Solidarity Is Showing Up

By Britt Dorton

The most important lessons I learned about justice in college weren’t taught to me in a classroom or from a textbook. I learned them in the Cook County Criminal Courts on 26th and California, where I came at least once a month to provide courtroom support to Gerald Elijah Reed. Elijah is a police torture survivor. In 1990, he was picked up by Chicago Police detectives who worked under Jon Burge and questioned as a suspect in a double homicide. During the interrogation, he was beaten so badly that a metal rod in his leg, which had been surgically placed after a gunshot wound years ago, was broken. After hours of torture and excruciating pain, he agreed to sign a confession. However, he maintained his innocence from that moment on, stating that he only confessed to end the torture. Despite a lack of evidence apart from his confession, Gerald was sentenced to life prison and incarcerated at Stateville Prison in Joliet, Illinois. In December of 2018, Gerald’s conviction was overturned after the Torture Inquiry Relief Commission determined that Gerald was a survivor of police torture. The special prosecutor for police torture cases, Robert Milan, insisted on retrying him, setting into motion a long journey of court hearings.

I first heard Gerald’s name in February 2019 when I was taking a class with Professor Alice Kim about Jon Burge and the Chicago Police Torture Cases. As part of the class, we were required to attend an event in the community that raised awareness about police torture or supported survivors in some way. One such event Professor Kim suggested was to attend one of Gerald’s hearings. My friend Eve and I decided to go. We woke up early on a chilly Friday morning and made our way to the courthouse, not knowing what to expect. We were greeted by Mark Clements, a torture survivor who has dedicated his life to supporting others. Mark led us to the courtroom and introduced us to the incredibly community of folks who provided courtroom support to Gerald and his mother, Armanda Shackelford. I’d never even heard of the words “courtroom support” before, but quickly came to learn it is a powerful and radical thing. Courtroom support is love in action. It can take many forms – showing up to hearings, offering hugs and encouragement, taking notes on what transpires in the court, showing solidarity in front of judges and in front of the press, offering a ride to and from court, and so much more.

That day, Eve and I learned how to bear witness to the injustice and cruelty of the justice system. We sat quietly while other cases were heard until Gerald’s name was finally called. He was brought out into the room in wheelchair, unable to walk unassisted as a result of the torture he survived and the lack of medical care he received in prison. The prosecution told the judge they hadn’t bothered to read a motion filed by Gerald’s attorneys and were therefore unprepared for the hearing that day. The judge granted them a two-week extension, and Gerald was wheeled back out of the room. Just like that, it was over. The hearing lasted ten minutes at most. We filed out of the courtroom as Armanda broke down in tears. She had been waiting almost 30 years to have her son home again, and in just a matter of minutes those hopes were once again delayed. Her fight for justice for her son would continue. Mark told us that the press would want to speak to Armanda, and encouraged us to stay and help show
support for Armanda. We followed the small crowd down to the lobby where the reporters were waiting. We stood awkwardly, feeling a bit like outsiders in this space, but joined in the chants and songs. We stood tall around Armanda while she and the attorneys spoke, calling for justice for Gerald, telling his story. The courthouse security stood around us, stone-faced and intimidating. Once the interview was finished, it was time to head home. Armanda stopped Eve and me and asked if she could hug us. She wrapped her arms around us and thanked us tearfully for coming, told us how much it meant to her that we were there.

What do you say in those moments? How do you respond when someone is suffering such unimaginable heartache? When you feel so powerless in the face of injustice? I just hugged her back. “He’s so lucky to have a mother like you,” I said. It felt like I should at least offer words of comfort. She smiled at me and thanked us once more. Eve and I began our journey back home, speechless. How could we not get invested after that? What began as an assignment for class became so much more. And so two weeks later we showed up again. And again. We negotiated with professors to come late on the mornings there was a hearing. We shared the cost of rideshares to and from court, as there was no accessible public transportation option for us to get there. We invited friends and classmates to join us, and many of them took us up on the offer. We became part of that small, powerful, beautiful community. The first thing we did each Friday upon entering the courtroom was to find Armanda and say hello. She always gave us a big hug, asking us about school and thanking us for being there. Then we would greet our fellow courtroom regulars – “How have you been?” “How’s work going?” “What do you think is going to happen today?” “You think the prosecutor will actually show up on time?” “It’s so good to see you.” – and take our seats.

In the strict confines of the courtroom, we allowed ourselves one quiet moment of protest each Friday morning. “All rise,” the clerk would call as the judge stepped into the room from his chambers. Following the lead of Armanda, we all remained sitting in a show of solidarity. And when Gerald’s name was called and the door at the back of the court opened, we all stood and remained standing until the clerk demanded we sit once more. Each day we sat and hoped and listened. And each day the judge granted delays and extensions. The hearings dragged on and on. Some days we cried together in the courthouse lobby. Some days we chanted. And every day we showed up to offer love and support to Gerald and Armanda. At times it felt so small in the face of such looming injustice, but I’ve learned that community is the most vital gift we can offer each other. Showing up was a reminder to Gerald that he was not forgotten, and to Armanda that she was not alone in this fight.

It was a long fight. Weeks turned into months turned into years. We witnessed delays and extensions, hope and grief, and ultimately a horrific miscarriage of justice when the judge presiding over the case declared, after over a year of court dates without any actual oral arguments, that Gerald was lying about being tortured, dismissed his claims, and ordered him back to Stateville to serve the remainder of his life sentence. We cried and yelled and held each other in the courthouse. We held Armanda as she cried and promised this wouldn’t be the end. The fight would continue – and it did, despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations like the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression organized petitions, social media
campaigns, and call-ins. They shared scripts to call elected officials and links to join Zoom court hearings. While the pandemic prevented me from showing up in person, I continued to share Gerald’s story and find any way I could to show support.

On April 1st, 2021, social media posts confirmed what I’d begun to hear through the grapevine – Gerald Reed was coming home. Governor Pritzker had granted him clemency and after three decades, he would finally be released. After two years of bearing witness to injustice and grief, I was finally able to bear witness to happiness the very next day when Mark livestreamed Gerald’s release. I watched him reunite with his mother, both of them crying as they hugged each other for the first time in far too long. It wasn’t quite justice – Gerald is still fighting to get his conviction overturned and finally clear his name, but it was joy. It was hope.

Justice isn’t something handed down by a judge or a governor alone. It’s not a gift that comes easily. And all too often, what we call justice is simply a disguise for systems of harm and violence perpetuated by the state. Justice doesn’t come easy in our current system – it must be fought for. In the midst of that fight, we are all called to bear witness. We may not be able to fix the system in a day or to right a long history of wrongs on our own, but we can offer care. We can build communities of love and support. That care can lift spirits and reach through prison walls.

I called Armanda later that week to congratulate her. The delight in her voice was evident. Before I hung up she said, “I want to thank you. You were there, you know? You really showed up and it meant so much to me.”

“You did all the hard work,” I assured. “It was an honor to be there and be with you.”

A few days after that I had the chance to speak with Gerald over Zoom. He announced he’s going by Elijah now – a name he chose to signify the start of a new life. It was surreal to have a conversation with the man I had only ever seen from afar. We’d spoken once over the phone and I’d heard so many stories about him, but to actually talk was an incredibly profound experience. He echoed many of his mother’s words, emphasizing how important it was to both of them that folks showed up to those court hearings to show their love.

The simple act of showing up is powerful. It is solidarity. It is love. It may not be justice, but in a world full of so much injustice, showing up to provide support is a radical form of direct action. We all have a part to play in the fight for justice, and it begins by just showing up. I know this is only the beginning of Elijah’s story, and of the work that he and Armanda are both committed to doing on behalf of other survivors and incarcerated folks. It has been a privilege to bear witness to their journey and to have played some small part in this fight. They taught me that if we care about justice, we must care for each other. We must show up for our community because it is care that leads to change, and it is care that reminds us what this work is all about.

To truly learn, step outside of the classroom and away from the textbooks of theory. Show up. The greatest lessons are learned by caring for one another.