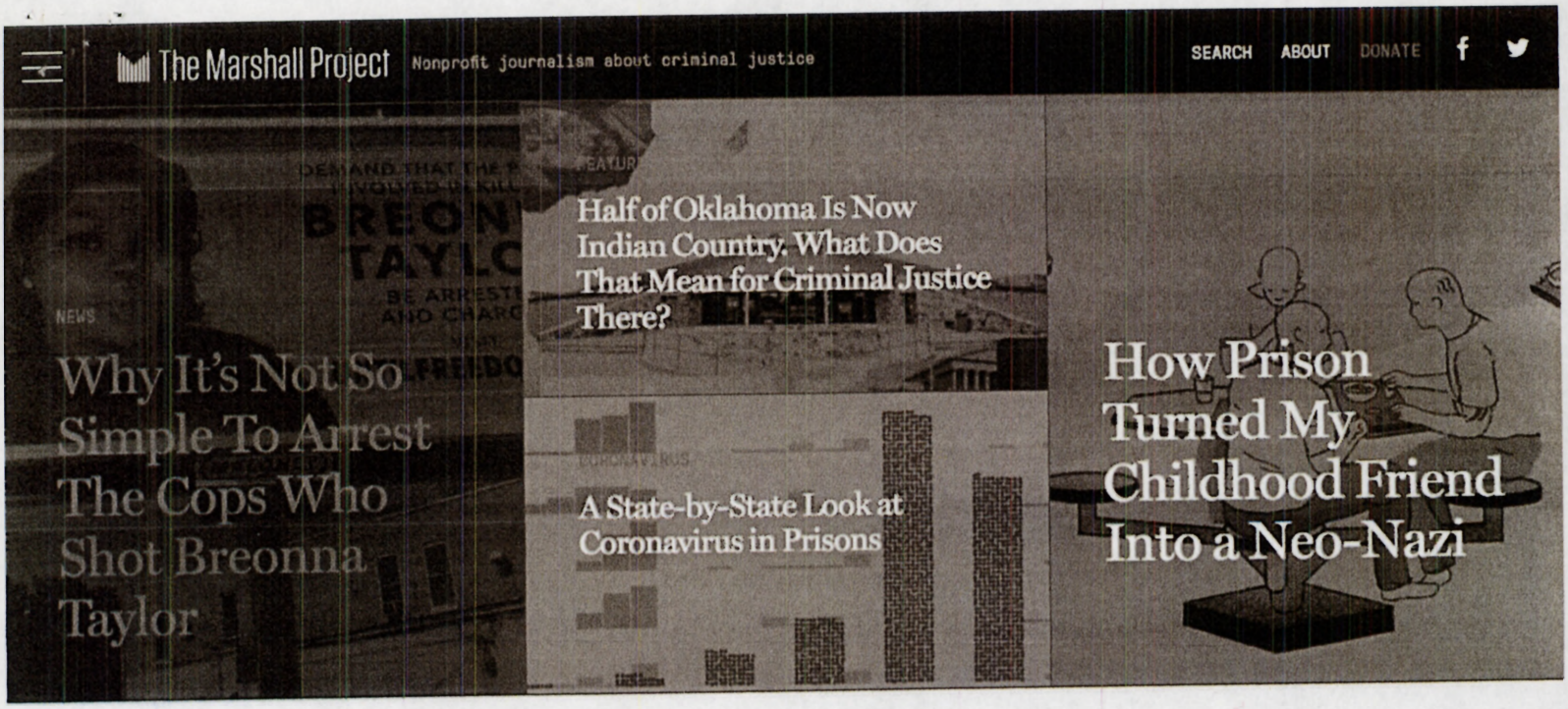
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08.06.2020
LIFE INSIDE

How Prison Turned My Childhood Friend Into a Neo-Nazi

We grew up listening to Tupac, smoking blunts and emulating Black people. Behind bars, our past was a dangerous secret.

By **CHRISTOPHER BLACKWELL**

Perspectives from those who work and live in the criminal justice system. Sign up to receive "Life Inside" emailed to you every week.

As I entered the prison dining hall, the drone of more than one hundred men conversing shocked me. In little snippets, I could hear that they didn't focus on home. Most talked about the dramas of life behind bars.

Since arriving at the Washington State Penitentiary, known as Walla Walla, this was my first contact with such a large portion of the general population. I noticed that most prisoners sat at long tables segregated by race: Black people in one area, White people in another, Mexican people in the middle. As I got into the long food line, I scanned the details of the hall, hoping to find where I belonged. (I have Native family and always had Native traditions in my life growing up.)

A person is lucky to be warned before entering the chow hall not to sit in another prisoner's seat. That would likely mean getting assaulted. Hopefully you have already identified where your people sit when you receive your food tray—that is, if you are fortunate enough to know who your people are.

If not, then you'll have to slowly walk toward the exit while hundreds of eyes absorb your every move, shoving as much food in your mouth as possible before dumping the tray and leaving.

After my first day in the dining hall I came to learn that every part of the prison functions in this manner: the phones, the showers, the tables in the big yard. Nothing goes unclaimed according to race, and those who ignore such claims will learn a very real lesson in a most unforgiving way. Back

in my living unit, I ran into an old friend I'll call Jeremy, who I had grown up with on the streets of Tacoma, Washington. Tacoma is a diverse city with both middle-class and poor communities, some overtaken by gangs and criminal activity.

I could see that Jeremy, who is White, was different from the man I knew at home. He had tattoos of Nazi and Nordic symbols all over his body. They were visible from a mile away, and I remember thinking, *There is no way he will ever be able to remove those.*

I had known this person for decades and never once had he professed hate toward anyone, least of all non-White people. Thoughts of listening to Tupac together on my front steps flooded my mind. We would lamely try to look as 'hood as we could, with our Dickies hanging off our asses and our black Chuck Taylor's and white tank-tops. This is how we spent our younger years: smoking blunts and chasing girls who were not White. If you would have asked me before seeing him at Walla Walla what his type was, I would have said Black girls. He loved them, he always claimed.

Jeremy's first words to me were a request. "No problem," I said to my friend. "I got you."

He looked me dead in my eyes and said, half-pleadingly, half-threateningly, "You cannot tell anyone in here who I was out on the streets. Do you understand?"

I didn't at first, but I soon caught on. He didn't want his White supremacist buddies to know that outside of prison he emulated Black people and had relationships with them—not that either of those things means he ever truly respected them.

I gave him my word, not out of fear, but because I didn't want to see anything happen to him, and I didn't want to create conflict my first week locked up. I had heard all the horror stories about prison when I was in the juvenile system doing time. Until I knew where I stood, I refused to make any waves.

After I was in my cell for the night, I started to think about Jeremy. *Why was he involved with a group of individuals that required he lie about who he really was? What the fuck made him turn into a White supremacist?* But I also thought, *What if I had to make a similar choice? Am I lucky to have the option of grouping with Native people?* I was tied to a different culture that allowed me to avoid becoming involved with a hate group just for safety.

The next time I saw Jeremy, the conversation was uncomfortable. "What's up?" I said, trying to gauge where we sat.

"Not much," he responded. It was clear that he didn't want to be seen with me.

"What have you been up to in here?" I tried again, hoping this would open the door so I could ask him what the hell he was thinking.

"Just doing this time," he replied blandly. He said less with his mouth than with his eyes, which shone with embarrassment as he watched me scan the tattoos covering his body.

I walked away.

I would see Jeremy in different areas of the prison, but things always seemed odd. He would barely talk to me and always tried to keep the people he hung around away from me, as if I was going to tell them about all the rap music he used to listen to. As time went by, we started walking right by each other with nothing more than a simple nod.

I'm sure that the second Jeremy gets out of prison he will regret all the tattoos he got while on the inside. He may try to have them removed, but that's probably impossible. Every time he looks down at his own hands in the free world, at those hateful symbols, he'll feel that shame.

As the years went on, I had other friends come in from the free world who would become completely different. It was as if they were shapeshifters, especially when it came to race. I came to realize that everyone who is incarcerated has to make a choice about their group identity.

And over the years I have come to understand that all prison groups are nearly the same. It's easy to think that if something is religious or cultural it is positive. To an extent it can be. Nevertheless, we are all structured like gangs, use intimidation like gangs and suppress individuality like gangs.

I joined the Native group rather than staying on my own because I thought I would be a part of something positive, not a gang member, which I had avoided being all my life. We even corrected other prisoners when they called us a "car." (That's what we call groups of individuals who stick together in prison). We would say, "No, we are different; we're a family."

But we were all doing the same shit. Trying to make sure we were not taken advantage of by finding strength in numbers. Using violence.

Eventually I left the group. I stopped hanging out and meeting up at the group tables. Men who had said they loved me like a brother and who I had known for years turned their backs on me immediately, as if I had caused them harm. We started to walk right past each other in the prison halls, as if we had never known each other—just like Jeremy and I had.

Is what Jeremy and these people did just for safety, or is it that they don't want to be alone?

Prison can make you feel pretty lonely, there is no doubt about that. Many would argue that it is even designed to make us feel this way, isolated and powerless.

So I now stand alone in prison, unlike my old friend. I'll put it this way: What I stand for is much more important than who I stand with.

Christopher Blackwell, 38, is incarcerated at the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, Washington, and is working toward publishing a book on solitary confinement. He is serving a 45-year sentence for murder and robbery.