



WORKS

In My Own Words Ojore Lutalo & Bonnie Kerness (2023)

Josephine Graf: Let's start at the beginning. How did the two of you meet? Ojore, what led you to reach out to Bonnie?

Ojore Lutalo: On February 4, 1986, I was placed in a pre-hearing MCU [Management Control Unit] with 10 other prisoners. Most of us had been in the control unit for several days, and they tell me we don't have disciplinary infractions—we were there for being Muslims or revolutionaries, or jailhouse lawyers. I realized that I needed some outside assistance, so I wrote a letter to the national office of the American Friends Service Committee. They forwarded my letter to Bonnie, who sent someone from the Office of the Ombudsman to the prison to interview me. They told her that they couldn't find me! I was one of the most closely watched prisoners in the system, but the prison officials "couldn't find me." So from there, Bonnie, myself, and others in the control unit began the NJ Control Unit Monitoring Project.

Bonnie Kerness: I got a letter in February of 1986 from Ojore Lutalo, from New Jersey State Prison, saying, "I have just been placed in a Control Unit. What's a Control Unit? Why am I here? And how long will I have to stay here?" It was 22 years before we had any answers. The Management Control Unit in New Jersey was opened in the 1970s, for Sundiata Acoli, who was a member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, and Assata Shakur's co-defendant. The very birth of this form of isolated confinement was for political purposes. By the '90s, the Clinton administration began flooding states with money so that they could build not just prisons, but solitary confinement units and entire solitary confinement prisons. It was Ojore and 96 people living in concrete boxes without ever having been charged with any infractions. Prisons have always had punishment units, which were bad enough. But this was even more egregious because people were placed in the Control Unit feeling as if it were a personal dungeon. Everybody there was known to be political. And there they sat, for many years, until we were able to form the New Jersey Control Unit Monitoring Project, which led to the National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons.

