

# SANTA CRUZ STYLE

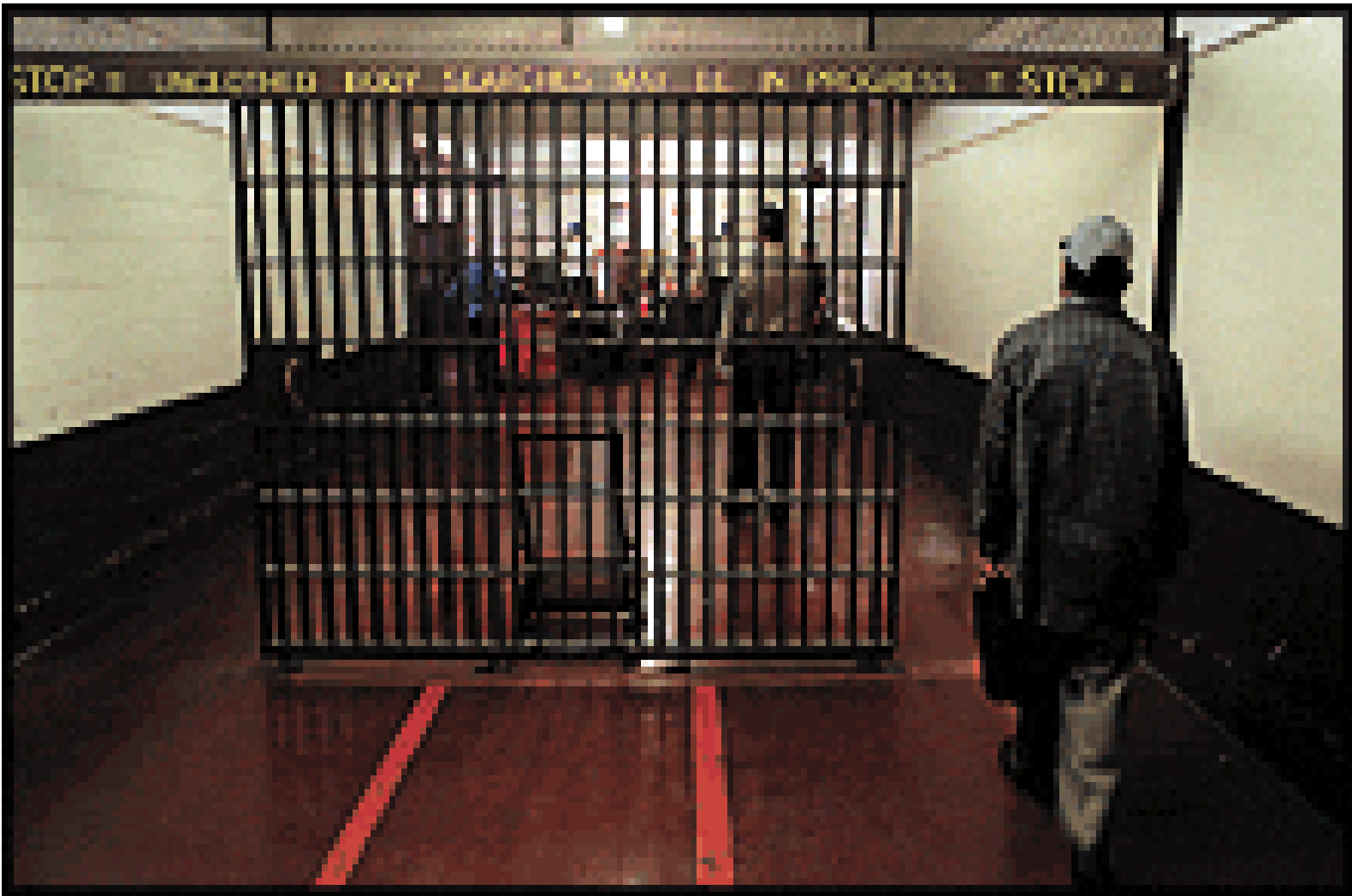
SANTA CRUZ SENTINAL

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Sunday September 29, 2002

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## Behind Bars



Daniel Alejandro enters into prison.

Foto del centinela de Shmuel Thaler

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## Behind bars

### Two local residents shed small ray of light into heart of darkness

By **PEGGY TOWNSEND**  
Sentinel staff writer

In the state prison at Tracy, there is a place inmates call The Zoo. It used to be a gymnasium where prisoners would go exercise when the tule fog rolled in and made it hard for guards to see if an inmate was making a break for it or resolving some dispute with a sharp piece of metal. But now, because of overcrowding, the hot, airless gym is home to 700 men. Their bunk beds line up in rows like the grid of a small city, and a guard with a rifle paces a catwalk above their heads.

In here, one wrong word is enough to set off a riot.

It's in The Zoo and in the cellblocks of a prison that was once nicknamed "Gladiator School" for the gang violence that went on here, that Daniel Alejandro and Mary Lou Solomon of Santa Cruz do their work.

They come here to talk to inmates about getting an education, about working together, about respect between the races.

They have brought mariachi bands and Aztec dancers to celebrate Cinco de Mayo inside the prison and persuaded actor Danny Glover to give a speech for the African-American celebration of Juneteenth.

They have held prayer ceremonies with inmates and even helped organize a car show.

They may be small things on the outside, but inside, the events helped ease the racial tensions that hum in the background like a live electrical wire.

At the Deuel Vocational Institute, as the state prison is named, everything is divided by race — African-Americans, whites, Asians and Hispanics (who split themselves even further into Norteños, Sureños and Mexican Nationals).

"I think they have done a lot of good as far as calming things down," says Cpt. Mario Reyes, a correctional officer who's been on the job 27 years.



□ Daniel Alejandro enters the prison.  
Sentinel Photo by Shmuel Thaler

"Two years ago at the (Cinco de Mayo) show, I actually saw the groups intermingling — Norteños walking next to Sureños," Reyes says, watching a string of prison newcomers walk by in orange jumpsuits, their hands folded obediently behind their backs.

"For those few hours they were all one Hispanic race," Reyes says.

"When the show was over, they all went back to their ways.

"But for those few hours," he says, "it was good."

### **Walking the line**

Waves of heat shimmer up from the asphalt parking lot as Alejandrez walks toward the prison on the outskirts of the Central Valley town of Tracy.

It was 103 the day before — 95 inside the prison.

It will probably be just as hot today.

Alejandrez points to a spot near the beige, cement block buildings that make up the 50-year-old prison.

"We had the car show right over there, on the handball court," Alejandrez says with just a hint of pride.

It doesn't mean much to an outsider until he explains that in this prison, the handball court is the exclusive territory of the Chicanos, that blacks control the basketball courts, the whites take the baseball field and weight room, and the Mexican nationals have the soccer field.

To set up something on one group's territory and have other groups walk there was a big step.

"It was good, man," Alejandrez says. "Everyone came to see them (the cars). Everyone was impressed that it could happen."

At the prison entrance, Alejandrez and Solomon pass through a pair of 15-foot chain link fences with curls of razor wire on top.

A female corrections officer walks beside them.

When they first came to the prison, Alejandrez and Solomon had to sign a paper saying that they understood if they were taken hostage, officials would not negotiate for their release.

Even after eight years of visiting, they say, they are always a little nervous when they walk inside.

There are 4,000 inmates in a prison built for 1,700 men, and tensions run high.

Things are quiet today, the corrections officer says, but that's no guarantee something won't happen.

Three months earlier, a melee had broken out between black and white prisoners on the basketball courts.

Five people, including a corrections officer, were hurt.

"We never go in here as peacemakers," Alejandrez says. "Peacemakers have to be careful how they do their work. There was a guy who got shanked in Solano for trying to keep the peace.

"We go in more with a cultural and spiritual mission."

Their idea is to give inmates contact with someone on the outside, to connect them to something positive and to the spiritual side of their lives.

The inmates say they respond because Alejandrez and Solomon treat them with respect. That they listen to their needs and expose them to things like prayer and meditation — something they didn't know before.

"We show them there is hope," Alejandrez says, "and there are people who care for them."

### **Making a difference**

Upstairs, a dozen men sit around tables in a beige prison classroom.

They wear dark blue jeans and crisp, long-sleeve shirts.

Most people would wilt in the heat that's already building in the room, but not them.

Most of them are lifers.

They know how to handle things in here.

"Mary Lou," they call out as Solomon walks into the room, and some of them get up to give her a hug.

"She just has a gentle way about her," says Mervyn Brookins, watching Mary Lou.

Once a talented running back for Oregon State's football team, Brookins is now serving a life sentence for robbery and kidnapping.

"She just has a beautiful spirit," he says.

Brookins, 35, has been in here long enough to know how things are inside this prison and the difference Solomon and Alejandre make.

The racial stuff disappears for the few hours Solomon and Alejandre are here, he says. For a few hours in this room, blacks talk to Mexicans and Sureños sit next to Norteños.

"You carry yourself in a different manner," says the man with chocolate brown skin.

"You don't want to let them down.

"They have introduced us to so many things. They came in and did a healing ceremony for us. I've never been exposed to something like that."

But most importantly to the men, the two haven't given up.

Alejandre and Solomon have been coming here for close to a decade — longer than most other groups.

Alejandre, says Brookins, who's completed two apprenticeships while inside, is the man he wants to be if he ever gets out of prison.

Like others in the room, Brookins is a man of influence in the unwritten, but understood, hierarchy of the prison.

In the language of prison, a man with influence is known as a "shot-caller," although no one calls anyone that name in this room.

It was an important step when these men became part of the prison's different committees: the African-American Committee, the Committee of Mexican Culture, the Native American Committee.

Even more important was when they began to meet together with Solomon and Alejandre to put on celebrations like Cinco de Mayo and Juneteenth.

It meant that each group would have to respect the others' celebration, that they were doing something together.

"At Juneteenth there was a friendship dance, and it was something new for us to be holding hands with a white on one side and an Asian on the other," says Manuel Hernandez, shaking his head.

He's 33 and has spent the last 14 years behind bars.

"But at the same time, for us, it felt like our purpose was beginning to show some roots."

From across the table, Jose Vieyra watches.

He's a lifer who has been in prison for 23 years and doesn't say much.

But when he talks, the other inmates listen.

"You choose how you give back," says Vieyra, folding his arms across his blue prison shirt. His eyes are sharp. Quick.

"Now I help the younger guys understand how to do their time: to get their education and get out."

He nods his head toward Solomon and Alejandrez.

"It is my pleasure," he says, "to work with these people."

### **Building bridges, cars**

In the afternoon, Solomon and Alejandrez head down the wide brown and beige hallways of Deuel.

Solomon, a tiny woman with a fall of long black hair, walks with a limp, the result of a motorcycle accident and the prosthetic leg she now wears.

Alejandrez just finished his first chemotherapy treatment for a tumor doctors found in his abdomen.

But they would never think of stopping their visits to the prison.

Even though they are both founders of the anti-violence group Barrios Unidos in Santa Cruz, they have no grant for this prison work.

It's something they do on their own.

They walk past cellblocks with two-man rooms the size of broom closets.

Past the place where inmates are strip-searched after every session spent working in the prison's mechanics, carpentry, aviation or auto body shops.

One of Alejandrez and Solomon's pet projects is located nearby, a 1948 Oldsmobile coupe that inmates are restoring and that will be raffled off to benefit Barrios Unidos and Teatro Campesino when it is done.

Inside a noisy auto shop with a television set tuned to "The Jerry Springer Show," a beefy man with sandy blond hair sits beside the Chevy V-8 engine they are going to put in the car.

Alejandrez claps him on the shoulder.

"How's it going, man?" Alejandrez asks and listens while the prisoner talks about the progress he's made — how the engine will allow the classic car to hit today's freeway speeds.

The man, Brian Sass, says he's glad to be part of the car restoration project.

"This gives me the opportunity to repay society for the mistake I made," says Sass. "I did a bad thing and I want to make up for it."

He was convicted of second-degree murder for driving under the influence, he says.

He got 15 years to life.

In the shadowy rules of prison, the mechanics shop where Sass sits is white territory.

The body shop is Mexican territory.

The best part of the project, Alejandrez says, is that the whites and Mexicans are working together to get the job done.

### **Something to look forward to**

One of the most amazing thing for some of the prisoners is the way Solomon will come up and give them a hug.

They open their arms wide when she walks into the pottery room, the laundry area, J wing where bare-chested men sweat in the afternoon heat.

They laugh when they say they can't believe a woman would come to prison to give people hugs. They say they have been touched by the Native American prayer circles she organizes.

"Mary Lou," the men call out to her as she walks by, "it's good to see you."

Solomon smiles.

The men she has befriended feel like her sons, she says.

The warden, Claude Finn, approves of what the two Santa Cruz visitors are doing.

They "have continuously provided spiritually uplifting and positive motivational messages to the inmate population at DVI," he says.

"Their efforts are greatly appreciated by the inmate population, the staff and, especially, by myself."

Down a fenced walkway, a tall, African-American man covered in sweat and the dust of a cement-block medical clinic he is building, calls out and hurries up to Solomon.

He looks a little like the actor Lou Gossett Jr., and says his name is Shaheev Scott.

He's been in prison for 25 years for murder and robbery.

Nearly half his life.

Scott turns and walks back with Solomon.

Down the long hall where new prisoners stare from behind smudged windows.

Past the metal bars that clang shut behind them.

"Their coming is a blessing," he says of Solomon and Alejandro.

"It's the one thing I've got to look forward to."

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