

**Cellblocks To Mountaintops Podcast**  
**Episode 3:**  
**PUSH THE BUTTON**  
**Transcript**

**Disclaimer:** This episode includes a description of a suicide attempt. Listener discretion is advised.

**Host:** When the Benton County Sheriff Deputies arrested Sterling Cunio on January 16th, 1994, he was wearing his victim's necklace; a small eagle pendant on a silver chain. He asked his attorney if he'd be out by summer.

**Sterling Cunio:** At that point, I didn't grasp the significance of the harm that I created, nor the significance of what lay ahead of me.

**Host:** In his trial, the prosecution said that Sterling was criminally old beyond his years. Several law enforcement officers repeated what they'd apparently heard that he was in a gang out in Chicago. Sterling confessed to murder, kidnaping and robbery so that prosecutors wouldn't call on him to testify against his friend, Will. There was a gap in sentencing laws for juveniles at that time, so there were no minimums or maximums to help guide the judge. He handed him two consecutive life sentences. Sterling was now a scrawny, whiskerless 17-year-old and headed to prison for the rest of his life. It was his first time in an actual cellblock in an adult facility, and he was the youngest person in the building. He was scared as hell.

**Sterling Cunio:** I got processed in, got a bunk assigned. When I get in there, there's an older white guy; scraggly beard, raggedy teeth, had all kinds of lightning bolt tattoos.

**Host:** Sterling didn't know it at the time, but those lightning bolt tattoos, they meant his new cellie was a neo-Nazi.

**Sterling Cunio:** He'd been doing his push-ups, and he'd been eating all three meals and everything else. So, I get into this cell, and this guy he said what are you? I was like wh- what do you mean what am I? You know, he's like, well what race are you? It's like, I'm I'm mix, I'm Mulatto. He's like, well, what's that? I said Black and White. He said, well you can't be in here, I only cell up with white dudes. And I say, how do I move? And he said, you got to push the intercom and tell the officers you can't be in here.

**Host:** Sterling had been prepped by some of the inmates at the county jail while he was waiting to be sentenced.

**Sterling Cunio:** I've been schooled. Don't, you know you're going to be tested, don't back down, it's no matter what the consequence is, it's rougher in the long run, if you back down in the beginning, and keep the cops out your mix.

**Host:** Meaning whatever you do, do not involve any correctional officers, and pushing the button would call an officer. Sterling didn't know what to do. He wanted to get out of the cell, sure, but how?

**Sterling Cunio:** Is this my first test or what? Right. So, I tell him I can't push that button. He told me I was going to have to push the button, he would make me push the button. I was like, well, I can't push the button. And I'm scared as fuck, but I just got here, so I knew I had to stand, and so I refused to press the button.

**Host:** His cellie left. But that night, when it was time for lock down, he returned and laid down on the bottom bunk. Sterling got on the top bunk and stayed still.

**Sterling Cunio:** After the officer stops by the cell, checks, makes sure we're both in there, and he continues on with his tier check. As soon as he left the cellblock, the dude stands up, and snatches me off the top bunk, and I hit the ground and he's just on me, you know, raining punches and kicks, and I was powerless. This cat got mad strength. He banging my head on the toilet, and then he stopped beating me and he like tell me to press the button. I thought like, this is it. This is where I'm going to die, or this is where I get raped. It happened probably 5, 6 times throughout that night.

**Host:** Sterling was no match for this guy. He'd only fought with kids his own age.

**Sterling Cunio:** I'd never been in a cell fight, and I've never fought with a man. And the next morning, come out the cell, and I'm-it looks like I've been, I've been beat on all night. You know like lumps, and cuts, and eyes swollen, and lips busted. And there was this brother, T Rock, you know came and asked me what had happened, and I told him; and then I seen him go talk to a few blacks, and then he went and talked to a few whites, and then he went in there, and beat the shit out of him. This fucker presses the button and leaves the cellblock. Has the police come get him to leave the cellblock. That was my first night in the adult prison.

**Host:** Sterling said his first cellie went into protective custody that day and he never saw him again. Sterling would soon adapt to prison life, but it wouldn't be easy. From Narrative Alchemy, Sonic Union, and PRX I'm your host, Phil Stockton, and this is Cellblocks to Mountaintops. In this episode, coming of age behind bars. That's after the break. To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at [cellblockstomountaintops.com](http://cellblockstomountaintops.com).

**Host:** Remember Sterling's friend Anthony Pickens, who also spent time at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility? His path had a lot of similarities to Sterling's, but unlike Sterling, Anthony never had a stable home. He was born to a teenage mother and beaten regularly by his stepfather. The state intervened when he was nine. They sent him to a foster home in Portland.

**Anthony Pickens:** I was the youngest kid there. Everybody was older as well as bigger than me. I probably was still in my four foot something state.

**Host:** The foster home had about 20 kids, most of them in gangs. At first, he had a hard time fitting in until he was initiated. Being in a gang was the closest thing to a family he'd ever experienced.

**Anthony Pickens:** They would feed me, they would clothe me, whatever I needed; if I needed, bike, I would get a bike. So, when you 10, 11 years old, that stuff means a lot. And yeah, they were my shelter.

**Host:** It wasn't long before he started running away to live in different gang houses or on the streets.

**Anthony Pickens:** And whenever I got picked back up by the police or ended up in another group home or foster home, I leave again, go straight back to them. So, at the same time that they were caring for what I felt like was my needs at the time, they were also teaching me the lifestyle, and teaching me the culture, and what was expected of me. I was ten years old when I first started to learn, sell drugs and and cook up crack cocaine. Learned how to steal cars when I was about 12. It almost felt like joining a military sect because you end up seeing some friends hurt, you end up seeing friends die, and in your mind, you're like, I've got to protect my people. First time I seen somebody killed I was 11. I've seen a dead body previous to 11. But the first time, like a friend of mine got killed, I was like 11 years old. He got his head blew off next to me. You know, there's somebody drove by shooting; we were out there, standing on the corner, and he got hit in the head.

**Host:** And four years later, at age 15, at the urging of a more senior gang member, he took another teenager's life in an attempted robbery. He was held at the county jail while he awaited trial, and the sheriff's deputies there didn't know what to do with him.

**Anthony Pickens:** They said, we don't know where to put you because you're a kid and we don't have anywhere else to put you, we're not used to this situation. He came back a few hours later again and was like, will you go to a mental health unit? Because it's the only place we can put you that's a single cell. We can't put you in the cell with an adult. And so, I spent over two years on a mental health unit with severely mentally challenged individuals.

**Host:** Mental health care in most prisons is barely adequate. It basically means medicating prisoners heavily and isolating them so that they can't hurt themselves or each other. You can hear the sounds of people in crisis screaming or yelling to imaginary people. Teenagers are intensely social, and the isolation was devastating to Anthony's mental health. He was essentially in solitary confinement, which is known to be associated with self-harm, psychosis, and suicide. That's one of the reasons the UN considers it a form of torture. For juveniles, it can be detrimental to development. Carly Baetz, the child psychologist we met in our last episode, said solitary confinement can both cause and exacerbate preexisting trauma.

**Carly Baetz:** And for youth in particular, whose brains are still developing, being placed in forced isolation like that, even for brief periods of time, can have really detrimental psychological consequences so things like suicidality, and self-harm, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, there's such a host of different consequences for using solitary confinement.

**Host:** Yet it is still widely used in American prisons. On any given day, about 60,000 people have spent at least the past two weeks in solitary confinement. That's according to research from the Prison Policy Institute, a criminal justice research organization. And people are placed there for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes it's to manage inmates who might be experiencing mental health crisis. Sometimes it's because they are a member of a vulnerable population; like someone who might be targeted for being a snitch, or because they are gay, or trans. It's often used as a punishment, too, for both violent and nonviolent misbehavior, like, talking back to an officer.

**Anthony Pickens:** It got to the point to where I had my own mental crisis at one point. They used to give us these tablets, uh Tylenol tablets like 2 or 3 a day, but I saved them up—and I saved up, like, close to 60 of them.

**Host:** Taking too much acetaminophen can damage the liver and even lead to death. He took them all.

**Anthony Pickens:** Started feeling a little funny, fell down, they found me, pumped my stomach, and brought me back.

**Host:** And that was all before he was sentenced and sent to prison. Anthony was taken to the same prison as Sterling. Sterling also spent a lot of time in solitary in his early years.

**Sterling Cunio:** It's torture. Bright lights, constant noise, people screaming, people experiencing mental health breaks, people committing suicide, and you just sat in there, day after day after day after day after day after day.

**Host:** Sterling was sent there a lot in those early years. Not because of his charges or for his protection, but as a punishment for misbehaving once he was inside. We got a hold of Sterling's disciplinary records, and there's a lot in there from his early years. He had several disciplinary tickets for disobedience, disturbance, possessing contraband, and assault. He threw hot water at another inmate, shattered a light cover, tried to escape, even attacked a guard with a homemade shank.

**Sterling Cunio:** First get theirs, fuck the world I don't give a fuck bout nothing. I got life, I'm not going home, and I was in an environment that was violent and rewarded violence. And so those first few years is just what it was. Like, if I want to be safe, I have to just be vicious. It was the war zone mentality.

**Host:** But sometimes he was sent there for minor infractions too, like having hard boiled eggs he wasn't allowed to have. During his first decade at OSP, he was in the hole more often than he was in general population.

**Sterling Cunio:** The first couple of years was really tough. The isolation was horrible. I went into a multi-year depression.

**Host:** Placement in solitary also makes it more difficult to maintain connections with the world outside. Access to the phone is highly restricted. Same with visits and you're fined for whatever infraction got you sent there. Many people lose all the money they might have had on their books, which means no canteen, no creature comforts, like body lotion or snacks.

**Sterling Cunio:** I remember my grandpa sent me 25, 30 bucks here and there. My aunt would send me some money here and there.

**Host:** That's Terry, the aunt that wanted to take him in after Mama died.

**Sterling Cunio:** Me and Anthony bonded right away because before he got there, I was the youngest person in the prison. And when he got there, it was like, hey, you know, there's another kid here, and I was 16, he was 15. And we just became cool, we just became friends, and have over the years became brothers.

**Host:** Like Sterling, Anthony already had a history of breaking the rules, and the two teenagers got into even more trouble together. They were often sent to the hole at the same time, and they both learned early on that to stay sane, they needed to engage their minds. That's after the break. Stay with us.

**Anthony Pickens:** I would spend my time reading, everything on the shelf. Every book they had, I just read it. Whether it was religious books, whether it was John Grisham, which was extremely popular back then—everything.

**Host:** Prison libraries tend to have extremely limited collections. Mostly self-help books donated by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or churches. But if you're lucky, you might have someone on the outside who sends you more interesting titles.

**Anthony Pickens:** My favorite book has always been, since the first time I read it, will always be, Malcolm X The Autobiography. I read it every year for ten years straight.

**Host:** In many facilities, that kind of book would be banned. Reasons for denying books are often vast and opaque. A visual dictionary was recently banned in Texas just because it contained a picture of a weapon of some kind. Other books have been banned for coming from an unknown address or containing so-called subversive ideas. Prison officials typically have wide discretion.

**Sterling Cunio:** Elijah Muhammad and Nation of Islam, 120 lessons were banned, and then movement for Black Lives Matter and things like that could get banned.

**Host:** In recent years, prison officials in some states have made it even harder to get books inside. New approved vendor lists make it so they can no longer receive copies directly from people on the outside, or even from organizations like Books to Prisoners. Attorneys have challenged these and other restrictions on books as a violation of prisoners First Amendment rights. Courts have fairly consistently sided with prison officials, who say they're just trying to maintain security, and prevent contraband from entering the institution. But people on the inside have developed ways to at least keep the books already in the prison from being confiscated, and in the hole, they've even found ways to pass them around.

**Sterling Cunio:** We would fish it. Take string out of socks or underwears or cotton blankets, and tie it into long lines and then swing, and out on a comb a piece of soap so it's weighted down, and then sling it out across the floor.

**Anthony Pickens:** In the direction you trying to go. The other person can do the same if they meet, tangle up, and the other person just pulls it in.

**Sterling Cunio:** And then they pull it in underneath the doors, and so we would fish it like that. And if they catch you fishing they confiscate whatever you were fishing, and so what we would do, particularly with books that we knew were banned or on the censored list, you know there's a lot of them, we would hand transcribe books that we had so that we would loan out the copies, and if a copy or a book was ever confiscated off the tier for fishing, we'd have another source.

**Host:** That's right. They transcribe books word for word, so they'd have a backup if an officer took it. It was one great book that ended up shifting Sterling's routine and his outlook.

**Sterling Cunio:** I remember I was in the hole, somebody loaned me Nelson Mandela's book, *Long Walk to Freedom*. He was speaking to his experience as a human being inside of a prison, and it was matching my experience as a human being inside the prison. The reasons while we were there were different, but the experience of imprisonment was relatable. There was something there. I was in the hole and I would read about how he structured his time.

**Host:** Nelson Mandela's writing gave Sterling a roadmap for how to stay sane in solitary confinement. How to survive and through discipline, develop his mind. Sterling spent more and more of his time reading, and writing.

**Sterling Cunio:** That was really at the time when I didn't have no outside support.

**Host:** He was looking for inspiration, and connection wherever he could find it.

**Sterling Cunio:** So, I would start structuring like some of my regiment. I would stay up at night and read and write.

**Host:** It was possible to retrain his circadian rhythms because in the hole there were no windows, no natural light.

**Sterling Cunio:** During the day I'd sleep because that was when it was a little more louder. We'd make earplugs out of flip flops, use the lid from the top of a toothpaste to cut out some little foam earplugs, and just put them in. Tied a towel around your ears and your eyes and sleep during the day. I'd wake up between 2:30-3 in the afternoon. Now I'd go outside or not outside, you go what they call outside is just an empty cell with a pull up bar; so you go out there, you do your pull ups, you do your push-ups. I would write after dinner, and then I would usually write up to about 8 o'clock. And then, depending on where I was in the hole and some places, we could have little AM FM radios. So then at 8 o'clock I would just be listening to all types of different musics and stuff, and then the lights go out at 10. It usually quiets down. There's this convict courtesy of 10 to 10, meaning no talking or screaming out your cell from 10 at night till 10 in the morning. So, when it would quiet down, that's when I would start reading. I was looking for new ideas, I was looking for new ways of being.

**Host:** When Sterling began taking my class, he told me that he'd spent more than nine years in solitary confinement all in all. I couldn't even begin to fathom spending so much time alone with no one to talk to. But he found words within that isolation and in the silence, and he began experimenting with poetry. Here's one of Sterling's poems about spending time in the hole.

**Sterling Cunio:** Constant fluorescent radiance of artificial lights. Eroding retinas, disrupting sleep, anxiety, depression, rage. In the hole for 3,285 days. Days of hunger, Cold. Slow motion. Tortured. Cuffed. Shackled. Stuck. 3,285 poems. Imaginary companions, engaged in fantasy dialogue. The mind held together by counting bricks in the wall. 3,285 days.

**Host:** In place of conversation with other people sometimes he'd write to the authors of the books he'd read. He never sent them, but he loved engaging with the ideas and the theories. And when Anthony was in solitary at the same time, they'd read the same books so they could talk about it from a distance through a vent.

**Anthony Pickens:** We both went to solitary confinement for like close to two years together, and that was my first time doing a long time in solitary confinement.

**Host:** Neither of them had gone to high school. At that point, Sterling had only finished sixth grade, and they weren't able to participate in any educational programs in the hole. But by then, Sterling had learned the importance of setting goals.

**Anthony Pickens:** So even though we did negative things to get in the hole while we were there, he taught me how to be constructive, and to use the time wisely so that I wouldn't just sit in the hole going crazy. He taught me like, look, when we get in here, we're going to teach ourselves how to write screenplays. We're going to write a book; we're going to read the complete works of Shakespeare. So, I read it and I was like this is interesting, kind of didn't understand a lot of it because of the language and I was- well I finished it.

**Sterling Cunio:** Man, you read everything, like you mean everything from: ancient gods, to aliens, to Malcolm X, and Black Panthers, and Assata Shakur, and seven habits, how to finance real estate, how to do this, Kahlil Gibran, Rumi. I read. I read a lot.

**Host:** Sometime around 2006, when he was almost 30, Sterling was in solitary again. This time he started reading *Sophie's Choice*, the 1979 novel that was made into a film.

**Sterling Cunio:** It's a story about a mom who got sent to a concentration camp. And when she got to the concentration camp, the Nazi Kapo made her decide which one of her children would live. And even though it's a fiction book that messed me up like that, that disturbed me greatly. I was pacing back and forth in the cell. I couldn't understand, like, why was I so mad about this story, this fiction book? And then that was the very first moment that I had, like, this empathetic connection to the harm that I caused in my crime. Even though the victims of my offense weren't children, they were still somebody's child. Up until that point, my emotions were detached and very self-focused. What was I thinking why didn't I just not go that? But this was the very first moment in which I felt what it must have felt like for the mother, the father, the brother, for whoever had to deliver that news. I've connected to the harms of my behavior, and it fucked me up. I had got to a point in my own development in which I could kind of start reconnecting to my own humanity, and that book was just the trigger for a moment of empathy, and it was crushing.

**Host:** Sterling's transformation began in isolation. He discovered a world of stories and ideas that challenged him to expand his mind and to reach deeper inside himself. But his transformation would continue through relationships and reaching out to others and to one person in particular.

**Sterling Cunio:** Writing is very intimate. You get to share that deeper levels than you might normally do. And for me, that was a connection to where I was willing to open up, and deal, and face things that I didn't anywhere else.

**Host:** And the correspondence would turn into something neither of them had expected.

**Cheryl Cunio:** We started to realize that we were really connecting. So that's when things kind of took a little bit of a turn.

**Host:** That's next time on Cellblocks to Mountaintops. If you or anyone you know is struggling with a mental health crisis or suicidal thoughts, please call 988. That's the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 988.

To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at [cellblockstomountaintops.com](http://cellblockstomountaintops.com)

## **PODCAST TEAM**

Host

**PHIL STOCKTON**

Brought to you by

**NARRATIVE ALCHEMY, SONIC UNION + PRX**

Original Concept

Executive Producer and Director

**LYDIA B. SMITH**

**WITH PERMISSION FROM STERLING CUNIO**

Story Editor

**JESSICA PUPOVAC**

**FOR NARRATIVE ALCHEMY**

Producer and Fact-checker

**DEBRA M SIMON**

Legal Counsel

**MARK BRADFORD**

Legal Consultants

**ALIZA KAPLAN**

**RYAN O'CONNOR**

Graphic Designer

**MARTA RIBEIRO**

Content Consultant

**JACOBA ATLAS**

Social Media & Outreach Coordinators

**KATIE HARDIMAN**

**MIYA MURAI**

**FOR SONIC UNION**

Producer

**KIMU ELOLIA**

Original Music and Music Supervisor

**JUSTIN MORRIS**

Audio Engineer

**MACEY ESTES**

Sound Design and Mixing

**ROB BALLINGALL**

**MACEY ESTES**

Sonic Union Executive Creative Director

**HALLE PETRO**

Head of Production

**PAT SULLIVAN**

**FOR PRX PRODUCTIONS**

Executive Producer

**JOCELYN GONZALEZ**

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**QUINTON CARR-GOODWIN**

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