

CALIFORNIA

Report on the Central California Women's Facility *Karonji Spears*

My name is Karonji Spears, #W44928. My work assignment is staff barber. I am writing this letter to you regarding my ex-bunker (cell mate) Sonja Stapels, #W46467. I started this letter on December 27, 1993, and since that time, Sonja Stapels has died (January 2, 1994).

The week of Thanksgiving, November 23, 1993, inmate Stapels was moved from "A" yard to B06-11-3L underneath me. From the minute she was moved into my room it was easy to see that she was definitely sick, both physically and mentally. Several of us in Room 11 tried to help her all we could to get settled. During the next week we saw that Sonja was not healthy enough to program, even though the paperwork from "A" yard stated she was cleared for full duty, camp and kitchen cleared. She was entirely too sick to program that way.

We began ... tried to work with our staff to get her over to the infirmary. Our staff and MTAs (Medical Technical Aides) began giving us problems. Sonja was not receptive ... she was afraid...she was full of open, oozing sores (which later were found to be cancer).

We tried to get them to look at her. On Saturday, December 4, 1993, Sonja as sitting in the day room with her pants legs pulled up picking her open sores. I went to our 3rd watch staff and asked if they would turn around and look at her so they could see first hand what she was doing. They "laughed" and would "not" turn around. They told me to wait and talk to C.O. Remy (officer in charge). I told him what Sonja was doing and what was going on with her. The next night he called the MTA to 506 and they looked at Sonja. He confirmed to us that there was something definitely wrong with her and to get her to the sick call. He began the paperwork needed to get her to the psyche and to the doctor.

On December 6, 1993, C.O. Lingard got her an appointment for the doctor. The MTAs sent her back to the unit with instructions to pick up her medication on Wednesday - Motrin, Tylenol and Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion!! By then she had gotten a wheelchair, too. She became weaker and weaker and when a couple of us caught a cold and chest flu, Sonja went from bad to worse! She wouldn't go eat and she was having body aches, fever and severe diarrhea. Her ankles were swollen, her open sores were worse and her breathing was difficult. She was in a tremendous amount of pain, which caused her to toss and turn and moan all the time, especially in her sleep. She was so weak she wouldn't eat at all.

On Friday, December 10, C.O. Lingard made another attempt to get her to the treatment center, but again the MTA returned Sonja back to the unit at 4 p.m. ... the MTA ... went into the bubble and told the staff (who were not our regular staff) something. They all laughed and he

left. I then went up to the staff and asked them if there was anything I should know before I returned her to her room. They laughed again and said, "don't ask her about the 'bugs in her head and ears.'" I then took her back to her room and put her to bed.

Sonja was extremely sick ... was failing ... in a lot of pain and very weak. I felt bad for her and also a bit concerned for myself and the other roommates, regarding the obvious possibility that she had full blown AIDS and the effect it would have on us. We all had respiratory colds.

On Saturday night December 11, 1993, after the 2200 count, Sonja's breathing was becoming difficult, so we called the staff and the MTA. The sergeant came and said the MTA was busy and Sonja should take 2 Motrin and go to sick call the next day. Well, I laughed (out of disgust), and said, "Well, that's like, "take two aspirin and call me in the morning,'" The sergeant said, "I guess so," and left.

The next morning was December 12. We told C.O. Cee and he called over and I took her to sick call. He asked me if I would explain exactly what was happening with Sonja. I tried. MTA McDaniels was working. When I tried politely to explain to her what Sonja was going through she told me to leave her there and leave! So I did. McDaniels was rude, uncaring, and spent about three minutes with Sonja before sending her off to brunch alone. I took Sonja home from brunch and back to bed.

It was on December 13 that Sonja finally got to the infirmary and stayed. On December 20th at 6:30 a.m. she was taken to Merced County Medical Centre. She died two weeks later on January 2nd at about 4:00 a.m. of pneumonia and complications due to AIDS.

How sad. How sick she must have been, how tired and sore and empty she must have felt. I believe that had it not been for C.O.s Linyard, Remy and Cee, Sonya would have died in her cell!!

During her last two weeks I investigated on my own and learned that she was dying. It motivated me to begin this letter during the week of December 27. I was told on December 31 that she was dying and on respirator and had full blown AIDS and that she'd never make it back from the hospital. The C.O. who told me that was laughing. He was one of the staff that would simply not turn around and look at Sonja on that Saturday night when she was picking her sores. How do you respect a staff that looks at human life that way!?!??

Sonja is dead. Now what? How did she spend a 16 month - two year sentence here, get out for three days, go through County, "A" yard, and come over the wall to B06 with no one knowing she was that sick -fall through the cracks and die? Where are the tests, her physical, her blood work, T.B. results, pap smears, the whole medical work up she was supposed to have had? How was she camp cleared, kitchen cleared and cleared for full duty? I saw it. Her illness was obvious to us and we have NO medical training! Then when it was brought to the attention of

the medical staff, why couldn't they see that she needed more than tylenol, motrin and Vaseline Intensive Care Lotion!!? for cancerous sores? Why didn't they keep her overnight for observation? Scared, incompetent, or just apathetic?

Now, last but not least - what do people in room 11 have to be concerned with? T.B., hepatitis, HIV? And has anyone cared to call any of us in for any tests regarding infectious diseases? We've been led to believe she had other complications! I have put in to be retested for all of these, but I wonder isn't this how diseases get spread? Does this institution just ignore the possibility that we could be exposed to T.B., hepatitis, etc.,?

I feel for her family and I'm glad that Sonja is free of pain and at peace, but did she have to die that way, that soon? Maybe CCWF is too big to handle one person???? There's a major problem with medical!!!

Chowchilla Women's Prison
January 1994

