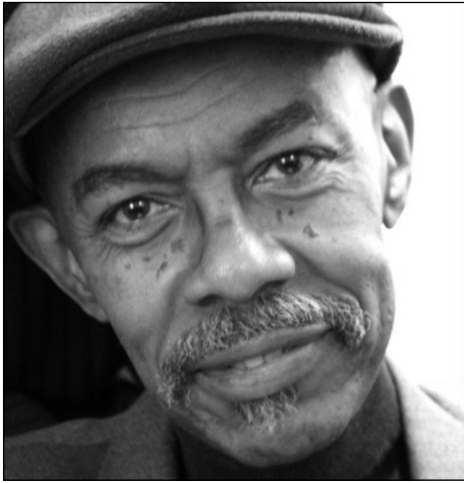


Eddie Ellis



Eddie was part of the Think Tank and helped to develop concepts, programming, and advocacy early on in the history of Exodus. “Eddie Ellis (1941-2014) was a Black Panther who served 23 years in prison for a murder he did not commit. Upon his release in 1992, he worked constantly on prison issues, helping to establish organizations such as the Community Justice Center, the Prison Moratorium Project, the Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions, and the WBAI-FM radio Program, On the Count: The Prison and Criminal Justice Report.”

(see: <https://rappcampaign.com/event/remembering-the-life-and-legacy-of-eddie-ellis-10th-anniversary-memorial-celebration/> and <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2014/07/25/eddie/>)

Transition

by Eddie Ellis

The Transition from max to medium is incredible. One does not realize how truly stressful and pressure packed a max is until there is some other basis for comparison. Here, for instance, there are no passes or escorts. You just go and come, as you please, whenever you want to travel: into the blocks, dorms, yard, gym, school, mess hall, wherever, you just go. It's like something I would never have thought could be, having spent 21 years in a max setting.

Many, many of the men that left Green Haven in the past 5 years are here. It's like old home week. But there are also many kids under 25, it's strange. Almost like 2 joints: one for the adults, the other for the kids, although we are all governed by the same rules. Few, if any of the

kids have ever been in a max, so their perceptions of what prisons are all about are distorted. Most think this is a joke. I guess with 1 to 3 or 2 to 4, one can easily have that outlook, especially if this is a second or even third bid, counting one “youthful offender.” Adjusting has been difficult. These guys play with the police like they are “buddies;” even worse than what we were beginning to see at Green Haven. It’s a trip.

I refused to go in the dorms, so I’ve been stuck in reception until a cell becomes available. After taking one look at the dorm living conditions and physical structure, I was struck by the observation that there is no difference between dorm living and being in a homeless shelter. It is almost like men are being conditioned and prepared – emotionally, physically, and psychologically – to live in homeless shelters upon release. I mean, all the dorms are in medium joints (no dorms in max) and one has to be “5 years or less” to the Board to qualify for a medium. So as we become short to the Board, we are transferred to these mediums and put in these dorms that approximate life in a homeless shelter, which is where a good percentage of men on parole ultimately find themselves. Having been conditioned to dorm life for 5 years prior to parole release, we see nothing unusual degrading or unnatural about living in or under such conditions once we are confronted with that reality in the street. Consequently, we accept such a fate as normal and we fall right into the program, almost as if we were still in the joint. Here is the amazing part: I spoke to the psych here about this and his response was that most men on parole needed a “structured environment” and that places like homeless shelters provided it. Well, I was too shocked to respond, so I just kept my mouth shut and filed that comment in long-term memory.

The funny thing is that most men want the dorms because you never have to “lock in” and they can stay up until 2:00 AM Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, to watch TV and make phone calls. But for me, forget it. The noise, confusion, foolishness and absolute lack of privacy outweigh all other considerations. And after 21 years in my own cell, I don’t need any conditioning for dorm living. I told the captain that if push comes to shove, I know there are cells, in segregation, so please don’t even consider putting me in the dorm. He understood where I was coming from.