Behind the Scenes of Acclaimed Prison Documentary *The Alabama Solution*

By Madison Chandler

The Alabama Solution is a 2025 Oscar-nominated documentary that highlights exploitation, abuse, and other problems in our state's prisons. In 2019, directors Andrew Jarecki and Charlotte Kaufman visited Easterling Correctional Facility in Clio, Alabama to document what they were told would be a revival meeting and barbecue. They soon realized, however, that it was a ploy to portray the prison in a positive light. Inmates eventually told them about horrific abuse. The barbecue visit led to a six-year investigation that became the subject of the film. *The Acta Diurna* interviewed writer, podcaster, former news anchor, award-winning journalist, and *The Alabama Solution* co-producer Beth Shelburne:

Who do you think controls the narrative around prisons in Alabama, and how did your film challenge that power?

I think traditionally the narrative has been controlled by media that have been in the pocket of law enforcement. When I was working in traditional media, I was working at Fox Six, which is a fine TV station. But it is traditional media, and the stories that are reported are police blotter news— stories about arrests where literally all the information that is reported is *from cops*. And so, we hear from cops that they made an arrest in a murder, we hear facts about the murder, and then we get to see a mugshot of the person who has been arrested for the murder, [despite the fact that they are considered] innocent until proven guilty. But we're going to put a mugshot up of them that is performative and makes them look criminal. And then we don't have any information from *their side*. No context, no nothing. That is the form that most media follows, and I think that it is changing. It is not just *The Alabama Solution*; there have been reports, journalism, filmmaking, and storytelling that challenge the narrative, because marginalized voices have been amplified to challenge it. There have been entire media outlets like *The Marshall Project* that are dedicated to covering the criminal justice system by amplifying the story of the folks who are caught up in it. So, it tells a story about crime and safety through a different lens. Not through the victim-offender framework, but through stories about people. And that's what prisons are: people. It's a whole group of people. I think our film challenges the narrative that everybody in prison is bad and that prisons are there to keep us safe. Because people inside the prison are being brutalized and killed, so *they* are not being kept safe. You see deep levels of corruption amongst the staff, so that is not public safety; that's a criminal gang operating on the taxpayers' dime. Being proximate to the men who are living this and are narrating the story gives audiences the chance to rethink their own personal biases about folks who are incarcerated. I have a lot of white people in audiences around the country

that commented something to the effect of, “I was really surprised at how smart and articulate the prisoners were.” At first, I got annoyed; like, please check your privilege. But I realized that you must meet people where they are.

Do you think that the emphasis on violent crime in the media makes people care less about the conditions in Alabama prisons or what inmates experience?

I absolutely do. Yes, the traditional media has always been focused on the worst examples of crime. Very little thought is put into the causes of crime. I would say little to none. Even our criminal justice system isn’t really interested in why crimes happen. They just want to tell a story about a person who perpetrated the crime. When the media focuses on certain types of crime against certain types of people, the general public has a sense that the world is very dangerous— that there are some horrific people who deserve harsh punishments. It’s really hard to advocate for somebody who caused [serious] harm, but the truth is that everyone in our prison system deserves to be kept safe. There are many people who caused harm at some point in their lives, but they are different people now. There are also thousands of people who are there for property crimes, drug crimes, and crimes of self-defense – circumstances that the media is not interested in focusing on. I think it has created a big disconnect and allows folks to disregard prison atrocities by saying “welp, they committed a crime, and they are there for a reason, so whatever happens to them, they deserve it.” That is toxic logic when you think about it. It’s definitely prevalent in the deep south.

The stories that you cover involve people and families who are experiencing trauma. As a reporter, what toll does it take on you to witness their suffering, knowing you’re able to return to your own life in a way they can’t?

Yeah … That’s a really good question. I think that this work is not for everybody. As you said, you’ll be experiencing some secondhand trauma by listening to stories that involve real, serious harm. And when you make a choice to cover those types of stories and really dig into those issues, you’re sort of saying to the world, “I believe that this is important. I believe this is worth my time and your time.” In that sense, you are sort of acting as an advocate to prevent human suffering. So, I definitely consider what I do to be a form of advocacy journalism. I am making a choice to focus on marginalized communities – specifically, people in the criminal punishment bureaucracy who are experiencing harm. So, it does take a toll, but like I said, I don’t think it’s for everybody. There are certain people that are cut out to be proximate to this kind of subject matter, and I think I am one of them. My mom is a retired social worker and always worked at the intersection of poverty and civil rights, so it is kind of in my DNA. I also have a bunch of lawyers in my family, so a curiosity about the law is in me. I have a big capacity for empathy, so

it isn't hard for me to face somebody who has caused serious harm or committed a crime at one point in their life. That's something I feel like I can do that I don't think everybody could. But it does take a toll, and there have been days where I've felt despair about the things that are happening. Sometimes you wonder if what you are doing is making a difference. But, at the end of the day, I am a free citizen, and the people that I write about are not. So, I do have strategies to relieve my own anxiety. Some of the things I do are really basic, like getting enough sleep and exercising. But I also have some hobbies and interests that are completely separate from civil rights and criminal justice. I like to do artistic things. I enjoy traveling, I bake, and I dance. Finding ways to experience joy outside the subject matter [of criminal justice] has been really important to me. There are certain times of the day when I just can't take any more phone calls or respond to anything else. I just have to carve it out for myself. And that's been really helpful to better these emotional ups and downs that come with the work.

What happened to the prisoners who [with bootleg phone-camera video] contributed to the documentary? Throughout the documentary, when the prisoners advocated for themselves, they were met with harsh violence. Robert Earl Council was blinded. What is it like for them now that this filmmaking process is over?

I am so glad that you asked that. I encourage you to follow the social media accounts for the Alabama Solution. The film has an advocacy and impact campaign. It's NoMoreAL.com. They are on Instagram and other social media channels … the impact campaign has been providing updates on our whistleblowers. The three men in the film, Robert Earl Council, Melvin Ray, and Raoul Poole – all three of them together have served over 90 years in prison. They've each been there for decades. And so they have been working as whistleblowers, documenting the things going on in the prison system long before the filmmaking team started engaging with them. They had a YouTube channel set up in 2014. They didn't have a big platform, but they were already on the prison system's radar. And they had been retaliated against because of their activism. There were a couple of organizations that screened the film before it was released, and they felt called to raise money and create a legal defense fund for the men. So [a legal team and fund] was put in place. And all three men right now, I am happy to say, are at different prisons and doing pretty well, all things considered. But when the film was released in October, no one in the prison system said anything to them. In January, their organization— the Free Alabama Movement— had put out a statement saying they were planning another work stoppage, a work strike that you see in the last scenes of the film. After that statement was put out, the Department of Corrections sent officers to snatch each man up and they took them to an isolated unit at Kilby Prison in Montgomery. It was solitary confinement in the basement of the prison. And so, when that happened, we established a legal defense fund, and we were able to mobilize the attorneys, who immediately filed an injunction. They were able to see the men

on regular wellness checks. They couldn't place phone calls, but we were still able to create a network of communication. So, when the attorneys went in, they were able to message us on Signal and tell us the status of everybody. We would tell the advocates, men's family members, and whoever was designated as the men's point of contact. The legal team ended up filing a lawsuit against the prison system. It was a due process claim, saying that there was no reason for them to be put in solitary confinement … It was totally retaliation for their activism. As a filmmaking team, we sent out a bunch of action alerts for people to call the prison and write letters, to raise hell about what the prison system had done. After two months of all this, each man was released back into the general population. They are back with their friends and their communities. They can speak to their families again. It was harrowing, and when you work with whistleblowers on any subject matter, particularly in jail and prisons, the stakes are high because they are in an environment that is not a democracy. It is hard to offer any kind of protection to them that you could offer to a whistleblower who is not incarcerated. So, we had many conversations throughout the making of the film about ways we could support them, about what we could do to offer some measure of protection, given their circumstances.

In the documentary, there was a scene of a man experiencing a drug overdose while in a center meant to rehabilitate prisoners who are drug users. Where are they getting drugs?

The transportation of drugs into the prison is probably the biggest problem in the system because of all the violence that comes with active addiction. In a contained environment, you've got robust drug trafficking and addicted people who are being preyed upon, leading to a lot of situations where addicted folks are getting extorted. Their families are getting extorted. There is just no way that this amount of drugs could be coming in and impacting so many people without collusion among the staff. And, if you talk to anyone in the system, they will say yes, of course people will throw packages over the fence. I believe there have been one or two drones that have been intercepted. Even though there's newer technology, by and large, the drugs are coming in through the front entrance of the prison with officers and staff bringing it in. There are folks who work within the prison administration that are involved in this drug trafficking. They are looking the other way from those who are getting paid. So, corruption is a huge issue that the system is unwilling to tackle in a meaningful way.

Your documentary's focus was mainly on male prisons, but what are female prisoners in Alabama experiencing? What brutality are they facing? In the future, do you ever plan on releasing something about women in prison?

So, I have been writing about prison and covering the situation in Alabama prisons since 2012. I started by covering a maximum-security women's prison. It's called the Julia Tutwiler Prison for

Women. It's located in Wetumpka. There was a huge crisis with male officers sexually assaulting and sexually harassing women who were incarcerated there. That was kind of my introduction to incarceration. It blew my mind. I had been covering crime for 15 years at that point, but I had absolutely no knowledge about the crime that happens against people who are in prison. It just opened up Pandora's Box for me. I covered the women's prison for about two years, then the federal government came in and investigated. They reached a settlement with the prison system on a number of remedies, including getting rid of male officers and hiring mostly female staff. The situation inside Tutwiler vastly improved. However, for several years, it unfortunately has been sliding back into a lot of problems. Part of the reason is because there were federal monitors that came in — people who were assigned to come into the prison and make sure that the prison administration was adhering to all the terms of the settlement— who left about two years ago. [Since then] the prison has started backsliding. What I am hearing is that there are a lot of problems bubbling up in Tutwiler again. I think that 85% of women who are incarcerated are mothers, so you have a real family separation element in women's prisons, and a tremendous sense of guilt that mothers feel for that. There is a lot of shame and therapeutic needs that are not being met in women's prisons. Unlike men's prisons, much of the population in women's prisons have been victims too – either from sexual assault or some kind of crime. It is just a fact that sexual assault increases the risk that you are going to end up in prison, too. Then [the women] are locked away in a dungeon; the whole model of prison is not set up to be therapeutic. So, it is very hard for most of the women that are locked up in Alabama. Another issue in our system is that Alabama simply locks up too many people for too long. We hand down draconian sentences compared to other states that are sentencing people to the same kinds of crimes but for much less prison time. [Long sentences] have not proven to make the state safer, either. Alabama does not rank well in public safety. Alabama has a high ranking when it comes to gun violence. So, the prisons, men's and women's, are very overcrowded. There are a lot of people packed into tight spaces, and there are not a lot of staff who care. There is not a mindset that is geared toward helping people, recovery, or rehabilitation. None of that is there.

Having reported about abuse in Alabama, and receiving worldwide recognition for your documentary, have you or any of your co-producers been targeted? Exposing situations like these can be dangerous, and in other countries, journalists' murder rate is high. What has that been like for you?

Well luckily, most American journalist do not get murdered for doing high-risk reporting. In this project, we have not been targeted other than officials saying rude and tasteless things about us in the press. Governor Ivey is saying that there is a low bar for the Academy Awards, and it means nothing that we were nominated for an Academy Award. Our attorney general called us left-wing lunatics who want to destroy prisons and glorify criminals. He clearly hasn't seen the

documentary, because that is not what we are saying. But I have felt the cost of reporting on these issues and putting out critical reports that call out state officials or individuals who have been bad actors in the system. Pre-covid, I was completely booted off the press distribution list for the Governor's Office and the Department of Corrections, which included them not responding to any questions that I submitted. You cannot do that as a government agency. Just because you don't like journalists or even a citizen, you cannot just ignore them. They have an entire office called the Public Information Office that exists to answer questions. I had to get some lawyers involved from Yale's First Amendment Clinic, and we had to take a series of actions. I wrote an op-ed, and then we published an open letter and got a bunch of journalists to sign on. Finally, my access was restored, but those kinds of things are unnecessary and unprofessional. It's unconstitutional when a government agency decides they are just going to stop responding to a journalist or belittle them. But, in this day and age, we see hostility and contempt being directed at journalists from the White House. I think that just trickles down to states and different people in power feeling like they can do that, too. Still, there is nothing that has happened to make us feel like we are in any kind of danger. I have had people on social media say I am a terrible person. That's *whatever.* A lot of law enforcement types dislike me. It is surreal to read conversations about yourself that other people are having. On Facebook there was a thread, and a cop said I was brainwashed by the inmates years ago: "she has turned into this woke lunatic." And then somebody else said, "I think she has always been an awful person." Not everybody is ready. The thesis of the film is challenging and confrontational. Not everybody is ready to accept that the system doesn't work and that it is cruel and unusual. It doesn't make it safer. It is a criminal enterprise. It is provocative and upsetting, and a lot of people react by dismissing it. But a lot of people feel like their own story is reflected in the film, especially justice impacted people. [The film] is breaking open a stigma to give people space to talk about these kinds of things. That has been cool to see.

Is police brutality a real thing?

It is. I mean, people will ask, "Do you feel safe talking to people in prison," and I have never had a bad interaction with anybody on the inside of a prison except for staff. They can be scary at times. But the inmates know that I haven't had any bad interactions with them.

What do you hope people better understand about prisons after watching this?

I think it's James Baldwin who said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced." And I don't think that the United States or Alabama in particular has fully faced the brutality of our carceral system; how racist it is, how much it penalizes people for public health issues like addiction, or for societal problems like poverty and

education. We have a society that criminalizes things that aren't a crime. It has become a repository for people who have serious mental illness. Prison is the worst place for someone who is dealing with a mental health crisis ... So, I think that what we really hoped is that this film would disrupt people's comfort with our systems, because they need to be uncomfortable and it needs to be disrupted. The status quo needs to be shaken up. We wanted to put these issues in front of people by using contraband cellphone footage to show people what [incarceration] looks like, and what people are dealing with. You can't unsee that. We felt like we were charged with telling the truth and putting the truth in front of people to spark change. But first people need to *see* it, so they know that it is true.