



**ABOLITIONIST
LAW CENTER**

10th Anniversary Program Transcript September 20, 2023

Rikeyah Lindsay (Event Host): to collaborate with people who have been impacted by violence, um, who understand that prisons and police is not the way that we're going to create safety in our communities. Um, and we are advocating to make change. Uh, we are straight ahead. The C four arm of A. L. C. Um, which is the organization that we are here to celebrate tonight.

I want to welcome everybody. I hope you guys are enjoying yourself. The food is good. The drinks are good. The vibe is great. We're excited to have you all here tonight. We are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Abolitionist Law Center. Thank you!

ALC has come a long way since 2013. We began with just two attorneys, Brett Brody and Dustin McDaniels who were fighting for the freedom of our first client, Russell Maroon Shoatz.

Ten years later and here we are. We are humbled and honored to have brought people home, including our very first client, Mr. Russell Maroon Shoatz.

And we have grown, always looking for new tactics to challenge the carceral system. Last year, through litigation and organizing, ALC impacted over 70,000 people. So tonight is a celebration. We are excited to celebrate with you and our movement family to acknowledge where we've been, what we've accomplished, and what we look to do in the future.

Right now I'm gonna call up Mr. Brett Grote and he will be sharing a little bit more about ALC and why we do what we do. Brett!

We love Brett! We love Brett!

Bret Grote (ALC Legal Director): Good evening, everybody. This room and all of you here is one of the joys of my life to see.

Thank you, everybody, for being here. Anybody who knows me knows I like to tell stories. This one tonight, though, is going to be brief, I promise. It'll be concise, so that'll be a change of pace for me.

This is something that discusses a couple of threads of the movement. Work that the Abolitionist Law Center does, and is about our history and about our future. And when I say our, I mean everybody in this room. So as we celebrate our 10th anniversary at the Abolitionist Law Center, we want to share with everybody here something we haven't publicized very much but just last week an ALC client was granted compassionate release again. This was the 10th time, the 10th time we have brought somebody home under Pennsylvania's restrictive medical transfer law since October 2021.

Now, incarcerated people are only eligible for release from prison under this statute if they are near death, often unable to walk, and required to go into hospice or nursing care. As movement lawyers, we understand that our work is not just about structural change, class action injunctions, or monetary damages.

At its core, our work is rooted in being there with and for our community when they are facing their darkest moments and most difficult challenges.

It is a sick society that lets people die in prison, and we will use every means available to bring people home while they have life left.

This life affirming work against these death dealing institutions has deep roots in ALC's history and our abolitionist movement in Pennsylvania.

In 2013, we filed our first case which challenged the 22 years of solitary confinement of Russell Maroon Shoatz.

He was released from solitary nine months later with a lot of leadership from the one cheering over there, Teresa, her whole family, and a much larger movement.

In 2021, we filed our first compassionate release petition and Maroon was again our client. But Maroon was more than a client. He was a comrade, a movement elder, a father, grandfather, and a mentor to our abolitionist community. He fought for us, so we fought for him. Since our first case, we have filed 10 more challenges to solitary confinement.

And of all of those that have reached their conclusion, we've won every single one.

And since Maroon was granted compassionate release in October 2021, so he could transition outside of prison walls, surrounded by his family and beloved community, we've now brought 10 people home through these filings. So Maroon taught us to fight for our whole community, and we lift up his legacy and our continuing mission to abolish solitary confinement, death by incarceration, prisons, and all that stands in the way of the liberation of our world.

Rikeyah Lindsay: Thank you! Ten more, and a whole prison, a bunch of prisons to go. So at this point of the evening, we want to continue on in that spirit of things. Thank you, Brett, for coming to share.

We also want to take a moment to thank our sponsors. Thank you to Amistad Law Project; Kairys, Rudovsky, Messing, Feinberg, and Lin; Pennsylvania Innocence Project, Wiseman, and Schwartz. Thank you to everyone who has donated to make tonight possible. Thank you to everyone who donated. And thank you to our movement family. Also, if you haven't got a chance to donate, there should be some QR codes on your table.

[Take a second to donate](https://bit.ly/alc10event) with your phone and help us continue to do what we do: <https://bit.ly/alc10event>

Finally, I would like to say thank you to our staff, the interns and everyone who has worked in ALC or for ALC or with ALC, since we started 10 years ago with just two attorneys and one client. We also want to give a huge thank you to World Cafe Live and the staff. Don't forget to tip your bartenders.

So we hope that you are enjoying getting to mingle and meet each other. And we are definitely going to keep the party going. But we do want to take a brief moment to have a few words from our board member, Ghani, and our fearless leader and executive director, Saleem Holbrook, who are going to come up right now and share a few words.

Ghani and Saleem.

Kempis Ghani Songster (ALC Board Member): One of the things I don't want us to lose sight of tonight is the role that the prison struggle played in the abolition movement. The prison struggle began on the shores of Africa in medieval pens that held human beings in wait for slave ships. It continues today in the form of mass human caging of descendants of those people. Poor and working-class people in modern day penitentiaries or what they call state correctional institutions, where human beings are held as legal slaves violating international law.

All right. The prison struggle grew up alongside the abolition movement. It didn't begin after slavery. It ran alongside slavery. And continued all the way to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Liberation Movement where you had members of the Black Panther Party, Deacons of Defense, every resistance movement you could think of saw their members put behind prison walls. And they carried their philosophies, their examples of resistance behind the walls and resisted the administration and the oppression that was taking place behind prison walls.

Russell Maroon Shoatz was one of those. Jojo Bowen was one of those. Mutulu Shakur. Sundiata Acoli. Kuwasi Balagoon. These were the people that went inside behind the walls and carried with them not only their organizing philosophy, but also their connects that they had on the outside. And taught people behind the walls how to organize for change. What followed that decades later was another generation of people who were not political prisoners but were prisoners of politics nonetheless. That went to the hole and met these buried generals. These generals that were buried in the dungeons and were politicized by them. My people like Mike Africa and Yusef. Our brother Yusef right there. And Debbie Africa for the sisters.

I'm trying to give you some context here to what we're talking about. Because see, just like a lot of people come into prison now and they see TVs and they see visits and they see certain amenities, although it's slowly being taken away. They think it was always like that. They don't really understand the blood, the lives that were lost, and the blood that was lost.

When people fight for those things, it's the same way a lot of people getting into the abolition movement, joining organizations like the Abolitionist Law Center. They assumed it was always this way. The fight that took place to build this. And that fight began behind prison walls. Please understand and appreciate where I'm coming from here.

Our fearless leader right here, Robert Saleem Holbrook, along with myself. Along with our brother over there, Shakaboona, John Moore, Bilal, Felix Rosado, Yusuf. All of these brothers, man. They, groomed us to carry on the prison struggle and to continue the contribution to the abolition movement. And we've brought that organizing out here to the world.

We started this behind the walls in connection with well-meaning human beings and abolitionists on the outside. And we continue that movement right here with y'all on the outside. And we want y'all to realize that while abolitionists, we fight for the fundamental and essential right for everybody to be free.

We fight for that. And the same way abolitionists were seen as troublemakers and rabble rousers and people that were crazy back in the day, but now we look back at abolitionists and now we admire their example. The same way they look at us today as rabble rousers, as troublemakers, as people on the fringes; decades down the line, they're gonna be looking back at us, at YOU, and realizing that you were standing on the right side of history. You understand what I'm saying?

We want you to recognize that. Continue to stay connected to the prisons. Stay connected to the prison struggle. Because the prison struggle is not only inseparable from the abolition movement, it **IS** the abolition movement. It is the abolition movement. All power to the people. Salute to Russell Maroon Shoatz, The Abolitionist Law Center.

And I want to say this too. The Abolitionist Law Center freed a living Maroon Shoatz. He was a living Maroon. He wasn't just Maroon in name. That wasn't just a name he tacked on himself. You know, he read in history and he thought it was fly and said, I'm gonna call myself Maroon. He was a living maroon. By every definition of the word. And he helped to create The Abolitionist Law Center after he had tried to escape through spectacular and sensational fashion multiple times, and they brought him back.

When he said the Kunta Kinte is no longer in me, I'm 75 years old now. I can't climb the walls and jump and climb trees and jump streams and run 400 miles like I used to, like back in 1977. I'm still going to use every tool I have in my tool kit to organize and liberate myself and liberate others who are oppressed. And he did that.

He created an organization that, although it took years, ended up freeing him. And not just freeing him. Like I said, a maroon, a definition of maroon is not just somebody that escaped. And he taught me this. It's not just somebody that escapes but somebody that comes back and frees others that they leave behind. Remember, that's what the maroons did. They didn't just go run away into the mountains like in Jamaica or the swamps of the Everglades or the rainforests of Curacao or the palm forests of Brazil and just stayed there.

They came back. They raided plantations and freed others and took them to liberty. Maroon did the same thing. He freed so many people. Arthur Cetewayo Johnson was freed by the Abolitionist Law Center. John Moore was freed by the Abolitionist Law Center. I also want to mention my brother Shabaka.

So look, let's keep it going y'all. Let's keep it going. Let's be proud abolitionists and remember this: The process of social change moves not in a straight line,

but in a zigzag fashion. In other words, stony is the road we try. This is the law of revolution, right?

And this road is characterized by fits and starts, by periodic stagnation, by ideological splits, by setbacks and mistakes, by major and minor defeats.

And by small and big victories. We will get there, y'all. We will get there. Stay the course. Hold it down. Do not change. Be proud abolitionists.

Support the Abolitionist Law Center. It's not just an organization, an abolitionist organization in name only. It is in that continuum of abolition. It is in that tradition. It's doing like Assata Shakur said, carrying on the tradition of abolition. It is one of the ones, along with the Amistad Law Project, it's one of the true abolitionist organization in the state of Pennsylvania today and one of the only true abolitionist organizations in this country. So, salute to y'all.

Come on, my brother, Saleem.

Robert Saleem Holbrook (ALC Executive Director): I also want to bring some ancestors into this space.

When I think of the Abolitionist Law Center, it wouldn't exist had it not been for the mind of Russell Maroon Shoatz. But it was the actions of our mamas within the Human Rights Coalition that laid the groundwork for our movement here in Pennsylvania.

Mama Pat in the back. I know all the mamas in here don't expect me to call all y'all. We'd be here all night. But I also want to call into the room, my late mother, who was also present. I want to call into the room Mama Gay, Shabaka's mother and also Ms. Coffey. Shabaka, myself, and Jerome you know, we all had to have the news broke to us that our mothers died while we were in the cages. Some of us were in solitary confinement when that happened.

And, if there's anything that guides me, if there's anything that guides our mission, I always think back to those days when I was in solitary confinement, and there were two quotes that I always lived by, and that was, Jalil Muntaqim, ***“we are our own liberators.”***

And then Assata Shakur, ***“we must build spears that penetrate our enemies and shields that protect us.”***

That's what the Abolitionist Law Center is. When we talk about being our own liberators. When Cetewayo was released from the hole after 38 years, that was Cetewayo's work. We were just a vehicle to bring that about.

When you look at all of the prisoners, ex-prisoners, formerly incarcerated in this room, Shakaboona, myself, Shabaka, John Moore, Yahya Moore, Attila, JT.

We liberated ourselves and we're gonna own that. Because oftentimes that's missed. Oftentimes people who are caught up in those cages, who are caught up in the hole, are overlooked.

I know, I know. I feel, I feel my community. For me to stand, be able to stand here after serving 27 years in prison, going into prison at the age of 16 spending close to 10 years in solitary confinement. I'm just going to sum this up by saying that that would not be possible without the people in this room. That would not be possible without my comrades on the inside.

That would not be possible without the love and comradeship we have with each other. But more importantly that we have with our communities and our family members. And that's why I really feel, I really feel emotional right now. Seeing so many faces in this room, seeing so many family members in this room, knowing that with your son, with your husband, with your brother, like I broke bread in the yard and we were talking about what we were going to do when we were free. And none of us ever had a conversation that we were going to come out here and live a normal life.

That's not happening. All of us left out the prison. All of us left out of those cages with a commitment to come home and liberate the ones we left behind. But more importantly, to dismantle this oppressive system. And when I say dismantle this system, I want to make clear that I'm not just talking about police and prisons. Because as an abolitionist, police and prisons are not the priority of our fight. They are the most immediate object that oppresses our communities. But when we talk about abolition, we're talking about abolishing the social contract that governs this racist country. We're talking about abolishing the conditions that create prisons, that create police.

And if abolition is our horizon, then for those of us that have been in those cages, what we're going to say to you all who are abolitionists is: You damn sure better be liberating some people on the road to that horizon because we're not leaving anyone behind fighting for the future world that we want to see.

We need to bring people home now. We need to lessen the oppression that the system imposes on our community now. That's the immediacy. So thank you all for coming out tonight. Thank you for joining this community. I look forward to being in the struggle with you all going forward. I look forward to planting more

seeds of abolition, not just out here, but to continue planting those seeds within the prison walls.

We're never going to forget our people on the inside. It's the family members that are here. One thing I do know is that y'all are my backbone. Y'all are my backbone. Y'all know that I got y'all back. And I sleep safe, I sleep secure knowing that y'all got mine. So I really appreciate y'all. Thank y'all.

Thank you. I also want to thank my sister and my partner Marissa. You know, I would not be here if it wasn't for them keeping me sane. And, you know, if anyone deserves a round of applause, they do for putting up with my sh.

So thank you. I want to bring Cetewayo up on the stage.

Arthur Cetewayo Johnson (ALC Client, Comrade and Friend): I just want to salute and show my appreciation for the Abolitionist Law Center for helping me. I was in a situation where I was locked in a hole for 38 years. Nothing going on, stuck with life in prison, nothing going on. And I got a letter from Brett one day, he said Maroon told me to contact you, try to help you get out. And he put a petition in, took me down to the federal court, and the federal judge ordered me released from South Lake County.

And then immediately after that, he said, what's up with your street case? I told him I didn't have any of my paperwork because they sent me to the federal prisons, and they threw it all away. So he said, I'm gonna work on that. And about a year or so later, he got me out of prison after doing 50 years and 10 months, he got me out, so that was like amazing how you go from looking at life like there ain't nothing going on, stuck in there using every ounce of determination and fortitude I can to survive this hole stuff. And be able to walk out. So I salute them and I greatly appreciate what they've done for me. And all the other people. That's all I basically got to say.

Rikeyah Lindsay: Alright. So I just want to take a second, I'm going to go off script for a second and have all of our returning citizens, if you can, can you stand up for a second, because I want the room to see the work of ALC.

I just want to share my thanks and the thanks of ALC and all of our partners for all of you, because like Ghani said, y'all reaching back. Y'all didn't get your freedom and run off and do your own thing. You're still fighting to liberate all of us, right? Until all of us are free, none of us are free.

So with that, I hope you guys had a chance to really understand what it is, the work that we do and why we are in this fight. And I hope y'all continue to stay in the fight with us.

