



Former inmate Jack Davis points out his favorite work among images requested by prisoners who spent time in solitary confinement.

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# SOLITARY ASSIGNMENT

- Inmates invited to pick photo art for their cell walls
- Seeking to humanize lone lives in confinement

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Jack Davis, released in 2013 after nearly 30 years in New York prisons for robbery, knows the photograph he would have picked for his cell wall while in solitary confinement.

It would be the montage of a changing New York City, from the subways and Times Square to the World Trade Center site, juxtaposed with the unchanging Statue of Liberty.

"That's the Apple, man," he said Sunday in Manhasset at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, gesturing to the photograph by Sylvia Hardy delivered to an inmate named Raymond.

On Sunday, the congregation displayed two dozen photos sent to those in solitary confinement through the program, Photo Requests from Solitary.



Viewing the photo exhibit at the Unitarian church in Manhasset.

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Another inmate, Dan, requested "a photograph of a black female with hazel eyes in black leather pants with the same material stitches but a different color like hot pink, all of which define her figure, with a setting of orange and blue in the sky posted up next to a Benz (powder blue) in a park."

The photographer, Jason Altaan, did not disappoint.

Other requests are simpler. "I would like to have a painting of the outdoors, maybe a wooded scene, with maybe a doe and twin fawns," wrote Hershel on July 20, 2013.

"You can look at that and see

someone is more than their worst act," said Jean Casella, co-director of Solitary Watch, a web-based group aimed at raising public awareness about the widespread use of solitary confinement. "It's a reminder that, even though they're surrounded by gray walls, they have a complete inner life going on."

The exhibit, part of a campaign to change how New York handles solitary confinement, shows the imagination and memories of those locked in solitary confinement for weeks at a time, prison reform advocates said.

The program invites inmates to request photo images. "Any-

thing in the world, real or imagined," said Casella. Artists in Illinois started it in 2009 and it expanded to New York and California prisons in 2013.

About 40 images, produced by volunteer photographers, have been sent to New York inmates so far. Another 80 have been sent to those incarcerated in Illinois and California.

Alicia Barraza and Doug Van Zandt, who spoke at the exhibit Sunday, imagined that their son, Benjamin Van Zandt, would have liked the photo of a white wolf at night, with a full moon shining off the snow.

Van Zandt, serving time for burning down an empty house when he was 17, killed himself in solitary confinement. His parents said he was mentally ill, and not receiving proper care.

The couple said they were advocating for the State Legislature to pass the HALT Solitary Confinement Act this year. Claire Deroche, social justice coordinator for the congregation, said her group would advocate for the HALT bill.

The photos and some requests by inmates will also be on display Jan. 23.